Singularity and Repetition

in Carl Schmitt's Vision of History

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Abstract:

Despite the problematic political positions he adopted during his life span, the work of Carl Schmitt contains a fascinating argument in favour of 'the political', which is understood as a plural symbolic space composed of friends and enemies who reciprocally recognise each other. Schmitt's struggle for the political is a struggle for a public spirit which accounts for this plurality. One of the terrains on which Schmitt wages this struggle is that of historical meaning. The image of history is crucial for the political, as it is one level on which the relation between enemies is symbolised. In this paper, Schmitt's polemic for a political conception of history, which gives the enemy and the defeated their due place as political subjects, will be reconstructed. Central to Schmitt's endeavour is the attempt to think historical singularity, against the notion of repetition in history, against the understanding of history as a reservoir of 'lessons' and against ideologies of progress. Through his polemic, a profane and sober image of history appears which stresses singularity, relative contingency and openness, and the pluralisation of social temporalities. The enigmatic notion of the katechon will play a crucial role in providing a very minimal but crucial form of historical meaning for such a political conception of history.

Key words: Carl Schmitt, the political, historical singularity, repetition, katechon

Introduction

Central to Schmitt's work is a recurrent polemic in favor of 'the political'. Not only his book on the concept of the political, but also most of his other texts can be read as an argument against depoliticisation. Of course, throughout his life span he took concrete political positions, which were often very problematic, such as his advocacy for plebiscitary presidency under the Weimar Republic or his alliance with the Nazis. What makes his theoretical production interesting, however, is not the concrete struggles Schmitt waged against definite enemies, but his defense of the political as such.

Although they were always also interventions in a concrete political conjuncture, Schmitt's main books of the twenties, but also some of his later works, are philosophically located on a metalevel: they are philosophical struggles against certain ways of thinking or "types of spirit", as Schmitt called them¹, which threaten to undermine the political. 'The political' entails a certain spirit, or, as one would say nowadays, a 'symbolic order', structuring the relations and institutions between inimical (groups of) human beings and governing their self-understanding. In *Political Theology* or in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, for example, Schmitt polemicised against economic and technical ways of thinking, which depoliticise human relations. In the *Concept of the Political*, but also in other works, he mainly criticised ways of thinking which threaten to intensify the political relation between friend and enemy to such an extent as to take it "beyond the political" (*über das Politische hinausgehend*)². Schmitt's philosophical strategy thus consists of the attempt to find a way of

¹ C. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 11.

² The English translation "transcending the limits of the political framework" (C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36) does not have the strong and concise meaning as the original German "*über das Politische hinausgehend*" (C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 37).

thinking or 'spirit' which is genuinely political, through polemic with depoliticising and 'hyperpoliticising' ways of thinking, thus finding a middle ground between these extremes. The political denotes the "degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation."³ This intensity is produced symbolically, through the way the enemy is morally or spiritually "put into question."⁴ The political is then situated on a scale of increasing intensity between a pre-political level, on which the social relation is not yet interpreted as a friend/enemy opposition, and a hyperpolitical level where the antagonism is intensified to such a degree that the enemy is being moralised⁵ or theologised⁶.

As a result of this metapolitical fight, a rather formal way of thinking 'the political' appears. Several authors have underlined this formal and even nihilistic aspect of Schmitt's thinking of the political⁷. However, people who accuse Schmitt of nihilism often remain blind for the fact that 'the political' for Schmitt is something worth fighting for, that its loss through de- or hyperpoliticisation would be dangerous. In this sense, his work has some similarities to Arendt's. My contention is that, precisely because of its formal nature, Schmitt's philosophical position about the political can be upheld without endorsing the concrete and often very problematic political stances Schmitt adopted during his lifetime. His defense of the political is situated on a metapolitical or metaphilosophical level of the

³ C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

⁴ C. Schmitt, "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West. Bemerkungen zu Ernst Jüngers Schrift: 'Der Gordische Knoten'," in C. Schmitt, *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 533.

⁵ C. Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1991), 190; C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 36; C. Schmitt, "Theory of the partisan", *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, 3 (2004), 67.

⁶ C. Schmitt, *Ex captivitate salus. Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945/47* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002), 89; C. Schmitt, "Theory of the Partisan", 66; C. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 190; Jakob Taubes, *En divergent accord. A propos de Carl Schmitt* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 2003), 25.

⁷ E.g. Karl Löwith, "The occasional decisionism of C. Schmitt," in R. Wolin (ed.), *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 150; John McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism. Against politics as technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112; Reinhart Kosseleck, *Le futur passé. Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1990), 226-227; Marcus Llanque & Herfried Münkler, "'Vorwort' von 1963," in R. Mehring (ed.), *Der Begriff des politischen. Ein kooperativer Kommentar* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 14.

struggle around the spiritual or symbolic ordering of political relations, which can be studied and endorsed apart from Schmitt's concrete political stances. Elsewhere I have argued that Schmitt makes two clearly distinguishable conceptual moves: first, he wages a metapolitical struggle for 'the political,' and only in a second move, he attempts to 'place' or 'territorialise' the political plurality in a particular way.⁸ This 'territorialisation' results in a particular distribution of politicisations and depoliticisations which misrecognises particular political subjects (particular enemies). Concretely, Schmitt wanted to territorialise the political in such a way as to enable the state to monopolise the political decision again, and to make sure society would be completely depoliticised. My hypothesis is that Schmitt's most problematic conceptions of the strong state, sovereignty or executive power should be understood in terms of this spectral tension between the political and its territorialisation.

In the framework of this article, I will limit myself to discussing Schmitt's political-philosophical struggle for the political on a very specific terrain, namely that of historical meaning. The image of history is crucial for the political, as it is one level on which the relation between enemies is symbolised. His approach takes an intermediate position with regard to the image of history: although he firmly criticises certain philosophies of histories (of progress for instance), history remains crucial for the political, thus necessitating an answer to the question of historical meaning. Indeed, for him the political is intrinsically historical and timely, as it is intimately related to social change.⁹ As history remains central, the process of giving meaning to it can not be evaded. And like all politically relevant concepts, the concept of history and the meaning attached to it cannot but be of a polemical

⁸ M. Lievens, *Spectres of the Political. Uncovering the Metapolitical in Carl Schmitt*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Leuven, 2009.

