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Carl Schmitt, an Epigone of Machiavellianism?

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Abstract

This article aims to illustrate Schmitt's theories as extensions of Niccolò Machiavelli's political concepts to sustain order within the state. The author aims to explicate the complex nature of Carl Schmitt's concepts as a continuation of Machiavelli's thoughts, aimed at upholding the idea of state authority. In the text, the author tries to show that the proper context for reading Schmitt is the decaying form of the state established in the seventeenth century, whose form, as a continuation of Catholic theology, Carl Schmitt fiercely defends against the liberal hegemony. Schmitt's ideological and political choices suggest that he consciously aligns with the intellectual themes that Machiavelli navigated, while at the same time Schmitt struggled against the effects of the secularization of politics, a process of which Machiavelli was a precursor.

Keywords

decisionism, Carl Schmitt, political theology, Niccolò Machiavelli

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Introduction

Carl Schmitt, as a jurist and political philosopher, continues to garner unyielding interest. The works of the German thinker are subjected to critical analysis by numerous scholars and thinkers from across the globe, representing diverse intellectual traditions.¹ This phenomenon is fostered by the ambiguity and multifaceted nature of the German author's thought.² He embodied both the role of a political thinker utilizing the conceptual framework of philosophy and theology, and that of a lawyer crafting his treatises with the polemical flair typical of a political publicist. As Adam Wielomski articulates in his examination of the reception of Carl Schmitt's thought in Poland and globally: "all researchers are searching for the key to Carl Schmitt, the central issue that will illuminate the thought of this eminent jurist and provide a comprehensive perspective from which the German jurist viewed reality."³ A chart presented in "The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt" can be seen as an effort to pinpoint such a central issue. In the chart, the works "The Nomos of the Earth," "Political Theology," and "Constitutional Theory" are regarded as pivotal texts connecting three spheres of Schmitt's thought: reflections on law, politics, and culture. Nonetheless, this representation is just one among numerous perspectives in the ongoing discourse, all striving to identify the central issue described by Adam Wielomski.⁴ Acknowledging the de facto impossibility of finding a singular interpretive key due to the evolution of Schmitt's own thought and interests, as well as his impact on thinkers from various intellectual traditions, it remains valuable to explore the intellectual roots of his political thought. Although these roots may not offer a definitive answer regarding the "central question" for Schmitt, they can shed light on the intellectual motifs, influences, and conceptual frameworks that guided the author of "Political Theology." Typically, studies of Schmitt's thought highlight figures such as Thomas Hobbes and certain 19th-century counter-revolutionary thinkers, including de Maistre, de Bonald, and Donoso Cortés, as those who most profoundly influenced him.⁵ This influence is particularly evident in works from the 1920s and 1930s.⁶ From Hobbes, Schmitt took anthropological pessimism and the conviction that the state, through coercive measures, halts the inevitable wave of violence stemming from competition among individuals and groups. Schmitt utilized the ideas of anti-revolutionary authors, who sought to establish institutions to bolster the faltering 19th-century monarchy, to formulate his concept of decisionism. The literature extensively documents the connections between 19th-century writers and the author of "Leviathan" with the ideas of the German jurist. However, Schmitt's links with the thought and works of Niccolò Machiavelli have received much less attention in scholarly studies. Yet, as I aim to elucidate in this paper, exploring the interconnections between these contentious thinkers enables us to interpret both the theories advanced in their works and the public engagements of the German jurist.

1. Cf. W. Engelking, *Recepcja myśli Carla Schmitta w USA po 1945 r.*, "Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne", 2019, Vol. 71, No. 1, pp. 187–214, DOI: [10.14746/cph.2019.1.8](https://doi.org/10.14746/cph.2019.1.8); Q. Zheng, *Carl Schmitt, Mao Zedong and the Politics of Transition*, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, pp. 7–31.

2. W. Engelking, *Carla Schmitta krytyka liberalizmu w latach 1916-1938. Próba syntezy i interpretacji*, "Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne", 2019, Vol. 71, No. 2, p. 138, DOI: [10.14746/cph.2019.2.6](https://doi.org/10.14746/cph.2019.2.6); A. Wielomski, *Interpretacje Carla Schmitta na świecie i w Polsce*, "Studia nad Faszyzmem i Zbrodniami Hitlerowskimi", 2011, Vol. 33, pp. 415–416.

