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*Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political* (review of the Swedish edition *Det politiska som begrepp* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2010; translation by Svenja Hums). The German original *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin (1932). Review translated from Swedish, published in *Sociologisk Forskning* 2011:3, pp. 114-116.

While I am writing this book review, there are accounts in the media of a crisis in a well-known fashion house in Paris. The chief designer there was reported to the police for anti-Semitism after remarking very openly “I admire Hitler”.

At the same time, one can note in social science publications frequent positive references to a lawyer and political thinker who in the 1930s expressed himself in a similar way, at a time when National Socialism had triumphed in Germany. This is Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), who in the early 1980s returned to public notice on a broad scale after the journal *Telos* devoted an entire theme issue to him, which attracted much attention. Since then, interest in him and his writings has grown very much. He is now mentioned frequently and is referred to in highly positive terms in recent issues of the *New Left Review*, the *London Review of Books* and *Current Sociology*. How did this come about? How can the degree of acceptance of extreme political views differ so markedly over time? Most of those familiar with Schmitt’s work probably know that he was a member of the NSDAP. They have also very likely heard of his notorious article in 1934, “Der Führer schützt das Recht” (“The Führer protects the law”). There he describes enthusiastically how Germany’s leader at the time was able to create a law of his own and pronounce death sentences without trial: “The true leader is always also a judge as well.”

Can one perhaps nevertheless say that Carl Schmitt’s theories and conceptions are of such class that his political views are best disregarded? One of his particularly well-known theoretical works, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (*The Concept of the Political*) from 1932, is now available in a good Swedish translation. Anyone can read it and adjudge for oneself.

This Swedish edition of the book (entitled *Det politiska som begrepp*, 2010) corresponds to a second, 1963, German version of Schmitt’s book. That second version of the book contains both a newly-written preface and seven pages of final comments aimed, as Schmitt states, at “facilitating the reading of this new edition of a 30-year-old text” and “at least for a short period of time letting the original text, which has almost drowned in a flood of efforts to refute its contents, speak for itself again” (p. 133). Now, nearly 50 years later, critical readings are less common. The most thoroughgoing critique of Schmitt’s theoretical work appears to still be Ingeborg Maus’s *Bürgerliche Rechtstheorie und Faschismus: Zur sozialen Funktion und aktuellen Wirkung der Theorie Carl Schmitts* (1976).

How can one explain the far less critical assessment today than earlier of Schmitt’s work and the much more frequent citation of it

that now takes place? Schmitt writes in the preface to the second (1963) German version of his book that he feels he can do no more than speculate regarding what factors led to the continued interest in his book and a new edition of it being published accordingly. If one speculates regarding this, one could end up concluding that such interest in it is quite in line with the spirit of the times as it has developed in the post-secular societies of today. One often hears formulations nowadays of just what *it is* to be this or that, such as “What it is to be a human being”. Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* aims at providing the reader a clear understanding of “the political itself” or “the essence of the political”. What Schmitt has to say about these matters is sometimes of considerable interest. He provides a broad overview of the political and legal theories of his time and shows himself to be highly conscious of their limitations. At the same time, anyone who believes that the starting point for sociological or political theories should best be *the absence* of conceptual essentialism of any kind does not have particularly much to learn from Schmitt.

The best-known distinction or metaphor in *The Concept of the Political* is presumably that of “friend/enemy”, to be understood, as Schmitt states, “in a concrete, existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols, not muddled together with or hollowed out by economic, moral or other ideas, and not at all in a personal, individualistic sense as an expression of personal feelings and inclinations” (p. 47). Schmitt is very detailed in his argumentation regarding what constitutes a “friend” and an “enemy”, yet it is difficult to understand the text as representing anything much other than a document of its time. What more does it say than that Schmitt recommends use of an existential conflict approach based on the assumption of human wickedness, and the natural state of “war of all against all” (Hobbes)? An unsophisticated sociological conflict perspective would appear to be more fruitful. That means simply describing a given society’s structure in both formal and informal terms based upon diverging interests between social groups that are in a state of conflict with one another.

It has been discussed whether there is any conceptual relationship between the content of Schmitt’s work and the political actions he has taken. Carl-Göran Heidegren argues in his introduction to the Swedish version of *The Concept of the Political* that there is no continuity in Schmitt’s thinking that could explain his becoming a member of the NSDAP, which he did on May 1, 1933. After the fall of the Weimar Republic, people at that time were living in a new period, one in which there was a need of a new form of government, and the new regime “appeared to embody his conception of a leader-centered democracy that is able to distinguish between friend and enemy” (Introduction p. 19). Yet the idea of a “leader-centered democracy” is a major element in National Socialistic ideology. Such an idea was also included already in an early draft of *Der Begriff des Politischen* that was published in 1927, which suggests there to have indeed been a continuity in his thinking. The same basic ideas just referred to are

likewise to be found in the book *Die Diktatur* (“*Dictatorship*”) that Schmitt came out with in 1921.

To the picture that one obtains of Schmitt as a political thinker and a molder of public opinion, one can add that after the end of World War II, as he sat in arrest for a period of time, there is no indication that he expressed even a word concerning his involvement in National Socialism. In contrast, in his diary entries during the years 1947 to 1951 he seemed to be very open in the feelings and views he expressed regarding this period in his life. His diaries were intended for posthumous publication. This took place in 1991, when his book *Glossarium* appeared. In it, one can read the following concerning a partial ban on publication to which he was once subjected: “Genocide and slaughter, pathetic concepts [...] but against me a shameless murder of ideas has taken place” (p. 265). Despite all of this, there are signs of political clear-sightedness on his part, such as in his stating, “Nothing is more interchangeable than being politically left and being politically right” (p. 264). Such a reflection appears to be quite applicable today, in a wide variety of situations. Also, Schmitt’s cherished concept pair of “friend/enemy” can perhaps be regarded as an alternative “left versus right” for intellectuals who endeavor to keep abreast of societal developments that are underway.

The lawyer and legal philosopher Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde has the last word in the Swedish version of Schmitt’s book. He poses the question of whether Schmitt’s constitutional theory and the concepts behind it are still applicable to “[...] understand the state, the life within a state, and the existence of a state” (p. 167). Well, if one believes that social sciences and political science should return to and pose existential questions regarding such matters as “the essence of politics” and “what sense and meaning war can be said to have” – perhaps, but otherwise no.

A question to consider in this context is of course how, and with what motives, does a pluralistic democratic society determine what can be permitted to be said and by whom, for example about the deeds of different dictatorships in world history. The chief designer in Paris was reported to the police and lost his job, whereas Carl Schmitt, in contrast, is achieving new posthumous triumphs: from “ideocidium” to being a leading intellectual and a respected political theoretician.

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Translated by Robert Goldsmith