

A Fascist Philosopher Helps Us Understand Contemporary Politics

By ALAN WOLFE

To understand what is distinctive about today's Republican Party, you first need to know about an obscure and very conservative German political philosopher. His name, however, is not Leo Strauss, who has been widely cited as the intellectual guru of the Bush administration. It belongs, instead, to a lesser known, but in many ways more important, thinker named Carl Schmitt.

Strauss and Schmitt were once close professionally; Schmitt supported Strauss's application for a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to Paris in 1932, the same year in which Strauss published a review of Schmitt's most important book, *The Concept of the Political*. Their paths later diverged. Strauss, a Jew, left Germany for good and eventually settled in Chicago, where he inspired generations of students, one of whom, Allan Bloom, in turn inspired Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*. Schmitt, a devout Catholic who had written a number of well-regarded books -- including *Political Theology* (1922), *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), and *Political Romanticism* (first printed in 1919) -- joined the Nazi Party in 1933, survived World War II with his reputation relatively unscathed, and witnessed a revival of interest in his work, from both the left and the right, before his death in 1985 at the age of 96.

Given Schmitt's strident anti-Semitism and unambiguous Nazi commitments, the left's continuing fascination with him is difficult to comprehend. Yet as Jan-Werner Müller, a fellow at All Souls's College, Oxford, points out in his recently published *A Dangerous Mind*, that attraction is undeniable. Müller argues that Schmitt's spirit pervades *Empire* (2000), the intellectual manifesto of the antiglobalization movement, written by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as the writings of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, recently much in the news because of his decision to turn down a position at New York University as a protest against America's decision to fingerprint overseas visitors (although not those from Italy).

When I served as the dean of the graduate faculty of political and social science at the New School for Social Research in the 1990s, the

efforts of the decidedly left-wing faculty to play host to a conference on Schmitt's thought brought into my office an elderly Jewish donor who informed me that he was not going to give any more of his money to an institution sympathetic, as he angrily put it, to "that fascist." I was tempted to tell him, not that it would have helped, that Schmitt had become the rage in leftist circles. *Telos*, a journal founded in 1968 dedicated to bringing European critical theory to American audiences, had started a campaign in the 1980s to resurrect Schmitt's legacy, impressed by his no-nonsense attacks on liberalism and his contempt for Wilsonian idealism. A comprehensive study of Schmitt's early writings, Gopal Balakrishnan's *The Enemy*, published by the New Leftist firm of Verso in 2000, finds Schmitt's conclusion that liberal democracy had reached a crisis oddly reassuring, for it gives the left hope that its present stalemate will not last indefinitely. Such prominent European thinkers as Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Derrida have also been preoccupied with Schmitt's ideas. It is not that they admire Schmitt's political views. But they recognize in Schmitt someone who, very much like themselves, opposed humanism in favor of an emphasis on the role of power in modern society, a perspective that has more in common with a poststructuralist like Michel Foucault than with liberal thinkers such as John Rawls.

Schmitt's admirers on the left have been right to realize that after the collapse of communism, Marxism needed considerable rethinking. Yet in turning to Schmitt rather than to liberalism, they have clung fast to an authoritarian strain in Marxism represented by such 20th-century thinkers as V.I. Lenin and Antonio Gramsci. And it hasn't just been Schmitt. *Telos*, in particular, developed a fascination with neofascist thinkers and movements in Italy, as if to proclaim that anything would be better than Marx's contemporary, John Stuart Mill, and his legacy.

Schmitt's influence on the contemporary right has taken a different course. In Europe, new-right thinkers such as Gianfranco Miglio in Italy, Alain de Benoist in France, and the German writers contributing to the magazine *Junge Freiheit* (Young Freedom) have built on Schmitt's ideas. Right-wing Schmittians in the United States are not as numerous, but they include intellectuals -- often described as paleoconservative -- who expend considerable energy attacking neoconservatism from the right. One of them, Paul Edward Gottfried, a humanities professor at Elizabethtown College, in Pennsylvania, is especially prolific. Himself an occasional contributor to *Junge Freiheit*, Gottfried defends the magazine for rejecting "the view that every German patriot should be evermore browbeaten by self-appointed victims of the Holocaust." No wonder he has a soft spot for Carl Schmitt. Gottfried is the kind of writer who puts the term "fascism" in quotation marks, as if its existence in the European past is

somehow open to question.

