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Verwantschap in extremen : politieke theologie bij Walter Benjamin en Carl Schmitt

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Summary

In this book, I have analyzed and compared the political theologies of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. Benjamin belonged to the early Frankfurt School, a group of leftist intellectuals, who tried to save the critical impetus of Enlightenment thought. These thinkers combined a Marxist and psychoanalytical approach to reveal a discrepancy between subjective consciousness and objective historical conditions. Schmitt, on the other hand, was part of the so-called Conservative Revolution, a movement of publicists on the far right, who tried to reconcile a typically modern belief in the controllability of social practices with reactionary ideas about the political community. By continuously undermining the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, these thinkers in fact paved the way for National Socialism. While Schmitt had a considerable career as “crown jurist of the Third Reich,” Benjamin was forced to flee to France, where, in September 1940, he took his own life.

Though in many respects opposite figures, Schmitt and Benjamin, in the late 1920s and early 30s, engaged in a dialogue with each other to which a letter and several references in their work testify. In the letter, dated December 9, 1930, Benjamin expressed his approval of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, claiming it confirmed his own “modes of research.” The nature of this affinity he had already indicated in a 1928 curriculum vitae: by approaching the work of art as an “integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of an age, which cannot be limited to a substantive domain,” Benjamin thought to link up with “contemporary attempts by Carl Schmitt” (GS VI, 219).

We should not forget that it was Schmitt himself who, in the 1950s, first drew attention to Benjamin’s endorsement of his work. Apparently, the former State Counselor of Prussia, whose involvement in National Socialism had in the meanwhile become the object of criminal investigations in Nuremberg, believed his correspondence with a Jewish intellectual might contribute to his rehabilitation. Against this background, it is understandable that Theodor Adorno, who was the first to edit Benjamin’s complete correspondence, omitted the letter to Schmitt. He

thought the letter too painful, and feared it might lead to political suspicions against Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, if not to an unjustified and premature rehabilitation of Schmitt.

All in all, Benjamin's interest in Schmitt lasted about seventeen years, from the time he first implicitly referred to Schmitt's doctrine of sovereignty in a letter to Gottfried Salomon (1923) to the moment he explicitly rejected it in what would turn out to be his final work, the "Theses on the Concept of History" (1940). However, Benjamin did not appear to have embraced Schmitt's ideas uncritically. Instead, his relation to him proved to be ambiguous from the start. Characteristic is a diary entry from the Spring of 1930, which reads: "Schmitt – affinity, hate, suspicion" (GS II/3, 1372). Benjamin's words seem to indicate precisely the various modes of his relation to Schmitt: although based on certain theoretical and methodological affinities, it was never without critical distance, never without the suspicion that, at the very point where affinities seemed most concrete, the object was to think against the other.

In his turn, Schmitt would become interested in Benjamin, although it remains unclear precisely when. After the war, he suggested he had already read and engaged with Benjamin's work in the 1930s. In a letter to Hansjörg Viesel, he even claimed he had written his notorious 1938 study on Thomas Hobbes as an "attempt to answer Benjamin." However, Schmitt's claim seems exaggerated, for there is, in fact, not a single reference to Benjamin in Schmitt's pre-war writings, nor are there any turns of phrases which suggest familiarity with his thought. Schmitt only started to mention Benjamin explicitly in 1956, in his book *Hamlet or Hekuba*, to which he added a separate excursus on Benjamin's *Origin of German tragic drama* (1928).

Although Schmitt did not explicitly engage with Benjamin's thought in his pre-war writings, he did testify to similar interests and views. Moreover, these views and interests were not merely incidental or superficial, but based on shared theoretical and methodological convictions. Perhaps most striking was their shared "methodological extremism": both authors held that philosophical thinking, in formulating and reflecting on concepts, had to orientate to the most extreme and exceptional case, rather than the ordinary and normal. Benjamin formulated this methodological extremism in the introduction to his *Origin of German tragic drama*: "The empirical (...) can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in

the extreme.”¹ Schmitt called for a similar method in his *Political Theology* (1922), arguing that “the rule” did not prove anything, whereas the “exception” had the force of a real revelation: “it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”²

In the present study, I have examined the relation between Schmitt and Benjamin on three levels: (1) that of the theoretical and methodological affinities they have pointed out themselves (2) that of concepts they have borrowed from each other – concepts they would develop and criticize in their own writings, and (3) that of a common theoretical ground that, though perhaps unnoticed by themselves, originated from a shared intellectual horizon. In other words, I have read the texts of Benjamin and Schmitt next to and as “answers” to each other, even though it was not always possible to ascertain whether they were actually meant as interventions in a dialogue.