3. A. Wielomski, *Interpretacje Carla Schmitta...*, op. cit., pp. 416–417.

4. J. Meierhenrich, O. Simmons, "A Fanatic of Order in an Epoch of Confusing Turmoil": *The Political, Legal, and Cultural Thought of Carl Schmitt*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, eds. J. Meierhenrich, O. Simmons, Oxford University Press 2016, p. 53.

5. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzyjonizm Carla Schmitta*, transl. A. Górniewicz, "Kronos", 2010, 2 (13), p. 118.

6. C. Schmitt, *Teologia polityczna i inne pisma*, transl. M.A. Cichocki, Wydawnictwo Aletheia 2012, pp. 92–104.

Schmitt on Machiavelli

The author of “Political Theology” infrequently references Machiavelli in his works. This is because Schmitt views Machiavelli primarily as a thinker concerned with the “technique” (art) of governance, rather than a creator of new political theories. According to the German jurist, Machiavelli’s focus on the mechanics of governing the state aligns with the treatises of the Renaissance era. Thus, Schmitt argues, the apparent contradiction between Machiavelli as the advisor to an absolute ruler in “The Prince” and as an ardent republican in “Discourses” can be reconciled. In Schmitt’s view, both of these works serve to describe the technique of governance rather than to present political manifestos. Schmitt observes that Machiavelli’s chief adversaries are politicians who oscillate between committing atrocities and adhering to moral principles. A successful politician exhibits consistency in pursuing the goal of establishing a durable state order. The political system of the state, Schmitt suggests, is of secondary importance compared to historical and social factors.⁷ Crucial to Machiavelli is the establishment of a stable state order. As a product of the Renaissance, the Florentine thinker is captivated by Roman institutional structures. Of particular interest to Machiavelli is the Roman institution of dictatorship, which Schmitt characterizes as “commissarial” (a temporal institution constrained by law). He views this institution as a vital “safeguard” within the Roman system, shielding the republic from its gravest dangers. The dictator, in the interest of preserving order, suspends the law without altering it.⁸ Scholarly works predominantly emphasize the disparities in the depiction of the dictatorship institution in the writings of the two thinkers, as Schmitt himself acknowledged by noting that Machiavelli does not differentiate between commissarial and sovereign dictatorships. However, the distinctions between the two scholars run deeper. Primarily, there is a fundamental disparity between Schmitt’s heteronomous political and Machiavelli’s mixed system.⁹ In her text comparing Schmitt’s sovereign and Machiavelli’s dictator, Gülce Tarhan Çelebi observes that for Schmitt, the political system rests on a heteronomous political community, whereas for Machiavelli, power must uphold order by managing the conflict between opposing groups: the elite and the public.¹⁰ However, it is notable that scholars who draw comparisons between the two thinkers often reference the work “Dictatorship,” in which Schmitt devotes considerable attention to Machiavelli. This work is not considered a central piece in “The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt.” Considering the remark expressed earlier regarding the classification of Schmitt’s works in terms of their relevance to his overall thought, it is worth pondering whether, in the quest to uncover Machiavelli’s influence on Schmitt, one should first turn to Schmitt’s seminal work—the treatise “Political Theology.” This approach is taken by the American scholar John P. McCormick in his intriguing article on Machiavelli. He dedicates considerable attention to highlighting the similarities between

7. C. Schmitt, *Dyktatura*, transl. K. Wudarska, Fundacja Augusta hr Cieszkowskiego 2016, pp. 26–32.

8. *Ibidem*, p. 29.

9. A. Moudarres, *On the Threshold of Law: Dictatorship and Exception in Machiavelli and Schmitt*, “I Tatti Studies”, 2015, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 349–370, DOI: [10.1086/683136](https://doi.org/10.1086/683136).

10. G. Çelebi, *Political Order, Emergency Powers and Law in Machiavelli and Schmitt*, “Filozofia (Philosophy)”, 2022, Vol. 77, Issue 6, pp. 427–441, DOI: [10.31577/filozofia.2022.77.6.3](https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2022.77.6.3).

