

the concept of the political carl schmitt

the concept of the political carl schmitt is a foundational theory in political philosophy that explores the nature of politics, sovereignty, and the distinction between friend and enemy. Carl Schmitt, a prominent 20th-century German legal and political theorist, developed a unique approach to understanding political identity and conflict. His ideas have had a profound influence on legal theory, political science, and contemporary debates about sovereignty and authority. This article delves into Schmitt's central concepts, including the political as a distinct sphere, the role of the sovereign, and the friend-enemy distinction. Additionally, it examines the historical context and the enduring relevance of Schmitt's theories in modern political discourse. The following sections provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of the political Carl Schmitt.

- Understanding the Political: Schmitt's Core Idea
- The Friend-Enemy Distinction
- The Sovereign and the State of Exception
- Historical Context and Intellectual Influences
- Contemporary Relevance and Critiques

Understanding the Political: Schmitt's Core Idea

Carl Schmitt's concept of the political centers on the idea that politics is fundamentally about distinguishing between friend and enemy. Unlike other social spheres such as economics or morality, the political is defined by the intensity of group identification and opposition. Schmitt argues that

political identity is not formed through rational debate or consensus but through existential conflict. This delineation sets politics apart as a unique domain concerned with collective survival and power dynamics.

The Political as an Autonomous Sphere

Schmitt posits that the political cannot be reduced to or fully explained by other categories like ethics, law, or economics. It is autonomous because it deals with existential decisions about life and death, community, and conflict. This autonomy underlines the irreducible nature of political antagonism and the necessity of decisive action in political affairs.

Defining the Political Through Conflict

At the heart of Schmitt's theory is the premise that the political is essentially antagonistic. The presence of a clear distinction between friend and enemy creates the conditions for political grouping and collective identity. This conflictual nature is not merely metaphorical but real, potentially resulting in physical confrontation. Hence, the political is inseparable from the possibility of conflict and war.

The Friend–Enemy Distinction

The friend-enemy distinction is perhaps the most famous and controversial element of Schmitt's concept of the political. It establishes the criteria by which political communities define themselves and identify their opposition. This binary opposition is a decisive factor in political decision-making and sovereignty.

Friend as Political Ally

In Schmitt's framework, a friend is someone who shares a common identity and values within a political community. Friends are united by solidarity and mutual recognition, forming the core of the

political collective. This unity is essential for the stability and survival of the political entity.

Enemy as Existential Threat

The enemy is not merely an opponent or adversary but an existential threat to the political community. This threat legitimizes extraordinary measures, including the suspension of normal legal and moral rules. The enemy represents a danger to the collective existence, which justifies decisive and sometimes violent responses.

Implications of the Friend–Enemy Distinction

- Defines political boundaries and group identity
- Justifies sovereignty and emergency powers
- Highlights the irreducible nature of political conflict
- Raises ethical and legal challenges regarding the treatment of enemies

The Sovereign and the State of Exception

Central to Schmitt's political theory is the concept of sovereignty and the state of exception. The sovereign is the authority who decides when normal laws do not apply and exceptional measures are necessary for the survival of the state. This power underscores the connection between law, politics, and emergency.

Definition of Sovereignty

Schmitt famously defines the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception.” This means that true political authority lies in the capacity to suspend the legal order in times of crisis. Sovereignty is thus not merely about creating laws but about the ultimate decision-making power in moments of existential threat.

The State of Exception Explained

The state of exception refers to extraordinary circumstances where normal legal frameworks are suspended to preserve the political order. Schmitt argues that such moments reveal the true nature of sovereignty and political power. The state of exception blurs the lines between legality and illegality, emphasizing the primacy of political survival.

Role in Modern Political Systems

Schmitt’s ideas on sovereignty and exception have influenced debates on emergency powers, constitutional crises, and authoritarianism. They highlight tensions between legal norms and political necessity that persist in contemporary governance structures.

Historical Context and Intellectual Influences

Understanding the concept of the political Carl Schmitt requires situating it within its historical and intellectual background. Schmitt’s work emerged during the volatile interwar period in Germany, reflecting the political instability and ideological conflicts of the time.

Weimar Republic and Political Turmoil

The collapse of the Weimar Republic and rise of extremist movements deeply influenced Schmitt’s

thinking. He sought to address the challenges of political order, legitimacy, and sovereignty amid democratic decay and social fragmentation.

Philosophical and Legal Influences

Schmitt drew on a wide array of intellectual traditions, including legal positivism, conservative thought, and existential philosophy. His engagement with thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel shaped his views on authority, conflict, and the nature of the political.

Controversies Surrounding Schmitt

Schmitt's affiliation with the Nazi regime and his authoritarian views have generated significant controversy. While his theories remain influential, they are critically examined for their ethical implications and potential misuse in justifying dictatorship.

Contemporary Relevance and Critiques

The concept of the political Carl Schmitt continues to resonate in contemporary political theory, law, and international relations. Scholars and practitioners engage with his ideas to understand sovereignty, emergency powers, and political identity in a globalized world.