The main thesis I have presented in this book is that both the affinities and differences in the work of Schmitt and Benjamin can be explained from their shared interest in political theology. Both authors believed that, even in a secularized modernity, theological motifs, images, and metaphors have continued to determine our understanding of the political. Both, more particularly, tended to emphasize the structural and systematic resemblances between theological and political concepts. Benjamin, for example, refers to similarities between the proletarian general strike and god’s law destroying violence (GS II/1, 202); between the sovereign and the martyr (GS I/1, 249); and between the proletarian revolution and the Messianic arrest of happening (GS I/2, 703). Schmitt, for his part, argues that political and theological concepts are comparable in their “systematic structure” (PT, 43). To illustrate this claim, he points out similarities between the legal state of exception and the miracle in theology (PT, 43); between the unlimited powers of the sovereign and god’s omnipotence (PT, 53); and between the sovereign’s decision and the theological *creatio ex nihilo* (PT, 38).

¹ Benjamin, W. (2003, orig. 1928), *The origin of German tragic drama*, transl. by John Osborne and introd. by George Steiner, London and New York, Verso, 35.

² Schmitt, C. (2005, orig. 1922), *Political theology. Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, transl. by Georg Schwab and introd. by Tracy B. Strong, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 15.

Contrary to Benjamin, Schmitt emphasizes the need, not only for a systematic but also for a genealogical analysis of theologico-political motifs, arguing that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state” are in fact “secularized theological concepts” (PT, 43). More particularly, he suggests that some of the characteristics and qualities originally ascribed to god have, in a process of secularization, been transferred to and projected upon the sovereign ruler. However, as Hans Blumenberg has shown, Schmitt never actually presented an analysis of these “rearrangements.” Possibly in response to Blumenberg’s critique, Schmitt in his later work seems to deny his earlier genealogical claim: “Everything I have said on the topic of political theology consists of remarks made by a lawyer about a systematic structure-affinity (*systematische Struktur-Verwandtschaft*) between theological and political concepts, which imposes itself in legal practice and theory” (PT II, 79, footnote 1).

The notion of political theology has a technical meaning in the writings of Schmitt and Benjamin. Strictly speaking, it covers more than politics and less than theology. Political theology does not refer to what is usually called politics, *i.e.*, those issues that concern politicians, but to “the political” (*das Politische*). Both Benjamin and Schmitt, independent of each other but in similar words, argue that the political no longer takes place in the traditional political arenas, such as the state and political parties, but has become omnipresent: in modern societies the political is present and active in media, economy, culture, and so on. What is usually meant by “theology,” that is, comments on revelation and theories of the religious, is scarcely to be found in their work. Hence, political theology refers to neither a political form of theology nor a “theology as politics.” It rather indicates the (re)appearance of theological figures of thought in a secularized political sphere, in which their original meanings and functions have become obsolete. The theological (re)surfaces not only in fundamental political beliefs, ideologies and myths, but also, for example, silently, in theories of sovereignty, decision, and the “force of law.”

Several authors have noticed the shared theologico-political interests of Schmitt and Benjamin. The present study aims at correcting their interpretations in two respects. First, they have failed to do justice to the particular nature of political theology. For, in the work of Schmitt and Benjamin, political theology refers to a typically modern phenomenon, *i.e.*, the (re)appearance of theological figures of thought in a political sphere that has been exposed to processes of secularization and neutraliza-

tion. As a result, theology has not completely disappeared, but it has been *translated* into the seemingly neutral and secular idiom of modernity. In the eyes of Schmitt and Benjamin, this is decisive: in modernity, it has become inadmissible or even impossible to refer directly or explicitly to theological categories in the political sphere, even though they continue to haunt our understanding of the political. Here, we have left the sphere of direct and explicit identifications, and entered into that of an indirect language, of translations and analogies.

Second, we have criticized the existing interpretations for ignoring developments and shifts in the theologico-political views of Benjamin and Schmitt, resulting in a too static image of their relation. In his later writings, Schmitt no longer compares the unlimited powers of the sovereign to god's omnipotence, but to the "restraining force" (*katechon*) described in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:6-8). He thus seems to have given up his earlier view, according to which something of god's eternity reflected upon the sovereign. In turn, Benjamin, in his later writings, no longer relates the proletarian revolution to a divine "law-destroying violence," but rather to a notion of eternity, in which the hopes and "claims" of the past will be fulfilled. Thereby he, too, seems to have abandoned his earlier view, according to which god's eternity can only reveal itself negatively in history, as a violent or destructive force.

