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# The concept of the Political in Marx's concept of Crisis

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Since the fall of the Berlin wall, in a world in which labour seemed to have lost its universality as historical subject, and the rise of anti-racist and feminist movements led to identity politics, many post-marxists have been using Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of the Political – combined with notions of Gramsci – to revise critical theory and criticize neoliberal hegemony. In this paper I will argue that Marx's perspective on crisis/exception is more “political” than Schmitt's. Throughout its conceptual history - from Greek mythology and philosophy, to its modern scientific meanings – the concepts of crisis relied upon an apparent opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. I explore how, from Socrates to Marx, these dialectic relations have dominated European political philosophy. The concept of crisis explores the boundaries between judgement and process, between ideology and material circumstances and thus reveals the boundaries between “science” and the two other epistemological fields which are often opposed to science: history – with an analysis of the Methodenstreit and Popper – and the Political – with a focus on the work of Carl Schmitt and the state of exception. Based on these I make the case that crisis opens the way for a truly political and historical scientific knowledge. Such a “Political” scientific perspective – rather than the natural or social scientific framework – I consider essential for critical theory about science in times of liberal hegemony. On these basis I will argue for a return towards Marxism - as the political science par excellence – in order to address the shortcomings of critical theory today.

## The context of the Political

The major inspiration for the conceptualization of the concept of the political in contemporary critical theory, ranging from Mouffe, Laclau, Swyngedouw, Brown, Žižek, Agamben, and Derrida to Arendt, was Carl Schmitt. Schmitt dedicated his work to the relation between science and the political. As a student of Max Weber, Schmitt developed the concept of the Political as an answer to the crisis of the Weimar republic. According to Schmitt, the neo-Kantian methodologies used by Weber and his contemporary liberal colleagues were inadequate to cope with the changing conditions. (McCormick p79) He accused their approach to be “soulless”; reflecting only the dominant thought of depolitical modernist technicism, which reduced humans to mere machines and took away any real meaning in the world and in life.

Schmitt wasn't satisfied either with his contemporary resistance to this industrial alienation, which according to him took the form of romanticism (RC, PR). Romanticism's simple negation of modern technical rationality – in the form of aesthetics - neglects the struggle of ideologies – and thus couldn't therefore transcend the dualism of soul and soullessness, characteristic of the modern age. (McCormick Schmitt) Schmitt resorts to a Hegelian dialectic approach to escape this dilemma. He writes that in contrast to “purely natural-scientific rationalism”, which “could never grasp what is politically at issue, namely, the concrete situation and the concrete moment”, Hegel's “dialectical philosophy of history, if properly employed, provides a powerful means to free the concrete here and now, the *hic et nunc*, from the sphere of irrational intuitions or emotionally guided impressionism, and install man as the master over the irrationality of a fate ordained by God, nature, or providence” (Schmitt, Hegel and Marx) The Political functions as the *aufhebung* between modernity and its dialectical negation, romanticism, between technology and aesthetics, between science and myth.

According to Schmitt, meaning is restored by the political, defined by the “distinction of friend and enemy” - its main criterion. The political contrast based upon ‘decision’<sup>1</sup> or judgement, - of “we” in contrast with a “them”, locates meaning in the realm of collective identifications. (Mouffe, Furner 2014) These shared collective identities are not aimed at escaping reality but to change it.

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<sup>1</sup> - the expression of will whose binding force is ‘created out of nothing’, not following a norm or precedent.”

Schmitt's concept of the political has religious roots. Against the protestant ethic of Capitalism in Weber's work, Schmitt – as a devout catholic - chose the political in Roman Catholicism – a political institution with religious fervor, giving meaning to man and society, prepared for making alliances and to declare enemies. (McCormick p73) As Schmitt distanced himself from the church, he conceived a Political theology based on nationalism and myth; eventually transforming him eventually from a conservative catholic into a reactionary supporter of fascism. The reactionary content given by Schmitt to the political is undeniable, and shows its dangers. Nevertheless has the conception of the political as an anti-thesis to the liberal domestication of policies through rational argument and privatization, rendered it inspirational for much of our contemporary critical thinking, particularly in times of crisis of neoliberal hegemony.

## Crisis, the exception and the political

As we have seen before, Schmitt developed the concept of the political in the middle of the crisis of the nineteen thirties. The link between crisis, the political and hegemony is not a mere historical coincidence. In this decade, the contradictions of the European capitalist system became undeniable, and the liberal consensus became unsustainable. Schmitt's concept of the Political emerged at the moment when the laws of the free market exchange and cosmopolitan international law vanished in the polarization between identities of classes, nations and races. The Political served as a critique of the declining liberal hegemony – that was Schmitt's aim in his critique of liberal technique -, but was at the same time the expression of its historical demise – at least temporarily – and its disruption in conflicting ideologies.

