



Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty

Carl Schmitt, George Schwab (Translator), Tracy B. Strong (Foreword)

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Written in the intense political and intellectual tumult of the early years of the Weimar Republic, *Political Theology* develops the distinctive theory of sovereignty that made Carl Schmitt one of the most significant and controversial political theorists of the twentieth century.

Focusing on the relationships among political leadership, the norms of the legal order, and the state of political emergency, Schmitt argues in *Political Theology* that legal order ultimately rests upon the decisions of the sovereign. According to Schmitt, only the sovereign can meet the needs of an "exceptional" time and transcend legal order so that order can then be reestablished. Convinced that the state is governed by the ever-present possibility of conflict, Schmitt theorizes that the state exists only to maintain its integrity in order to ensure order and stability. Suggesting that all concepts of modern political thought are secularized theological concepts, Schmitt concludes *Political Theology* with a critique of liberalism and its attempt to depoliticize political thought by avoiding fundamental political decisions.

Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty Details

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Andrew says

It's hard to know whether to give this 5 stars or 1 star.

It's an incredibly clear headed mediation on the deep problems of liberalism and democratic government. Almost like an instruction manual for aspiring authoritarians.

Steven Wedgeworth says

Schmitt here continues his critique of liberalism, showing that "the political" requires a notion of a sovereign to be meaningful and that this sovereign must have the power of the exception. This exception is largely rejected by liberalism, however, as it would rather view politics as a science, governed by laws. The sovereign and the exception are dependent upon a theological framework.

Schmitt shows how liberalism historically transferred theological concepts to the state and then eventually to the people, necessarily deifying them. Still unsatisfied though, liberalism pushes own towards totalitarianism or anarchy, both of which, according to Schmitt, logically follow from liberalism.

g says

In this book Schmitt explains the contradictions of an immanent legal system whereby the state of exception becomes concealed underneath a veil of laws - yet, it is the state of exception that determines the sovereign, and only with the emergence of such a state, i.e. WW2, can one observe the transcendent authority of the sovereign. Schmitt, who has been a Professor of Law in Nazi Germany, declares that a dictatorship is the only meaningful method of governance that relieves us from such contradictions, and that points to a transcendental authority replacing the authority of God. Only with a neu-Leviathan, a transcendental captured in an immanent form, can we grant the universal interest of the nation.

Even though I am very glad to have read the book I should admit that I am overwhelmed, and not convinced, by the ideas of Carl Schmitt, and a bit scared as well.

Bookshark says

The core idea of this book is so simple and straightforward that it is sufficiently captured in the two most famous passages - the first sentence of the first chapter and the first paragraph of the third chapter. The rest of the book is just elaboration upon these points in relation to the ideas of various legal theorists and philosophers, notably Hobbes, Rousseau, and the anarchists. If you're reading this to get a background in Schmitt so that you can use him in your contemporary work, proceed; but if you're just trying to familiarize yourself with his ideas, you don't need to read much of it to get the point.

Bernardo Kaiser says

"The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition."

Who said Law can't be well written?

Akis Kexas says

It is a very helpfull book for our view in political theology

Colm Gillis says

A short treatise which is so crammed with great quotes. Schmitt offers an explanation for the development of the state and sovereignty in conceptual terms. The polemical tone of the text, while it greatly enhances the points he at times makes, also means that some observations are not fully explored. Schmitt likes to write tersely, but I think this could have done with being expanded a little bit. Nonetheless, a tour de force.

Suzanne says

really interesting treatment of executive power. on the eve of political breakdown, of a moment of "exception" for which the written laws offer no remedy, he says the executive needs the freedom to make decisions. problem is, it can go both ways depending on who's in charge. he assumes that the executive respects the rule of law in all other respects, and reluctantly acts to decide on exceptional events. but what if the executive is, like, bush?