I have argued that these shifts and developments in the theologico-political views of Schmitt and Benjamin can, at least in part, be explained from their attempts to answer each other's criticism and objections. This becomes clear, for example, in Benjamin's *Origin of German tragic drama*. Here Benjamin criticizes Schmitt's doctrine of sovereignty for being one-sided in focusing exclusively on the contra-reformatory ideal of a "complete stabilization" of the legal-political order, thereby ignoring the concrete experience of catastrophe from which it stemmed. Schmitt would have completed "the image of the sovereign, as tyrant," that is, as a ruler with a blind spot for the limits to his rule. It is notable that Schmitt, shortly after, decides to redefine his notion of sovereignty: in the second edition of his *Concept of the political* (1932) he argues that the sovereign has to orientate, not only to the ideal of a "complete stabilization," but also to the "real possibility" of a violent conflict. Whether consciously or not, Schmitt thereby answers Benjamin's criticism in that he no longer deems the sovereign ruler capable of creating a completely stabilized legal-political order comparable to god's eternity, but, rather,

describes his function as that of averting an always threatening catastrophe.

In other respects, however, Schmitt proves unable or unwilling to meet Benjamin's criticism, formulating his own objections against the latter's reading instead. Benjamin had read Schmitt's doctrine of sovereignty in the context of the baroque "play of mourning," thereby making its underlying theologico-political premises susceptible to a possible dramatization. Hence, in the play of mourning, the sovereign no longer appeared as god's highest representative on earth, but as the allegory of a fallen creation, being exposed to irresistible physical impulses that made him indecisive and incapable of ruling. Schmitt criticized Benjamin's reading: by transferring sovereignty to the context of the baroque play of mourning, Benjamin had undermined its "seriousness." Schmitt now attempted to reaffirm the seriousness of sovereign decisions, relating them to the "real possibility" of violent death. He even introduced a new definition of sovereignty: the sovereign was no longer only he who decided on the state of exception, but also he who, in the ultimate case (*Notfall*), could demand a "sacrifice of life."

It would take years before Benjamin answered Schmitt's criticism. He presented his reply in the final work he was to complete, his "Theses on the concept of history" (1940): with his doctrine of sovereignty, Schmitt had contributed to legalizing an essentially lawless violence of the state. Benjamin, by contrast, set out to formulate the task of creating a "real state of exception," in which both the state and the violence committed in its name would be brought to an end. In the meanwhile, much had happened in their lives. As an adviser to Weimar's last governments, Schmitt had been personally involved in the Republic's downfall. He had advised the governments to declare a state of exception in order to counter the danger of anti-constitutional forces. He had thereby given them, inadvertently, the means to appropriate an unlimited authority and to ignore constitutional guarantees against an abuse of power. Benjamin refers to these events implicitly in a radio program, which is broadcast mere days before his flight from Germany in March 1933. By proclaiming a state of exception, the governments advised by Schmitt had destroyed all constitutional "dams," thereby creating the seat of a "dictatorial power." Instead of protecting the German people against the "flood" of anti-constitutionalism, they had surrendered it to Hitler's dictatorship.

Although Schmitt and Benjamin, in their post-1933 writings, scarcely refer to each other, they introduce a whole series of concepts, such as those of the mythical and dialectical image, of remembrance and forgetting, of the “now” and the “delay,” that can be placed and understood in a dialogical constellation. While Schmitt focuses on a “mythical image,” meant to make the present order appear necessary in light of a historical continuity, Benjamin sketches a “dialectical image” that robs the existing order of its appearance of necessity in light of a discontinuity. In this context, I have suggested that Schmitt’s anti-Semitism, which is unambiguously expressed in his study on Hobbes, is connected with a mythical image, *i.e.*, that of the state as a powerful Leviathan who has been “killed” by the Jews. At the same time, Benjamin, in his *Arcades Project*, attempts to counter this anti-Semitism by confronting it with the dialectical image of the *flâneur*.

