



The Political Imaginary after Neo-Liberalism: Populism and the Return of 'Elemental Politics'

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Abstract In this paper, I claim that Carl Schmitt's enigmatic work *Land and Sea* provides contemporary philosophers and social theorists with important insights into what appears to be an emergent, post-neo-liberal, political imaginary. With theologico-political imaginary grounded in a conception of politics framed around elemental forces, Schmitt allows us to see that the slow retreat of neo-liberalism portends a return to early modern political imaginaries. In so-called 'populist' age, when the nation and nationalism seem to be returning to the political arena in transformed ways, Schmitt allows us to see that the geopolitical imaginary of the land and the sea are again involved in this transition. I conclude with an examination of the challenges that any such elemental, 'pre-Socratic', political imaginary are likely to pose for extant democratic norms and values.

Keywords Media | Leadership | Carl Schmitt | Elemental | Pre-Socratic





1. Neo-Liberalism and the Mediated Imaginary of the Leader

It has become a commonplace in contemporary philosophy and social theory to claim that the political realm in so-called modern 'liberal democratic' societies no longer supervenes upon the old triumvirate of ideology, party-political affiliation and class interest. This so-called 'neo-liberal', 'post-Marxist', situation, it is claimed, reflects the emaciation of 'the authentically political' in late-capitalist societies - mainly due to the global and globalising expansion of market relations and their political corollary, 'retail politics': where 'voters-as-consumers' of 'policies-as-commodities' have become the only significant political tribunal. In response, social theorists returned to the - previously unfashionable - idea that the beating heart of the political resides in the characteristics of (a now manufactured) political charisma, specifically in the mediated image of political leaders.¹ Here, in the ruins of the post-ideological and the confusion of the post-rational, key questions in the sociology of politics and political philosophy, especially questions linked to the basis of the social contract and the willingness to participate in and affiliate with party-politics, increasingly collapsed into questions of taste. More specifically, into questions of the aesthetic appreciation of leadership style and its capacity to transform politics from of a space of ideological contestation to a form of mass enjoyment staged a new type by tragi-comic leader (see Postman 1987). The great thinker of this shift, of course, was Marshall McLuhan - for whom the transformation of the modern political imaginary into a post-ideological politics of the image portended the (re)turn of a tribalised politics of affect; where the political agenda, rather than being shaped by an ideal rational consensus, proceeded to the beat of 'the tribal drum'. In this regard, McLuhan - and, of course, Guy Debord (1967) - claimed that this is largely because the basic unit of the electronic media is the image - that transcends the capacity for critical interrogation *à la* the political imaginaries forged in the crucible of the European Enlightenment. Images, the dominant semantic form within globalised and mediated capitalism, can, it seems, be consumed and enjoyed; but they cannot critically evaluated in terms of their truth and falsity and hence they resituate politics into a post-rational positioning. Images, as primarily mobilisers of affect rather than cognition, suggest that modern political culture has collapsed into a taste culture. Here, logic, argument and critical thinking in the dialectical sense, it is suggested, become impossible to enact within political contexts - inaugurating a profound change in the political psychologies of modern individuals or groups. Thus for McLuhan, the mediated spectacle has given rise to 'a total reorganisation of our imaginative lives' (McLuhan 1995, 332-333). Politics now takes place only in the space of the affective bond, within an

¹ This is also reflected in the recent trend for understanding the political by means of psycho-biographical studies of politics- that examine the impact of the psychopathology of leadership on the political process.



aesthetic space where it is possible for individuals to be 'stirred in unison' by means of the mediated image of the leader. Even for Marxist social theorists such as Manuel Castells, it is the increasing role that the media (in all of its varieties) plays in the shaping and constituting the political realm that has engendered a political imaginary based upon the simplest and most powerful political image-form: the mediated representation of the leader (Castells 2000). In these accounts, mediated politics becomes in a sense a politics 'beyond the word', a politics devoid of logos – a resolutely post-historical politics whose pathological symptoms are ennui, apathy and cynicism.

