



# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Know your Schmitt: a godfather of truth and the spectre of Nazism

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Huysmans, Jef (1999). Know your Schmitt: a godfather of truth and the spectre of Nazism. *Review of International Studies*, 25(2) pp. 323–328.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S026021059900323X](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S026021059900323X)

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# Know your Schmitt: a godfather of truth and the spectre of Nazism

JEF HUYSMANS\*

In a recent article in the *Review of International Studies* Hans-Karl Pichler argues that Hans Morgenthau's intellectual universe was saturated by 'typically European philosophical problems' which he transferred to an American political context.<sup>1</sup> He shows this by looking at how Morgenthau tried to overcome the value determinacy of social science, as pointed out by Weber, by grounding his political realist theory in a Schmittian understanding of the political, which defines war—the friend/enemy distinction—as the essence of the political and finds it anthropologically in the evil, dangerous nature of human beings.<sup>2</sup>

I have a problem with the article because Schmitt emerges as just a serious political theorist, which he indeed was. But he was also more than an important political theorist. He was a member of the Nazi party between 1933 and 1936 explicitly providing legal justifications for the Nazi regime and its policies, thus becoming for some the *Kronjurist* of the Nazis. In that period also anti-Semitic references started appearing in his work. Since then his name and work have carried the spectre of Nazism and by implication of the Holocaust with them. This spectre is nowhere sensed in Pichler's analysis. It does not seem to have any grip on Pichler's narrative. I think this is unfortunate because I believe this spectre should always haunt any invoking of Schmitt or Schmittian understandings of the political. The reason is not to silence discussions about his understanding of the political, but rather to render normative questions about the ethico-political project his concept of the political incorporates as the kernel of any working with or on Schmitt's ideas.

## Losing the spectre in meta-theoretical puzzles and a history of ideas

After Schmitt's death in 1985, some have tried hard to delete the spectre of Nazism from Schmitt's legacy. In political theory—but IR is catching up fast—one can notice a rehabilitation of Schmitt the political theorist<sup>3</sup> which decouples, implicitly or

\* This article is indebted to the discussions on Schmitt's concept of the political in the Critical Theory Reading Group at the London Centre of International Relations at the University of Kent. I would also like to thank Mick Cox for helpful comments on an earlier version.

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Karl Pichler, 'The Godfathers of "Truth": Max Weber and Carl Schmitt in Morgenthau's Theory of Power Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185–200.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Lilla, 'The Enemy of Liberalism', *The New York Review of Books*, 15 May 1997, p. 39. For an interesting interpretation of the revived interest in Schmitt and of some of the thorny questions implied see: Tracey Strong, 'Foreword: Dimensions of the New Debate around Carl Schmitt', in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated and with an introduction by Georg Schwab and with a foreword by Tracey B. Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996[1932]), pp. ix–xxvi.

explicitly, Schmitt's choice for the Nazis from the substance of his political theory. For example, biographical evidence and substantial differences between Schmitt's theory and the Nazi ideology have been used to conclude that Schmitt was an opportunist using the Nazis to secure his career or that he was simply misled by the Nazis.<sup>4</sup> In comparison to this example, Pichler's path is more implicit but not necessarily less effective in losing the haunting spectre of Nazism in the retrieval of Schmitt's work.

Pichler's implicit rehabilitation is not a result of the substance of his argument but of the way in which he introduces Schmitt in his analysis of Morgenthau's political realism. He inserts Schmitt's political theory in a framework dominated by an epistemological question:

The aim of this article is to understand why and how Morgenthau, in *Politics among Nations*, throws the Weberian limitations on the objectivity of the social sciences overboard and indulges in absolute statements.<sup>5</sup>

The genre within which his interpretation develops is largely a history of ideas. He renders the political theory of Morgenthau intelligible by looking at how it relates to the ideas of two godfathers of 'truth' in the history of political and social theory. Morgenthau's contribution to this history consists of trying to establish political realism as a social science which tells the truth about the political and avoids the pitfalls created by the value determination of social theory. He uses a Schmittian understanding of the political to do this. The international political refers to an emergency situation in which the survival of the state is at stake and which has its origin in the evil, i.e. dangerous, nature of human beings. In this situation the state faces the choice of surviving or perishing. The only way to survive is to maximise power. Consequently, value questions about the definition of good or right are subsumed under the necessity to maximise power to protect the survival of the state.<sup>6</sup> This is a well-known story. Pichler's contribution consists of emphasising the importance of Schmitt's concept of the political for establishing the truth value of this realist theory of international politics.<sup>7</sup> To support his view Pichler introduces among others biographical data, such as Morgenthau's recording of his meeting with Carl Schmitt,<sup>8</sup> which reveal a relatively intense relation between Morgenthau and Schmitt.

