SOMETHING TO DIE FOR. THE INDIVIDUAL
AS INTERRUPTION OF THE POLITICAL IN CARL SCHMITT'S
THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL

LAVINIA MARIN

Abstract. This article aims to question the anti-individualist stance in Carl Schmitt's concept of the political by uncovering the historical bias of Schmitt's anti-individualism, seen here as one of the main driving forces behind his argument. For Schmitt, the political can take place only when a collectivity is able to declare war to another collectivity on the basis of feeling existentially threatened by the latter. As such, Schmitt's framework implies the inescapable possibility of war, as the condition which makes possible the political. Acknowledging the previous criticisms of Schmitt raised by John Rawls and Iris Marion Young, this article takes a different path by pointing to certain historically tacit assumptions in 1927 Germany which Schmitt took for granted, but which are not suitable for a contemporary political theory. The demonstration is done first by showing how the structure of interruption functions in the works of Schmitt, then showing how he conceives of the individual as a possible interruption of the political in history, and then placing this structure of interruption in the historical context of Schmitt's writing.

Keywords: Carl Schmitt, political community, xenophobia, anti-individualism, liberalism, concept of the political, war.

> "Germany is Hamlet!"
> Ferdinand Freiligrath (1844)

INTRODUCTION

Carl Schmitt was one of the most intriguing political thinkers of the 20th century. Although his political philosophy is tainted by his involvement in the Nazi party, as he was most known for being the "crown jurist of the Third Reich", Schmitt's thought remains an intriguing challenge for many political philosophers

Lavinia Marin ✉
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Laboratory for Education and Society, Research Group Education, Culture & Society, Andreas Vesaliusstraat 2 – bus 3761, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium; e-mail: lavinia@xindi.ro

especially today. As Schmitt's thinking entails a community-based politics which excludes the other(s) and, thus, leads directly to xenophobia as an unavoidable result of the political, there is a pressing need to answer Schmitt's challenges today more than ever. This is perhaps why preeminent contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Negri or Slavoj Žižek keep coming back to Schmitt and re-engaging with his work. In the past decades, there has been a renewed interest in the work of Schmitt both on a theoretical and practical level, also because of the rise of the new waves of nationalism coupled with xenophobia in Europe and elsewhere.

The challenge left behind by Schmitt is how to conceptualise the collective identity inside a political body without relying on the fear of a common enemy. Schmitt famously defined the political as being a concept in its own right which cannot be reduced to other concepts, similar to the ethical or the aesthetic. While the ethical is defined by the good/bad distinction, and the aesthetical by the beautiful/ugly, the political is based on the friend/enemy distinction.[1] Schmitt maintains that the political can be realised only inside a state, and, furthermore, that a state is genuinely a political actor when it can define who is the common enemy. The enemy is understood here as the one who existentially threatens the community's way of life and therefore can only be a collective enemy: "An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity."[2] Only under the existential threat of an enemy does the nation unite as a political community. Hence the political occurs only when the real possibility of war exists at the same time. If the world were to reach the eternal peace, then all nations would cease to be political and become something else, perhaps economic or technological communities.[3]

1. THE CURRENT RELEVANCE
OF SCHMITT'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Nowadays this Schmittian understanding of the community as being defined by the common enemy is re-emerging in the political arena. Perhaps because the European states are beginning to move away from political action, by transferring their right to wage war to supra-national entities such as NATO, new political voices are starting to emerge both at sub-national and supra-national level. A sub-national case study can be observed with the small town Pontoglio, in Italy, where in 2015 the local authorities wrote on the entrance sign to their town: "Pontoglio, town of western culture and deep Christian tradition. People unwilling to respect

---

[1] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Expanded ed. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0707/2006034003-b.html, 26.
[2] Ibid., 28.
[3] Ibid., 33.

local culture and tradition are invited to leave."[4] The Italian press immediately understood the implications of the sign as an anti-Islamic message: "Although not expressly stated, the messages were understood to be directed in particular at Muslims, with local residents reportedly dubbing them 'no-Islam signs'."[5]