In terms of its appropriation of the leader idea and ideal, the mediated leader imaginary is what we might term 'post-Napoleonic'. No longer did leadership require, with Napoleon, that in order to 'magnetise the masses, you must first of all talk to their eyes'. Thus this imaginary is quite different from the late Mediaeval/ Renaissance ideal of the political leader as the 'rider on the horse' (see Kohut 1985). On the contrary, in the age of mediated retail politics where politics becomes an arm of marketing and advertising, the leader must be an adept at the manipulation of appealing self-representations for their political affects – his/her feet must stand squarely on the ground and he/she must converse rather than implore (in a politics of 'conversation' not 'command'). Here, the leader becomes less of a 'heroic belligerent' and more of a 'narcissistic gamer' accomplished in the projection of 'winning images' capable of mobilising mass affect in a wider political conversation with the leader as the main contributor.² In this way, the charismatic dimensions of the older leader imaginary became 'secularised' – as Richard Sennett pointed out (see Sennett 1977). More specifically, they were transformed into something essentially comforting and soothing – in contrast to the charismatic leader in the Weberian mode, where charisma expressed itself as an 'extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or assumed' – as an 'extraordinary quality of the specific person' (Weber 1946, 295).³ In contrast to this, according to Sennett, although charisma remains an important factor underpinning contemporary forms of political authority, the mediated political imaginary – now largely devoid of ideological contestation – has become a battle of 'avuncular charismas' through the spectacle of the media. However, this, he argues, continues to blind the electorate to the real issues facing specific polities and prevents the emergence of popular, transformative, political forms – engendering only a blind

² The manipulation of representations for their political effects, in this account, has become a strategy for personal survival in increasingly warlike organisational arenas.

³ For Weber, traditional forms of charisma are always potentially revolutionary in they demand new obligations, the breaking of established rules and a radical antipathy to everyday routines. However, he recognises the limitations of charismatic forms of authority in this regard. For he acknowledges that 'pure' charisma tends to be 'short-lived' – and although the traditionally charismatic individual is likely to be seen as more vivid/alive/real than 'ordinary' individuals, as it is for him, non-rational/ magical in its effect, in the end it will always be unmasked as an illusion.



politics of feeling within a new type of polity that is ignorant and suggestible but fundamentally inert. The new leader imaginary is thus ideology in a new and more insidious guise. In Sennett's view, secular charisma, unlike its religious predecessor, has emerged as a deeply conservative force in that it is more about creating the illusion of trust and belonging to an Orwellian political space watched over by a kindly leader, as opposed to any challenging and pointing towards alternatives to the existing socio-political order. More specifically, for him, within the mediated leader imaginary - where the leader must be an accomplished 'self-revealer'; an adept at what he terms 'the psychic striptease' - the political demonic of the older imaginary is transformed into what we would now term a bland culture of celebrity that disguises its own complicity in familiar processes of exploitation and domination. As he puts it:

[t]he leader himself need have no titanic, heroic or satanic qualities in order to be charismatic. He can be warm, homey and sweet; he can be sophisticated and debonair. But he will bind and blind people as surely as a demonic figure if he can focus them upon his tastes, what his wife is wearing in public, his love of dogs. He will dine with an ordinary family, and arouse enormous interest among the public, then after he enacts a law that devastates the worker of his country - and this action will pass unnoticed in the excitement about his dinner (Sennett 1977, 270).

Thus, there has been a recognition that mediated charisma is the central node of the neo-liberal political imaginary - one that no longer upholds 'political virtues' of leadership in the classical philosophical sense, but rather only the self-imaginings, affective connections, presentational styles and particular rhetorical accomplishments suited to the postmodern consumer age. More generally here, the political as such is no longer perceived to be a contestation of strong wills, but merely an 'aesthetic contest', a political 'beauty contest'. It has been transformed into an affective power of the image of the leader and how this articulates itself as a 'suitable', typically likeable, 'character' that can be used to sell political policies as niche products, for increasingly fragmented political markets.