Robert says

This book laid out a distinct political program that helped lead the way to the Third Reich's lunatic dictatorship and underpins the rationalization of any leader who acts outside the law (including several of the last American Presidents, various mob bosses, vigilantes, and world leaders all over the globe). I say all this first, lest we forget the potential dangers of this kind of thinking. But there is a solid and undeniable truth in what Schmitt says on page 30, "Every concrete juristic decision contains a moment of indifference from the perspective of content... because the circumstance that requires a decision remains an independently determining moment." In short, it is an essential reality about legal and political situations that someone removed from the specific situation must eventually make a decision. The personal is inherent and cannot be removed, and Schmitt argues that only his Decisionist policy fully accepts and fully utilizes that reality. All other political theories try to avoid and disguise this reality in 'comprehensive' legal structures and/or

democratic voting systems and/or anarchic rejection of law, but all of these systems fail to deal with radical exceptions properly because none of these systems allows for one person to make an informed and rapid decision for the State when a crisis is looming. I, for one, was raised on the argumentative joys of political gridlock and political pacifism, so this is all very hard to swallow... but there is a brutal logic that is hard to deny, and just writing it off as 'evil' is no solution. Everyone should read this book, to know its arguments, and to make their own more informed.

Mohammad Ali says

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Reza Khabook says

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Mark says

This is a difficult read. It is, to me, very boring. That said, it is not that long. I found a pdf online, skipped the intro (which was almost as long as the text), and I read the whole thing, slowly, in 2-3 hours.

Schmitt was recommended to me by good reads, and I have learned that Marcuse was in part writing against him. This books sounds and feels like it was written by a fascist. That's the best way I can describe it. Schmitt envisions the state as a secular religious form. There are more extensive reviews.

I was unsure what to rate this book. I do not think it is a one-star book if a person considers that there are some potential insights into the way that a state may be viewed. However, this is an uncomfortable book.

Spanakos says

Schmitt argues that sovereignty cannot be possessed by the law or norms, but must, in the ultimate instance, be possessed by man. It is in the exception that sovereignty is formed. Liberal constitutional order tries to repress the sovereign, but it cannot. A state of exception cannot be legal circumscribed in advance. Schmitt argues that God was present in the world until the rise of Deism (and rationalism), which took God out of the world and turned the 'miracle' into the 'exception' in the natural order (hence the analogy of exception and miracle). The French Revolution and Deism with their belief in the neutrality of nature and the goodness of 'the people', as well as the constitutive power of the people, leads to a radically different sense.

W. C. says

Forget the neoconservatives. Their bogus neo-Platonism predicated on the noble lie was a merely half backed version of their somewhat inscrutable master, Leo Strauss. No, here it is---the description of the realm of realpolitik as it is practiced by our current administration. Back in the 1920's, Schmitt formulated

what is to my mind the most succinct version of the nature of the political in its raw form: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” Such is the first line of the book and the general view of politics. By ‘exception’, Schmitt means those moments when normal laws and codes of action are thrown out the door, such as, for the U.S., 9/11. The key to the argument is that power resides in the ability to be extra-legal, to change the rules by using moments of confusion to overpower them. No wonder, then, that Mr. Schmitt, writing this text in the absurd days of Weimar Germany, would then go on to endorse and continue to think and write for the Nazis.

Schmitt is someone everyone ought to read because he provides a precise formulation to what happens when powerful people see themselves as privileged to do with power what they will above and beyond mere laws. Read it with fear, trembling, and recognition.

BlackOxford says

Exceptional Nonsense; And Exceptionally Dangerous

Political Theology is the constitutional playbook for fascism. Written in the 1920’s, the book succinctly establishes the ultimate (that is to say theological) rationale for radical authoritarian nationalism. It remains a favourite text for more recent theoreticians, especially those with populist and evangelical tendencies, like Steve Bannon, in the United States.

For Schmitt, the sovereign, that entity in government beyond which there is no appeal, is “*he who decides the exceptions.*” That is, the person who can both define what constitutes an exceptional case in law, as well as what the disposition of that case will be, is the foundation of the state.* To understand the import of this claim, one only need contrast it with the governmental philosophy of separation of powers contained in the U.S. constitution.