Another current example, at a supra-national level, is the case of PEGIDA, the German association whose name in German means "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West". What unites the members of PEGIDA was not some form of political creed, nor their nationality, rather the felt existential threat that the Islamisation of Europe was putting their way of life in danger. What makes this example even more interesting is that PEGIDA, although it started as a German association, now has branches in many other European countries which recently united in a trans-national coalition, "Fortress Europe". The general attitude of the local governments is that neither Pontoglio nor "Fortress Europe" have the legal right to make such political statements as "European/Italian culture is defined by … X". This general feeling is in agreement with Schmitt's thinking: only the state should define who the common enemy is because the state is the only legitimate political actor in the framework of Schmitt's theory. However, Schmitt tells us that in case a state is too weak and refuses to take on the role of naming the common enemy, then other factions will take upon themselves this political role. The political throne cannot remain empty for a long time, because power abhors vacuum.

The emergence of political actions such as "Fortress Europe" or the identity-statement of Pontoglio show us that the impetus behind Schmitt's theory is now more alive than ever. The nation state has died, but the xenophobic feeling is increasingly on the rise in the Western world. Therefore it is important to try to deconstruct the assumptions behind Schmitt's political theory in order to show why the political defined through the constant possibility of war cannot be a usable concept for the 21st century.

2. CLASSICAL CRITICISMS OF SCHMITT'S CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL

Schmitt has been already criticised by many thinkers before. For example John Rawls criticised Schmitt without naming him in his work, *Political Liberalism*, where he stated that:

> Those who reject constitutional democracy with its criterion of reciprocity will of course reject the very idea of public reason. For them the political relation may be that of friend or foe, to those of a particular religious or secular

---

[4] Umberto Bacchi, "No-Islam signs raised in Italian village of Pontoglio urging Muslims to adapt or leave," *International Business Times*, December 17, 2015, accessed December 20, 2015, http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/no-islam-signs-raised-italian-village-pontoglio-urging-muslims-adapt-leave-1533828.

[5] Ibid.

community or those who are not; or it may be a relentless struggle to win the world for the whole truth. Political liberalism does not engage those who think this way. The zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs to democratic citizenship.[6]

The criticism of Rawls is very strong if one embraces the idea of a public reason, hence an individualistic and liberal outlook on society. But Schmitt would have answered probably that there is no social cement as strong as common fear of the enemy, and that public reason stands for a poor substitute of social cohesion. Ultimately Rawls and Schmitt stand on opposite sides, divided by their trust in the individual's right to self-determination. Hence an individualist critique of Schmitt does not touch the core of his thinking because it comes from another conceptual framework. Schmitt must be criticised with his own weapons, by accepting his conceptual universe, no matter how much one might disagree with his assumptions.

Another criticism, coming from a real world perspective, can be encountered in the work of Iris Marion Young who, following Derrida and Adorno, defines the metaphysics of Schmitt as a "metaphysics that denies difference" inspired by a "logic of identity".[7] According to Young, the conceptual problem of such a logic of identity is that it entails an idealised version of subjects who

> are present to themselves and presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. The desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand, and political sectarianism on the other.[8]

However, the fact that Schmitt's thinking has many commonalities with the ethnic chauvinism and sectarianism cannot stand in itself as a ground for dismissing the theory because for Schmitt the main point is that it is irrelevant on what grounds the common enemy is defined as long as there is an enemy. Schmitt clearly states that the basis for feeling existentially threatened by another community can be anything: "Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy."[9] Historically, it happened that race, religion and culture were very strong dividers among nations and the main causes of war in the last century. But this does not mean that other differences cannot be found in the near future which will lead to exclusion, for example socio-economic status. Schmitt's theory does not necessarily lead to racism or

---

[6] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Expanded ed., Columbia classics in philosophy (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2005), 442.

[7] Iris M. Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," *Social Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (1986): 1–2, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23556621.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 37.

chauvinism in itself, it is a larger structure of thinking that encompasses all forms of political exclusion.