Importantly, these claims have formed the basis for a new social theoretical paradigm vis-à-vis political phenomena: what we might term 'the paradigm of aestheticisation'. Within cultural sociology, 'aestheticisation' is now a very familiar theme. It refers to cultural transformations - associated with the idea of the post-modern - brought about by the encroachment of market dynamics and its powers to commodify onto the terrain of everyday life (see Featherstone 1992). The key assumption underlying the aestheticisation paradigm, when applied to the contemporary political arena, is that the mediated art of leadership (and the political itself, as a new kind of 'mediated art') has become the truth of politics and the most authentic idea(l) of the political as such.⁴

⁴ Here we can see the debt that this perspective owes to Heidegger, for whom the founding of a political state is one way in which truth happens (viewing the state as a work of art and the leader as artist, politics,



In this way, the aesthetic paradigm essentially collapses the classical ideal of the political as a moral space of virtue into that of a 'game' of credit and discredit. For in order to maintain their positions, contemporary politicians 'must seek to cultivate belief...establish or renew bonds of trust...as part of this process, existing or aspiring representatives commonly seek to discredit their rivals, to portray them as untrustworthy and unreliable, thereby augmenting their own stature at the expense of their opponents' (Thompson, 2000, 99). In this regard, within the mediated leader imaginary, political agency loses its rationality (logos) and becomes increasingly focussed on ethos and pathos as the basis for politics as an art of ridicule; a comic skill of being able to appear to 'out-do' one's opponent, especially in imagistic terms, in entertaining ways (and one should be surprised in the context that comics often became leaders). Here, political agency is seen as post-ethical, perhaps even post-political. It is shaped only by regularities in affective techniques and repertoires, within an imaginary where the capacity of the mediated leader image to win in a game whose outcome is a victory at the level of mass affect lies at the foundation of the political and the fundamental unit of social and political analysis.

What were the socio-cultural conditions of possibility for the emergence of the aesthetic paradigm? In part, this paradigm emerged because the incorporation of art into life (via the commodity form) in the 20th century transformed the cultural landscape to such an extent that it became possible to view the aesthetic dimension as a tool of public administration. More specifically, it became possible to view the aesthetic dimension as a realm of bureaucratic technique, as a regulatory space facilitated by the technics of the secular artistry of public relations. By these lights, contra Walter Benjamin, the aestheticisation of politics does not necessarily imply a return to fascism as such.⁵ It simply implies a new banalisation of politics – perhaps the defining characteristic of politics in the age of neo-liberalism. Indeed, the political, during the high-water mark of neo-liberalism [1979-2008], was a long way from the aesthetic politics of the 1930s. It merely existed as a new 'depoliticised' configuration, where the artistic self-fashioning of the personality of the leader became a focal point of a much wider imaginary capable of mobilising and manufacturing popular consent.⁶ In this way, the imaginary of the mediated leader stood as a new mode of governmentality – that emerged in a context where everyone (in the West), it seemed, had bread, but where the political leader

like art, is a space for the emergence of truth). Thus for Heidegger we can talk about political truth (and political error) but also through the opening that is the great work of the leader-artist.

⁵ This is not to say that the aestheticisation of politics cannot be viewed as a new type of *authoritarianism* – one where the issues of the day are obscured and inhibited behind the minutiae of the personality of the leader. This type of critique tends to resort to a Platonist dismissal of the aesthetic in its advocacy of the 'cold shower and hard seat' of civic republicanism (see Postman, 1987)

⁶ Nor does it represent a return to the fascistic ideal of the leader as the great artist (see Lacou-Labarthe 1990) nor are there a re-aestheticisation of the space of the political heroic, masculinist and warrior-like (where as Mussolini put said of socialism, the problems of the world will never be solved by such weak men').



became the central figure of the political now coextensive with the spectacular mediated entertainment circus, the provider of political manna from heaven.⁷

