

carl schmitt the concept of the political

carl schmitt the concept of the political is a foundational work in political theory that explores the essence and nature of politics through a unique lens. This influential text, written by the German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt, delves into the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy as the core of political identity and conflict. Schmitt's analysis challenges liberal and democratic assumptions by emphasizing the existential dimension of politics, where decisions often involve life-and-death stakes. The work also addresses the role of sovereignty, the state of exception, and the limitations of legal norms in political decision-making. This article provides a comprehensive overview of Carl Schmitt's concept, its historical context, key themes, and its continuing relevance in contemporary political discourse. Below is an outline of the main sections covered in this article.

- Historical Context of Carl Schmitt's Work
- The Core Concept: Friend-Enemy Distinction
- Sovereignty and the State of Exception
- Critiques and Controversies Surrounding Schmitt
- Legacy and Influence in Modern Political Thought

Historical Context of Carl Schmitt's Work

Carl Schmitt wrote *The Concept of the Political* during the early 1930s, a period marked by political instability and ideological conflict in Europe. The aftermath of World War I, the Weimar Republic's challenges, and the rise of totalitarian movements shaped Schmitt's perspective. He responded to what he perceived as the failures of liberal democracy and parliamentary politics to address existential political conflicts effectively. Schmitt's work emerged as a critique of liberalism's emphasis on rational discourse, legal norms, and individual rights, proposing instead that politics is fundamentally rooted in collective identity and existential antagonism. Understanding this historical background is crucial for grasping the motivations behind Schmitt's conceptual framework.

The Political Climate of the Weimar Republic

The Weimar Republic was characterized by political fragmentation, economic crises, and social unrest. Schmitt observed that the liberal democratic order was unable to maintain political unity or decisively respond to threats. This environment influenced his belief that politics must be understood through decisive actions and the capacity to distinguish friend from enemy rather than through procedural formalities.

Philosophical Influences

Schmitt's thought was influenced by a range of philosophical traditions, including existentialism, German idealism, and legal positivism. Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Hobbes provided foundational ideas about power, conflict, and sovereignty that Schmitt adapted to his analysis of political order and conflict.

The Core Concept: Friend-Enemy Distinction

At the heart of Carl Schmitt the concept of the political lies the friend-enemy distinction, which Schmitt argues is the defining characteristic of the political realm. Unlike moral, economic, or aesthetic distinctions, the political is concerned with the distinction between those who belong to a political community (friends) and those who pose a threat or opposition (enemies). This binary opposition captures the intensity and existential dimension of political conflict.

Defining the Political

Schmitt defines the political as the sphere where collective identities are formed and enemies are identified. The political is not reducible to ethical or legal categories but is an autonomous domain defined by the potential for conflict. This distinction reveals that politics is inherently antagonistic and that political unity requires the identification of a common enemy.

Implications of the Friend-Enemy Distinction

The friend-enemy binary has significant implications for understanding political behavior and decision-making. It explains the formation of political groups, the justification for conflict, and the limits of tolerance in political life. According to Schmitt, the existence of an enemy is necessary for political identity and cohesion.

- Politics involves existential conflict rather than mere disagreement.
- Political decisions often require a readiness to confront or exclude the enemy.
- Neutrality is impossible in truly political situations.
- Political identity is collective and oppositional.

Sovereignty and the State of Exception

Another central theme in Carl Schmitt the concept of the political is the concept of sovereignty, closely linked to the idea of the state of exception. Schmitt famously asserted that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception," highlighting the decisive power to suspend legal norms in times of crisis to preserve the political order. This notion challenges liberal

legalism by asserting that ultimate authority lies beyond the legal framework.

The Role of the Sovereign

Schmitt's sovereign is not merely a ruler within a legal system but the authority who can transcend the system to protect it. The sovereign's capacity to declare a state of exception reveals the political nature of decision-making, which may override normative legality to address existential threats.