This article will take a different path in criticising Schmitt, neither by questioning Schmitt's metaphysical assumption, nor by showing the real-world consequences of similar-minded theories. Rather, the path taken by this article is to show that Schmitt's thinking is dated, conceived in a very particular historical context – the Germany between the two world wars – and thus based on certain idiosyncrasies specific to that age which we cannot share anymore nowadays. The aim is to show why Schmitt's thinking is not suitable for a contemporary political theory and should be kept in the museum of political ideas.

The main argument in this paper will trace the roots of the strong anti-individualist tendency in Carl Schmitt's concept of the political illustrated in his 1927 essay, *The Concept of the Political*. Many commentators have noticed Schmitt's strong dislike of individualism but this is usually attributed to his aversion of liberalism, which can be conceived as the political expression of individualism. To the question "Is there any space left for individual dissent in the political community?" Schmitt would probably answer: "No, and there should not be." It is this normative dimension of the anti-individualism in Schmitt that should strike any reader as strange. According to Schmitt, citizens of a state should not ever wish to oppose the political decisions of their sovereign. But what is wrong with being a thinking individual inside the political community, especially in times of exception such as the times of war? Why should one not strive to be a pacifist in the style of Bertrand Russell, going against the public opinion and the state? After all, the most important myths regarding heroism are centred on individuals fighting the system embodied by the Leviathan, the windmills, the faceless crowds, etc. Why is the political the only way to give meaning to the individual life for Carl Schmitt?

3. THE STRUCTURE OF INTERRUPTION
IN SCHMITT'S WRITINGS

In tracing the roots of Schmitt's anti-individualism this paper will follow the structure of interruption which appears in many of Schmitt's writings. The structure of the interruption functions as a taboo, as something that cannot be said but works nonetheless to influence everything around it. Hence this paper will trace what is the unspoken or the taboo in Schmitt's discussion of the political. This approach was inspired by two authors: Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt himself. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben states that: "In every theoretical work – and maybe in every human work – there is something like an unsaid. There are authors who attempt to approach this unsaid and allusively evoke it, while others knowingly leave it unspoken. Both Schmitt and Peterson belong in this second

category."[10] For Agamben this unsaid in Schmitt's work is the problem of what is stopping the end of history from happening, namely what is arresting the *eschaton*. While Agamben was commenting on a later work of Schmitt, *The Nomos of Earth* (1950), where this theological problem was most pressing for Schmitt, it will be shown in this article that actually for the earlier Schmitt, writing *The Concept of the Political* in the 1930s, there was something else which remained unsaid at that time.

The clearest description of the structure of interruption is made by Schmitt when commenting on the work of Shakespeare in his 1956 essay *Hamlet or Hecuba: The irruption of time into play*. Here Schmitt posits an anti-individualistic aesthetic because he attributes the genuine tragic core of *Hamlet* not to the individual genius of Shakespeare, but to the irruption of time as history in the literary work. The history in Shakespeare's work was represented by certain events which were taboo in Elizabethan England, as nobody could speak about them in a public manner, yet widely known to the theatre audience. In writing *Hamlet*, which starts from the pattern of a simple revenge play with a standard plot, Shakespeare is forced to make adjustments so that the current taboos are not revealed on stage: the murderous queen and the problem of the legitimate heir to the throne. Both issues were the cause of a very tense situation at Elisabeth's court and later in James' court, but could also be inscribed in the larger ongoing tensions between Catholics and Protestants in England. Shakespeare could not blame the queen for killing Hamlet's father in the play, because everyone in the audience would have immediately thought of the actual queen Elizabeth I and her shady ascension to the throne. Shakespeare had to find a creative solution in writing around the current taboos of his time while avoiding to blame the queen for murder or tracing clearly who had the legitimate right to the throne in the play. The creative solutions found by Shakespeare were bending the standard plot and, as such, made Shakespeare's writing touch a tragic core otherwise impossible to invent, thinks Schmitt.[11]

