

Chantal Mouffe

Schmitt's Vision of a Multipolar World Order

I want to bring to the fore the importance of the thought of Carl Schmitt for grasping the situation in which we find ourselves today after the end of the bipolar world order. Contrary to all those who claim that the end of the Cold War has opened the possibility for the universalization of liberal democracy and the establishment of a cosmopolitan new world order, I will argue, using Schmitt's insights, that we are living in a unipolar world, with the unchallenged hegemony of the United States at the origin of our current predicament, and that the only way out lies in the establishment of a multipolar world order.

Before entering into the main discussion, it is, however, necessary first to discard a mistaken view. Several authors have suggested that the strategy of the neoconservatives who are behind George Bush's "war against terrorism" is influenced by Carl Schmitt's view of politics as friend/enemy discrimination. Some of them have been trying to trace this influence through Leo Strauss and his importance in the intellectual formation of several neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz. Their aim is to make Bush's politics appear sinister because of its supposed intellectual origins in somebody deemed to be

a “Nazi thinker.” They claim that it is because it envisages politics in a Schmittian way that the approach of the neoconservatives creates a dangerous polarization between the “civilized world” and the “enemies of freedom” and that it needs to be challenged. In other words, Bush’s war against terrorism is presented as the direct implementation of a Schmittian understanding of the political. To avoid the “clash of civilizations” to which this type of politics is leading, we are told, the solution is to come back to the liberal approach and to work toward the establishment of a cosmopolitan world order.

It is, of course, not my intention to defend Bush’s politics against his detractors. On the contrary, I will argue that Schmitt can help us to make a much more incisive critique of Bush’s politics. More important, perhaps, against all those who believe that Bush’s politics represents a parenthesis in the traditional American perspective, a parenthesis that could easily be overcome with a different government in Washington, I contend that Schmitt allows us to grasp the continuity existing between the traditional perspective and the politics carried out by the current government.

As far as Bush’s politics is concerned, it is clear that there is a profound misunderstanding at play in the conflation between Schmitt’s approach and the one promoted by Bush’s administration. To be sure, Schmitt repeatedly underlined that the *differentia specifica* of the political was the friend/enemy discrimination. But he always stressed that such a discrimination should be drawn in a properly political way, not on the basis of economics or ethics. He specified that the enemy should be never the “personal” enemy—what in Latin is referred to as *inimicus*—but the “public” enemy, *hostis* in Latin.¹ He would certainly not have condoned Bush’s use of moral categories of “good” and “evil” to designate his enemies and his messianic kind of discourse about the American duty to bring freedom and democracy to the world. This was precisely the kind of discourse for which he criticized liberalism.

Indeed, Schmitt was a sharp critic of liberal universalism, with its pretense of offering the true and only legitimate political system. For him the world was a “pluriverse,” not a universe, and he was adamant that any attempt to impose one single model worldwide would have dire consequences. In *The Concept of the Political*, he denounced the way in which liberals were using the concept of “humanity” as an ideological weapon of imperialist expansion and he showed how humanitarian ethics served as a vehicle of economic imperialism: “When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war

wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress and civilization to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy."² This, in his view, explained why wars waged in the name of humanity were particularly inhuman, since all means were justified once the enemy had been presented as an outlaw of humanity. Schmitt would no doubt have denounced the current drawing of the frontier between friend and enemy as one between the civilized world and its enemies as an avatar of the liberal rhetoric.

In fact, far from justifying Bush's strategy, Schmitt's approach provides us with many insights to undermine its basic tenets. Debunking its moralistic discourse, it brings to light the rhetorical moves used by the current U.S. government to confiscate and monopolize the idea of civilization. By declaring, as Bush did in one of his speeches, that "those who are not with us are against us," the current American strategy renders illegitimate all forms of opposition to the attempt to impose a Pax Americana on the whole planet.