The State of Exception Explained

The state of exception refers to extraordinary circumstances, such as emergencies or crises, where normal legal rules are suspended. Schmitt argued that such moments reveal the true nature of sovereignty and the political, as decisions made during exceptions determine the survival of the political community.

Critiques and Controversies Surrounding Schmitt

Carl Schmitt's ideas remain highly controversial, largely due to his association with the Nazi regime and his authoritarian leanings. His concept of the political has been criticized for potentially legitimizing exclusion, violence, and anti-democratic practices. Scholars debate the ethical and normative implications of his friend-enemy distinction and his views on sovereignty.

Association with Authoritarianism

Schmitt's political involvement with National Socialism has led to accusations that his theories provide intellectual justification for totalitarianism. Critics argue that his emphasis on existential conflict and sovereign decision-making undermines democratic pluralism and the rule of law.

Philosophical and Normative Critiques

Many political theorists challenge Schmitt's reduction of politics to antagonism, arguing that it neglects cooperation, dialogue, and democratic deliberation. Others question whether the friend-enemy distinction can adequately account for the complexity of modern political identities and global interdependence.

Legacy and Influence in Modern Political Thought

Despite controversies, Carl Schmitt the concept of the political continues to influence contemporary political theory, legal studies, and international

relations. His insights into the nature of sovereignty, political identity, and crisis management remain relevant in analyzing modern political challenges such as terrorism, state emergencies, and ideological conflicts.

Impact on Political Theory

Schmitt's work has inspired diverse readings ranging from critical theory to realist interpretations of politics. Scholars utilize his concepts to explore the limits of liberal democracy, the nature of political authority, and the dynamics of conflict within and between states.

Applications in Contemporary Politics

Modern political debates on emergency powers, state sovereignty, and political violence often invoke Schmittian ideas. His framework assists in understanding how states respond to perceived threats and the balance between legal order and political necessity.

1. Recognition of the enduring relevance of existential conflict in politics.
2. Understanding sovereignty beyond legal positivism.
3. Analyzing political crises through the lens of the state of exception.
4. Critical engagement with the limits of liberal political theory.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Carl Schmitt and what is 'The Concept of the Political' about?

Carl Schmitt was a German legal and political theorist known for his work on sovereignty and the nature of politics. 'The Concept of the Political' is his influential essay where he defines the political as the distinction between friend and enemy, emphasizing conflict as central to political identity.

What is the central thesis of Carl Schmitt's 'The Concept of the Political'?

The central thesis is that the political is defined by the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy, which transcends other social, economic, or moral divisions, making existential conflict the core of political life.

How does Schmitt differentiate the political from

other social spheres?

Schmitt argues that the political is autonomous and distinct from moral, economic, or aesthetic spheres because it is based on the possibility of conflict and hostility, specifically the friend-enemy distinction, which other spheres do not inherently contain.

Why does Carl Schmitt emphasize the friend-enemy distinction in politics?

Schmitt believes that the friend-enemy distinction captures the essence of political identity and conflict, where a group defines itself in opposition to a perceived existential threat or enemy, which legitimizes collective action and sovereignty.

What role does sovereignty play in Schmitt's political theory in 'The Concept of the Political'?

While sovereignty is more directly addressed in Schmitt's other works, in 'The Concept of the Political' sovereignty is implicit in the ability to decide on the friend-enemy distinction and thus determine the political community and its enemies.

How has 'The Concept of the Political' influenced contemporary political thought?

Schmitt's work has influenced debates on the nature of political identity, sovereignty, and conflict, impacting fields such as international relations, political philosophy, and critiques of liberalism, often sparking discussions about the role of conflict and decision-making in politics.

What criticisms have been made against Schmitt's idea of politics based on friend and enemy?

Critics argue that Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction can justify exclusion, authoritarianism, and violence, potentially undermining democratic pluralism and promoting antagonism rather than cooperation in politics.