While Schmitt’s mythical image is based on the *task of forgetting* to prevent “acts of revenge” and “claims” of the past, and to make possible a more or less stable political order, Benjamin’s dialectical image, by contrast, is founded upon the *task of remembrance* to save the “oppressed past” from oblivion, and to question the existing order in light of its “claims.” Both authors use a legal language, referring to “claims” of the past that the former believes should be done justice and the latter pleads to ignore. More importantly, both attach a theologico-political meaning to the imperatives of remembrance and forgetting respectively. For, according to Schmitt, forgetting is necessary in order to make possible a viable political order that, while awaiting eternity, can mitigate the human tendency for anarchy and lawlessness. Benjamin, on the other hand, suggests that the practice of remembrance opens up to an experience of history, in which the present order appears as violent, and eternity reveals itself as the wholly other.

I have, moreover, indicated that Schmitt’s mythical and Benjamin’s dialectical image originate from different experiences of time. Schmitt’s mythical image gives expression to the experience of a “continuing presence” (*dauernde Gegenwart*): it suggests that the present political order, though not timeless and eternal, is characterized by a certain duration and continuity, since it will exist until the end of time. Benjamin’s dialectical image, by contrast, bears witness to the experience of a “now” (*Jetzt*), in which the continuum of history is suddenly interrupted, and the existing order loses its appearance of durability. In this

context, I have suggested that Schmitt's concept of a "continuing presence" is related to the theological notion of the *aeuum*, *i.e.*, a duration and continuity despite change. Benjamin's "now," by contrast, indicates the experience of a radical interruption or discontinuity, in which the "truly new" announces itself. Here, eternity does not appear as the opposite of time, that is, as an absolute and eternal timelessness, but, rather, as embedded in time itself, as the most fugitive and transitory "now-moment" in which the past suddenly resurfaces with a new topicality.

In the late 1930s, the writings of Schmitt and Benjamin show a parallel turn to the philosophy of history and a shared interest in the relation between politics, theology and temporality. Both authors try to represent this relation in terms of theologico-political images, meant to serve as directives to the sovereign and the "revolutionary class" respectively: while Schmitt evokes the image of the *katechon*, whose task is to avert the threatening catastrophe, thereby safeguarding the existing order, Benjamin sketches the allegory of an "angel of history," who, his face turned toward the past, sees "one single catastrophe," which he seeks to end in vain. I have argued that Benjamin's allegory of the angel, though probably not conceived in reaction to Schmitt's idea of the *katechon*, can be read as an answer to it. For, while Schmitt justifies state violence as necessary in order to prevent a future event, *i.e.*, the always threatening catastrophe, Benjamin, with his allegory of the angel, suggests that the worst is already taking place, not despite but because of the willingness to accept the continuing violence as a temporary measure.

In trying to take stock of the relation between Schmitt and Benjamin, it is mainly the differences that catch our eye. We should, more particularly, not be misled by Benjamin's praising words in his 1930 letter to Schmitt, for it was meant to accompany the sending of a copy of the *Trauerspielbuch*, in which an implicit criticism of the latter's doctrine of sovereignty could already be found. Although Schmitt would take Benjamin's critique seriously, his remark in *Hamlet or Hekuba*, that he had been "particularly indebted" to the latter, should not mislead us either, for, in this work, Schmitt formulated sharp objections against Benjamin's interpretation of sovereignty. In the mid 1930s, both thinkers seem to have further distanced themselves from one other. While Schmitt, following the theological image of a "restraining force," ascribed to the sovereign the task of suppressing lawlessness and restoring the existing order, Benjamin

charged the “revolutionary class” with the Messianic duty of ending the oppression right away and breaking with the existing order.

Jacob Taubes once characterized the relation between Schmitt and Benjamin as a “mine that can blow to pieces our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period.”³ By that, he suggested that the clear-cut political distinctions that were meant to make sense of Weimar’s intellectual history had failed their purpose, and that particularly contacts and influences between intellectuals at the far left and the extreme right had been more frequent and substantial than, after the war, one was prepared to admit. A thorough analysis of this relation, however, must lead us to a different conclusion: not only have contacts between Schmitt and Benjamin remained scarce, their theoretical affinity was never without limits. Although, initially, in the late 1920s and early 30s, Benjamin and Schmitt seemed to approach each other’s positions, borrowing ideas and using the same conceptual language, they would eventually part ways. Particularly in the late 1930s, Schmitt’s theologico-political program of unmasking a “restrainer” at work in each century, proved irreconcilable with Benjamin’s project to develop a critical concept of history, orientated to the ruins of the past, which called for an immediate, no longer delayed redemption of humanity.

³ Taubes, J. (1987), *Ad Carl Schmitt. Gegenstrebiges Fügung*, Berlijn, Merve Verlag, 27.