Schmitt's commentary of *Hamlet* aims to explain how could one of Europe's main mythical characters – alongside Quixote and Faust – be the creation of an individual imagination? For Schmitt, who was an anti-individualist as mentioned before, the problem of the individual genius had to be solved. No matter how brilliant was Shakespeare, the source of the myth had to be outside his own will, something created with the tacit complicity of the audience of his plays: "A poet can and must invent a lot, but he cannot invent the reality core of a tragic action." [12] As history irrupts in the middle of the play, the aesthetic rules are abolished. Such rules were the standard plot of the revenge-play where the actions had to follow a

---

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a theological genealogy of economy and government (Homo Sacer II, 2)*, with the assistance of Lorenzo Chiesa, and Matteo Mandarini, Meridian, crossing aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 7.

[11] Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into Play*, with the assistance of Simona Draghici (Corvallis OR: Plutarch Press, 2006), 17.

[12] Ibid., 39.

certain pattern. The history is external to the aesthetic event of creation, it introduces something foreign in its composition, another rule. The Shakespearian melodrama (*Trauerspiel*) was for Schmitt just a game. A theatre play has nothing serious in it, thinks Schmitt, and this is why he puts in stark opposition *Hamlet*, as the real tragedy, with the play-within-the-play where actors cry for Hecuba, while there is nothing worth crying for there – thought Schmitt.

The distinction game (*Spiel*) – seriousness (*Ernst*) appears time and again in Schmitt's work and is a central conceptual mechanism for his thinking. For example, we find it in *The Theory of the Partisan* (1963) where the game-like war is defined in opposition to the absolute war. Schmitt borrows this distinction from Lenin of whom he talks with great admiration:

> Only revolutionary war is true war for Lenin, because it derives from absolute enmity. Everything else is a conventional game. […] The distinction between war (*Woina*) and play (*Igra*) is accentuated by Lenin himself in a marginal note to a passage in Chapter 23 of Clausewitz's Book II ("Keys to the Country") [...] In comparison with a war of absolute enmity, the contained war of classical European international law, proceeding by recognized rules, is little more than a duel between cavaliers seeking satisfaction. To a communist like Lenin, imbued with absolute enmity, such a war could only appear to be a mere game, a game that he would play in order to mislead the enemy, but one which he basically despised and thought risible.[13]

The absolute war is the only serious war, thinks Schmitt, and removing the conventional character of the uniforms (the regulars) makes it more serious. The absolute war is the revolutionary war because only then everyone is involved, the whole population is a member of the partisans – potentially, hence the enemy becomes the absolute enemy, i.e. the one which must be annihilated. [14]

The structure of interruption of the real manifests itself whenever some outside laws are acting into a fairly predictable domain, and this interruption splits the domain into game and seriousness. For Schmitt, the seriousness is the only one that matters, whereas the domain of the game belongs to the Romantic irony and to the imagination. The interruption functions like the exception in the normal affairs of the state. As soon as the state of exception is declared, citizens realise that their peaceful life was a mere game, a façade, and that the state protected their lives previously only so that they can die for their country in case of war. In Schmitt's thinking, the interruption as an external event is what gives meaning to an otherwise flat domain: the irruption of history gives meaning to a theatre play, the irruption of war is what gives meaning to the state in times of peace. But what needs to irrupt and interrupt the political in order to give it meaning? Is there a

---

[13] Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan: A Commentary on the Concept of the Political* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1963 (2004)), 35–36.
[14] Ibid., 36.

conceptual equivalent to the interruption of the aesthetic by the history that could explain Schmitt's political work? Here we turn to the *Concept of the Political* for an explanation.

4. THE CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING OF THE POLITICAL: THE POLITICAL IS, THE POLITICAL MUST BE

Schmitt famously defined the political as an antagonism based on the friend/enemy distinction. As such, the political is not a binary state, i.e. one is political or not, but rather a gradual distinction: "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping."[15] Any potential conflict that could escalate into a war becomes a political conflict.