Schmitt and Machiavelli, both in the main body of the article and in the footnotes. In order to elucidate Machiavelli's worldview, McCormick examines the Renaissance thinker's usage of the term *accidente*—denoting an event of political significance that could pose a threat to state order.¹¹ *Accidenti* can take various forms, as Machiavelli did not provide a comprehensive definition covering all possible occurrences. However, when they arise, all necessary measures should be taken to avert the threat of destabilizing the state. *Accidenti* bear some resemblance to Schmitt's notion of a "state of exception." Nonetheless, unlike Jacek Bartyzel, who explicitly asserts in his definition of "Machiavellianism" that "for the author of 'The Prince,' the realm of politics is one of perpetual state of exception,"¹² John P. McCormick argues that *accidenti*, while resembling Schmitt's concept of a "state of exception," are not identical to it.¹³ Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Schmitt diverges from Machiavelli's prescription, who advocates for a mixed form of government as the most effective means of overcoming crises induced by *accidenti*, while Schmitt unequivocally advocates for a sovereign representing a heteronomous political community. Additionally, unlike Machiavelli, Schmitt does not provide examples of a "state of exception," merely stating that it signifies an existential threat to the state. However, does Schmitt truly encompass all potential states of exception that a state may confront, as John P. McCormick suggested? While Schmitt rather briefly describes one of the fundamental concepts upon which he constructs his theory, scholars such as Wojciech Engelking argue that Schmitt's "state of exception" is not a homogeneous concept, and Schmitt himself nuanced this concept.¹⁴

11. J.P. McCormick, *Addressing the Political Exception: Machiavelli's "Accidents" and the Mixed Regime*, "The American Political Science Review", 1993, Vol. 87, No. 4, pp. 888–900.

12. J. Bartyzel, *Makiawelizm*, <http://www.legitymizm.org/ebp-makiawelizm>, (access 29.04.2022).

13. J.P. McCormick, *Addressing the Political...*, op. cit., p. 898.

14. W. Engelking, *Stan wyjątkowy i stan bez nazwy w myśli Carla Schmitta. Propozycja rozdzielenia*, "Archiwum Filozofii Prawa i Filozofii Społecznej", 2019, 1 (19), pp. 15–28.

Political Occasionalists?

Undoubtedly, what the Florentine political writer and the German jurist share is the controversies they evoked, which persist among commentators on their works. The primary criticism leveled against the ideas of both thinkers is their perceived absence of grounding in a moral framework, a point emphasized by John P. McCormick, who identifies exception as a central concern of their respective political theories.¹⁵ This criticism is strongly articulated by Karl Löwith, who in his text "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt" characterizes the thought of the German jurist as follows: "What Schmitt defends is a politics of sovereign decision, but one in which content is merely a product of the accidental occasion of the political situation which happens to prevail at the moment; hence content is precisely not a product 'of the power of integral knowledge' about what is primarily correct and just, as it is in Plato's concept of the essence of politics, where such knowledge grounds an order of human affairs."¹⁶ From the outset, critics have also accused Schmitt's thought of being tinged with nihilism, veiled beneath a veneer of Catholic references and ideas borrowed from 19th-century counter-revolutionary thinkers. One such critic is Karl Löwith, as quoted above,

15. J.P. McCormick, *Addressing the Political...*, op. cit., p. 898.

16. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 117.

who in his text “The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt” offers a highly critical assessment of Schmitt’s concepts of political theology and the idea of ‘the political’ as constitutive elements of politics.¹⁷ Was Schmitt truly a political nihilist? Certainly, he was influenced by German idealism, the works of Nietzsche, and Hegelianism. Given the impact of these intellectual currents across generations, not just among German thinkers, such a claim should not be contentious. However, it is worth considering whether what the astute critic of German nihilism perceives as its outcome is Schmitt following in the intellectual footsteps of another thinker whose views were also deemed rife with ambiguities and contradictions—namely, Machiavelli. The charge of occasionalism can indeed be applied to Machiavelli, with his indifferent stance towards morality and religion. The frequently cited John McCormick draws parallels between Schmitt’s dilemmas and Machiavelli’s thought, highlighting that Schmitt is a thinker of the decline of the modern state era, during which Machiavelli developed his vision. In fact, Schmitt diverges from the Platonic ideal of seeking what is just and right in politics because he is a thinker operating in an era with a fundamentally different approach to political philosophy. This shift is aptly described by Leo Strauss in his essay “On Classical Political Philosophy.” Strauss delineates the fundamental difference between classical political philosophy, rooted in Greek thought and striving towards a universal political ideal, and the new political philosophy, exemplified by the Hegelians, initiated by Niccolò Machiavelli, which seeks to describe real politics while eschewing the pursuit of universal political models.¹⁸ Indeed, Löwith’s approach seems to be fundamentally erratic in attempting to view Schmitt as a theorist endeavoring to create yet another positive political theory. As John McCormick observes, Schmitt is a product of the twilight era of the modern nation-state, shaped by the developments of the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁹ To delve deeper than Löwith and grasp the essence of Schmitt’s thought, we must view it through the lens of a thinker who lived during the emergence of a state form that was crumbling before Schmitt’s eyes. Schmitt’s focus on issues that clashed with his vision, elements of church teaching and tradition, and the occasionalism attributed to him all stem from his Machiavellian approach to politics. Like Machiavelli, Schmitt considered ethical and moral concerns to be indifferent, subject to change depending on the place and time, as the prince’s paramount goal was to establish a robust state capable of quelling internal strife and external threats. For Schmitt, confronted with the looming threat of political disintegration, the primary objective was to preserve the political unity of the nation and maintain the state’s monopoly on decision-making. Both thinkers diverge from the pursuit of an ideal system model, instead seeking methods to uphold order within the state. They both concur that only the state has the capacity to prevent bloodshed, a natural consequence of the evil inherent in human nature. Consequently, Schmitt, as Löwith

