



# Spatial contestation? – The theological foundations of Carl Schmitt's spatial thought

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## ABSTRACT

Carl Schmitt's work on the political is extensively used as an intellectual point of departure in contemporary academic debates about political contestation. More precisely, Carl Schmitt's friend versus enemy-distinction is invoked as an essential figuration of political contestation. At the same time, the past few years have seen the attention paid to the spatial thought of Carl Schmitt increase. However, references to the work of Carl Schmitt fail to take the embeddedness of his theories in a complex theological–political–spatial triangle into account. This article aims at joining these readings of Schmitt with regard to the current debate about contestation and space by analyzing the idiosyncratic connection between Carl Schmitt's Catholic faith, especially in the figure of the *katechon*, his theory of the political and his conceptualization(s) of space. The underlying logic of his worldview becomes explicit by reviewing his concepts of (a) the *nomos*, (b) land and sea, (c) the *Großraumordnung*, as well as (d) the Partisan, which form the benchmarks of his work between the 1930s and the 1960s. Against this background we analyze the value of Schmitt's work for the ongoing debate about contestation and space. Our core argument is that his understanding of the spatial–political nexus and his metaphysical worldview stand in contrast to contemporary conceptualizations of spatial–political relationships.

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'... There are neither political ideas without space,  
nor – vice versa – spaces or spatial principles without ideas.'  
(Schmitt, 1991a, p. 29)

## 1. Introduction

How can political contestation be conceived in spatial terms? Recent discussions (see Barnett, 2004; Massey, 2005) of this question draw on debates about contestation in general political terms. In this debate the oeuvre of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) is often understood as the guiding spirit. His friend versus enemy-distinction is seen at the heart of political contestation. Besides his political thinking, Schmitt's spatial thought has also received growing attention. Earlier attempts aimed to construe either Schmitt's idea of spatial contestation in analogy to the post-foundationalist positions concerning his friend versus enemy-distinction (Mouffe, 2007) or analyzed his spatial thought from a 'geopolitical' or 'political-ideological' point of view with special attention to Schmitt's involvement with the National Socialists (Elden, 2010).

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We shall argue that both approaches fall short of analyzing in detail the idiosyncratic relationship between theology, the political, and space in Carl Schmitt's thought. This is why this article suggests that it may be of special interest to review Schmitt's works with an explicit spatial orientation with regard to their value for current debates about spatial contestation.

## 2. Carl schmitt, contestation and space

Discussions of the concept of political contestation often take Carl Schmitt's friend versus enemy-distinction as their starting point. The most prominent voice of the debate on political contestation, Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000, 2005), draws extensively on Schmitt's understanding of the political, for which the friend versus enemy-distinction is the central assumption,<sup>1</sup> as it serves as the basis of her conception of radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, 2001). But on the whole Mouffe's understanding of Schmitt's work is at least ambivalent, as she thinks 'with Schmitt against Schmitt' (Mouffe, 2007, p. 14). On the one hand she draws on his concept

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the intellectual shortcomings and inconsistencies of borrowing Carl Schmitt's concept of the political for contemporary debates about the 'repoliticisation' of politics see Latour (2004) and Chandler (2008). On the relationship between Mouffe and Schmitt, see Desai (2001). Whether Chantal Mouffe is a proponent of so called left-Schmittianism has been subject of another debate: for pro, see e.g. McCormick (1997, p. 170), for contra, see e.g. Krause (2008, p. 158).

of the political and the friend *versus* enemy-distinction, stating that ‘... Schmitt’s emphasis on the ever present possibility of the friend *versus* enemy distinction and the conflictual nature of politics constitutes the necessary starting point for envisaging the aims of democratic politics’ (Mouffe, 2007, p. 13–14). Mouffe’s emphasis of the constitutive character of irresolvable antagonisms for the establishment of societal order thus follows Schmitt as does her criticism of liberal universalism and of rational models of consensus-building.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, she turns against Schmitt by rejecting his focus on an homogeneous national *demos*. Contrary to Schmitt, who ‘... saw an insurmountable contradiction between liberal pluralism and democracy’ (Mouffe, 2007, p. 14), Mouffe claims that a plurality of antagonisms is also to be found within democratic societies, whereas Schmitt restricts the political to relations between states.<sup>3</sup> For her, intrastate pluralism is the basis of ‘the permanence of conflict and antagonism’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 33), and a constitutive characteristic of democratic societies. Against Carl Schmitt, Mouffe tries to establish a pluralist, radical-democratic model of politics, which is inspired by Schmitt’s friend *versus* enemy-distinction.

The reception of Mouffe’s understanding of the political as ‘... space of power, conflict and antagonism’ (2005a,b, p. 9) has recently inspired an extension of the contestation-debate to the spatial aspects of contestation. Barnett (2004), in particular, takes critical recourse to Mouffe’s Schmitt-inspired concept of the political. The main argument is that Chantal Mouffe’s vocabulary of ‘closure’ and ‘exclusion’ does not only tend to a spatialization, but also to a territorialization of political practices (Barnett, 2004, p. 506). This, following Barnett, makes her approach vulnerable to the persistence of binary and stable distinctions, which she claims to have overcome by sidelining Schmitt’s theological framework. Thus Mouffe – notwithstanding her emphasis on the procedural character of social formations – is criticized for developing a too restrictive and one-dimensional picture of how spaces are ‘produced’ and for neglecting the plurality of generative and dynamic spatial practices (Featherstone, 2008, p. 50–55) as well as the [vagueness of] quotidian ‘productions’ of spaces (Massey, 2005, p. 154).