Schmitt uses multiple strategies to justify his definition of the political as the friend/enemy distinction. Upon closer inspection, it seems that there is such a thing as over-justification in his case. Thus Schmitt finds justifications for his concept in the theory of political realism, in historical evidence, in aesthetics, and in theology. Though Schmitt tries to show that the political will happen regardless whether we want it or not, as a "fact of life" [16], he also states that the political needs to be and must be. This normative dimension, unnecessary if he had confined himself to political realism, is what leads ultimately to his anti-individualistic stance. Schmitt cannot argue dispassionately for the political, he must plead with ardour for its eternal existence.

As a pure philosophical concept, Schmitt distinguishes the political through its specific antagonistic distinction: as the ethical takes place in a realm between good and evil, similarly the political exists between the distinction friend/enemy. This is a relational definition, anti-substantial and anti-essentialist. He arrives at this distinction by using an archaeology of political concepts: at their root, all political concepts were forged against someone, in a polemic or battle that we came to forget:

> Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term.[17]

The political terms that we use now are mere "ghost-like abstractions" of a past conflict that we seem to have forgotten.

[15] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 29.
[16] Ibid., 33.
[17] Ibid., 30–31.

Another way to ground the political for Schmitt is to point at the actual international relations forged between the states. Reality itself confronts us with this distinction: "The concern here is neither with abstractions nor with normative ideals, but with inherent reality and the real possibility of such a distinction."[18] Current states and nations (in the 1930s) grouped themselves around this "antithesis" which was "an ever present possibility for every people existing in the political sphere."[19] Furthermore, if states decide to avoid this distinction and organise themselves peacefully, these will be extinct or be conquered by other states: "Only a weak people will disappear. […] As long as a state exists, there will thus always be in the world more than just one state. A world state which embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exist. The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe."[20]

The political also receives an aesthetic justification by being defined as the most intense relation that humans can experience. For Schmitt, by definition, any difference which becomes intense enough as to be felt existentially threatening, is political. This is because the utmost intensity comes from the threat of death. "The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy."[21] Behind this aesthetic notion, the concept of seriousness emerges: Schmitt assumes that something cannot be serious unless one wants to die for it. To be serious for Schmitt means to be dead-serious. The meaningful life for the individual is only given by the possibility to die for one's community.

The final justification is the normative one and also the most puzzling. Near the end of *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt arrives at an anthropological profession of faith, partially inspired by Machiavelli: all men are fundamentally evil. From this he concludes that all political theories are either pessimistic (like his own) or optimistic (such as liberalism which professes a faith in human improvement). But if men are taken to be evil by nature, then two consequences follow: men need to be ruled by someone who knows better and will take all blame for them – hence the need for a Sovereign; the second one is that the people need to believe in something greater than themselves. If they did not, then they would probably kill each other, like Ivan Karamazov hypothesised in Dostoevsky's novel *The Karamazov Brothers* with the famous phrase "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted".[22] Schmitt was an admirer of Dostoevsky and the echoes of the Russian writer can be heard all through his work. Schmitt was aware that religion's word was dead for many people, hence in order to prevent humanity from going into a

[18] Ibid., 28.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 53.
[21] Ibid., 33.
[22] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers* (OUP Oxford, 2008).

bellum omnium contra omnes, something had to replace the dead God announced by Nietzsche and Ivan Karamazov. People needed to believe in something, and Schmitt proposes the political community as the replacement for God's empty spot. It was the only logical option as the political is secularised theology in Schmitt's system.[23] But this new belief in the political community meant that it had to be just like the theological faith which it was replacing: without doubt, ardent, and total. God is dead hence the Political must be alive.

