



*Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt*

By Michael Marder

AQ1 Continuum, 2010. Pp. 190. ISBN 978–0–8264–6595–5. \$120.00 (hbk).

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All those interested in the ontological nature of politics will find Michael Marder’s new book an indispensable tool not only because it provides outstanding analyses of Carl Schmitt’s political philosophy but, above all, because of its insight into the German master’s ontology. Together with Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lefort, Schmitt is among the few philosophers who embraced a non-objectivist political ontology, resorting, often implicitly, to the conclusions of existentialism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in order to overcome metaphysics. Although such an operation has often been interpreted as totalitarian, given its existential preoccupation with the ‘wholeness’, much ‘ink and paper could have been saved’ – as Marder rightly explains in the first pages of the Introduction – ‘were Heidegger’s existentialism and its consequences properly understood in terms of the impossibility of totalizing human existence in its temporal openness’ (p. 6). However, contrary to the recent literature on Schmitt, Marder’s goal is not to present or describe once again his fundamental concepts of the ‘state of exception’, the ‘sovereign decision’ or the ‘friend-enemy distinction’, but, rather to assess the ontological impulse that gave birth to them. This impulse, which has been ignored at the expense of these concepts’ application to our contemporary condition, illustrate how Schmitt has not simply produced a political philosophy, as Giorgio Agamben or Richard Wolin believe, but instead ‘an ontology that inquires into the uniquely political mode of being’ (p. 3).

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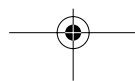
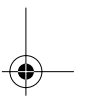
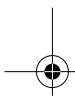
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But how has Schmitt reached the level of political ontology? According to Marder, Schmitt arrives at political ontology by means of phenomenology and existentialism, which are the ‘royal roads’ leading toward it, since they allow, on the one hand, ‘individual beings to appear’, and on the other, ‘Being to present itself as a question’. This is why the human being, instead of constituting an ontically circumscribed region, itself becomes the question of the specific meaning of the political. As we can see, Schmitt’s concept of the political is neither totalitarian nor metaphysical, given that it is existentially embodied in determinate living oppositions, oppositions that allow the critical experience of our political existence to take place. As Marder explains, we

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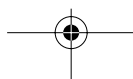
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5 experience a political-existential crisis whenever we are put into ques-  
 tion in our very being and that this crisis is not a merely fleeting, tempo-  
 rary, singular occurrence but the shape and being of the human being  
 who is inexorably unhinged, questioned, targeted by the other, whom  
 I call 'my enemy' but without whom I lose my human countenance.  
 (p. 85) AQ2

10 Political scientists, accustomed to 'political philosophy' as opposed to  
 'political ontology', might wonder where the demarcating line between the  
 two passes, in light of their apparent common concern with the political in  
 general. Contrary to what many might think at first, the difference between  
 political philosophy and political ontology does not result from the restric-  
 15 tion of the political sphere to a static systemic organization, but, conversely,  
 from the irreducibility of practical existential concerns in politics. This is  
 why Marder clarifies that while 'politics is an experience ... of the human  
 beings, whose very humanness is defined by the possibility of undergoing it,  
 [...] political ontology is an inquiry into this experimental field, lacking any  
 predetermined structures, norms, or ground-rules' (p. 4). In sum, political  
 ontology deals with 'groundless existence', while political philosophy is  
 20 occupied the 'grounded institutions and bureaucracies' that, supposedly,  
 sustain its own existence. AQ3

25 The book is divided into three parts ('The Elements', 'The Critique', 'On  
 the Ground') and eight chapters (1 'Geometry of the Exception: The Point  
 and the Line', 2 'The Danger: Unavoidability of Risk', 3. 'The Non-Ground:  
 From the Concept of the Political to the Event of Politics', 4 'Politics in  
 Question', 5 'Metonymic Abuses of Modernity', 6 'Political Reduction to  
 Constitutive Subjectivity', 7 'Living Forms: Culture, Multiculturalism, and  
*Complexio Oppositorum*', 8 'Political Hermeneutics: The Necessity of  
 Interpretation'), where Schmitt's phenomenological methodology and  
 30 hermeneutical objectives are outlined and substantiated with constant  
 references to Husserl, Heidegger, and many other authors who have influ-  
 enced him. Although, for the main part, the book is dedicated to Schmitt's  
 phenomenological notion of the political (as 'the politicizability of human  
 existence, as the possibility inherent in what is, *stricto sensu*, non-political',  
 35 p. 33), the most original part of the text is the last chapter, where Marder  
 ventures into the political nature of interpretation, hence 'political herme-  
 neutics'. In the rest of this review, I will comment on the last chapter, given  
 its originality and innovation both with regard to Schmitt's political ontol-  
 ogy and with reference to all those political philosophers who still believe  
 40 that the truth of the political mechanisms resides 'in its technological [or  
 metaphysical] perfection' instead of its 'breaking points where limits are  
 revealed' (p. 136). AQ4