But there are, I venture to say, no seminars on Schmitt taking place anywhere in the Republican Party and, even if any important conservative political activists have heard of Schmitt, which is unlikely, they would surely distance themselves from his totalitarian sympathies. Still, Schmitt's way of thinking about politics pervades the contemporary zeitgeist in which Republican conservatism has flourished, often in ways so prescient as to be eerie. In particular, his analysis helps explain the ways in which conservatives attack liberals and liberals, often reluctantly, defend themselves.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt wrote that every realm of human endeavor is structured by an irreducible duality. Morality is concerned with good and evil, aesthetics with the beautiful and ugly, and economics with the profitable and unprofitable. In politics, the core distinction is between friend and enemy. That is what makes politics different from everything else. Jesus's call to love your enemy is perfectly appropriate for religion, but it is incompatible with the life-or-death stakes politics always involves. Moral philosophers are preoccupied with justice, but politics has nothing to do with making the world fairer. Economic exchange requires only competition; it does not demand annihilation. Not so politics.

"The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism," Schmitt wrote. War is the most violent form that politics takes, but, even short of war, politics still requires that you treat your opposition as antagonistic to everything in which you believe. It's not personal; you don't have to hate your enemy. But you do have to be prepared to vanquish him if necessary.

Conservatives have absorbed Schmitt's conception of politics much more thoroughly than liberals. Ann H. Coulter, author of books with titles such as *Treason: Liberal Treachery From the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* and *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right*, regularly drops hints about how nice it would be if liberals were removed from the earth, like her 2003 speculation about a Democratic ticket that might include Al Gore and then-California Gov. Gray Davis. "Both were veterans, after a fashion, of Vietnam," she wrote, "which would make a Gore-Davis ticket the only compelling argument yet in favor of friendly fire." (Coulter recently displayed her vituperative talents by calling former Sen. Max Cleland, a triple amputee, politically "lucky" for having dropped a grenade on his foot while serving in Vietnam.) Liberals, by contrast, even in their newly discovered aggressively anti-Bush frame of mind, stop well short of Coulter's violent language. Interestingly enough, Schmitt had an

explanation for why conservative talk-show hosts like Bill O'Reilly fight for their ideas with much more aggressive self-certainty than, say, a hopeless liberal like Alan Wolfe.

Schmitt argued that liberals, properly speaking, can never be political. Liberals tend to be optimistic about human nature, whereas "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil." Liberals believe in the possibility of neutral rules that can mediate between conflicting positions, but to Schmitt there is no such neutrality, since any rule -- even an ostensibly fair one -- merely represents the victory of one political faction over another. (If that formulation sounds like Stanley Fish when he persistently argues that there is no such thing as principle, that only testifies to the ways in which Schmitt's ideas pervade the contemporary intellectual zeitgeist.) Liberals insist that there exists something called society independent of the state, but Schmitt believed that pluralism is an illusion because no real state would ever allow other forces, like the family or the church, to contest its power. Liberals, in a word, are uncomfortable around power, and, because they are, they criticize politics more than they engage in it.

No wonder that Schmitt admired thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, who treated politics without illusions. Leaders inspired by them, in no way in thrall to the individualism of liberal thought, are willing to recognize that sometimes politics involves the sacrifice of life. They are better at fighting wars than liberals because they dispense with such notions as the common good or the interests of all humanity. ("Humanity," Schmitt wrote in a typically terse formulation that is brilliant if you admire it and chilling if you do not, "cannot wage war because it has no enemy.") Conservatives are not bothered by injustice because they recognize that politics means maximizing your side's advantages, not giving them away. If unity can be achieved only by repressing dissent, even at risk of violating the rule of law, that is how conservatives will achieve it.