In this regard, following on from theorists like Frank Ankersmitt, aesthetic politics is the symptom of a wider crisis of political representation, one where the relationship between system and polity was forced into a new imaginary register (see Ankersmitt 1996). For Zygmunt Bauman too, in a global economy that has wrought a separation of economic power from politics, the only role left for the political is immaterial: 'direct rule' over social representations (Bauman 1996, 74). In this scheme, as political projects took on the aspect of aesthetic project, political programs and campaigns were transformed into a self-consciously stylish and a style-consciously 'inauthentic' politics of affect, with the mediated image of the leader at its centre.⁸ In this quintessentially postmodern concept of the political, the political does not exist prior to the political 'space of representation' but is completely consequent upon it. The leader is a creation, who then re-creates the political space as/in his/her own image. Politics here is seen as produced by the leader-imaginary as its primary ontological consequence. Hence the increased importance to contemporary politics of those who project/produce image-representations: the leader's advisers, his/her 'kitchen cabinet' and the media.⁹ In this account, all 'metaphysical' conceptions of politics are rejected in that they fail to recognise the resistance of the mediated imaginary to any kind of revolutionary idea or ideal. This is because metaphysical politics assumes the transparency of the political realm to rational modes of thought and action and it seems that no such transparency is possible when politics emerges from mediated images to a new leader imaginary.¹⁰

⁷ The political psychologist Jon Elster (see Elster 1993, 35) - following the historian Paul Veyne - has claimed that the old Roman imperial method of political control - 'Bread and Circuses' - can still be seen in operation today. The Roman method of political control is based upon a simple idea: as all forms of political power are faced with problem of potentially recalcitrant polity, then the job of the politician is to both maintain the basic needs of the masses and *distract* them away from any thought of rebellion (or perhaps any thoughts at all).

⁸ However, modern politics, like all modern thinking generally, is also concerned with the problem of political representation; the problem of finding legitimacy for the use of political power. This need for a rational grounding or set of checks on the uses of political power shows the modern politics and philosopher apologists is concerned with finding the *democratic a priori* that grounds all forms of governmentality.

⁹ Ankersmitt's work essentially amounts to a critique of John Rawls' theory of justice. Rawls famously argued, on neo-Kantian *a priori* grounds, that the political character of any system of social organisation could be subjected to normative critique (his philosophical device of the 'original position' and 'the veil of ignorance' were designed to create the conditions of possibility - disinterestedness - that could make such normative judgements possible).

¹⁰ Indeed, in neo-liberalism, it must be conceded that, when viewed in metaphysical terms, political reality became a broken reality, a set of competing yet incommensurable perspectives: to the extent politics became an art of creating most appropriate perspective without factual or moral constraint, beyond the norms of what Karl Rove famously termed 'the reality based community' (see Suskind 2004). Following Kant in the third critique aesthetic judgements are judgements without principle - they are judgements that create their own rule and norm in the free play of the political imagination - and in groundless age liberated from the constraints of time and place it is this dimension that seemed the only one capable of mobilising consent.



2. The Political Imaginary after Neo-liberalism: Carl Schmitt and the Political Imaginary of the Elements

The wider historical context that provided the conditions of possibility for the aesthetic paradigm was the crisis of the nation state in the context of contemporary globalisation. With the hollowing out of the imaginary of the nation-state brought about by global economic and cultural deregulation, a new sensitivity to the aesthetics of a new 'multi-culture' emerged - and with this a new hostility to nationalism and heroic national figures as repositories of political value.¹¹ In an era of economic flux and cultural fluidity and hybridity, when values seemed to have become corroded in the acid reflux of globalised affects - all traditional political spaces became little more than arenas for aestheticized performances. In this context, the only thing fixed, the only remnant of the classical political world, was the image of the leader - as a ghostly residue that remained even when all other political phenomena, even popular plebiscites, had been rendered little more than empty rituals. Globalisation, we might say, subjected the political realm to the now cultural-economic logic of the neo-liberal market, dissolving it in the corrosive economic acid of the commodity form - leaving only the leader image as the basis for non-commodified forms of political engagement and participation. Aesthetic politics was simply the attempt to come to terms with this moment. Indeed, the only political events of note in this period were scandals, suggesting that here we witnessed a return to a tragic and, on occasion, tragi-comic conception of politics (see Falcao, 1999). Within this imaginary, the political leader stumbled not on the ground of conflict or ideology but, rather, on the mediated image of his/her own moral character, as can be seen if we consider, for example, the scandal that affected Bill Clinton's second presidential term (see Thompson 2000).