Marder is correct in suggesting that Schmitt's aims are hermeneutical,  
 given his interest in reorienting the grounded institutions 'toward the

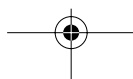
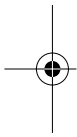


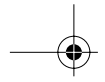


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future', that is, reinterpreting them 'with recourse to the "real possibility" that would impart a new sense of vitality, incompatible with the endorsement of a totalitarian state, to collective existence' (p. 4). This, after all, has always been the essence of the traditional hermeneutical contribution to religion and law, a contribution intended to transform the established textual canons and legal norms. Yet, if every interpretation (as Heidegger and Gadamer explained) is already an existential decision that becomes political, insofar as it shakes up and reactivates impersonal legal, bureaucratic, and political structures, then the goal of hermeneutics (in its 'phenomenological' and 'existential' guises) is to subsume 'the question concerning the meaning of Being – ontology as a whole – under the question of the specific meaning of the political' (p. 9). This is probably why Marder suggests that to study the meaning of Being, as Heidegger did, or to concentrate on the 'specific meaning' of the political, in the manner of Schmitt, is not only to challenge the metaphysical assumption that one could treat Being and the political objectively, but also to insist on the necessity of interpretation. Reducing a constitution, for example, to a set of legal statutes inevitably sets out a formalization that detaches the text of the law from the concrete historical and vital meanings that have also generated it. However, what does such formalization or detachment imply for the Being of the constitution? Schmitt himself responded indirectly to this question in *Constitutional Theory* 1928 when he stated that a 'constitution is not based on a norm, whose justness would be the foundation of its validity. It is based on a political decision concerning the type and form of its own being, which stems from its political *being* [aus politischem *Sein* hervorgegangen]' (*Constitutional Theory*, p. 125). Given that the political decision is always existential, that is, 'groundless', Schmitt – explains Marder – 'has chosen the hermeneutical path for his political philosophy. That is one of the reasons why he feels such antipathy to institutional approaches to politics and, especially, to proceduralism with its normative, rule-bound imposition of political method' (p. 178).

While many political philosophers will question whether Marder's presentation of Schmitt has not gone too far in presenting him as a 'groundless' philosopher, that is, as a postmetaphysical thinker, it should be underlined that only this interpretation is worth fighting for, to the extent that it puts Schmitt's critical ontology in the service of the politics of the oppressed. Although the German master's place in contemporary philosophy and political thought is becoming increasingly more important, the current 'return' to Schmitt through intellectual celebrities, such as Derrida or Agamben, does not live up to the promise of the postmetaphysical liberation of politics. The theoretical erasure of the concept of the political, its exaggerated identification with state institutions, and liberalism's historical tendency to de-politicize politics are the features that Schmitt disapproves of desiring to free us from them. Marder's *Schmitt* is





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not just another interpretation, but rather the effect that Schmitt himself probably wished for: ‘a politics that does not recoil from the temporal sense of Being but, rather, plunges headlong into groundless existence [in order to] overcom[e] the crisis and metaphysical impasses of transcendentally legitimated regimes and institutions’ (p. 187). Thus, following Gianni Vattimo’s latest developments of ‘weak thought’ in *Ecce Comu* (2003), Marder concludes his outstanding study emphasizing the right of the oppressed to interpret, in other words, how the hermeneutical act is not an arbitrary decision but an attempt to render politically relevant the oppressed (or the weak):

Claiming the right to interpret for the oppressed is not only the first step in the direction of restituting their world and making it meaningful based on their own experiences, but it is also an act of sovereignty conditioned by a declaration of the state of emergency

(p. 177)

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