17. Ibidem, pp. 119–122.

18. L. Strauss, *Jerozolima i Ateny oraz inne eseje z filozofii politycznej*, transl. R. Mordarski, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki 2012, p. 158.

19. J.P. McCormick, *Addressing the Political...*, op. cit., p. 898.

highlights, is interested in the exception rather than the norm.²⁰ John McCormick similarly suggests that Machiavelli's thought can be characterized as a philosophy of political exception.²¹

Machiavelli formulated the foundations of his theory against the backdrop of a specific political landscape—the political fragmentation of Italy and the persistent encroachment of neighboring powers during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Consequently, characteristic of the author of “The Prince” is the conception of sovereignty as the complete neutralization of any external factors that could impede power. As noted by Piotr Nowak in his work on the Florentine thinker, Machiavelli scrutinizes the emergence of a new breed of rulers in Italian principalities—the *condottieri*—who ascend to power through armed coups. These rulers lack the legitimacy bestowed by either customary law or divine authority. Consequently, the order they establish is entirely autonomous.²² For these rulers, existing structures hold no value; rather, they are perceived as hindrances to the establishment of a new political order. Machiavelli's prince, therefore, has a singular objective—to uphold sovereign power and thereby maintain the political unity of the state. This distinctive perspective characterizes Florentine thought. The longstanding debates over whether “The Prince” serves as a manual for autocrats akin to Cesare Borgia seeking power, or, as Antonio Gramsci would argue, as a blueprint for a prince intent on constructing a modern state for the people, are ultimately fruitless disputes.²³ Machiavelli's groundbreaking contribution lies in being the first philosopher to grapple with the concept of the “state of exception,” manifested in the form of the previously discussed *accidenti*, and as a thinker who perceives politics as an autonomous sphere of public life. Machiavelli does not delve into inquiries about the axiological foundation of power, ethical considerations of justice, or the legitimacy of a ruler's actions. Instead, his central concern revolves around the means themselves—to what extent one can go to uphold societal order. In this regard, he emerges as a philosopher of political “technique,” viewing politics as a self-contained domain, akin to an art or technique. While other facets of public life may influence politics, they are not integral to it. Machiavelli's secularization of politics entails stripping away elements external to the state order. Machiavelli does not draw upon an axiological foundation rooted in a different religious or moral context. Although he does not dismiss the existence of morality, within the realm of politics, he deems its principles irrelevant. Individuals often act immorally, so the authority must adapt to this reality.²⁴ Machiavellianism examines other manifestations of public life solely in terms of their utility for political ends.²⁵ We can describe him as Löwith characterizes Schmitt—an occasionalist for whom everything is derived from a particular, specific political situation. As an example, let us consider the actions of Cesare Borgia, detailed

20. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 116.