The attention paid to the spatial aspects of Carl Schmitt’s work, which had long been neglected, has recently increased (Ronge, 2008; Hooker, 2009; Legg, 2011). When authors address the spatial-political nexus in the work of Carl Schmitt, they usually identify him as a ‘classical’ geopolitical thinker (see van Laak, 2000; Osterhammel, 2000; Chandler, 2008). While it should not be denied that Carl Schmitt was familiar with the writings of Halford Mackinder (see Schmitt, 2003, p. 37), Karl Haushofer or Friedrich Ratzel, in our view Schmitt does not fit into the camp of geopolitical authors. Schmitt, living in the heyday of geopolitical discourses, avoided the term ‘geopolitics’ in his writings which, moreover, do not provide conclusive evidence for the geo-determinism typical of the ‘classical’ geopolitics of his time. If one followed a broader understanding of geopolitics Schmitt’s spatial writings could arguably be subsumed under this label, however, his highly original and idiosyncratic understanding of the relation-

ship between space and politics deserves a more differentiated investigation which this article hopes to provide. Thus Schmitt does not look at this relationship from a merely strategic or power-oriented point of view, because this is precluded by his assertions about the relationship between theology, the political and space. In stark contrast to many geopolitical thinkers, such as Kjellen or Haushofer, Schmitt’s thoughts are not guided by the geopolitical belief that the mastery of space is necessary to reach certain political goals – as some authors and politicians (see the discussion in Linder (2008)) imputed to him when he formulated his *Großraum* theory; Schmitt did not even follow the idea that politics revolves around the competition for space.<sup>4</sup> Except for his differentiation between ‘land’ and ‘sea’, which has to be understood from his theological point of view (see below), Schmitt has very rarely discussed the direct influence of concrete spatial references on policy and diplomacy.<sup>5</sup>

While we do not consider Schmitt as a ‘classical’ geopolitical thinker, nor, like Stuart Elden (2010, p. 24), read the spatial aspects of his work through the lense of Schmitt’s political views, we claim that Carl Schmitt’s main trajectory throughout his work is his belief in the interrelationship between space and the political. This features his own politicization of space, in which the friend *versus* enemy-distinction is spatialized by connecting the respective antagonists to the qualities of certain spaces.<sup>6</sup> Against this background this article aims to contribute to the current debate about contestation and space by analyzing the idiosyncratic connection between Carl Schmitt’s Catholic faith, his theory of the political and his conceptualization(s) of space.

Our hypothesis is that the reference to Carl Schmitt as the guiding spirit of the concept of spatial contestation is highly problematic in at least three different respects: First, the theological basis of the political and the conception of space as its corollary are often ignored. In our reading the spatial-political nexus, which is crucial for Schmitt’s writings, has to be seen in the light of his ‘... implicit theology of the political’ (Assmann, 2002, p. 16).<sup>7</sup> Second, the friend *versus* enemy-distinction is mostly discussed without taking its positioning within Schmitt’s entire worldview into account. This does not only foreclose a more thorough discussion of his work, but also shapes the way the friend *versus* enemy-distinction is employed in the contestation debate: isolated from its conceptual context and thus devoid of considerable portions of its meaning. Third, Schmitt’s understanding of space does not go beyond a ‘methodological territorialism’ (Jessop et al., 2008, p. 391) and does not take into account that political contestation can take place in multiple forms of spatialities. Therefore the intention of this paper is to restructure the discussion of Carl Schmitt’s influence on the contestation and space debate by paying attention to the theological-political-spatial triangle at the heart of Schmitt’s thought. The conceptual fundament for this idiosyncratic connection was laid in his essays *Politische Theologie*

<sup>4</sup> The concept of ‘Großraum’ was criticized by many national socialist authors including the SS-officers Werner Best and Reinhard Höhn. Their criticism focused mainly on the lack of his ‘biological’, ‘racial’, and ‘völkische’ orientation (cf. Blindow, 1999, p. 91–106; Mehring, 2009, p. 396).

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Elden has recently (2010) elaborated on the problems with ‘reading Schmitt geopolitically’. Elden suggests that Schmitt does not have much to add to debates about geopolitics, and that he needs to be read against the background of his political engagement with and his intellectual corroboration of the Nazi-regime before he can be even considered as a geopolitical thinker. We claim that for the debate about space and contestation Schmitt’s thought is determined by his theological, not by his political views, which have – in contrast to the political background of his spatial thought – seldom been discussed.

<sup>6</sup> This move could be regarded as part of the above mentioned broadly understood geopolitics (see Agnew, 2010 for the portrayal of the ‘struggle for souls’ of the Catholic Church as an example of such broadly understood, unconventional geopolitics).

<sup>7</sup> See also Meier (1994, 1998). For a rather critical review, see McCormick (1997), who states, that Meier ‘...too heavily emphasizes Schmitt’s faith.’ See also Noack (1996), Pesch (1999), Maurer (2002), Ojakangas (2007), and Dean (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe rejects political theories which either understand political decisions as results of deliberative negotiations (Habermas, 1992, 1996) or propose a ‘third way’ beyond the antagonism of left and right (Giddens, 1994, 1998). From Mouffe’s point of view, both approaches negate the political, because they focus on rationally modeled consensus instead of the friend *versus* enemy-distinction.

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted that Schmitt did in fact not limit the political to interstate relations. In the 1932-edition of ‘Der Begriff des Politischen’ (Schmitt, 2007) he hanged the scope of the political in comparison to the 1927-edition (Schmitt, 1927). In the latter he saw the political as a subject matter of its own, whereas in the former he regarded it as ‘no subject matter of its own, but only [as describing] the level of intensity of association or dissociation of people, whose motives are religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic [...]’ (Schmitt, 1996, p. 38) This shift of meaning relates the political to domestic politics and also covers civil war (Meier, 1998, p. 31).

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