Schmitt's perspective reveals how this kind of discourse, far from being new, has long been at the core of American politics. He thereby helps us locate Bush's strategy in the wider context of the various steps taken by the United States to enforce its global hegemony. In "Völkerrechtliche Formen des modernen Imperialismus," a text published in 1932 that is extremely relevant today, Schmitt examined the new form of imperialism represented by the United States.³ The argument's specificity consisted in playing with the antithesis of economy versus politics, claiming—in an eminently political way—that economy and commerce were "apolitical." Schmitt argued that thanks to the Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed in 1823, the United States had managed first to exclude the great powers from the American continent, so as to subject all the nations of that continent to its exclusive hegemony, and later to justify its sole right on intervention in those countries in the name of international police actions to secure democracy.

Schmitt was particularly interested in a new juridical form invented by the United States, the "contract of intervention," which allowed it to intervene in the affairs of another state on the pretence of helping that state defend its independence or the property and liberty of its citizens. Officially, those states remained independent and sovereign, but in practice they were put under the control of the United States, which could decide to intervene

when it considered that its interests were in jeopardy. Such contracts of intervention were signed mainly with Central American countries. Schmitt examines in details the case of Cuba, which the United States “liberated” from Spain in 1898. The young republic was quickly forced to sign a “contract of intervention” that allowed the United States to maintain troops, control several strategic bases, receive important economic and financial concessions, and even intervene in its interior affairs to guarantee its independence and maintain the peace. Indeed, the Marines repeatedly landed in Cuba in the 1900s, and each time the United States declared that it was not an intervention since the contract of intervention gave them the right to intervene. For instance, when they intervened in 1919, it was with the pretext of guaranteeing independent elections. No great effort is needed to find many parallels with what is happening in Iraq today.

Schmitt saw the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 as representing a further step in the attempt by Washington to establish its global hegemony. After Woodrow Wilson forced the Society of Nations to recognize the Monroe Doctrine in its article 21—a recognition that amounted to acknowledging the superiority of American principles—the Americans managed through the Kellogg-Briand Pact to take away from the Society of Nations the power to make the crucial decisions about world peace. Indeed, the pact did not condemn war or try to abolish it; its aim was to outlaw war as an instrument of national politics. This means that an important question was left open: to decide which wars were acceptable and which were not. The decision was of course made by the U.S. government, which thereby established itself as the arbiter of what should be considered war or simply an operation of peace maintenance and public security. The aim of the Americans, claims Schmitt, was to give the Kellogg-Briand Pact—with respect to the whole world—a similar function to the one played by the Monroe Doctrine in the American continent.

No doubt, while critical, Schmitt was also clearly impressed by the capacity of U.S. imperialism of having managed to secure the interpretation of decisive political strategic notions like peace, disarmament, order, and public security. As he put it: “One of the most important phenomenon in the juridical and intellectual life of the humanity is that those who detain the real power are also able to define the meaning of concepts and words. *Caesar dominus et supra grammaticam*: Caesar also reigns over the grammar.”⁴

Bipolarity versus Multipolarity

Another aspect of Schmitt's work is of great relevance for thinking about international politics. After the Second World War, he dedicated an important part of his reflections to the decline of the political in its modern form and the loss by the state of its monopoly of the political. According to him, this was linked to the dissolution of the *jus publicum Europaeum*, the inter-state European law that for three centuries had made possible what he calls, in *Der Nomos der Erde*, "eine Hegung des Krieges" (a containment of war). He was concerned by the consequences of this loss of monopoly because he feared that the decline of the state was creating the conditions for a new form of politics, "international civil war." It is in this context that, in *Theory of the Partisan* (1963), he examined the figure of the partisan which he presented as the product of the dissolution of the classical state order structured around the demarcation between what is and what is not political.⁵

How could one envisage an alternative to such a dangerous situation? What kind of order could replace the *jus publicum Europaeum*? Those questions were at the center of Schmitt's preoccupations in several writings of the 1950s and early 1960s, where he discussed the possibility of a new "Nomos of the Earth." In a 1952 article he examined how the dualism created by the Cold War and the polarization between capitalism and communism could evolve and imagined several possible scenarios.⁶ He rejected the idea that such a dualism was only the prelude to a final unification of the world, resulting from the final victory of one of the antagonists that would have managed to impose its system and its ideology worldwide. The end of bipolarity was likely to lead to a new equilibrium guaranteed by the United States and under its hegemony. However, Schmitt also envisaged the possibility of another form of evolution, consisting in the opening of a dynamics of pluralization whose outcome could be the establishment of a new global order based on the existence of several autonomous regional blocs. This would provide the conditions for an equilibrium of forces among various large spaces, instituting among them a new system of international law. Such an equilibrium would present similarities with the old *jus publicum Europaeum*, except that in this case it would be truly global and not only Eurocentric. This was clearly the kind of evolution that he favored.