21. J.P. McCormick, *Addressing the Political...*, op. cit., pp. 888–892.

22. P. Nowak, *Lekcja realizmu*, “Kronos”, 2011, 3 (18), p. 36.

23. A. Gramsci, *Pisma wybrane. Tom 2*, transl. B. Sieroszewska, Książka i Wiedza 1961, pp. 488–496.

24. N. Machiavelli, *Książce*, transl. C. Nanke, Wydawnictwo Vesper 2008, pp. 69–70.

25. P. Nowak, *Lekcja realizmu...*, op. cit., p. 33.

Machiavelli's “exception” and Schmitt's “state of exception”

in Chapter VII of “The Prince.” After seizing Romagna, Borgia appoints the ruthless Ramiro de Lorca as its governor, who implements a repressive policy according to his whims; “Afterwards, the Duke judged that such excessive authority was no longer required, since he feared that it might become odious.”²⁶ The former governor ends up quartered, while Romagna receives a government stripped of its special power to use violence. This showcases Machiavelli’s *modus operandi*. A prudent ruler, when necessary to maintain order, suspends the law, employing whatever means are required. Simultaneously, once the menacing situation is resolved, authority adapts to the public sentiment. Machiavelli finds the use of universal models nonsensical when the political unity of the state is imperiled. The era he inhabited was marked by profound changes: spiritual, political, and social. The robust authority of a single hegemon within the state secures its survival. Amidst a world descending into chaos, where various factions vie for dominance, Machiavelli aligns with a singular locus of power capable of quelling the chaos stemming from the breakdown of the existing socio-political framework. This disorder can be managed by navigating the conflicts among multiple groups and gaining ascendancy over them. Thus, a mixed system is not the most idealistic perspective, but it serves as the most pragmatic systemic form for establishing enduring order. The objective, therefore, is to contain chaos and foster equilibrium through the supremacy of the state over religious, economic, and class particularisms.

Machiavelli thus places the exception at the core of his political reflections. Contemplating the exception serves the Italian philosopher in his quest to delineate the state’s objective of upholding equilibrium in domestic politics. He seeks to unravel how the sovereign can uphold state order and, consequently, the extent of measures employed for this purpose. Schmitt, as a distant successor to the Florentine thinker, emerges at the twilight of the modern nation-state era, recognizing the impossibility of maintaining the existing forms of government. He reconfigures the Machiavellian inquiry, transforming it into a quest for navigating the decay of established state forms and determining the appropriate means for this task. This is not a novel query within the annals of political thought with Schmitt; it had been previously addressed by thinkers of the counter-revolutionary period, from whom Schmitt draws extensively in formulating his concepts of “sovereign” and “the political.” These thinkers sought to address how to ensure the continuity of the prevailing order amidst the erosion of all conceptual frameworks that could legitimize it. Their focus was not on reorganizing the political order, but on preserving it, thus unwittingly carrying forward Machiavelli’s ideas. For them, the point of reference was the state of exception, not the normative state. The upheaval following the revolution led them to advocate for the suspension of the law to safeguard the state. What sets de

26. N. Machiavelli, *Książę...*, op. cit., pp. 29–30.

Maistre, de Boland, or Donoso Cortés apart from Schmitt is primarily the robust axiological foundation of their thought rooted in Catholic doctrine, which, as scholars note, often serves as a rhetorical veneer in Schmitt's case. The tensions and ambiguities within Schmitt's ideas stem from his position as a distant epigone of Machiavelli. Although scholars have highlighted significant disparities in the concepts of Machiavelli and Schmitt, it is essential to recognize the four-century gap in history that separates the two. In Machiavelli's era, a feudal system based on a hierarchical social structure still persisted (albeit weakening). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, "The Prince" served as a manual for a new generation of rulers emancipated from prior hierarchies and authorities. In contrast, Schmitt inhabits an era dominated by homogeneous political communities in Western Europe, witnessing the decline of the political state form that emerged at the dawn of the modern era, supplanted by new phenomena within Western civilization.

In grappling with the challenge of addressing the metamorphosis of the prevailing form of government amid political and civilizational shifts, Schmitt revisits Thomas Hobbes and his notion of the sovereign. Concurrently, he directs his critique towards the phenomenon of depoliticization and the liberalism that epitomizes it, contemporaneous with Schmitt. Liberalism, intent on domesticating the realm of politicization delineated by Schmitt through the technologization of politics, essentially yields similar outcomes to communism. The political ceases to be within the domain of the state and instead evolves into a battleground for the conflicts among interest groups.²⁷ As Löwith observes, "It was only under the predominance of modern democracy, of thinking in the natural sciences, and of the kind of economy that thinks in terms of natural scientific concepts that decisionistic thinking, which reaches its apex in the determination of a personal will, became replaced by faith in anonymous laws of a natural scientific kind."²⁸ For Schmitt, a staunch opponent of liberalism, such "depoliticization" undermines the state, leading to the concealment of the political. Consequently, Schmitt advocates for the resurgence of decisionist thought in politics. Another flaw in Schmitt's contemporary public discourse is the belief in the state's neutrality. Schmitt's adversaries—the liberals—contend that individuals, being inherently good, can peacefully resolve conflicts among themselves. They argue that public debates and periodic parliamentary elections, where rational and factual discussions occur among the people's representatives, will yield amicable resolutions. Contrary to this, Schmitt, drawing from Thomas Hobbes, adopts a stance of anthropological pessimism and employs the concept of the political as foundational to politics instead of debate. According to Schmitt, the political is the arena where existential disparities among individuals become evident.²⁹ These disputes may escalate to violent resolutions, necessitating decisive action to avert the risk of a civil war. This is the