⁹ In stable times without social change, jurisprudence overrules politics, to the extent that one can no longer speak of a state in the first place but of an "unpolitical legal community" (C. Schmitt, "Legalität und Legitimität," in: *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924-1954 : Materialien zu einer Verfassungslehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985), 267).

nature¹⁰. Giving meaning to history is thus an important battle field which Schmitt does not want to leave to the marxists, who were monopolising this ideological struggle.¹¹

In this paper, I will try to reconstruct this polemic for a political conception of history, showing how Schmitt particularly tried to find an image of history which gives the defeated their due place. Central to this is the attempt to think historical singularity, against the notion of repetition in history or of 'lessons' to be learned from it, and against ideologies of progress. Through his polemic, a profane and sober image of history appears which stresses singularity, relative contingency and openness and the pluralisation of social temporalities. This image is won by rejecting any thinking which threatens to turn history into a scientifically understood process, from which political decision has disappeared. The enigmatic notion of the katechon will play a crucial role in providing a very minimal but crucial form of historical meaning for such a political conception of history.

Politicising history

Although their substantial political positions differ greatly, Schmitt's approach to history converges remarkably with Walter Benjamin's, as far as their critique of ideologies of progress and their attempt to rescue the 'defeated of history' is concerned. Both try to think history as intrinsically political, contrary to dominant historical narratives which often obfuscate the political character of history by thinking it in terms of progress. This turns the image of history or historiography itself into a battle field, in which both Schmitt and

¹⁰ C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 30-31.

¹¹ C. Schmitt, "Die staatsrechtliche Bedeutung der Notverordnung, insbesondere ihre Rechtsgültigkeit," in : *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze*, 261; C. Schmitt, *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation* (Cologne: Greven, 1950).

Benjamin fight for a political conception of history. For both Schmitt and Benjamin, what is at stake in this battle is to rescue the position of the defeated of the historical process.

“From now on, the political crowns history,” states Walter Benjamin in his *Passagenwerk*.¹² However, the political understanding of history tended to get lost because of the dominance of ideologies of progress, which especially Stalinism and social-democracy upheld.¹³ The empty and homogenous time of progress made them blind to the necessity of conscious political decision and its full and broken time, based on a clear comprehension of history as a process of discontinuities, crises and bifurcations. It made them powerless in the struggle against the war and fascism, which they tended to see merely as a detour of the progressive course of history.

According to Benjamin, real political action requires a break with this idea of progress, in favor of a ‘dialectical’ image of history, which at the same time redeems the downtrodden of the past through a radical decision in the present. For him, the notion of progress is central to the ideology of the victors. It generates an image of history as following its inexorable course, thus making the defeated disappear from the historical narrative, as their defeat must have been inevitable. On top of the defeat itself comes the ‘judgment of history’, history here becoming almost a subject in itself legitimising the victors’ position. Therefore, a redemptive way of writing history will have to rescue the defeated from oblivion by redefining history as intrinsically political, thus creating a space for alternative options put forward by a plurality of political forces.

In this way, writing history becomes a deeply political (and metapolitical) act for Benjamin. The same accounts for Schmitt. “[A]ll spirit is present spirit,” he says in his *Concept*

¹² W. Benjamin, *Paris Capitale du XIXe Siècle: le livres des passages* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), 405.

¹³ W. Benjamin, “Theses on the philosophy of history”, in *Illuminations* (New York : Shocken Books, 1986), 258.

of the Political.¹⁴ All historical knowledge is knowledge of the present, and derives its intensity from the present.¹⁵ In this present, it is the victors who write history, he states in *Ex Captivitate Salus*.¹⁶ Moreover, the victor tends not only to write history, but to determine “its vocabulary and terminology as well.”¹⁷

While Benjamin tries to redeem the defeated of past struggles, and to retell history on the basis of its “waste”¹⁸, Schmitt focuses more on the contemporary political effects of historical discourses. The political, understood as the relation between friends and enemies who recognise each other as human and political subjects, is threatened when the ideology of progress appears within this polemical symbolic space between enemies. Indeed, this ideology transforms the way the enemy or the defeated are symbolised and understood, potentially undermining their political subjectivity and the pluriversum of political forces which is constitutive of the political. In his book *Ex Captivitate Salus* Schmitt tells about his experiences of being in the position of the defeated in front of the victors’ judge, and suggests he can understand better than anyone this position of rightlessness:

The suffering, which humans inflict on each other, is terrifying. We cannot simply turn away from it. But how will we endure its appearance? Especially, how will a man (Schmitt seems to be talking about himself here, ML), for whom the knowledge of the law has become a part of his existence, bear the mere fact, yes the mere possibility of being totally outlawed, whoever undergoes it in a singular case?¹⁹

¹⁴ C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 62.

¹⁵ C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 79.

¹⁶ C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, 25.

¹⁷ C. Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Grossraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte. Ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 52.

¹⁸ A. Vanderveelde, “Materialisme en mystiek. De geschiedenisfilosofie van Walter Benjamin”, *Denk-wijzen* 2 (1986), 77-100.

¹⁹ C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, 60.

