

Eliminating politics

Carl Schmitt's critique on liberalism and its relation to politics and violence

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Abstract

A clear and coherent political theory provides guidelines for liberal societies coping with terrorist attacks. Reflection on violence and politics can give further insight for conceptualizing the terrorist threat. In this article, concepts from the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt are used to construct a framework, in which politics, violence, and liberalism can be conceptualized in a coherent way. These concepts are outlined and applied to the present day situation, in order to explore the applicability of Schmitt's framework of the political to terrorism.

Keywords

Legal theory, liberalism, Carl Schmitt, political philosophy, terrorism.

Background

A new enemy has been faced. Terrorism, the politically motivated threat of violence against civilians, has entered a new era since recent large scale attacks (Rosenthal, 2004). The extent of the terrorist act, the chance for small groups of individuals to achieve a massive destruction, make terrorism a present-day threat for safety in western liberal democracies (De Boer, 2004). Coping with this threat nowadays has

become an important priority in western politics. Nevertheless, the novelty of terrorist mass destruction increases the call for a useful framework for political thinking.

Liberalism is a fundamental element of western political culture. Therefore, it is important to clarify the significance of politics and violence in the current western societies in relation to liberalism. Rethinking the basic principles and limitations of present-day western society, more specific on politics and terrorism, can add to the discussion mentioned above.

Aim and research question

The aim of this article is to develop a clear and coherent view on politics and liberalism, which can help to understand the way contemporary liberal societies cope with politics and terrorism. The coherence of liberalism and politics has been extensively studied by the German thinker in constitutional law Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). This paper will discuss the philosophy of Carl Schmitt and its possibilities to conceptualize a view on liberalism and politics.

The concept of the political

Before a coherent approach to politics and terrorism can be developed, the concept of the political has to be defined. The political has been studied extensively in Carl Schmitt's work *Der Begriff des Politischen*.

The political monopoly of the state has been reduced in the 19th century. Several spheres of human thought and action have separated themselves of the state by a polemic of non-politics. The state was not allowed to interfere in domains like arts, religion, and science. In this way these domains could conceal their political aims. Therefore, the essence of the political cannot be derived from the state. To think the

concept of the political, one has to rethink the state from the political, the division, and the struggle. The state presumes the political, and not the other way around.

When can we denominate something as political? For Schmitt, the political has its own criteria, distinct from the different, relatively autonomous spheres of human thought and action, such as religion, ethics, or economics. The specific distinction, to which political acts can be reduced, is the distinction between friend and enemy. This criterion can serve as a definition. It is in accordance with the relatively independent criteria of the other domains, like good or evil in the moral domain, or beautiful or ugly in the aesthetic. Schmitt mentions three key aspects of this distinction.

First, the distinction between friend and enemy is autonomous; it cannot be reduced to the other oppositions. It is meant to represent the intensity of an association or dissociation. The political enemy does not have to be evil or ugly. Its key characteristic lies in being the other, the stranger, in an extraordinary intensive way, so that in the end, conflict is possible. Second, next to this eventuality for combat, there has to be one collective opposed to another collective, in order to be political. Therefore, the political enemy is always a public enemy. Of all oppositions, the political is the most intensive and extreme one. The more a situation between parties comes to the extremes of the friend-enemy distinction, the more political it is.

The third characteristic of the political criterion is, that the political relation always refers to a specific opposition. Therefore, all political concepts are polemic in nature. They aim for a specific opposition and are bound to a specific situation. The political relation refers to the possibility of struggle, civil war, or in case of a state, war with a foreign enemy. The political opposition is the most extreme and intense one. The more a relation between collectives approaches the extremes of the friend-enemy distinction, the more political it becomes.

The polemic effect of political terms

The concepts friend, enemy and combat obtain their true meaning by their relation to the actual eventuality of physical killing. War is definitely not the aim, nor the goal, nor even the content of the political, but as an actual eventuality the presupposition is always present. Because of this presence, human thought and action is characterized and will result in specific political behavior.

All political concepts are polemic. The aim for a specific opposition, and are bound to a concrete situation. When the extreme consequence is realized, a distinction can be made between friend and enemy. On the other hand, when the situation is omitted, the political concepts become vague abstractions. Specific political terms such as society, class, sovereignty or terrorism become incomprehensible when one does not realize a specific party is being put into disadvantage by their use.

A religious, moral, economic, ethnic or any other opposition becomes political when it is intense enough to group people as 'friend' or 'enemy'. In order to be political the struggle does not have to be current, as long as the eventuality of the existential struggle has been taken into account. It indicates the existence of a political will if one considers oneself faced with this eventuality. The refusal to apply the political distinction indicates the weakening of the political will of a nation, group or class (De Wit, 1992).

Neutralization and depolitization

Now the concept of the political has been defined, the specific role of the political in the liberal culture can be examined. How can this relation between weakness and the political be understood in present day liberal society? Schmitt interprets the history of

the last four centuries as a succession of distinct, central domains. A fundamental motive for this period in European history was the pursuit of a neutral sphere.