Theology as an ancestor of the political has a disadvantage: it carries with it the problematic distinction between the chosen people and everybody else back into the political realm. Since all political concepts are secularised theological concepts, the theological roots of the political carry into the political the core distinction chosen ones/ not-chosen and translate it into the political distinction friend/enemy: "The fundamental theological dogma of the evilness of the world and man leads, just as does the distinction of friend and enemy, to a categorization of men and makes impossible the undifferentiated optimism of a universal conception of man."[24] It is in the nature of men to categorise the others as enemies or the not-chosen-ones. If people would not believe in their own superiority as the chosen ones, then there would be no faith, hence no salvation. Theology is predicated on the existence of the Other, the Stranger, the damned not-chosen.

This normative grounding is the most problematic in Schmitt's work. He did not need it, the political could have stood up on its own as a *Realpolitik* concept, grounded in history. But Schmitt felt the need to add this emphasis: the political must be, it is necessary for the humanity because all humans are evil. Schmitt re-iterates throughout the essay that the political will always exist, as long as there will be any differences between humans, and that the great contenders of the political, namely economy and technology, will also succumb to politics eventually.[25] However, Schmitt would not be arguing so passionately for the need for the political unless he would not feel that the political can end. This can be inferred from the relation between the political and its history.

5. THE RELATION BETWEEN HISTORY AND THE POLITICAL

The 1956 essay *Hamlet or Hecuba* outlines a key aspect in the relation between the political and the historical. According to Schmitt, the age of the political had a definite start in Europe at the end of the 100 years' war. The political could begin only after the theological ceased to be the main way to define

---

[23] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* Studies in contemporary German Social thought (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 1985), translated by George Schwab, 1.

[24] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 65.

[25] Ibid., 78.

human relations: "The sovereign state and politics are diametrically opposite to the medieval forms and methods of an ecclesiastical and feudal domination."[26] The famous idea advanced by Schmitt that all political concepts are secularised theological concepts needed an inciting event to put an end to the rule of theology in human affairs. This event was a war:

> The hundred-year civil war between Catholics and Protestants could not be wound up but by dethroning the theologians, because they kept stirring up civil war by their doctrines of tyrannicide and just war. In the place of the medieval order, feudal or corporative, the establishment and maintenance of public tranquillity, security, and order have been the legitimizing performance of this newly structured state.[27]

Schmitt opposes the political to barbarism: "Politics, police and politeness thus become a troika of modern progress against ecclesiastical fanaticism and feudal anarchy, in short, against medieval barbarity."[28] In other words, the historical emergence of the age of the political was a auspicious event in European history. But this has two consequences for Schmitt's argument: first, that the age of the political can end just as well as it started; secondly, that every progress leads eventually to a form of decay. The theological nature of the political concepts implies a linear conception of time, characteristic to Christianity, where time advances straightways towards Apocalypse. For Schmitt the problem of the end of history was acutely present in several of his writings. It is most obvious when he discusses technology and asks whether the age of technology "in which the soul is helpless and powerless"[29] signifies the end of the political. But in 1927 Schmitt was not ready to admit defeat yet, the time had not yet come to secularise the political in technology.

If the age of the political had started because of a war, could it not end also by a war? This is the most pressing question which stands behind Schmitt's attempts to ground the political through any way possible. After the First World War the League of Nations emerged as an international attempt to prevent any future wars, and Schmitt goes to great lengths to show how absurd and non-political this idea was. Any idea of universal pacifism, be it from an anarchist or liberal perspective, is shot down by Schmitt in his 1927 essay. But the liberals were the real enemies for Schmitt's concept of the political because of their essential individualist outlook on society. Schmitt thought that the liberals, led by their egotistical political romanticism, were guilty for not taking seriously the political with all its possibility of death and annihilation. This is where the root of the Schmittian anti-individualism can be found. If the liberals are right and one should pursue egotistically one's interests, then it is in everybody's interest to have eternal

---

[26] Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, 54.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 54–55.
[29] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 92–93.

peace, hence to end the age of the political once and for all (understood in Schmittian terms as the age where a war is always possible). The most dangerous for Schmitt's concept of the political was the individual subject which tried to act as an interruption of the age of the political in the 20th century.