Given his own political trajectory, these passages are of course very ambiguous, but they do enrich the view we have of Schmitt's vision of the enemy and the defeated. The picture of history he gives in this text is a very sober one: many people go down, some become martyrs, and new generations find in suffering and need the driving force for new realisations: "World history is not the basis of happiness."²⁰ Contrary to Benjamin, Schmitt thinks no redemptive action is possible for the defeated of the past, except for some of them who are remembered as martyrs. Still, in this text more than in any other, the defeated enemy becomes an object of ethical consideration. Schmitt identifies himself with the naked human being in the face of the powerful : "Nudest is the human being, who is put undressed before a dressed human being, unarmed before an armed, powerless before a powerful one."²¹

Being himself among the defeated of world war I and especially of the ensuing treaty of Versailles, Schmitt has always considered his fight for political dignity of the (defeated) enemy as one of his central concerns. The conclusion of this war was not founded on a real peace treaty, but it was "a damning judgment of the victors on the defeated, who were marked even more as enemies afterwards, the more they were defeated."²² In the apparently inexorable trend to world unity and universalism, which characterised 20th century politics, this '*Vae Victis*' becomes ever more hard to bear.²³

Contrary to Benjamin, Schmitt is thus not seeking a new, redemptive form of writing history, but he is trying to rescue the political in the present. Images of history are very relevant to how the political relation is symbolically constituted. Schmitt himself underlines

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 79.

²² C. Schmitt, "Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind," in *Positionen und Begriffe : im Kampf mit Weimar, Genf, Versailles 1923-1939* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 279.

²³ C. Schmitt, *Die Wendung zum diskriminierenden Kriegsbegriff* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1988), 33.

how philosophies of history based on the notion of progress, produce, as all political discourse do, subjects: “The planning and leading elites produce themselves and the masses they lead with the help of historical-philosophical meanings.”²⁴

The symbolic production of subjects is never an innocent thing. The ideology of progress and its concomitant struggle for world unity have definite effects on how these are produced and on the relation that arises between them. According to Schmitt, the struggle for world unity is based on a particular historical-philosophical self-understanding.²⁵ This self-understanding is constitutive of the political: “More than any other magnitude, self-interpretation is an element of the current world situation.”²⁶ This self-understanding in terms of progress has a constitutive effect on the political relation. It tends to distort the specifically political character of this relation by situating the enemy in a past which is already lost: “All mass propaganda seeks its evidence in the proof that it lies at the side of things to come. All mass belief is merely the belief to be situated rightly, while the opponent is situated falsely, as time and history and development work against him.”²⁷ The struggle between the old and the new on the line of progress can never be one between two equal political subjects who recognise each other as such. When progress is conceived as the increase in technical mastery of the world, the opponent is definitively reconfigured as a merely technical source of disturbance, which can be easily pointed at and eliminated. In a technical era, the powerful think of the defeated as mere disturbers.²⁸ The end result of this

²⁴ C. Schmitt, “Drei Stufen Historischer Sinngebung,” *Universitas* 5 (1950), 927-931.

²⁵ C. Schmitt, “Die Einheit der Welt,” in: *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1952), 500.

²⁶ Ibid. 501.

²⁷ C. Schmitt, *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation. Vier Aufsätze* (Cologne: Greven Verlag, 1950), 12. However, technical progress as such also creates ever new enmities, which oppose old and new: “Old forms of enmity are merely replaced by new forms, as when in all domains of human progress the new denotes the old as its enemy by principle.” (Erich Vad, *Strategie und Sicherheitspolitik. Perspektiven im Werk von Carl Schmitt* (Opladen: Westdeutsche Verlag, 1996), 56).

²⁸ C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, 84.

process inevitably consists of a world fashioned according to the ideals of the victor. Schmitt's main polemical opponent in this regard being communism, he fears its project of "the unity of the planet and of its submission to one sole master."²⁹

As stated, the political is predicated on time and social change. When social change is thought in terms of progress, however, this can have de- or hyperpoliticising effects, especially when it is linked up with the expected advent of world unity. In his text on 'The Legal World Revolution', Schmitt states that progress is one of these empty abstractions which can have many meanings: "*(p)rogress* in the sense of accelerated scientific, technical and industrial development (...) can become an all-out global legitimization of opposing political means and ends."³⁰ Schmitt is not intent on criticising the modern industrial society or its economy, with all its environmental and health effects, as such, but to show how the notion of progress functions politically, how it tends to distort a genuinely political symbolic order. Although many different forms of progress exist, he focuses mainly on the notion of 'political progress,' which refers to the parole of international parties seeking to further world unity in the wake of the 1917 October revolution. This process is forecasted as a "planetary appropriation of industry", whose methods of conquest will be "more intensely aggressive and of greater destructive potential in terms of the means of power utilised."³¹ This kind of progress will not forcibly entail ethical or moral progress according to Schmitt: "The day *world politics* comes to the earth, it will be transformed into a *world police power*. That is a dubious progress!"³² A kind of hyperpolitics is its result, as the enemy inevitably becomes

²⁹ C. Schmitt, "L'unité du monde (II)," in A. de Benoist (ed.) *Du Politique. 'Légalité et légitimité' et autres essais* (Puisseaux: Editions Pardès, 1990), 242.

³⁰ C. Schmitt, "The Legal World Revolution", *Telos* 72 (1987), 76.

³¹ Ibid. 80

³² Ibid.

a criminal instead of a political adversary, or an enemy of humanity, which is the worst kind of enmity.³³

This critique of the political use of philosophies of history is a constant throughout Schmitt's work. It is particularly present in some of his later texts, but also in his 1923 text on the crisis of parliamentarism, in which he formulates a strong critique of Lukács' philosophy of history.³⁴ Its messianism also discredits the enemy in advance and undermines the contingency of political decision.

Historical singularity

In his struggle around the concept of history, Schmitt attempts to formulate an alternative to the dominant philosophies of history which threaten to undermine the political. One possibility he discusses, is the return to the 'new paganism' of the theory of eternal return. This is not a real alternative for Schmitt, however, as it amounts to the renunciation of history altogether.³⁵ It takes human beings back into nature again, while the essence of political existence is to transcend it. In nature, there is no politics: a relation can only become political when one can put the other spiritually into question.³⁶

Moreover, there is a more profound problem with the idea that there is repetition in history. Even when it does not figure within a philosophy of eternal return, it is politically problematic. Schmitt raises this issue within the framework of a discussion of the strategic

³³ Theo De Wit, "Op zoek naar de vijand. De agressiviteit van de vooruitgang volgens C. Schmitt," in A. Braeckman (ed.) *Onbeheggen met de moderniteit* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2001), 117.