27. W. Engelking, *Carla Schmitta krytyka...*, op. cit., p. 146.

28. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzyjizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 117.

29. C. Schmitt, *Teologia polityczna...*, op. cit., p. 261.

role and duty of the sovereign. In restoring order, the sovereign may suspend the law, as “There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists. All law is ‘situational law.’ The sovereign produces and guarantees the situation in its totality. He has the monopoly over this last decision. Therein resides the essence of the state’s sovereignty, which must be juristically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide. The exception reveals most dearly the essence of the state’s authority. The decision parts here from the legal norm, and (to formulate it paradoxically) authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.”³⁰

The foundational concepts for the phenomenon of the political are the notions of enemy and friend. They serve a similar role in the political as profit and loss do in economics, good and evil in ethics, and beauty and ugliness in esthetics.³¹ For Schmitt, enemy and friend are concepts “to be understood in their concrete and existential sense,” manifesting as “one fighting collectivity of people confront[ing] a similar collectivity.”³² These groups exhibit hostility towards each other in an existential, public context, distinct from adversaries in the private sphere.³³ The decision, taken by the sovereign, holds inherent significance; it aims to settle conflicts between groups and thereby foster order. The state possesses exclusive authority in designating certain groups or individuals as *hostis*—the public enemy jeopardizing public order.³⁴ Schmitt further asserts that the authority to determine the fate of human life, or more precisely, the capacity to negate another being, is the defining characteristic that sets apart the political community from other forms of association wherein individuals operate within society.³⁵ The political, as Schmitt comprehends it, though influenced by various facets of human existence such as economics, religion, or culture, signifies “only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings.”³⁶ Therefore, according to Schmitt, the political possesses a comprehensive nature; those who control it determine who the enemy is and thereby, in a sense, construct political reality. Consequently, ethical or economic norms do not govern it. While the political may draw upon them, they are not its originating source. So, what is its origin? On what grounds does Schmitt establish his arguments? What axiological foundation underpins the validity of his theories? Unlike Donoso Cortés or de Bonald, he does not resort to traditional Catholic axiology. Adam Wielomski asserts in his text that “Schmitt’s break from the Church resulted in the absence of a metaphysical basis and the advocacy for a dictatorship based on violence without recourse to any axiological framework, a departure lamented by some scholars (usually Catholic).”³⁷ Another interpretation is offered by Löwith, as cited earlier, who perceives Schmitt’s thought as a manifestation

30. Ibidem, p. 52.

31. Ibidem, p. 254.

32. Ibidem, p. 255.

33. Ibidem, pp. 255-257.

34. Ibidem, p. 276.

35. Ibidem, p. 278.

36. Ibidem, p. 267.

37. A. Wielomski, *Interpretacje Carla Schmitta...*, op. cit., p. 422.

of German nihilism.³⁸ His critical examination of Schmitt's concept of the political and decisionism hinges on revealing their tendency towards occasionalism—Schmitt's failure to anchor his ideas in any moral framework, unlike counter-revolutionary thinkers, renders his theory applicable to any challenge to a prevailing order. Furthermore, his polemical stance against political liberalism leads Schmitt to arbitrarily employ concepts inherent to the theory he vehemently opposes. Löwith astutely observes that by rejecting the liberal conception of politics and constructing his theory in opposition to it, Schmitt becomes ensnared in the very thought patterns he critiques.³⁹ An illustration of this is Schmitt's interpretation of the biblical injunction to love one's enemies. Drawing extensively from counter-revolutionary thought, Schmitt, akin to a staunch liberal, disregards the political ramifications of Jesus' teachings, contending that they pertain solely to believers' private conduct rather than their public lives. Thus, Schmitt distinguishes between *hostis* and *inimicus*, political enemy and foe (in the biblical perspective). He argues that the commandment to love applies exclusively to private enemies, not to public enemies—those who pose a threat to the state. Towards public enemies, the commandment does not hold. This approach conveniently sidesteps the political implications of Christianity's guiding principle—the commandment to love one's neighbor. This deliberate inconsistency in Schmitt's thought, given the significance of pluralism in the state and its role in undermining national political unity, serves as further evidence for Löwith of the nihilistic underpinnings of the German jurist's theory. "Schmitt's decision in favor of the political is not a decision in favor of a definite and authoritative subject area, as it is in religious, metaphysical, moral, or spiritual decisions generally; rather, it is nothing other than a *decision in favor of decisiveness*—regardless of what this is actually in favor of—because this is the specific essence of the political."⁴⁰