The ‘exception’ in Scmitt’s conception is equivalent to a period of ‘emergency’. During this period, the sovereign may not only suspend the constitution, as sovereign dictator he may amend it to suit the situation, that is, to meet a pressing need. ‘Whose need?’ Is of course the central issue. Schmitt defines it as ‘ours’; ‘us’ being defined negatively as not ‘those who are against us’. In short ‘we’, the people who constitute the state which is subject to sovereign power, are those who subscribe to the concept of the sovereign dictator. One is either friend or enemy. Each category defines the other. The logical loop is airtight.

Politics, therefore, has a rather peculiar meaning within this framework. It cannot mean pluralistic conflict and debate to arrive at some compromise because ‘friends’ cannot be in conflict with each other and ‘enemies’ are there to be overcome.

Similarly, there cannot be any fixed ‘rule of law’ since all law is situational and needs to be adapted to the needs of the people and the threats against them, that is their enemies. Human beings, Schmitt believes, cannot be made subject to a set of political rules or universal laws because as human beings the content of their lives and threats to those lives cannot be anticipated. Any insistence on law as such imperils the very existence of the people as well as their state.

In short: rules are essential for public order and the existence of the state. But, critically, rules are there to be broken as necessary to ensure the health and welfare of the state. Not broken by just anyone of course, only by the sovereign, the dictator, the leader, the Fuhrer. The political must be eliminated and replaced by

organizational and technical rationality in order to prevail against the enemy.

What do these claims have to do with theology? Schmitt believed that we have entered a secular age which is dominated by 'hollowed-out' Christian institutions that have lost the power they had at the height of European Christianity in the 16th century. His aim is to restore the legitimacy and strength of power held by medieval, of course Christian, monarchs to the leaders of the modern state. An up-to-date version of *L'estat c'est moi*.

This may sound alien to anyone brought up in modern democratic state. But it is a theory that has been promoted consistently by not just the Catholic Church but by most Protestants sects. This theory is that the source of all power, including political power, is God. Power is distributed, like grace, from this source through various institutions of church and government as if in a series of waterfalls. Each level is granted what they need to carry out their duties, and passes on the degree of power necessary for subordinate levels to do the same.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the Catholic Church fought bitterly against democracy and in favour of monarchy, specifically on the basis of this theory of power. Schmitt, a Catholic, was acutely influenced by Catholic philosophers and theologians who were reacting primarily to the dislocation of ecclesiastical power brought about by the French Revolution. [see my review of East West Street for details: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>]

Today it is Trump and his band of evangelical supporters who are carrying the flag of sovereign dictatorship. Trump's clear attempt to eliminate not just his political opponents, but politics itself is evidence of his intent. Similarly his persistent efforts to define real Americans as not immigrants nor as Muslims, nor as black people, nor even as members of the Democratic Party, are tactics taken straight from Schmitt. Trump's recent claim to be above the law, to be able to pardon himself, is perhaps the clearest example of his intention to take control of the 'exception' in Schmitt's sense.

This also explains why so many American Evangelicals are so intensely attached to an obviously vile, mendacious, and corrupt leader. He has, in their view, been appointed by God to clean the stables, to drain the swamp, to overturn the money-changers who are all engaged in the un-godly practice of politics. It is politics which these religious enthusiasts despise, particularly politics which contradict their beliefs in their own Christian superiority.

So if you have wondered about what the connection is between Bannon (lapsed Catholic), Pence (evangelical Catholic), and many others surrounding 45, check out Schmitt's little book. If what is happening appears to be a religious war, this is not illusory. Theology is most powerful where it is least challenged, that is among true believers.

But it is a war sparked not by Muslims or immigrants, or black people. Rather it is created by something that has become embedded in the fabric of modern Christianity: the belief that power is and should be controlled by 'us', the community of believers, the Christian *Ummah*. It is after all a matter of divine right. As a cradle Catholic myself, I point this out with deep regret. So it goes.

* I suspect that Schmitt's inspiration for this formulation is the 11th century theologian, Anselm of Canterbury. His 'ontological proof' for the existence of God defines God as "*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*": that which it is not possible to think of anything greater. This is the political equivalent of Schmitt's proposition and provides a convenient surrogacy for God in the role of sovereign dictator.