However, within current crisis of neo-liberalism, the aesthetic paradigm has become less and less useful as a tool for making sense of the nature and significance of contemporary political phenomena. Today, even secular charisma is disappearing. Leaders no longer sooth or amuse. On the contrary, they terrify - suggesting a return to the older Platonic problematics of 'the tyrant'. Moreover, in this regard, the idea(l) of the nation, despite announcements of its demise, has survived and returned to avenge its own death. In this regard, the leader now presents him/herself as someone who again embodies 'the nation' - often in raw elemental form. If we consider say Trump, Erdogan, Putin or even Macron, we can discern an attempt on the part of the leader to deploy a personality in order to capture the (often defiant) spirit of a nation that globalisation has threatened with decline - symbolising its capacity to survive and thrive in the belligerence of global economic spaces. The leader it appears is now required to (re)connect with a popular national resentment residing beyond the enclosed spaces of

¹¹ From this vantage point, the problem with the political as it has been traditionally conceived - such as the imaginary of the modern state - is that it is simply fig leaf for some of the most crude oppressions and dominations.



the political spectacle; to return to, as we might say, to a new and more fundamental element; the nation as a political 'ground' and 'grounding', in order suggest reparations to the social nexus now relegated 'underground' (see Maffesoli 1996). In a sense, this is a problem that aesthetic politics masked – the politics of place and space; to the extent that today we may be witnessing the return of a political imaginary that neo-liberalism repressed, to a geo-political imaginary of locations. If so, then neo-liberalism merely concealed another, much more archaic, imaginary – one linked to deeper, more fundamental and more vital forms – to forms of belonging linked to wider spatial imaginaries of meaning and participation. In this regard, the political imaginary of today articulates itself not in the superficiality of the image but in the search for a grounded 'political metaphysics' beyond the leader's artistic refashioning of politics. It portends, we might say, a more elemental form of politics of shocks and shudders – of sudden explosions, where the idea of revolutionary upheaval again becomes conceivable, in a post post-historical condition. Here, politics manifests itself in a quite different *durée*, no longer in the timeless (and spaceless) instant of mediated images, but in the more expanded temporalities of larger national imaginaries, where leaders appear as epiphenomena to a more expansive historical drama. This political imaginary stands much closer to the theological, as well as its modern cousin, the imaginary of technics.¹² In its elemental mode, the post-neo-liberal political imaginary understands politics in terms of lifeworlds grounded in the imaginary of tradition; and not, as was formerly the case, in bureaucratic or charismatic forms of authority. Indeed, what we see here is that in opening up the political to 'the elements' that 'carry it away' the political again becomes historical and history political – but in way that is increasingly enchanted by the glamour of the past.

The breakdown of the neo-liberal political imaginary is thus returning philosophers and social theorists to the forgotten question of the articulation of the nation with 'the world historical' as such. Mythical understandings reemerge here; no longer is the leader central and no longer is the nation imagined mainly via global economic concerns. Now, mysterious questions of national destiny re-emerge; hidden affinities and prophecies drive the political forwards into, ever renewed, opportunities (Angela Merkel has recently referred to the idea European Unity as a 'Community of Destiny' (*Schickalsgemeinschaft*)). The leader here is effective only to the extent that he/she can signify and mobilise these mythical-elemental forces. In a sense the older charismatic type – that worried Weber so much – returns here, albeit in ways now modulated by forces that render him/her increasingly grotesque, a monstrous cipher for other, more theological, political forms. The leader again stalks the world as a Titan – with no Zeus in sight ready to oppose him/her. In this context, conventional analytics of persuasion have become inadequate, as they attempt to understand political phenomena in terms of leader as an image rather than what Maffesoli has termed 'a vector of communion'

¹² Marxism is the political imaginary that has striven to find a mode of articulation between the imaginary of technics and the political imaginary as traditionally conceived.