6. THE INDIVIDUAL INTERRUPTION OF THE POLITICAL

According to Hooker, Schmitt saw a flaw in Hobbes' political theory which had left open some space for individual autonomy: "in failing properly to subordinate the 'covenant' of the people to the power of the sovereign, Hobbes opened up a conceptual gap that has been widened ever since by the liberal assertion of the primacy of individual *veritas* over the *auctoritas* of the state."[30] It is this gap which the liberals tried to widen and Schmitt tried to close.

Schmitt traces everything that is problematic with the individual in the political community by describing the problem of romantic irony. For Schmitt the Romantic's way of avoiding reality's constraints is a sign of irresponsibility: the Romantic "ironically avoids the constraints of objectivity and guards himself against becoming committed to anything. The reservation of all infinite possibilities lies in irony. In this way, he preserves his own inner, genial freedom, which consists in not giving up any possibility."[31] Like a child, the romantic wants it all, to try everything, to explore everything. Schmitt sees it as his duty to take on the role of an adult and point out that there are limits. Irony must be dropped when things become dead-serious, i.e. in case of war. Schmitt speaks with contempt of those who do not want to die, rallying Hegel's notion of the bourgeois:

> The bourgeois is an individual who does not want to leave the apolitical riskless private sphere. He rests in the possession of his private property, and under the justification of his possessive individualism he acts as an individual against the totality. He is a man who finds his compensation for his political nullity in the fruits of freedom and enrichment and above all in the total security of its use. Consequently he wants to be spared bravery and exempted from the danger of a violent death.[32]

The Seriousness (*Ernst*) is the highest value for Schmitt, and the most obvious commitment to seriousness is the will to die for something. Not wanting to die means the impossibility to commit, leading to a life of egotism and consumerism. Hence it is the ethical task of the community to give meaning to the

---

[30] William A. Hooker, "The state in the international theory of Carl Schmitt: Meaning and failure of an ordering principle" (LSE, 01/01/2008), 18.

[31] Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism,* Studies in contemporary German Social thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 72.

[32] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 62–63.

individual life which otherwise would be lost in egotism. Here one can discern the influence of Kierkegaard's insight that the individual must have a higher purpose for one's life, because the self is a relation between the infinite and the finite: "But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself."[33] Schmitt redefined this relation by replacing the absolute in Kierkegaard's equation with the political community. The true ethical task for Schmitt is to become a member of a community, to identify with it, to die for it. Only the community brings the individual out of his petty self, from the rule of his impulses, and gives him something to live for, something to die for. According to Tracy B. Strong, writing in the introduction to *The Concept of the Political*, "Schmitt clearly thought that he had given a positive answer to the first question: that people will only be responsible for what they are if the reality of death and conflict remains present."[34]

For Schmitt, the Kierkegaardian notion of responsibility to oneself is reversed into a responsibility towards the community alone. According to Kierkegaard, one cannot escape the ethical task of becoming a self:

> [e]thically it is the task of every individual to become a whole human being; just as it is the ethical presupposition that everyone is born in the state of being able to become one. That no one should manage is irrelevant; the point is that the requirement is there. And however many cowardly, mediocre and hoodwinked individuals joined in a project of abandoning themselves to become something *en masse* with the help of the generation, ethics does not haggle.[35]

But for Schmitt, the ethical task of becoming a self turns into the political task of becoming a member of a community.

Schmitt needed to ground the individual way of life into the community because, otherwise, the individual had the capacity to end the age of the political. A first attempt, illustrated by the League of Nations, was already underway when Schmitt was writing his essay on the political. Schmitt had to blame the bourgeois fear of death for the foundation of pacifist-oriented international organisations, because the other option would have been to blame the war itself for the destruction of the political will in Europe. Schmitt could not bring himself to admit in 1927 that the First World War was a mistake. Only later he admitted it, in 1963,

---

[33] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, with the assistance of Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's writings 19 (Princeton, Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

[34] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, xvii.