Schmitt did not believe that the existing dualism could last, and he was acutely aware of the possible consequences of the establishment of a unipolar world order. He was convinced that, by establishing a "true pluralism,"

only a multipolar world order could provide the institutions necessary to manage conflicts and avoid the negative consequences resulting from the pseudouniversalism arising from the generalization of one single system. But he was also aware that such a pseudouniversalism was a much more likely outcome than the pluralism he advocated. Unfortunately, his fears have been confirmed since the collapse of communism.

Since September 11, 2001, Schmitt's reflections on the status of a "post-statist politics" and the dangers of a unipolar world have become more relevant than ever, and I believe that they can help us grasp the nature of terrorism. As Jean-François Kervégan has suggested, they allow us to approach the question of terrorism in a very different way from the one now accepted, as the work of isolated groups of fanatics.⁷ Taking our bearings from Schmitt, we can see terrorism as the product of a new configuration of the political characteristic of the type of world order being implemented around the hegemony of a single hyperpower.

I agree with Kervégan that Schmitt's insights about the consequences of a unipolar world order are extremely illuminating for grasping the phenomenon of terrorism. There is certainly a correlation between the now unchallenged power of the United States and the proliferation of terrorist groups. Of course in no way do I want to pretend that this is the only explanation. Terrorism has always existed, and it is due to a multiplicity of factors. But it undeniably tends to flourish in circumstances in which there are no legitimate political channels for the expression of grievances. It is therefore not a coincidence that since the end of the Cold War, with the untrammelled imposition of a neoliberal model of globalization under the dominance of the United States, we have witnessed a significant increase in terrorist attacks. Indeed, the possibilities of maintaining sociopolitical models different from the Western one have been drastically reduced, and all the international organizations are more or less directly under the control of Western powers led by the Americans.

Schmitt helps us to realize that it is high time to acknowledge the pluralist character of the world and to relinquish the Eurocentric tenet that modernization can take place only through Westernization. We should relinquish the illusion that antagonisms could be eliminated by a unification of the world transcending the political, conflict, and negativity. We must also abandon the idea that the aim of politics is to establish consensus on one single model. The central problem that our current unipolar world is facing is that it is impossible for antagonisms to find legitimate forms of expression. It is

no wonder, then, that those antagonisms, when they emerge, take extreme forms, putting into question the very structure of the existing international order. In my view, the lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal model of globalization fosters discourses and practices of radical negation of the established order. To create the channels for the legitimate expression of dissent, we need to envisage a pluralistic world order constructed around a certain number of great spaces and genuine cultural poles.

The new forms of terrorism reveal the dangers implied in the delusions of the universalist globalist discourse which postulates that human progress requires the establishment of world unity based on the implementation of the Western model. This is why, against the illusions of the universalist humanitarians, we must listen to Schmitt when he reminds us that “the political world is a pluriverse, not a universe.”⁸ This is, I believe, the only way to avoid the “clash of civilizations” which was announced by Samuel Huntington and to which, despite its intentions, the universalist discourse is in fact contributing.

Notes

- 1 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 26.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 3 Carl Schmitt, “Völkerrechtliche Formen des modernen Imperialismus,” in Carl Schmitt, *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar—Genf—Versailles, 1923–1939*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 184–203.
- 4 Carl Schmitt, *Positionen und Begriffe*, 202.
- 5 Carl Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963).
- 6 Carl Schmitt, “Die Einheit der Welt,” *Merkur* 6 (1952): 1–11.
- 7 Jean-François Kervégan, “Ami ou ennemi?” in “La guerre des dieux,” special issue, *Le nouvel observateur*, January 2002.
- 8 Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 53.