(see Maffesoli 1996b) – as a space within which the political again reconnects with ‘the social divine’.

Thus what is needed, in order to make sense of this shift in the way that the political is both understood and enacted, is what we might term a more ‘explicitly theological’ turn in relation to our understanding of contemporary political phenomena. For the emerging political imaginary carries with it overtones of a new ‘fundamentalism’ and a sense of a reconnection with the metaphysical dimensions of politics that existed previously *sub silentio*. In this regard, the emergent political imaginary now appears to be reforming key politico-philosophical categories that neo-liberalism had seemingly cast into the dustbin of history, conceptions of ‘class interest’ also stand out here, but most especially notions linked with ‘ontological security’, with ‘earning’ and ‘belonging’. In this context, the leader becomes increasingly associated with the demonic – as the stage-manager of the political as a new theatre of cruelty; in extremis, the leader, as René Girard would put it, of scapegoating and mimetic violence (see Girard 1995). In this way, the new political imaginary of the leader connotes aspects of ‘sacred kingship’ – a force from which all familiar political phenomena become seen as tributaries of this single primordial power.

And it is here that Schmitt’s depiction of the early modern geo-political imaginary is supremely useful and insightful. More explicitly, by these lights, Schmitt understands the political imaginary of the long *durée* of early modernity, at least until its dissolution in 1945, as the conflict between two elemental forces – land and sea (see Schmitt 2015). The first elemental political force, land – ‘earth’ – Schmitt associates with the ‘Catholic’ pole of the modern; with the counter-reformation and, ultimately, with the elements of ecological thinking that, after Nietzsche and Heidegger, now claim that philosophy and politics must ‘return to the earth’. However, in contrast to this chthonic conception of politics, he proposes a Protestant/Huguenot ‘water power’, oriented towards the lawless freedom of the sea in its possibilities for creating global empires of trade, piracy and looting – the political imaginary of what we would today term free-market capital. Interestingly, Schmitt understands this elemental conflict in explicitly theological terms (in terms of the political mythology and eschatology found in the Old Testament book of Job, but also in certain modern Kabbalistic themes). Specifically, he views the modern international political order as a conflict between Behemoth, the land monster – usually represented as a bear or hippopotamus – and Leviathan, ‘the great fish’, who, in Kabbalistic lore, plays with the Lord for a few hours every day and on whose flesh the faithful will feast at the end of time. For Schmitt, in modernity, this conflict manifested itself as the conflict between England, as the great sea Leviathan, and various European land powers; the most important of which in the 20th century was between England and Germany – the direct ancestor of Europe’s greatest ‘imperial earth power’, the Holy Roman Empire. Thus, for Schmitt, the modern evented itself in a new spatial disjunctive synthesis of land and sea that came to its conclusion in what initially appeared as the triumphant victory for the British political thalassic imaginary, the British Empire.