Confronted with a state of exception, the disintegration of the state structure, Schmitt unequivocally advocates for a decision in favor of the state. Schmitt, with good reason, drew upon intellectual motifs from counter-revolutionary thinkers, uncovering the theological origins of their ideas. Politics, or more precisely, the political, constitutes a clash between two apocalyptic forces: the enemy and the friend, who are adversaries in an existential sense. However, Schmitt acknowledges that the modern state is engulfed in crisis. The metaphysical outlook of the Enlightenment era, rooted in the belief in a deistic Creator, has reshaped the conception of the state. A shift in metaphysics brings about a transformation in the realm of politics. Another transformation involves the transition from a transcendent conception of God to immanentization associated with the democratization of politics. Democratization has led to the fusion of society and politics, resulting in the totalization of the latter. In Schmitt's view, it is liberalism that bears responsibility

38. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzyjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 115.

39. Ibidem, p. 121.

40. Ibidem, p. 120.

for this state of affairs, as it inherently promotes individualism, exacerbating the fragmentation of the individual and consequently leading to the depoliticization of public life. “To the extent that this tendency toward the *depoliticization* of the state, particularly by means of economy and technology, seeks a politically neutral ground, Schmitt characterizes this tendency toward depoliticization as one toward *neutralization* as well. Since the emancipation of the Third Estate and the formation of civil democracy and its refinement into industrial mass democracy, this neutralization of distinctions which are measure-giving for politics, together with the postponement of decisions regarding these distinctions, has developed to the decisive point where it is now changing into its opposite—into a *total politicization* of all areas of life, even those which would appear to be the most neutral.”⁴¹ Schmitt contends that liberals actively aim to neutralize politics by attempting to integrate it into legal or economic frameworks. Recognizing the irreversibility of secularization’s impact, Schmitt sought to reintroduce the concept of politics in terms of decisions.⁴² This endeavor culminated in Schmitt’s accession to the Nazi movement.

Describing Schmitt’s ideological evolution, Löwith concludes that the pivotal moment for the German jurist was 1934, when Schmitt deemed the situation to be normal and Germany’s political order rescued by the Nazi regime.⁴³ While Schmitt’s accession to the Nazi movement has been attributed to opportunism, his motives appear to have been more complex and rooted in his earlier reflections on the state of emergency.

Schmitt saw in Nazism an opportunity to rejuvenate the German state. However, he overlooked the revolutionary character of the movement, which did not aspire to restore the former German state but aimed to establish its own order.⁴⁴ With a lack of ethical grounding in Schmitt’s ideology, he misinterpreted the nature of the transformations unfolding in Germany. Schmitt advocated for a Nazi state, convinced that he was adhering to de Maistre’s renowned maxim: “*tout gouvernement est bon lorsqu’il est établi* [every government is good when it is established],”⁴⁵ completely disregarding the reality that Nazism constituted a revolution executed in the name of the past, striving for the complete overhaul of Germany—a departure from the original principles of the Savoyard writer. Devoid of an ethical foundation, decisionism led Schmitt astray. His endeavor to safeguard the vestiges of the “old world” against liberal neutralization ended in a resounding failure. Subsequently marginalized by the Nazi authorities, Schmitt ceased to develop his version of decisionism and shifted his focus to institutionalism.⁴⁶ Following the collapse of the Third Reich, and due to his refusal to comply with the denazification process, Schmitt found himself unable to secure employ-

41. Ibidem, pp. 112–113.

42. W. Engelking, *Carla Schmitta krytyka...*, op. cit., p. 146.

43. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzyjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., pp. 130–131.