Is Schmitt's concept of the political compatible with liberal democracy?

Many scholars contend that Schmitt's concept challenges liberal democracy because it prioritizes existential conflict and decisionism over pluralistic dialogue and compromise, though some interpret his work as a critique meant to refine democratic theory.

How does Schmitt's historical context influence his ideas in 'The Concept of the Political'?

Writing during the interwar period in Germany, Schmitt was influenced by the instability and conflict of the Weimar Republic, which led him to emphasize the inevitability of political conflict and the need for decisive authority.

Can Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction be applied to international relations?

Yes, Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction has been applied in international relations theory to understand how states identify allies and adversaries, framing conflict and war as central elements of global politics.

Additional Resources

1. *The Concept of the Political* by Carl Schmitt

This foundational text by Carl Schmitt introduces his central idea that the political is defined by the distinction between friend and enemy. Schmitt argues that politics is rooted in existential conflict and the potential for violence, challenging liberal notions of consensus. The book is essential for understanding Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy and his theory of sovereignty.

2. *Carl Schmitt and the Political: A Critical Introduction* by Tracy B. Strong
Tracy B. Strong provides a comprehensive introduction to Schmitt's political theories, with a focus on the concept of the political. This book critically examines Schmitt's ideas in the context of 20th-century political thought and offers insights into their relevance today. Strong engages with Schmitt's controversial legacy while highlighting his influence on contemporary political theory.

3. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* by Carl Schmitt

In this influential work, Schmitt explores the relationship between theology and political authority, famously stating that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception." The text complements his ideas in *The Concept of the Political* by emphasizing the role of decision-making in moments of crisis. It is a key resource for understanding Schmitt's view on sovereignty and the state of exception.

4. *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* by William E. Scheuerman

Scheuerman offers a detailed intellectual biography of Carl Schmitt, focusing on how his concept of the political shaped his broader work and political engagement. The book situates Schmitt's ideas within the turbulent historical context of Weimar Germany and examines their implications for modern political theory. It is a valuable resource for readers interested in the historical and intellectual background of Schmitt's thought.

5. *Friend and Enemy: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* by Leo Strauss

This collection of essays, inspired by Leo Strauss's interpretation, delves into Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction as a critique of liberalism's optimistic view of human relations. The book explores how Schmitt's concept of the political challenges the foundations of liberal democratic theory. It is an important work for those studying the tension between liberalism and political realism.

6. *The Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: A Critical Introduction* by Jens Meierhenrich

Meierhenrich offers a critical yet accessible analysis of Schmitt's political theories, including a thorough discussion of the concept of the political. The book explores Schmitt's ideas on sovereignty, dictatorship, and the nature of political conflict, placing them in both historical and

contemporary contexts. This introduction is useful for understanding the complexities and controversies surrounding Schmitt's legacy.

7. *Schmitt's Political Theology: The Paradox of Sovereignty* by Jeffrey L. Kahn

Jeffrey L. Kahn examines the theological underpinnings of Schmitt's political theory, especially the concept of sovereignty as a theological and political paradox. The book analyzes how Schmitt's concept of the political intersects with his views on law, authority, and exception. It offers a nuanced interpretation of Schmitt's thought for scholars interested in political theology.

8. *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* by Carl Schmitt, edited by George Schwab

This edition includes the original text of *The Concept of the Political* alongside critical essays and commentary that contextualize Schmitt's ideas. The expanded edition provides readers with a deeper understanding of the friend-enemy distinction and its implications for political theory. It is an essential resource for students and scholars seeking a comprehensive view of Schmitt's concept.

9. *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* by Ellen Kennedy

Ellen Kennedy explores the paradoxical relationship between authoritarianism and liberal economics in Schmitt's political thought. The book discusses how Schmitt's concept of the political can be seen within the framework of authoritarian liberalism and its impact on modern governance. It offers critical insights into the tensions between political authority and economic freedom in Schmitt's work.

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