Schmitt uses the concept of exception in a very similar way as the idea of “crisis”; as a moment of disruption of the normal, a need for political, even theological judgement. This state of exception stands in contrast to liberal, positivist science tries to intrinsically tries “banish from the human mind every exception”. (MC223, PT 41)

Schmitt claims that this relation between norm – the normal state, consensus - and exception cannot be understood without dialectics: the exception confirms the existence of the norm and the norm creates the exception. (127 MC) According to Schmitt, the state of exception - particularly in his work starting from Political Theology in 1922 – brings with it the possibility of sovereign powers; that is: the power of law-making authority beyond the law/norm, that can create a new historical political situation that irreversible transforms its nature. Inspired by Schmitt, according to Agamben the state of exception “marks a threshold at which logic and

praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference.”

Crisis thus emerges, when consensus is over, when the choice appears, when the Political emerges. This Political transgresses politics – the low policy dimension, le Politique versus la politique (Mouffe) – and thus enters in the very scientific paradigms as well. A crisis exists when Hegemony is challenged, thus when the scientific consensus disappears: rather than a transition from natural toward social sciences, in a crisis, we observe a necessary transition towards a Politization of sciences.

This politicization is not necessarily a fatal barrier to scientific knowledge. On the contrary: Schmitt had defended that in the state of Exception, it is the differentiation between enemy and friend itself that produces meaning. (McCormick, 92) If one accepts the premise that “truth” is always partial; “obscuration” – defending the friend-perspective and disconsidering the legitimacy of the enemy one - should be approached as an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge. (Roitman, 2011) The political functions as a filter and structuring principle in the natural chaos of information. It is within this context that Roitman (2011) claims that “crisis” should be treated as an “enabling paradox”. (Roitman 2011) When in a “critique” – or a Political scientific perspective - crisis is depicted as the logical outcome of historical progress – it de facto obscures the contingent political significance of such critique; but doing so Crisis functions as a lens which makes certain things visible and others not – producing a particular forms of knowledge. Crisis thus effectively creates and structures a new Political science.

## The Political is not enough

Can we then neglect the problems with Schmitt’s concept of the political? Above I referred to the reactionary content Schmitt gave to the political. While the crisis of liberalism was also a precondition for social experiments of the popular fronts, the social welfare state and redistribution policies, one cannot neglect that the way how fascism – the so-called ultra-politics (Zizek) – could bring the crisis towards other-than-progressive Political conclusions.

As McCormick (p112) rightly points out: The concept of “political activity” in Schmitt’s work, tends to fall into the trap he so much reproached the political romanticists. That is to say: just as the esthetics of romanticism, his approach is characterized by the final emptiness of the concept of the Political as such – as “the political is itself devoid of any substantive content”.

The consequence of this “emptiness” is that its conceptual approach can be useful for approaches from all kind of different political perspectives – and can therefore create monsters as well. Isn’t this described in Gramsci’s - Schmitt’s contemporary - famous description: “Crisis

consists precisely in the fact that the old world is dying and the new cannot yet be born, in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” (A Gramsci, 1971, p556)

While the Schmittian interpretation of the political was ultra-reactionary - in the form of a catholic opposition to liberalism – and Schmitt’s legal interpretation of crisis, the state of exception, legitimized a fascist regime, it also enabled Schmitt’s theory to become particularly relevant for thinking the Political among contemporary progressive theorists, as referred before.

Many contemporary critical “post-Marxist” theorists used Schmitt to transcend Marx and Gramsci in a post-modern age. The political seemed to be a crucial concept of critique in an age in which socialism was seen as “passé” and where the category of labour seemed to have become too weak, too accommodated and too conservative to play the role of a universal historical agent; as the driving force of emancipatory change. Chantal Mouffe’s and Ernesto Laclau’s “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy”, and Mouffe’s further work are a prime example. Schmitt’s idea of the political would enable them to transcend the universality of capital, and instead focus to build alliances between different identities in changing common struggles in a pluralist democratization. The political thus legitimized the dawn of the era of identity politics in political and critical theory and practice.

But as much as Schmitt accused the romanticists of becoming accommodated within liberalism as a mere form of aesthetics, a similar critique could be directed to many forms of contemporary “critical” identity politics which are based on the concept of the political. Let us instead do the opposite of what Mouffe, Habermas – whose project was the removal of the “ideological ballast” out of Historical Materialism - and others have done: Let us bring Schmitt’s concept of the political back into Marx’s analysis. Given the ideological enmity of the conservative catholic Carl Schmitt towards Bolshevism, an honest “Schmittian reading of Marx” could sound ridiculous, but I believe it could give some of the answers to the theoretical and ideological shortcomings of Schmitt’s theory; and bring some insight for a reconceptualization of “Political” Science.

## Marxism as a more than Political Science

Curiously, in a radio-broadcast of 1931, Carl Schmitt himself proposed Marxism as the ultimate form of a political science. He considered Marx’s theory particularly important in a context in which “the political” was “situated in a seemingly apolitical, economically determined industrial society.” (Schmitt, 2014 p 389). The political – in the form of the radical opposition between Capital and Labour – is the kernel of ‘Marxist... science’ “(Furner, 2014 p374)

But Marx is more than just political (Furner). The most fundamental difference between Marx and Schmitt lies in the points of departure for the analysis of modernity. Schmitt, influenced by Weber, considered technicity the driving force behind modernity. This focus on “technicity” – the general phenomena of economic-technical thought or Weberian rationalization - which incorporates both the dynamics of market and bureaucracy (McCormick p45)- allowed Schmitt to claim that Marx, and the communists, ultimately shared the same cultural principles, of technical development, as the bourgeois society. Such a culturalist characterization of technicity conceived “the political” as the mythical anti-thesis of “scientific”. In Schmittian terms, a real “Political science” would therefore be impossible, and Political knowledge is condemned to mythical meanings. Not so for Marx.