Schmitt's conception of the political imaginary of early modernity is manifestly a conflicted one – one where we might term the 'Anglo-Saxon' element of the sea found itself in conflict with 'continental' chthonic political forces of various kinds. And this theological reading of modern geo-politics continues to illuminate contemporary spaces of the political in insightful ways (Schmitt's brilliance resides in his capacity to read politics theologically). Most especially, it allows us to make sense of a number of seemingly inexplicable phenomena and that are today (rather unhelpfully) grouped together in the theoretical category of 'populism' (for, as we can immediately see, neo-liberalism, with its focus on the mass-affective capacities of mediated leadership, was nothing if not populist; populism is nothing new). By way of example, take the recent referendum in the UK on the UK's continued membership of the European Union. In terms of the aesthetic paradigm, this event is almost totally inexplicable – as what we might term 'aesthetic power' was fundamentally on the side of the 'Remain' camp. Global Media was dominated by a political rhetoric designed to create negative affect vis-à-vis the leave agenda (what was disparagingly called 'Project Fear' by Leave-supporting politicians. All three leaders of UK political parties sided with the Remain cause – and, Boris Johnson notwithstanding, there were few 'secular charismatics' on the Leave side. Even that most charismatic of all secular charismatics, Barak Obama, turned up to speak in defence of the Remain cause. Indeed one is struck by how aesthetically awful the Leave campaign was, to the extent that in aesthetic terms, Brexit must be seen as a return to 'ugly politics' – a politics that was at once brutally and basic – something that presents itself as a radical anomaly as far as the aesthetic paradigm is concerned. But Schmitt can help us to see what was missed here. Importantly, in Schmittian terms, if one examines the discourse of the so-called 'Brexiters' closely, we can see that the Brexit imaginary is one that expresses a desire of the UK to return to its mythical element, of 'the sea'. It is an imaginary of the UK a great free, swashbuckling, trading nation, led by 21st century equivalents of Raleigh and Drake – now capable of countering the power of a familiar old Behemoth, Vladimir Putin's Russia and one that no longer has to 'grovel' to the EU and, to a lesser extent, the US. More specifically, in the context of Brexit, Schmitt's political imaginary exposes familiar Cromwellian-messianic dimensions of the Brexit project in its theologico-political vision of a thalassic liberal global 'commonwealth' of peaceful trade that still resonates in the context of contemporary globalist discourses. This can be seen in the 'Brexiteer's' quasi-imperial dreams of Brexit as opening the door to a 'Second Elizabethan Golden Age' and in their project for a new British globality that could engineer a reversal of the UK's relative long-term economic and political decline (see Jones 2016). However, it also reveals the likely centrality of empire to the new political imaginary more generally – and the extent to which the nation may well now discover its former imperialist ambitions in the slow winding down of the post-war neo-liberal order. The return of the nation in contemporary political discourse is infused with imperial dreams of the nation as of an agent of a 'great politics of the great game, in the great spaces of the planetary space opened up by neo-liberal financial and cultural flows (globalisation). Thus, what we can



say here, is that in post-Brexit UK, we are witnessing a return to an elemental imaginary of the sea, beyond the bland aestheticism of the New Labour and Cameron eras; an imaginary of a new type of economic imperialism on the high seas of global trade in goods and (especially services); now mobilised in order to counter, what was perceived to be a neo-liberal condition of decline. It is an imaginary of a nation 'now finally' 'confronting a loss of certainty about its own distinctive content and world mission' in a return to a political theology believed to have been lost in the condition of post-historical globality (Gilroy 2004, 96).¹³

More generally, Schmitt allows us to see this quite clearly the extent to which the postmodern end of history was simply a hiatus; what Alain Badiou has referred to as 'restoration' after destructive 20th century wars, driven by the elemental conflict between English sea power and German land power (see Badiou 2005). However, what Schmitt could not discern was that, although 'England' ostensibly won these wars, in essence they led only to the eclipse of both powers and their domination by a new power, grounded in a new political element, the United States - with its command of the air. In terms of the new elemental political imaginary, 'air' represents a different kind of power. It signifies the power of flight, of 'air power'; not only in the military sense but also in the sense of the mobility of labour and the mobilisation of capital; of the politics of speed and the penetration of the electronic panopticon into everyday life; of the command of media via the control of the 'airwaves'. And it is here we can usefully draw on the another theological trope in order to augment the Schmittian imaginary by another mythical Old Testament figure, the mythical bird Ziz (see Drewer 1981). In Jewish and Christian religious iconography, Behemoth and Leviathan are typically accompanied by Ziz, a 'big bird' - whose feet are grounded on the earth but whose head reaches up to heaven. In elemental terms, Ziz clearly represents the element of air - something that was present already in the theological terms of reference that frame Schmitt's account, but that Schmitt, because of the technological and political conditions then in place, could not clearly discern. And this points us towards a limitation of Schmitt's perspective - its reductive binarism that restricts the space of geo-politics to only two conflicting elemental powers. Today, we have moved beyond this condition and any complete understanding of the political dimensions of our, 21st century, modernity will need to take into account a wider array of elemental forces - perhaps more even than the familiar four classical elements of earth, air, fire and water. As already suggested, we need to incorporate the element of air into our understanding of politics - one that in many ways dominated in the age of neo-liberalism and supported the postmodern, post-historical, imaginary, as one now liberated from its roots and grounds.¹⁴ However,