Aung Sett Kyaw Min says

The third and the fourth essays are much more accessible and offer trenchant insights into

1) the sociology of the concept of sovereignty (the science of drawing out the structural homology between theology and modern theory of the state),

2) the nature of liberalism as both a class and as an attitude towards the moment of decision (the liberals want to dissolve the moment in an endlessly drawn out discussion) and

3) how in the modern state the political is being increasingly swallowed up by techno economic managerialism first diagnosed by Max Weber.

The fourth essay in particular provides a good overview of the conservative/reactive thinkers of the 18th century to whom Schmitt is intellectually indebted

Despite some shortcomings, this book has certainly piqued my interest in Schmitt

Chris Schaeffer says

Three stars for illuminating my understanding of juridical theory and political sovereignty in Weimar Germany. Negative two stars for literally espousing fascism. I look forward to using Schmitt in the future, and was very pleased to read him firsthand after a semester of coming across him in dimly lit footnotes and editorial asides, but Christ, come on. Still--still! Fascinating, compellingly argued, and VERY elegantly written. I can see why Benjamin kept up a correspondence with the guy. Gotta get around to De Maistre some time.

Morteza says

Schwab correctly calls Schmitt; The Hobbes of the 20th century.

In this book Schmitt tries to define his concept of the political sovereignty. He believes that first of all we need to define the 'exception' -not the norm- to grasp the meaning of this concept. "sovereign is he who decides on the exception." (p.5) All laws are 'situational laws.' Because in the case of emergency there exist no law. "There is no norm that is applicable to chaos." (p. 13) At the end of the day, this is the sovereign who decides the right thing to do in the chaos. Then the sovereign is outside of all laws and he is who "produces and guarantees the situation in its totality."

But how this happened and modern sovereign became the omnipotent law-giver? Schmitt suggests that this was the motto of 18th century rationalism: "imitate the immutable decrees of the divinity." Rousseau's 'sovereign', Cartesian 'prince' and Hobbes' 'Leviathan' are referring to the sovereign as an omnipotent law-giver- or the earthly God. The conclusion is mentioned in the first lines of the 3rd chapter:

"All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts (p.36)." The political sovereign is the secular God of the 17th and 18th century and all of the philosophical theories of history are secular versions of the Christian salvation story- this is the echo of Schmitt's catchword that we can hear from Karl Lowith in his worthy book; "Meaning in History."

Liam says

"Schmitt's insistence on the necessarily and irreducibly human quality of political and legal actions is key. Those who would elaborate a set of rules by which decisions can be made take human life out of politics: Schmitt is concerned to keep them. ... Decisions and judgements would always be necessary." (Tracy Strong's forward, xix)

"[W]e know that any decision about whether something is unpolitical is always a political decision." (2)

"The sovereign is he who decides on the exception." (5)

"The exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like. But it cannot be circumscribed factually and made to conform to a performed law. ... The most guidance the constitution can provide is to indicate who can act in such a case." (6-7)

"There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos." (13)

"The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition." (15)

"All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development -- in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver -- but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology." (36)

"The general validity of a legal prescription has become identified with the lawfulness of nature, which applies without exception. The sovereign, who in the deistic view of the world, even if conceived as residing outside the world, had remained the engineer of the great machine, has been radically pushed aside. The machine now runs by itself." (48)

"Liberalism, with its contradictions and compromises, existed for Donoso Cortes only in the short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question 'Christ or Barabbas?' with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation." (62)

"The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half-measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion." (63)

Daniel Cheng says

"Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."

In this slim 66 page volume, Carl Schmitt shatters the belief in the law's infallible aegis that was offered by liberal political theorists like Locke and Rousseau. The law can provide the normative framework by which juridical decisions are made, but the law will never be able to provide an answer for every possible situation that could arise. As mere words on a page, the law cannot make decisions when the unexpected appears. *This is why we need the sovereign.* Although we may fear the arbitrariness of an oppressive state, our attempt to negate the question of the state with the law is nothing more than hiding from the bare fact that when new unique problems confront us, at some point *someone must decide*. Despite being categorized as a conservative, what Schmitt offers us is a thoroughly *humanist* perspective, in which the power of the decision is taken back from the bureaucratic juridical order and placed back where it really belongs: *To people.*