This history of neutralizations starts with the neutralization of theology in the 16th century due to the transition to an era of the natural sciences in the 17th century. Theology is being omitted, because it is a domain of struggle. The 18th century can be interpreted as an effort to diminish differences by developing a universal humanitarian moral. The 19th century the society converted to liberalism and technocratic politics, which were considered as a neutral basis for peace and agreement.

The pursuit for a neutralized society, in order to bring struggle to an end, has been rejected by Schmitt. He argues that contradiction and inhumanity are inevitable consequences of a neutralized world. For example, the pacifistic ideal is likely lead to a war to end all wars, in name of humanity. This war tries to dehumanize the enemy by positioning the latter as an enemy of mankind, instead of an alternative society. Defending oneself against this enemy is not enough; total annihilation is required. Therefore, denying humankind's political nature in name of humanity will lead to a loss of humaneness. Regarding the political as inevitable is, according to Schmitt, more humane than acting on universalistic pretensions, which implicitly or explicitly aims for the elimination of the political.

The end of the political and Schmitt's 'political pluriverse'

The notion of the liberal culture has emerged within a metaphysics of progress, which addressed cruelty and violence to the political and the state. Therefore, the liberal tradition stresses the existence of distinct cultural domains, and subordinates the political domain as a subcategory of culture. As a result, in the liberal society, all

originally political oppositions will be transformed to moral and economic categories. Struggle is reduced on the one hand to moral debate, and on the other hand to competition. War and peace become moral notions. Schmitt firmly opposed against downgrading the political to a cultural category. He pointed out the hidden aspects of power as well as the cruel results of so-called moral and peaceful liberal politics.

Schmitt conceives the world as a 'political pluriverse'. Only when an organized political unity as a whole can make the friend-enemy distinction, it can be called a state. This does not mean that this political unity is completely depoliticized internally. However, the internal friend-enemy distinctions are put into perspective by the homogeneity, and the appearance of a foreign enemy. There has to be always a sovereign state that is a potential thread. This thread is therefore constitutive for the state.

A world without gravity

Next to the conception that the world is a political pluriverse, Schmitt reveals also a moral reluctance towards the idea of a depoliticized world. In the end, a culture of entertainment will be the end state of a world without politics or states. The political and the state are the only guarantee against a world without gravity. This gravity can reveal itself in oppositions that form the basis for demanding the sacrifice of one's own life.

Schmitt made another comment on neutralization. It is only possible to strive to a certain extent of shared understanding and agreement when one ignores the matters of truth and justice, and only worries about the technical means. But who ignores the matters of truth and justice, ignores the meaning of human existence.

The political subject

As stated earlier, a characteristic of political existence is that the risk of dying is given in a political way. Namely, the society as a political unity must be able to demand the willingness to die. This is an essential aspect of the reciprocity of protection of the civilian and his or her obedience to the state. But when the choice between life and death is presented in a liberal culture, the liberal individual will judge for himself whether he will comply with this demand, or will be disobedient. This corresponds to the idea of Thomas Hobbes, who considers the search for protection of the individual as the basis of the state. When the state is not able to provide this protection, society will be forsaken by its civilians.

But then the question will be, who protects the state against foreign enemies, when civilians have the right to opt-out of the war? On this point, two different notions of the subject (conceived as the reflexive, observing ego) are carried out by Hobbes and Schmitt. Hobbes' subject has a conditional obedience to the state. This obedience ends when the state loses its ability to guarantee safety. Schmitt's subject has an affective identification with the political. According to Schmitt the subject with conditional obedience has to be subjected to the subject of political action. Schmitt's critique on the liberal subject corresponds his comments on the Romantic figure. The Romantic cannot commit himself to a norm; neither is he able to make moral distinctions or political decisions. This results in total flexibility and unprecedented servility. The Romantic is always serving decisions of other, unromantic, persistent people.

A political dimension: the theory of the partisan

The implications of the liberal culture on the political have now been discussed. In addition to *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Schmitt made a distinction between several kinds of enemies (Schmitt, 1995). In particular, the partisan is considered a key factor in present-day warfare. The phenomenon of the partisan breaks down the distinction between the private and public enemy. Therefore he leaves the legal boundaries of traditional warfare behind: this is one of its primary characteristics.

History of the partisan

In the period of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, the international order was shaken up by the revolutionary claims in name of the 'universal man'. The partisan struggle can be regarded as a reaction to these claims, advocating a territorially bound form of legitimacy. The universal ethos of the Napoleonic conquests threatened the entire way of life in an unprecedented way. Therefore an era of unrestricted political conflict started. Because of the intensity of the conflict, neither the rebel, nor partisan, could be repressed.

The typical partisan is an irregular combatant that targets enemies in uniform. He is territorially bound, relies on mobility, and has is strongly politically engaged. This political characteristic of the partisan is the most important one: the ability to make the distinction between friend and enemy.

Schmitt distinguishes two types of partisans: the world revolutionary, and the defending activist that protects his cradle. The partisan opts for a party, and serves the interests of the group. Opposed to the universalistic mode of justification of the guerilla, the partisan can be characterized by its particularistic mode of justification.