[35] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, with the assistance of Alastair Hannay, Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0906/2009007357-b.html, 290.

with the amendment that the First World War had been a mistake because there was no real enemy involved: "In 1914 the peoples and regimes of Europe stumbled into World War I without real enmity. Real enmity was first engendered by the war itself, which began as a conventional state war of European international law and ended as an international civil war of revolutionary class enmity."[36] This was the unspoken taboo between the two wars in Germany. To admit that the war was a mistake meant to not be a true German. Schmitt blamed the individuals for their liberal politics which tried to construct a world without wars instead of blaming the senseless war which had made people die for nothing, with no real enemy – to use his terms.

In Schmitt's system, the individual has no place in the political community without willing to sacrifice himself for the others, whenever there appears an existential threat. There is no place for individual dissent because the political apparatus must go on, and this apparatus is fed with the possibility of another war. The possibility of war must be always present in the lives of people and it must be taken seriously by all in order to function efficiently. The original catastrophe of the 15th century was when people, tired by a hundred years war, stopped caring about the theological differences which had divided their parents and grandparents. With the end of the 100 years' war, the reign of the theological in Europe ended, and the age of the political started. For Schmitt a major concern was that perhaps the First World War might lead to a similar end of the age of the political. Schmitt wanted to counter people's tiredness of politics by feeding the political machine with new differences and antagonisms. The First World War as a war that promised to end the age of the political was the original catastrophe of the 20th century for Schmitt. However, this did not happen, Germany found another set of "real" enemies and the war started again.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have shown how Carl Schmitt grounds his concept of the political in an anti-individualist stance which informs all his later assumptions. This is not a novel finding, as already Rawls had pointed out the anti-individualist stance of Schmitt. However, the contribution of this article can be found in making explicit the historical context of Schmitt's anti-individualism. Thus, historically, Schmitt found himself writing in a time of crisis for Germany between the two world wars, a Germany which was trying to reconstruct its national dignity after having lost a war. At that time in Germany there was a strong social taboo against admitting that the First World War had been a German blunder and that it would have been better not to go into open armed conflict. Schmitt works around this taboo similarly to Shakespeare's going around the Elizabethan interdictions while

---

[36] Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan*, 67–68.

writing *Hamlet*; thus Schmitt is forced to justify any war with political ends, hence he ends up placing the right to wage war at the very heart of the political. Ultimately, the roots of Schmitt's political theory remain grounded in a historical soil which is now very alien to us ; only by being aware of the historicity of his thought we can begin resisting to the lure of his political theory.

REFERENCES

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a theological genealogy of economy and government (Homo Sacer II, 2)*. With the assistance of Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini. Meridian, crossing aesthetics. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011.

Bacchi, Umberto. "No-Islam signs raised in Italian village of Pontoglio urging Muslims to adapt or leave." *International Business Times*, December 17, 2015. Accessed December 20, 2015. http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/no-islam-signs-raised-italian-village-pontoglio-urging-muslims-adapt-leave-1533828.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Karamazov Brothers*. OUP Oxford, 2008.

Hooker, William A. "The state in the international theory of Carl Schmitt: Meaning and failure of an ordering principle." LSE, January 1, 2008.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death*. With the assistance of Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Kierkegaard's writings 19. Princeton, Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1980.

———. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. With the assistance of Alastair Hannay. Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0906/2009007357-b.html.

Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. Expanded ed. Columbia classics in philosophy. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Schmitt, Carl. *The Theory of the Partisan: A Commentary on the Concept of the Political*. Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1963 (2004).

———. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty.* Studies in contemporary German Social thought. Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 1985. translated by George Schwab.

———. *Political Romanticism.* Studies in contemporary German Social thought. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

———. *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into Play*. With the assistance of Simona Draghici. Corvallis OR: Plutarch Press, 2006.

———. *The Concept of the Political*. Expanded ed. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0707/2006034003-b.html.

Young, Iris M. "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference." *Social Theory and Practice* 12, no. 1 (1986): 1–26. http://www.jstor.org/ stable/ 23556621.