Introducing Schmitt's work by means of a history of ideas shaped around an epistemological puzzle considerably limits the possibility of incorporating the shadow of the Holocaust and Nazism in the story. Let's discuss first the limiting effect of the metatheoretical dimension. Since the 1980s—that is, following on from the interparadigm debate—theoretical debates have been saturated by ontological questions about the nature of international being and epistemological questions

<sup>4</sup> For example: Joseph W. Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt. Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Paul Piccone and G. L. Ulmen, 'Introduction to Carl Schmitt', *Telos*, 72 (1987). George Schwab, 'Introduction', in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* translated by George Schwab (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985 [1922]), pp. xi-xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Pichler, 'Godfathers of "Truth"', p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190 ff.

<sup>7</sup> See also for example, Klaus-Gerd Giesen, *L'éthique des relations internationales* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Fragments of an Intellectual Autobiography: 1904–1932', in Kenneth Thompson and Robert J. Myers (eds.), *Truth and Tragedy. A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), pp. 15–17.

about the validity of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The 2×2 matrix of Hollis and Smith which relates the epistemological opposition between explanation and understanding to an ontological opposition between holism and individualism, and Keohane's opposition between rationalism and reflectivism are among the most well-known boxing tools in this debate.<sup>10</sup> Although the metatheoretical perspective has certainly enriched the debates in IR, it has also squeezed normative questions out of the main picture. As Guzzini has recently argued,

The meta-theoretical debate of the last decade did, however, further remove normative thought from the criteria which characterize theoretical schools. This does not contradict the fact that normative theories have seen a remarkable comeback in recent years. But they appear in a different academic category altogether, which is something for specialists and their journals, but not for International Relations at large.<sup>11</sup>

As Guzzini states, this does not mean that normative questions cannot be raised. Pichler, for example, touches upon the normative dimensions of Morgenthau's work when he deals with the question why Morgenthau 'argues so forcefully for the preservation of the state'.<sup>12</sup> But, they are not the kernel of his discourse. They appear after the metatheoretical discussion and are actually not really integrated into it. In that sense, one could argue that normative questions have a secondary status in Pichler's work. Moreover, supporting the preservation of the state as a moral position is not really the most interesting element of the ethico-political position of Schmittian political realism. The more interesting question is what is the nature and the status of the state that is to be preserved and how does the state emerge in the Schmittian universe?<sup>13</sup> Such a perspective would have to include reflections on the aestheticisation of politics and violence embedded in a vitalist critique of the enlightenment inspired by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, for example.<sup>14</sup> It would also have to engage with Schmitt's view of modernity, his enmity towards liberalism and the political theology of despair which is an important basis of his critique of liberalism.<sup>15</sup>

Beside the metatheoretical perspective, a history of ideas also limits the possibility of retrieving the ethico-political questions of Schmitt's legacy. A history of ideas looks at the succession of ideas and their mutual fertilisation. Therefore it is not the preferred genre if one is interested in integrating ideas in the intellectual and political environment for the purpose of spelling out the practical significance of the

<sup>9</sup> Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 190–200.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 1–7; Robert Keohane, 'International institutions: two approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32 (1988), pp. 379–96.

<sup>11</sup> Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations*, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Pichler, 'Godfathers of "Truth"', pp. 198–9.

<sup>13</sup> Most interestingly on this: John McCormick, 'Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany', *Political Theory*, 22 (1994), pp. 619–52.

John McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Göran Dahl, 'Will "The Other God" fail again? On the possible return of the conservative revolution', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13 (1996), pp. 25–50.

Richard Wölin, 'Carl Schmitt, the Conservative Revolutionary: Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror', *Political Theory*, 20 (1992), pp. 424–47.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Lilla, 'The Enemy of Liberalism'.

political theory. Consequently, a history of ideas runs the risk of losing the importance of Schmitt's political choice in 1933. It is precisely this choice which grounds the imperative for a critical response to any retrieval of Schmitt's ideas. Reducing this choice to an accidental event separates it from the development of Schmitt's interpretation of the political and therefore makes it easier to represent Schmitt as a major political theorist offering excellent insights in the nature of the political while being silent about the spectre of Nazism and the tough ethico-political questions it instigates.

### **The habitus of political realism**

If a responsible management of Schmitt's ideas requires that his political choice of 1933 is turned into a spectre which will haunt any retrieval of the Schmittian intellectual legacy, then we need an approach to this legacy which relates ideas and practice more intensively than would happen in a history of ideas. A normative theory is not necessarily the answer. If normative theorisation means that one puts 'the precepts of received morality into some sort of consistent order' and interprets 'morality as a system of general principles and [tries] to discover a rational foundation for this system',<sup>16</sup> it would not really relate ideas and historical practices more profoundly. This form of normative theory does not differ much from a history of ideas with regard to integrating the intellectual, social and political history into the conceptual universe of a political theory.