Partisan war as the most fundamental struggle

All laws are in essence political, because their effect is separation. Therefore, the political constitutes social relations. Every society is formed by ‘friend-enemy’ distinctions that structure further interaction within this society.

The aspect of distinctions and conflict that are constitutive for a collective is the essence of the partisan war. Therefore, characterizing the partisan as a security problem is not sufficient to handle partisan war. Partisan struggle is the result of constitutive distinctions within the society, and agitates against them.

A partisan war is characterized by the absence of limitations, and therefore represents the most elementary type of warfare. All other wars are derived from the partisan type of war. Only when the behavior of armies is restricted because of the recognition of a broader legitimizing framework, war will be fought within certain limitations.

Because not all wars concern a total or existential struggle, it is possible and plausible that small or general wars are fought without the partisan involvement. But when one or both sides reject war laws, it is more probable that war degenerates into the most fundamental type: a cruel and extreme existential struggle over a territory: a partisan war.

The partisan and the international realm

The international judicial realm is a mechanism by which sovereigns try to restrict wars by regarding one another as equals. The contemporary partisans of the 20th century have searched for recognition at an international level to protect the characteristics of their own society. It is an explicitly political struggle for the defense of a particular interest and the construction of a new order in which this interest might

find peace. Without the international judicial realm, war and politics become a never-ending struggle. Struggle can be limited by entering this realm, where sovereigns regard each other as equals. In this way, the possibility of war can be reduced.

Applying Schmitt's ideas to contemporary politics

The use of the term terrorism and its connotations is polemic in nature and therefore a political term. It tries to make a distinction between friend and enemy, and thus serves a political purpose. Nevertheless, the phenomenon terrorism can be described as the threatening or use of violence against civilians with a political aim (Barker, 2003).

According to the approach taken by Carl Schmitt, terrorist struggle can be interpreted as an opposition of high intensity, with an eventuality to existential struggle. Because of this, a terrorist act is – above all – political. Therefore, to understand terrorism from a Schmittian perspective, its moral connotations can be excluded. Like partisan war, terrorism can be regarded as an elementary type of warfare, without legal limits. In line with the partisan, the terrorist can engage in struggle for universalistic norms (e.g. fundamentalism), as well as protection of territory and the way of life of their societies (for example Chechnya, Palestine). He can fight for a public cause, without the need to make a distinction between the 'private' and 'public' enemy.

What are the effects for a liberal culture when confronted with this kind of struggle? In a liberal culture, the freedom of the individual is maximized, and therefore state power has decreased. The sacrifice of the individual life for the public interest is therefore against its nature, and this makes the liberal culture fairly weak in face of terrorism.

Further, the liberal society has a long history of depolitization and neutralization. Because of this aim for neutralization, it has inevitably resulted in a society that has

been disposed of its gravity. It might have become more and more an entertainment culture, disposed of all gravity, in which production and consumption are key elements. It weakens the society by decreasing the political potential: its fundamentals are not suitable for identifying friends or enemies.

This is affirmed by the consideration of the political as a distinct sphere among others, subjected to culture in general, and the transformation of struggle to competition and discussion. The willingness of subjects in the liberal culture to sacrifice themselves for the public interest when the eventuality of struggle becomes real has therefore diminished. According to Schmitt, all that is left after depolitization and neutralization is a weak society.

The terrorist struggles seem not to be regarded as partisan warfare, as struggles for a universalistic cause or a particular way of life. They are regarded as last bits of resistance, against an internationally spreading liberal society, the inevitable political model of the 20th century.

The sphere of liberalism and technocracy is considered as a (pseudo-) neutral, apolitical sphere. Even more, it is often interpreted as an achievement of an ever-advancing world: it involves the idea that history has a purpose, and will end with a best possible world. Universal morals and international human rights are examples of aspects that are regarded as a step forward to a political unity.

This rhetoric represents the terrorist not as an external or internal enemy of the state, which has to be stopped. It diminishes him or her to the diabolical opposite of the good and progressive world. Therefore, by all means, terrorists have to be annihilated.

Conclusions

Neutralization, the fundamental motive of the last four centuries in European history, aimed at the elimination of the political, by denying elimination as its ultimate consequence. Schmitt's framework seems to be useful for interpreting struggle. The ideal of the depoliticized world with its absence of struggle can be confronted with the brutal episodes of the 20th century. This contrast reveals the inaccuracies of the interpretation the world from the 18th century perspective of universalistic hope for progress and perpetual peace.

The discussion above has shown how Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of the political, liberalism, and the partisan can be used to interpret the different types of violence and the phenomenon of terrorism in present-day society. Schmitt's selection of the political criterion as the most elementary mode of opposition, because of its existential relevance, can be a useful framework for interpreting violence and terrorism. State terrorism, partisan warfare, war against war in the name of humankind, the violence a liberal culture and the elementary warfare without judicial limits, all seem to be very relevant in the world today.

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