¹⁴ Schmitt wanted to view the US as the heir to the British Empire and the new sea power - by viewing the US as 'the larger island' that replaces the UK as the centre of the New Leviathan of trade. However, this, I think, does not stand up to scrutiny. In a sense, the US represents a radical break with the old land-sea dichotomy in being both a land-empire and a sea empire, whilst mobilising these in relation to the other two elemental forces of air and fire. However, in the US 'Ziz' dominates - it is a civilisation of the sky, of inter-



even this will not be sufficient. For, as Ernst Jünger observed, equally important today is the Promethean fire-element, as expressed in dynamics of technics and technological innovation – an element that clearly, as we now see, impacts of the powers of land and sea in complex ways.

3. Empedoclean Politics: The Politics of Mixture against Elemental Conflict and Purity

As Schmitt himself observed, political imaginaries often undergo significant mutation – and this seems to be exactly what is happening at present. Driven, by the ‘heavenly’ geo-political ambitions of the United States in the element of air, yet now returning to chthonic and thalassic elements repressed in the post-war neo-liberal imaginary, the emerging political imaginary will be only partially Schmittian. Indeed, today the elementary milieus of politics are much more complex – like Schmitt’s they appear resolutely pre-Socratic/post-Platonic, but more Eleatic than Ionic, more ‘Empedoclean’ than ‘Heraclitean’. More specifically, given the impossibility of traditional forms of military conflict between the great geo-political powers, Heraclitean strife will no longer be the dialectical motor of political movement and transformation, as it was for Schmitt. The land and sea monsters of old (and that led to the dark trauma of the 20th century) it appears are now both weakened. Thus, the new elemental politics will be one that seeks, with Empedocles, to combine, indeed ideally unify, all of its imaginary elements into a workable mixture; to take control of new planetary political spaces by harnessing and mobilising all of its elemental powers. The emerging political imaginary, in this way, will need to attempt to democratise the elements, to bring them into a new kind of balance and unity – to make earth and water, fire and air, complement in each other in productive ways that allow nations to maintain themselves as planetary forces in an ecological re-harmonising of the elements. The question here is how we are to achieve this. How to maintain the new elemental politics in democratic form? Is this possible, or are we now moving headlong into a resolutely ‘post-liberal phase’ of politics where democracy is increasingly questioned and the grounds of a politics residing in an elemental imaginary that is also immune to critical intellectual interrogation? Here, alarmist imaginings of a ‘return to fascism’ need to be taken seriously – but not too seriously, as the conflict between land and sea is now over and no nation can exist in one elemental form only. The new politics will be geo-political in a quite different way to those that demanded a politics of blood and soil – one where land (state-power), sea (global trade), air (media, communications and culture) and fire (technological

planetary dreams of alien encounters. However, in its partial mobilisation of all four forces (no matter how imbalanced) in political terms, the US is truly the one and only superpower – something that Schmitt could not have foreseen. This status will only be achieved by China if it manages to harness the powers of sea and air, something that it has yet failed to do. In a sense, China will only become hegemonic if it becomes more like the US.



innovation) will all need to be operative, simultaneously. However, to keep these elements in balance will require a new type of leader - and if we are to avoid a slide into a new soft-focus authoritarianism and old-style Titanism, we will require a new imaginary of the political leader, one not yet discerned - one who can integrate elemental powers into a new and better unities. Only by such means will the horrors of past imaginaries be avoided in any elemental politics of the future.

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