Application in Modern Political Thought

Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction and state of exception are used to analyze conflicts, terrorism, and the role of executive power in crises. His insights illuminate the challenges of balancing security and liberty in democratic societies.

Critiques and Limitations

Critics argue that Schmitt's framework risks legitimizing exclusionary and violent politics. The friend-enemy binary can lead to polarization and undermine pluralism. Additionally, the emphasis on sovereign exception raises concerns about the erosion of legal norms and democratic accountability.

Key Debates in Scholarship

1. The ethical implications of political antagonism
2. The relationship between democracy and sovereignty
3. The role of law during states of emergency
4. The relevance of Schmitt's ideas in postmodern and globalized contexts

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Carl Schmitt and why is he significant in political theory?

Carl Schmitt was a German legal and political theorist known for his critique of liberalism and his concept of the political as the distinction between friend and enemy. His work has influenced debates on sovereignty, the state of exception, and the nature of politics.

What is Carl Schmitt's concept of 'the political'?

Carl Schmitt's concept of 'the political' centers on the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy, which defines political identity and conflict. He argues that politics is about existential

oppositions that can lead to conflict, distinguishing it from other social spheres.

How does Carl Schmitt define sovereignty in his political theory?

Schmitt famously defined sovereignty as 'he who decides on the exception,' meaning that the sovereign has the authority to suspend the law in times of crisis, emphasizing the importance of decisive power in maintaining political order.

What role does the 'state of exception' play in Carl Schmitt's political thought?

The 'state of exception' refers to extraordinary circumstances where normal legal rules are suspended. Schmitt argues that the sovereign's ability to declare and control this state is crucial for preserving the political order and responding to existential threats.

How has Carl Schmitt's concept of the political influenced contemporary political debates?

Schmitt's ideas on friend-enemy distinction, sovereignty, and the state of exception have influenced debates on authoritarianism, emergency powers, and political identity, especially in contexts of crisis, nationalism, and challenges to liberal democracy.

What are the main criticisms of Carl Schmitt's political concept?

Critics argue that Schmitt's emphasis on conflict and decisionism can justify authoritarianism and undermine liberal democratic principles. His association with the Nazi regime also raises ethical concerns about the application of his theories.

Additional Resources

1. The Concept of the Political by Carl Schmitt

This foundational text outlines Carl Schmitt's key ideas about the nature of politics, particularly the

friend-enemy distinction. Schmitt argues that the essence of the political lies in the ability to identify and confront existential threats. The book challenges liberal notions of politics by emphasizing conflict and decision-making over consensus.

2. *Carl Schmitt: The End of Law* by Calum M. Neill

Neill explores Schmitt's critique of liberal legalism and parliamentary democracy, focusing on the philosopher's belief in the necessity of sovereign decision-making during states of exception. The book analyzes Schmitt's concept of the "state of exception" and its implications for contemporary political theory and constitutional law.

3. *The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt* by Jacob Blumenfeld

Blumenfeld delves into Schmitt's intertwining of theology and politics, revealing how Schmitt's political concepts are deeply rooted in theological ideas. The book discusses Schmitt's views on sovereignty, the state of exception, and authority, highlighting their religious and metaphysical underpinnings.

4. *Carl Schmitt and the Politics of Hostility* by Tracy B. Strong

Strong offers a comprehensive examination of Schmitt's conception of enmity and political conflict. This book situates Schmitt's thought within the broader context of 20th-century political crises, exploring how his ideas about the friend-enemy distinction have influenced political theory and practice.

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

In this seminal work, Schmitt investigates the relationship between theology and political authority. He famously asserts that "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," emphasizing the importance of decisive power in political leadership. The book is essential for understanding Schmitt's views on sovereignty and legal order.

6. *Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics* by Eran Vigoda-Gadot and Tamar Hermann

This volume assesses the relevance of Schmitt's political theories in the contemporary era characterized by post-political consensus and managerial governance. It critically engages with Schmitt's ideas about political conflict and sovereignty, questioning their applicability in modern

democratic societies.

7. *Friend and Enemy: Essays on the Politics of Carl Schmitt* edited by Bruce Douglass, Michael L. Morgan, and Thomas A. Spragens Jr.

This collection of essays explores various facets of Schmitt's political thought, particularly the friend-enemy distinction as central to understanding political identity and conflict. Contributors analyze Schmitt's influence on political philosophy, international relations, and legal theory.

8. *The Legacy of Carl Schmitt: Law, Politics, and the Exception* by Werner J. Patzelt

Patzelt examines the enduring impact of Schmitt's ideas on legal and political theory, especially his concept of the state of exception. The book discusses how Schmitt's thought continues to provoke debate about the limits of law and the role of political power in times of crisis.

9. *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* by Jan-Werner Müller

Müller critically assesses Schmitt's complex relationship with liberalism and authoritarianism, focusing on Schmitt's advocacy for a strong state alongside economic freedom. The book illuminates the tensions within Schmitt's thought and their implications for contemporary political ideologies.

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