³⁴ C. Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

³⁵ C. Schmitt, "L'unité du Monde (II)", 246.

³⁶ C. Schmitt, "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West. Bemerkungen zu Ernst Jüngers Schrift: 'Der Gordische Knoten'," in: *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 533.

answers to the current era of space revolution. He observes a tendency to repeat the answers that were given to former transformations of the spatial order of the world. He analyzes for instance how the Versailles treaty resulted in an intermediate situation between war and peace, as it understood peace merely as the end to actual fighting. What was really at stake, however, was to found a new spatial order, as the old one had fallen apart, which the Great War had shown so painfully. For Schmitt, peace could not just consist of the end of the fighting, as it then would become mere non-war.³⁷ Genuine peace required a new stabilisation of the global political relations.

The Great War was fundamentally new in history, according to Schmitt, and so had to be its ending. “In the great history of humankind, each true peace is only true once. Peace which really brings an end to a war around spatial order can only a peace based on a new spatial order.”³⁸ In this sense, one cannot repeat the old answers to the wars which took place within the former spatial order. The way peace is realised within a political configuration, is thus always historically specific. The protagonists of the Versailles Treaty were incapable of thinking the newness and singularity of the historical moment in which they acted.

This notion of historical singularity reappears in several of Schmitt’s post world war II texts. It adds an important aspect to his thinking of the political. If history would indeed repeat itself, politics would degenerate in the mechanic application of pre-given answers, while what actually is at stake, is to think singular events and to act in conditions which never existed before. There cannot be a general theory of history which provides omni-historical guidelines for political action. In several texts, Schmitt underlines that

³⁷ C. Schmitt, “Die Raumrevolution. Durch den totalen Krieg zu einem totalen Frieden,” in: *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 389.

³⁸ Ibid.

historical thinking is about unique situations and therefore about unique truths³⁹: “The big events are unique, irrevocable and unrepeatable. A historical truth is true only once.”⁴⁰

According to Schmitt, this also implies that counterfactual reasoning makes no sense. It is mere fantasy to try to think what would have happened if Napoleon had won Waterloo, if the industrial revolution would have originated on the continent etcetera. Such an exercise undermines genuine historical thinking, which has to be focused on the real singular event. Schmitt calls such reasonings ‘absurdities, because they forget the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events.’⁴¹

Schmitt recognises that man has “an almost irresistible need to eternalise his last great historical experience. Precisely my sense of history guards me from such repetitions. My sense of history especially maintains itself by recalling to memory the unrepeatable uniqueness of all great historical events. A historical truth is true only *once*. But also the historical call, the challenge which opens a new epoch, is true only once and is correct only once.”⁴² One is tempted to think history with the help of historical parallels, but these can only serve to sharpen the consciousness of the uniqueness of the historical event. If not, they turn into the basis of “a more general lawfulness, a functional sequence, which does not exist in history.”⁴³

Schmitt’s stress on historical singularity does not mean that history disappears altogether, as it is within the postmodern focus on the now, lacking historical roots. For Schmitt, one can think historically, and even try to grapple history theoretically, for instance, by theorising the

³⁹ C. Schmitt, “Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West,” 531.

⁴⁰ C. Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber/ Gespräch über den Neuen Raum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 55.

⁴¹ C. Schmitt, “Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West,” 531.

⁴² C. Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber/ Gespräch über den Neuen Raum*, 61.

⁴³ C. Schmitt, “Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West”, 531.

rise and demise of spatial orders or *nomoi*. Frederic Jameson underlines the striking parallel between Schmitt's notion of the *nomos* and the Marxist concept of mode of production.⁴⁴ This last concept is an omnihistorical notion, which obtains its specific content through analysis of a concrete historical form of society, and which thus enables a very open theorisation of history.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, in his post war work, Schmitt elaborates a general theory of how spatial orders or *nomoi* arise and perish, each *nomos* having its own historically specific way of functioning. The space revolutions in-between constitute singular historical moments or events.

What is important is that Schmitt's stress on difference and singularity in history is not based on epistemological considerations. His focus is on how historical meaning functions politically, and how it makes genuine political thinking and action possible. Schmitt's insistence on the singularity of historical events implies a specific conception of political action, consisting of giving a "unique concrete answer to the call of a similarly unique concrete situation."⁴⁶ Schmitt calls this 'call-answer' structure of historical events 'dialectic', and opposes it to the idea of polarity, which is present in historical visions focusing on the eternal return of the same. "Every historical action and act of a human being is the answer to a question which is raised by history (...). Every human word (*Wort*) is an answer (*Antwort*)."⁴⁷ The meaning of the answer is drawn from its precedent question, and the meaning of this question lies in the concrete situation from which it arises.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Notes on the Nomos," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2 (2005), 202. Schmitt himself remarkably also refers to the "suprastructure", as to what arises from what is "historically essential", namely the choice for a maritime or a terrestrial existence (C. Schmitt, "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West," 539).

⁴⁵ Derek Sayer, *The violence of abstraction. The analytic foundations of historical materialism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 532.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

In this sense, Schmitt's approach radically dismisses the notion of history as a reservoir of 'lessons' for future generations. Reinhart Koselleck called this vision of history '*historia magistra vitae*', being based on repetitiveness.⁴⁸ He showed how this vision ran out of credibility with the advent of modernity. As Tocqueville already said for instance, one cannot compare the works of the revolution with anything that preceded it: "I go back from century to century until the earliest antiquity; I do not see anything which resembles what I face today. When the past no longer enlightens the future, the spirit marches in darkness."⁴⁹

Schmitt's arguments on the call of history resemble those of Colingwood, whom he considers to be too psychological and individualistic, and those of Toynbee, whose challenge-response structure tends to erase historical singularity and thus overlooks the character of the historical itself. Schmitt argues that Hegel's dialectical vision had the potential to make this singularity reappear, although it immediately lost it again by formulating a speculatively systematic philosophy of history, in which historical singularity is subordinated to a greater historical plan.