A return to Marx – with a re-adaption Schmitts conception of the political – would in my perspective be a more fruitful approach. Instead of technicity, Marx projected the relations of production – capital, with its processes of accumulation, commodification and resistance against it - as the driving force behind modernity and the processes of alienation<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Marx took here a much more consequent “Schmittian” position than Schmitt; in the sense that his differentiation between Capital and Labour, the enemy and friend according to his perspective, brought “the political” to root itself of the historical process behind modernity. Not only does this make the analysis of modernity more consistent; it also permits to differentiate between “science” as a method and form of knowledge – and the effective driving force of alienation; that is Capital.

Without question, also for Marx, every truth is “political”; “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. *Man must prove the truth* — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice.” (Marx in thesis on Feuerbach) As in Carl Schmitt’s “political activity”, Marx truth is a political and historical practice<sup>3</sup>. But in Marx, the focus on labour, capital and the relations of production also give a “substance” to the political, more than “myth” can ever provide. Praxis brings material resources and historical agents “within” the process of a dialectical analysis.

Even Schmitt acknowledges this in his analysis of Marx and Hegel, when he says that Socialism is “not simply any possible type of criticism of the ills common to all epochs. It is not compassion for the unfortunate and the poor, struggle against injustice, resistance and rebellion.” Schmitt

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<sup>2</sup> This is the project of Political Marxism and Ellen Wood’s repoliticization of Historical Materialism in Democracy against capitalism

<sup>3</sup> Praxis

admits the merits of this Marxist 'Scientific' dimension, meaning that the Political is planted in "a concrete rational consciousness of one's historical situation as a whole, and, following from this, the claim to shape the entire situation of humanity in accordance with this consciousness." (Schmitt p390) The communist doctrine towards crisis completely changes the relation between the normal and the exception, and so, according to Schmitt: "The concepts of truth and science in Marxist scientific socialism can only be understood from such a dialectical philosophy of history."

This doesn't foreclose the element of "political myth". Myth plays an important role in the scientific Political struggle; particularly in the conception of class opposition and class conscience; in the popular transformation from "klasse an sich" to "klasse fur sich", and in the universalization of its claims as historical agent – from a particular material interest towards a universal truth. This political process and the struggle for truth that later would characterize Gramsci's conception of Hegemony, is already present in Marx.

The subaltern class perspective by definition represents a particular point of view and defines the field of visibility; and thus rejects an "objective-scientific" perspective, the hegemonic bourgeois "normality" that hides its "real interests". (Löwy 1978). The alternative perspective is political, subjective and literary "hypocrite" – as an ascending step of critique/crisis. For Marx, who theorizes from the proletarian position – that is to say starting from the material interests of the category of Labour - economic crisis functions as a moment when this "real" is made bare: The truth of the contradictions of the capitalist form of production – deriving from the fundamental opposition between Capital and Labour – emerges through the crisis.

By "politicizing economics", by choosing sides, through the focus on labour – as a subjective human negative element – at the core of capitalist reproduction in the form of value-formation and commodification (Löwy 1978, 72–73), Marx introduced class-struggle into the very heart of economic critique of capitalist reproduction. By doing so, Marx was able to historicize capitalism; in other words, instead of presenting the capitalist market-mechanisms as positive natural laws to be discovered; his approach revealed it to be a contingent social formation whose present and future depended upon a political conflict. By placing it in relation to other modes of production, he opened a possibility for change. The concept of crisis, also in Marx, plays a crucial element here, particularly in the form of revelation of the true political conflict. In Marx's own words: "In the crises of the world market, the contradictions and antagonisms of bourgeois production are strikingly revealed".

## Crisis, Critique and Political Science now

The concept of crisis is full of contradictions. These originate in the old meaning of the Greek concept of crisis, or *krinein* – which involves both an objective and subjective dimension, a moment of choice. Instead of seeing the contradiction as an ambiguity, a confusing element, and thus a limit to its scientific usefulness, this presentation explored the clarifying potentiality in the contradiction itself.

Crisis marks the temporal coincidence of the political need of universal truths, as well as the knowledge of their own historical particularity, and with it the possibility of political change.

Crisis breaks hegemony in the sense that it reveals that the post- or pre-political consensus is no longer possible, and political conflict appears. In a crisis-context, we see the true antagonistic political emerge – contradictions become at least temporarily irreconcilable.

The potentiality of crisis to reintroduce the political and the historical in scientific knowledge is even more important in our contemporary context of – declining – neoliberal hegemony which portrays our reality as being post-historical and post-political. Crisis requires the question of choosing sides in science.