44. M. Gauchet, *Ostateczny zwrot teologiczno-polityczny nowoczesności*, transl. M. Warchała, “Kronos”, 2019, 2 (49), pp. 109–110.

45. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzyjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 118.

46. W. Engelking, *Recepcja myśli Carla...*, op. cit., p. 212.

ment at universities. He settled in his hometown of Plettenberg, inhabiting a house he christened San Casciano—after the village where Machiavelli spent his exile.⁴⁷

Conclusions

Machiavelli and Schmitt find themselves at the juncture and conclusion of the era of the modern state, respectively, which renders the focal points of their philosophies considerably congruent. The primary disparity between Machiavelli and Schmitt stems from the span of 400 years of history, during which the crucial process of secularization of political concepts, pivotal from Schmitt's perspective, transpired, to which Machiavelli, as a critic of preceding political philosophy, significantly contributed. Both are chiefly concerned with "exceptions" that hold greater relevance for them than the normative state of affairs (in Schmitt's case, up to the 1930s). It is noteworthy that both thinkers crafted their works during epochs marked by the disintegration and transformation of existing state structures. This political tumult mirrors the upheaval that Germany encountered following its defeat in World War I. The accusation of occasionalism levelled by Löwith becomes somewhat less damning when we examine Schmitt's theory against the backdrop of the circumstances in which he formulated his theoretical framework. The avenues of state legitimacy to which he could appeal became obsolete due to the processes of democratization and depoliticization of politics. The Weimar Republic epitomized a state plagued by incessant internal crises, manifested in clashes between various factions within parliament and on the streets. Consequently, all of Schmitt's public endeavors strive to establish an order that ensures the cessation of the state's decay by neutralizing other factors and reinstating its leading role. Machiavelli pursued a similar objective: "for where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty."⁴⁸ Schmitt can be seen as an epigone to Machiavelli, yet he also grapples with the process initiated by the Florentine thinker—the gradual erosion of the state's legitimacy. Machiavelli was among the first to boldly challenge classical political philosophy, centering his theory around the concept of the exception, whose existence was dictated by state power itself.⁴⁹ Schmitt indeed follows in the footsteps of Machiavelli, thereby positioning himself as an epigone to the Florentine thinker. However, the phenomena Schmitt combats are the ramifications of a process intrinsically tied to Machiavelli—secularization.⁵⁰ Although Machiavelli did not oppose religion, his emphasis on treating power as an art effectively removed the core of religious belief—its moral principles—from the realm of state axiology. Four hundred years later, Schmitt remains unable to reconcile this disparity. Additionally, when comparing Machiavelli's

47. *Ibidem*, p. 193.

48. N. Machiavelli, *Rozważania, t. III, Wybór pism*, transl. K. Żaboklicki, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1972, p. 612.

49. Ł. Szymański, *Desakralizacja myśli politycznej w czasach nowożytnych*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Lublin-Polonia", 2018, Vol. 65, No. 2, p. 242, DOI: [10.17951/g.2018.65.2.235-246](https://doi.org/10.17951/g.2018.65.2.235-246).

50. M. Gauchet, *Odczarowanie świata. Próba politycznej historii religii*, transl. M. Warchała, Fundacja Augusta hr Cieszkowskiego 2021, pp. 286–292.

accidenti with Schmitt's "state of exception," it is evident that Machiavelli, at the onset of the modern era, does not explicitly delineate them. Moreover, he is capable of distinguishing between individual exceptions and grading them. In contrast, Schmitt's "state of exception" is even characterized as apocalyptic in nature.⁵¹ Schmitt's admiration for Cromwell's antagonism towards the Spaniards or the "inquisitorial spirit of Donoso Cortés" lacks the nuanced approach exhibited by Machiavelli in his theory.⁵² He unequivocally advocates for a decision in favor of the state. Engaged in a polemical fervor against liberalism, he totalizes the political.⁵³ This lack of nuance in the concept of "states of exception" contributes to the endorsement of Nazism, whose downfall marks the onset of the dominance of the liberal political paradigm. Machiavelli and Schmitt will thus also share the personal experience of exile and the defeat of their visions for their respective homelands.

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51. J. Taubes, *Carl Schmitt-Apokaliptyk w służbie kontrrewolucji*, transl. P. Graczyk, "Kronos", 2010, 2 (13), pp. 47–58.

52. K. Löwith, *Okazjonalny decyzjonizm Carla...*, op. cit., p. 124.

53. Ibidem, p. 123.

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