A more sociological theorisation of the ethico-political dispositions of Schmitt's political realism and, for example, Morgenthau's renegotiation of these dispositions would most likely bring out this relation more sharply and therefore would be one of the preferred ways of approaching Schmitt's work. A sociology of knowledge embeds the practical system of political realism 'that defines objects, rules of action, modes of relation to oneself'<sup>17</sup> in the historical socio-political space in which it was formulated. A most interesting approach working along these lines is Wölin's interpretation of Schmitt's work via Bourdieu's concept of the habitus (and implicitly via the related Bourdieuan concept of the 'field' effect).<sup>18</sup>

The habitus refers to a generative scheme of classifications and classificatory practices which function in social relations without explicit representation. In the form of dispositions it incorporates differential positions in the social space.<sup>19</sup> The habitus articulates the complexities of the ontological relation between the individual agent's categories of perception and understanding and the social structure in

<sup>16</sup> Terry Nardin, 'Ethical traditions in international relations', in Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel (eds.), *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Wölin, 'Carl Schmitt, the Conservative Revolutionary', p. 426. For a more thorough exposition of a Bourdieuan reading of intellectual 'godfathers', see Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the political ontology of Heidegger: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Noblesse d'Etat* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1989), p. 9.

which the individual agent operates. It thus emphasises the perpetual relation between individual dispositions and social positioning.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at Schmitt's ideas in terms of an intellectual habitus pushes the interpreter to ask how Schmitt's theory incorporates specific intellectual dispositions which are related to specific positions in the socio-political space of the German academia, the Weimar republic and the Nazi 'take-over'. According to Wölin and Dahl, *conservative revolutionaries* is the name of the differential position in Weimar politics which Schmitt's texts articulate most explicitly.

To understand the intellectual basis of Schmitt's political views, one must appreciate his elective affinities with that generation of so-called conservative revolutionary thinkers whose world view was so decisive in turning the tide of public opinion against the fledgling Weimar republic.<sup>21</sup>

Revolutionary conservative dispositions articulated a vitalist critique of enlightenment rationalism. With Nietzsche's expressionism and Kierkegaard's existentialism they shared the celebration of the creative, aesthetic powers of life and passion which appear in their full authenticity in exceptional conditions, like war for example. These ideas are set at work to support a fundamental(ist) critique of liberalism, which in Schmitt's case is further mixed with a theological world view.<sup>22</sup> Schmitt's originality—or, as some would argue, Schmitt's scandalous act<sup>23</sup>—consisted in deriving a positive concept of the political from the vitalist and existentialist critique of rationality. His political disposition articulated an aestheticisation of politics which emphasised the existential value of violence and 'a need for a different conscious, a spiritual reawakening of both heart and mind,' which made it different from the leftist revolutionary movement which stressed structural changes, that is changes in social, political and economic conditions.<sup>24</sup>

By means of the habitus concept Schmitt's legacy can be firmly placed in the social and political struggle of his time. Whether Schmitt's motivation for collaborating with the Nazis was conviction, opportunism or misjudged belief, is not of immediate concern. The relation between political positions and intellectual views emerges in an intersubjective understanding of social practices rather than as a psychological or motivational question. Neither is it essential to trace empirical, biographical evidence of Schmitt reading Nietzsche or Kierkegaard or whoever. Showing intellectual homology is more important than an intellectual biography. Or, as Bourdieu states it in relation to the Heidegger case:

... all the critics contrive to ignore the fact that Heidegger's philosophy might be only a sublimated philosophical version, imposed by the forms of censorship specific to the field of philosophical production, of the political and ethical principles which determined the philosopher's support for Nazism.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Loïc Wacquant, 'On the tracks of symbolic power: performatory notes to Bourdieu's "state nobility"', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10 (1993), pp. 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> Wölin, 'Carl Schmitt, the Conservative Revolutionary', p. 426

<sup>22</sup> Mark Lilla, 'The Enemy of Liberalism'; Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Bürger, 'Carl Schmitt oder die Fundierung der Politik auf Ästhetik', Christa Bürger (ed.), *Zerstörung: Rettung der Mythos durch Licht* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Dahl, 'The Other God', p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, pp. 3–4.

If Wölin's interpretation of Schmitt's intellectual habitus is correct, the specific dispositions his works articulated and the social position they implied, then the relation between Schmitt's theory and Nazism is not just accidental. This opens the window for reading Schmitt against Schmitt, that is, for introducing the spectre of Schmitt's political choice in any interpretation of theories which incorporate a Schmittian concept of the political, hence directly moving the ethico-political dimensions of political realism to the foreground.

I know that Pichler's problem is not Schmitt's dispositions or ideas as such. His question is about Morgenthau's political realism which, as Pichler also shows, is not a straightforward copy of Schmitt (for example, Morgenthau mediated Schmitt's legacy among others in the US post-war political and academic context). But my point is not about Schmitt as such either. It is about how the ethico-political dispositions of political realism and its related differential position in the social and political space could be moved centre stage in the theoretical discussions in international relations. One of the most interesting ways to retrieve the ethico-political heart of political realism is an interpretation of the relation between political realism and Schmitt's legacy in terms of the intellectual habitus it articulates. A sociological reading of Schmitt's habitus and how it has been renegotiated by international political theorists would retrieve the spectre of the Holocaust and Nazism from the revived interest in Schmitt's political theory. This would incite a permanent question about the ethico-political project of political realist theory any time Schmitt is invoked. Compared to a history of ideas framed in a metatheoretical question, this seems to me a more promising and also more responsible way of managing the intellectual terrain we are opening with the revival of interest in Schmitt in international political theory.