Schmitt's stress on historical singularity against the idea of repetition in history is not enough to rescue the political character of history. Indeed, emphasising the unique character of historical events can perfectly go together with thinking history in terms of progress.⁵⁰ And as Walter Benjamin has argued, if there is one depoliticising vision of history which is at

⁴⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé. Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1990), 41.

⁴⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique ; Souvenirs ; l'Ancien Régime et la révolution* (Paris: Laffont, 1986), 657.

⁵⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Le Futur Passé*, 47.

the side of the victors, it is the ideology of progress. That is why Benjamin demands to brush history against the grain.⁵¹

According to Schmitt the concept of progress is not only used by the victors of this era, but it has also become the ideology of the masses. Schmitt even speaks about a “religion of technicity”, characterised by the belief in progress and infinite perfectibility.⁵² It heads towards depoliticised world unity. This makes his outlook more pessimistic. Still, he clearly discards the ideology of progress in favour of a vision which can account for historical singularity more truthfully, by thinking it as an event:

History is not the unfolding of natural-scientific, biological or other rules and norms. Its essential and specific content is the event, which arrives once and doesn't repeat itself. Here, experiences do not count, neither do functionalisms, nor hypothetical proportions combined in order to see what would have happened when this or that fact would not have happened.⁵³

Schmitt's objective is to think history in such a way as to avoid the pitfall of historical automatism or lawfulness. Consequently, his conception of history is strongly opposed to the positivistic tendency towards lawful generalisations which make history calculable, as in Auguste Comte. Marx, too, had tended to generalise his concretely determined experience of industrialisation and his correct understanding of it into a general necessity.

Subordinating the historical moment to such generalisations is also what ideologies of progress tend to do. Although they might account for the uniqueness of the single moment, their rationalism nevertheless tends to destroy its singularity by putting it on a

⁵¹ Daniel Bensaïd, *Walter Benjamin. Sentinelle messianique* (Paris: Plon, 1990), 46.

⁵² Carl Schmitt, “Die Einheit der Welt,” 503.

⁵³ C. Schmitt, “L'unité du monde (II),” 248.

rationalistically conceived ascending line of progress.⁵⁴ Against this, Schmitt claims that history always prevails over such philosophies of history.⁵⁵ Although Schmitt systematically understands philosophy of history in a specific way, namely as the Enlightenment philosophy with its claim to scientific monopoly, he nevertheless argues that this idea is even valid for the Christian vision of history.⁵⁶

Schmitt's notion of historical singularity as event is a polemical weapon against ways of thinking which tend to undermine the political character of the public spirit or symbolic order. He tried to find a way to symbolise the historical present in such a way as to enable it to become political, i.e. making possible struggles between more or less equal political subjects which recognise each other as such, and which do not discredit or dehumanise each other in advance. Visions of history which introduce repetitiveness in history or forecast a future utopia, tend to consider one of the antagonists as rightful in advance. The insistence on historical singularity thus becomes a symbolic device to undermine the victors' image of history. For Schmitt, the idea of historical repetition is the spontaneous historical image of the victors, who "will not easily understand that also their victory is only true once."⁵⁷ Thinking historical singularity then opens the space for the enemy or the defeated, as it undermines the victor's claim to eternal domination. Faced with the alternative between "eternal recurrence on the one side, uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events and epochs on the other side," Schmitt thus clearly opts for the second.⁵⁸ At the same time, he

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ C. Schmitt, "Die Einheit der Welt," 505; Jean-François Kervégan, "Carl Schmitt and 'World Unity'," in C. Mouffe (ed.), *The challenge of C. Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999), 71.

⁵⁶ C. Schmitt, "Die Einheit der Welt," 504-5; C. Schmitt, "L'unité du monde (II)," 249.

⁵⁷ C. Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber/Gespräch über den Neuen Raum*, 61; C. Schmitt, "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West," 544.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 544-545; Erich Vad, *Strategie und Sicherheitspolitik. Perspektiven im Werk von C. Schmitt*, 104.

strongly dismisses utopian thinking as well, as this, too, tends to subordinate the historical present to a pre-given image of the future and thus to obfuscate the enemy.⁵⁹

With his stress on historical singularity, Schmitt opens the possibility for a radical historicisation of political defeat, in which the victors of today can become the defeated of tomorrow. The notion of history as 'judge' thus becomes problematic. Moreover, this stress on historical singularity also opens a space of contingency, in which human beings have to answer the call of history in fundamentally new ways. This contingency is not absolute or total, as, for instance, Schmitt thinks only a limited number of options are available to answer the current need for space revolution. There is no historical source, however, which can decisively help to reduce this complexity of the current conjuncture. Schmitt's approach thus tries to find a middle ground, opposed both to the dominant historical generalisations as to the demise of history altogether. This implies that the event is not 'pure' in the sense that it always appears within specific historical conditions, to which it can of course not be reduced. Thinking the political oscillates between the rejection of several kinds of philosophy of history and the maintenance of a profane, pluralised image of history which opens a space of contingency for strategic action.

Pluralising history

Throughout Schmitt's work, several attempts to think real history without falling into the trap of philosophy of history are unevenly developed. They result in a view of history which is not a predestined, transparent and meaningful totality with its own immanent

⁵⁹ C. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II. Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996), 31.

development. On the contrary, it is a contingent process characterised by a full concept of time broken by multiple temporalities, as different social spheres can have their own rhythms, accelerations and discontinuities. Even the sphere of (political) ideas has its own temporality, according to which “there are epochs of great energy and times becalmed, times of motionless status quo.”⁶⁰ The political will turn out to constitute an attempt to handle these multiple times, which require a thinking of crises, situated judgment and decision.