In short, the most important lesson Schmitt teaches is that the differences between liberals and conservatives are not just over the policies they advocate but also over the meaning of politics itself. Schmitt's German version of conservatism, which shared so much with Nazism, has no direct links with American thought. Yet residues of his ideas can nonetheless be detected in the ways in which conservatives today fight for their objectives.

Liberals think of politics as a means; conservatives as an end. Politics, for liberals, stops at the water's edge; for conservatives, politics never stops. Liberals think of conservatives as potential future allies; conservatives treat liberals as unworthy of recognition. Liberals believe

that policies ought to be judged against an independent ideal such as human welfare or the greatest good for the greatest number; conservatives evaluate policies by whether they advance their conservative causes. Liberals instinctively want to dampen passions; conservatives are bent on inflaming them. Liberals think there is a third way between liberalism and conservatism; conservatives believe that anyone who is not a conservative is a liberal. Liberals want to put boundaries on the political by claiming that individuals have certain rights that no government can take away; conservatives argue that in cases of emergency -- conservatives always find cases of emergency -- the reach and capacity of the state cannot be challenged.

There are, of course, no party lines when it comes to conservatives and liberals in the United States. Many conservatives, especially those of a libertarian bent, are upset with President Bush's deficits and unenthusiastic about his call for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. And, on the other side of the fence, there are liberals and leftists who want to fight back against conservatives as ruthlessly as conservatives fight against them.

Still, if Schmitt is right, conservatives win nearly all of their political battles with liberals because they are the only force in America that is truly political. From the 2000 presidential election to Congressional redistricting in Texas to the methods used to pass Medicare reform, conservatives like Tom DeLay and Karl Rove have indeed triumphed because they have left the impression that nothing will stop them. Liberals cannot do that. There is, for liberals, always something as important, if not more important, than victory, whether it be procedural integrity, historical precedent, or consequences for future generations.

If all that sounds defeatist, at least for liberal causes, Schmitt, inadvertently, offered a reason for hope. Searching for examples of liberalism to dismiss, he happened upon Thomas Paine and the American founders. Here, in his view, were liberals typically afraid of power; indeed, he wrote with some astonishment, they naïvely tried to check and balance it through the separation of powers. In that, Schmitt was correct. John Locke, not Thomas Hobbes, was the reigning social-contract theorist of the American experience. Our tradition owes more to Montesquieu than to Machiavelli, and even when we relied on the latter, we were influenced more by his thoughts on the Florentine republic than by his apologia for *The Prince*. America, Schmitt seemed to be saying, is the quintessential liberal society, a point rendered with great gusto, long after Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* appeared, in Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). Liberal to its very core, the United States has never been as attracted to the realpolitik tradition in political thought as the Germans; in fact, our

best thinkers in that tradition, Hans J. Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger, were immigrants from Germany. Because he showed so little appreciation for the American liberal tradition, Schmitt, supposedly a theorist of power, misunderstood the most powerful political system in the world.

To the degree that conservatives bring to this country something like Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, they stand against not only liberals but America's historic liberal heritage. That may help them in the short run; conservative slash-and-burn rhetoric and no-holds-barred partisanship are so unusual in our moderately consensual political system that they have recently gotten far out of the sheer element of surprise, leaving the news media without a vocabulary for describing their ruthlessness and liberals without a strategy for stopping their designs. But the same extremist approach to politics could also harm them if a traditional American concern with checks and balances and limits on political power comes back into fashion.

In the meantime, we are left with a fascinating example of the ways in which ideas fashioned at another time and place can anticipate events in this society at this moment. No wonder the 2004 election has aroused so much interest. We will, if Schmitt is any guide, be deciding not only who wins, but whether we will treat pluralism as good, disagreement as virtuous, politics as rule bound, fairness as possible, opposition as necessary, and government as limited.

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