The fact that historical time is not self-transparent, but characterised by non-contemporaneity and desynchronisation, is most obvious in the inevitable anachronism of the spirit. All spirit is present spirit, states Schmitt, while he acknowledges at the same time that spirit is inevitably struggle and differentiation, non-identity. In his text on ‘The Age of Neutralisations and Depoliticisations’, Schmitt develops the idea that the past centuries were characterised by several shifts in what constituted the central domain of spiritual life. In the 16th century, the theological was central, but this shifted respectively to the metaphysical in the 17th century, the humanitarian-moral in the 18th, and via an intermediate phase of the romantic-aesthetic to the economic and technical from the 19th century on. The motor force of this succession of stadia was the quest for a neutral sphere, “in which the struggle was brought to a close, and people settle their disputes, reach agreement and convince each other.”⁶¹ Schmitt explicitly states that this historical picture cannot be considered as a philosophy of history, but that it is merely an attempt to think the concrete history of concrete conflicts and their results a posteriori. The succession of ‘stages’ cannot be conceived as a line of progress nor of regress.⁶² What is at stake is a dialectic of elites which replace each other, not a philosophy of history as such.

⁶⁰ C. Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 8.

⁶¹ C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 88.

⁶² C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 81.

Schmitt takes a peculiar position within this historical succession: in an epoch which is impregnated by technical thinking, he strongly defends the concept of sovereignty, which is totally at odds with this way of thinking. Schmitt's philosophical position is an anachronistic intervention in contemporary spirit. How can Schmitt, in an era whose metaphysics, "the most intensive and the clearest expression of an epoch", is pervaded by mechanical and technical thinking and in which the machine is considered to "run by itself"⁶³, nevertheless escape from it and defend the political?⁶⁴ Similarly, how is it possible that in the 19th century Donoso Cortés upheld "the theological mode of thought of the Middle Ages, whose construction was juristic?"⁶⁵ Schmitt's polemic against the dominant technical spirit in favor of genuinely political thought inevitably pluralises historical time. This temporal plurality was indeed constitutive of his analysis of depoliticisation:

Actually, it would also be a misunderstanding to explain the succession of stages in such a way as if in each century there would have been nothing else than the central sphere. There exists rather a pluralist co-ordination of different stages which are already traversed; people of the same time and the same country, yes even of the same family live next to each other in different stages, and contemporary Berlin for instance is closer in cultural respect to New York and Moskou as to München or Trier.⁶⁶

Different spheres, and even different social subjects, have different historical temporalities. People do not have to go through all the stages the European elite has passed through.

⁶³ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 48.

⁶⁴ Cf. Every epoch has its "general state of consciousness" (C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46). Cf. "The identity of a period is of a metaphysical nature" (Catherine Colliot-Thélène, "Carl Schmitt versus Max Weber: Juridical Rationality and Economic Rationality," in C. Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of C. Schmitt*, (London: Verso, 1999), 144).

⁶⁵ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 52.

⁶⁶ C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 81-82.

Actually, the masses leaped from one kind of magic spirit to another: from traditional religion to the mass religion of technological progress.

This pluralisation of history and of social time is a recurrent theme in several of Schmitt's texts: from his interbellum work in which he emphasises the different rhythms of law, the military and the economic to his distinction of the multiple forms of progress in his text on the 'Legal World Revolution.'

Schmitt thus opens up history as a process characterised by multiple possibilities. As already stated, its contingency is not total: not everything is equally possible. Even if it is open, history has a structure, which makes that not all ideologies or ways of thinking can be as effective in a definite epoch or conjuncture. Indeed, a certain spirit can be really outdated according to Schmitt. He states for instance that the metaphysics of parliament can no longer be valid in the era of the proletariat. With the rise of this new political subject, the intellectual principles of such old institutions become ineffective. Nevertheless, these institutions can outlive themselves, even when their 'spirit' no longer has any effectivity. That is part of the diagnosis Schmitt makes of parliamentarism in his book *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Schmitt states that monarchy becomes a merely external apparatus when the "sense of the principle of kingship, of honour, has been lost, if bourgeois kings appear who seek to prove their usefulness and utility instead of their devotion and honour."⁶⁷ One can certainly find new practical justifications for maintaining the monarchy, but other institutions might be better suited to realise these practical objectives:

The same holds true of the 'social-technical' justifications for parliament. If parliament should change from an institution of evident truth into a simply practical-technical means, then it only has to be shown via *facta*, through some kind of

⁶⁷ C. Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 8.

experience, not even necessarily through an open, self-declared dictatorship, that things could be otherwise and parliament is then finished.⁶⁸

History thus has a certain materiality, and therefore, historical judgment remains possible for Schmitt, although from the moment it is expressed in the language of philosophy of history, it threatens to undermine the political. In the above example, however, Schmitt's judgment remains entirely grounded on an analysis of the factual forces which are politically relevant in the current epoch, and of how they can be integrated to form a political unity. What is crucial is that it is not history which judges, but concretely situated political subjects, who, faced with a limited range of possibilities inscribed within their historical configuration and with a definite enemy, have to decide.

The necessity and urgency to decide is increasing in the twentieth century under the influence of a number of events which constitute ruptures and continuities to which political adaptation becomes ever more difficult: "war and post war, mobilisation and demobilisation, revolution and dictatorship, inflation and deflation."⁶⁹ This has put the stabilising inertia of law under strain.⁷⁰ As economy and war push forward, law cannot follow, resulting in vain and dangerous attempts to "motorise" law.⁷¹

In a context of continual new developments, mere defense of the status quo becomes impossible.⁷² If one likes it or not, it is the time of events, ruptures and discontinuities which governs political action. This is the "full time" Benjamin spoke about,

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ C. Schmitt, "Die Lage der europäischen Rechtswissenschaft," in: *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924-1954. Materialien zu einer Verfassungslehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985), 404.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ingeborg Maus, *Bürgerliche Rechtstheorie und Faschismus. Zur sozialen Funktion und aktuellen Wirkung der Theorie Carl Schmitts* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976), 24; C. Schmitt, "Vergleichender Überblick über die neueste Entwicklung des Problems der gesetzgeberischen Ermächtigungen; 'Legislative Delegationen'," in: *Positionen und Begriffe* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 244.

⁷¹ C. Schmitt, "Die Lage der europäischen Rechtswissenschaft", 407.

⁷² C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 80.

and resembles a politicisation of the romantic time concept, which Schmitt described as follows:

In every moment, time determines the human being and confines the most powerful human will. As a result, every moment becomes an overwhelming, irrational, ghostlike event. It is the ever-present and incessant negation of the countless possibilities that it destroys.⁷³

Schmitt has a sharp consciousness of modern time: its momentaneous, fluid, contingent, rapidly changing character is an important aspect of his thought⁷⁴. His decisionism is a political-juridical answer to this full and pluralised time of modernity, which must be thought in terms of a discontinuous process of ruptures, moments of acceleration and of slowing down, of events. Every decision is an intervention in this multiplicity of times. It breaks the continuum of empty time: as Schmitt stated already in one of his early quasi-kantian works, there is a time of immediacy and one of mediation.⁷⁵

However, while the above quote on the romantic conception of time could also be interpreted as referring to the postmodern experience of the now, which lacks historical roots, Schmitt's notion of broken time figures within a strategic political perspective, focusing on the range of possibilities which are inscribed in the moment of decision. In several texts, Schmitt refers to the realist adage that politics is the "art of the possible."⁷⁶ This strategic conception is based on a very profane conception of time and history. Schmitt's reference to the "call of history" should be interpreted similarly, as a way to

⁷³ C. Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 69.

⁷⁴ Cf. C. Schmitt, "Legalität und Legitimität", 293

⁷⁵ C. Schmitt, *La valeur de l'état et la signification de l'individu* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2003), 143.

⁷⁶ C. Schmitt, "Politik", in: *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 134; C. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 7; C. Schmitt, "Die Ära der integralen Politik," in: *Frieden oder Pazifismus? Arbeiten zum Völkerrecht und zur internationalen Politik 1924-1978* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 465. He dismisses the definition of "high politics" as "the art of making the impossible possible" (a definition which is ascribed to Göbbels) as "too dialectic".

approach a concrete conjuncture in terms of its strategic (im)possibilities, between which one has to decide. It would be a mistake to hypostatise history into a ‘calling subject’. This would be at odds with Schmitt’s criticisms of historical-philosophical hyperpolitics. Strictly speaking, history ‘does’ nothing. If it would, it would render the political almost impossible. Because of his decisionism and its concomitant concept of time and history, Schmitt stands out amongst his fellow right-wing thinkers. He is no Hegelian dialectician, for whom the crisis is only a moment in the unfolding of contradictions towards higher syntheses. For Schmitt, not all contradictions can be rationally mediated, as Carlo Galli has shown.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that the notions of sovereignty and constituent power were so central to his approach, concepts which Hegel had refused.⁷⁸ His deeply modern conception of time makes it impossible for him to find security, like Louis de Bonald did, in the slow flow of history.

In this sense, Schmitt stands very far from the original understanding of conservatism, as for instance Panajotis Kondylis, who is greatly influenced by Schmitt, explained it in his book *Konservativismus*. The real sovereign, states Kondylis, is the demiurg of history (*Geschichtsdemiurg*).⁷⁹ Sovereignty and historicity go hand in hand.⁸⁰ Sovereign decisions show that “history is not a circle which is accomplished and brought to a close from the very beginning in the womb of the eternal order of being, but that it is an open and dynamic movement.” Kondylis understood conservatism as a vision which defended ‘*societas civilis*’, in which law is firmly anchored within a natural and divine order of being. The advent of the

⁷⁷ Carl Galli, *Genealogia della politica: Carl Schmitt e la crisi del pensiero politico moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

⁷⁸ Daniel Bensaïd, *Eloge de la politique profane* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), 73.

⁷⁹ Panajotis Kondylis, *Konservativismus. Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 76.

⁸⁰ Cf. “Der Souverän repräsentiert die Geschichte. Er hält das historische Geschehen in der Hand wie ein Szepter.” Walter Benjamin, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, in : *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I-1, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp SV, 1980), 245.

notion of sovereignty is disrupts this order, laying the ground for a different conception of time.

According to Schmitt, conservatism is no longer an option in modern society.⁸¹ Already in his early work in the 1920s, he situated notions which were central to him, such as dictatorship, in the sphere of “revolutionary democratism.”⁸² He considered decisionism as a genuinely historical mode of thinking in law, as it enabled one to connect to a singular point in time, contrary to normativism and concrete order thinking.⁸³

Katechon

As stated before, Schmitt’s struggle around historical meaning has a metapolitical stake : it is to ward off visions of history which inhibit a political self-understanding of the present. That is the reason why Schmitt cannot give a ‘scientific’ account of why the political appears at a certain moment in time. Trying to give for instance a sociological explanation of the appearance of friend/enemy antitheses, as a certain marxism attempted to do by sociologising the political, already endangers the political character of the symbolic order governing these antitheses. Politicisation cannot be seen to emerge from within a causal sequence, but must be understood as an event. For Schmitt, politicisation is always situated within real historical conditions, and in this sense his notion of the event differs from the

⁸¹ C. Schmitt, “Von der TV-Demokratie. Die Aggressivität des Fortschritts,” in: *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt* 26 (28 June 1970), 8.

⁸² C. Schmitt, “Donoso Cortes in Berlin, 1849,” in: *Positionen und Begriffe* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 96.

⁸³ C. Schmitt, *Über die Drei Arten des rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), 31.

one of Badiou or Althusser for instance.⁸⁴ But it inevitably entails a leap from these conditions onto the level of intensity typical of the political. Any other account of it threatens to shift the symbolic character of antagonism to a non-political level, be it of a moral, scientific or other nature. Formulating a theory which tries to give a scientific explanation for politicisation tends to reduce the political antagonism to an expression of a deeper causal logic, and this always threatens to shift the symbolic constitution of the antagonism to a de- or hyperpoliticised level.

In this sense, thinking the political implies thinking rupture and continuity, history and the event, as a contradictory unity. Indeed, the event cannot be thought of as a new beginning ‘ex nihilo’. Paradoxically, within the Schmittian framework the political decision always somehow stands under the command of an outside which precedes it : the exception, or the enemy. For instance, the sovereign does not decide ‘out of the blue’, but always within a crisis-ridden conjuncture, when history imposes the necessity to decide upon the sovereign. To the event of the sovereign decision precedes the manifestation of something which can be interpreted as the exception. In this sense, the appearance of the political is not, as it is in Hannah Arendt, the beginning of something radically new, because there is always something preceding the political event. Political action for Schmitt is fundamentally (historically) situated, and must understand itself as such.⁸⁵ That is why the political depends on the recognition of what precedes it, i.e. its historical situatedness and the plurality of

⁸⁴ Schmitt gives several analyses of the historical conditions of political change. His book on the Leviathan for instance is a deep historical analysis of how Hobbes’ thinking enabled the political to spring up outside and against the state (C. Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the state theory of Thomas Hobbes : meaning and failure of a political symbol* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996)). His text on Neutralisations and Depolitisations shows the shift of the political to ever new terrains which formerly functioned as neutralisations (C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 79-95).

⁸⁵ That is also why Schmitt’s concept of transcendence should be conceived of as “a transcendence *within immanence*”, as Mika Ojakangas exposed. (Mika Ojakangas, “Philosophies of ‘Concrete’ Life: From Carl Schmitt to Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Telos* 132 (2005), 29).

friends and enemies within which it appears. According to Schmitt, the attempt to realise a real '*creatio ex nihilo*' degenerates into hyperpolitics, as it annihilates the enemy.⁸⁶

Schmitt refuses 'natural-scientific' and 'philosophical' accounts of the event of the political, but at the same time, he definitely feels the need to occupy a position within the field of struggle around historical meaning, against the images of the automaton or of progress. He needs a meaning-giving element on the metapolitical level which is different from those accounts and which can nevertheless provide a more general historical image to underscore his sober contention that history is political. However true it might be, such a sober and profane vision cannot reach the polemic intensity required to successfully combat the opposite images of history.

The hypothesis can be put forward that it is within this problematic that the enigmatic notion of the katechon acquires its sharp edge. Many authors have been puzzled about the seeming impossibility to find coherence in Schmitt's use of this notion.⁸⁷ What is crucial, however, is what Schmitt opposes to it. It then appears that the katechon is a force which has to ward off the possibility of a world without politics, be it in the form of cosmopolitan "world unity", "total functionalisation" of law, "nihilistic centralisation" or "eschatological paralysis."⁸⁸ If one defines history in terms of political struggle, as Schmitt does, the end of history equals the end of politics.⁸⁹ That is where the notion of the katechon appears : restraining the end of history is fighting against the demise of the political. The katechon provides a strong image of what Schmitt's metapolitical endeavour is about : to save the political from de- and hyperpoliticisation. In this sense, one cannot reduce the

⁸⁶ C. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 190

⁸⁷ Cf. Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996); Théodore Paléologue, *Sous l'oeil du grand inquisiteur. Carl Schmitt et l'héritage de la théologie politique* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2004).

⁸⁸ C. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 165; "Drei Stufen historischer Sinngebung", 930; "Die Lage der europäischen Rechtswissenschaft", 429.

⁸⁹ Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon*, 108.

katechon to a force which merely maintains the current order or the state. It is a force which attempts to maintain the political character of the world in general. That is clear from the following passage, in which Schmitt connects the katechon to the notion of the people, which is the polemic counterpart to the notion of the state⁹⁰, but which remains genuinely political: “The katechon, that is shortage, that is hunger, misery and powerlessness. It are those who do not govern, it is the people; all the rest is mass and object of planning.”⁹¹

In this sense, my hypothesis, which cannot be fully developed here, is that the notion of the katechon fills the hiatus in Schmitt’s metapolitical endeavour to fight and to account for the political nature of the world, as any ‘scientific’ or other explanation of this politics tends to undermine it. Comparably to Derrida’s notion of “messianism without religion”, which denotes a profane, anti-utopian and politicising structure of historical experience, the katechon can thus be seen as a generic polemic and meaning-giving figure which is the key to a political conception of history, although it is more sober than Derrida’s messianicity.⁹² Schmitt clearly understood that one cannot abstain from giving meaning to history, thus leaving this space open to the many conceptions which tend to undermine the political character of the symbolic order which they are always a constitutive part of. In this sense, the katechon seems to be the most minimal devise to give meaning to history which can be imagined. It is a figure which is drawn from theology, but which has to keep history open, plural, contingent and profane, or in other words, political. The utmost the katechon does, is to discard the sacralisation of history which results from certain images of history. It does this by keeping off divine interventions or their secularised counterparts in the real world of

⁹⁰ C. Schmitt, *Théorie de la Constitution* (Paris: PUF, 1993), 380, 381.

⁹¹ C. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 272.

⁹² Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx. L’Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 102; Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in M. Springer (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), 36.

politics, as these can only lead to a form of hyperpolitics, because they in one way or another predict an end to history. The figure of the katechon is the minimal condition to ward off the theologisation of historical meaning, be it of an open religious character or of a secularised version of it (as with ideologies of progress and humanity). It is the minimal precondition to keep history and theology apart, rescuing the political conception of history from eschatological hyperpolitisisation.

Moreover, it enables a historicisation of defeats. That is something of which Tocqueville proved to be incapable, as he lacked the concept of a katechontic force, according to Schmitt. He thus became “a defeated, who accepts his defeat.”⁹³ At stake here is how the defeated can live with their defeat and their place in history. Consciousness of ‘katechonticity’ is what enables the defeated to relativise their defeat and maintain a consciousness of historical contingency and singularity. Such a vision provides the energy, albeit of a very weak kind, to politicise the defeat and to think of the strategic possibilities to overturn it. The katechon thus becomes a metapolitical weapon against the victors who try to eternalise their victory by depoliticising it. As it cherishes historicity, it preserves the politics of the present.

⁹³ C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, 31.

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