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# Textual and Critical Approaches to Reading Schmitt: Rejoinder to Odysseos and Petito

David Chandler

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## Introduction

My original article developed a critical understanding of the dynamic driving the revival of interest in Carl Schmitt's work within the discipline of International Relations. It concluded that Schmitt's revival said more about the idealism and defensiveness of critical theorising today than about any deeper appreciation of Schmitt's work itself. I very much welcome the response of Odysseos and Petito which, despite consciously evading my main points, provides some useful insights into the problematic nature of 'critical' readings of Schmitt's work. Here, I only have space to briefly highlight how their response seeks to evade the task of critique: that of historically and politically understanding theory in relation to the context in which it is developed and used. First, they seek to evade any critique of Schmitt's work itself, providing a dehistoricised textual reading which celebrates ambiguity and indeterminacy. Second, they evade the task of critical engagement with IR theorising today, seeking to shift the focus from what constitutes a critical approach to IR to a narrow discussion of textual interpretations.

## The Heterodoxy of Carl Schmitt?

Odysseos and Petito forward a highly problematic approach to interpretation, one which explicitly seeks to take theorists, in this case Schmitt, out of their historical and political context (a context which I went to some lengths to clarify in my original article). The consequences of taking Schmitt out of context are a degraded or superficial treatment of his work on the development of international legal order, a lack of attention to the historical differences between our context and Schmitt's, and a down-playing of the importance of his masterpiece of international political

theory, *The Nomos of the Earth*. In fact, it is a little disappointing to see two editors of a recent collection on the international political thought of Schmitt – which they billed then as the first critical analysis to promote the insights of *Nomos* – now retreating in order to warn of the apparent reductionist dangers which lurk when reading Schmitt's seminal work on this subject.

In order to demonstrate Schmitt's 'topicality' and 'relevance' for the discipline of International Relations, Odysseos and Petito wish to argue that we confront a similar (or even the same?) 'transitional crisis', thus enabling Schmitt's texts to speak directly to us, or engage in 'discussions' with us. This mystifies Schmitt's work and undermines the tasks of critique today. This is clear, at the most fundamental level, in their misunderstanding of the core concept of *jus publicum Europaeum*, which they argue is equated with what 'in IR we call "Westphalia"' (467) and with 'the modern international order' (472). In dehistoricising Schmitt, Odysseos and Petito also dehistoricise his subject matter – international law. Sixty years on from the publication of *Nomos*, the 'Westphalian' modern international order is generally equated with the framework of the UN Charter system, with its norms of sovereign equality and non-intervention. This has little in common with Schmitt's understanding of the *jus publicum Europaeum* and, in fact, as *Nomos* notes, arises on the basis of its destruction.

Without historical context, Odysseos and Petito are in danger of parodying Schmitt's self-understanding, seemingly incapable of any framework of comprehensive critique. This inadequacy comes across clearly in their discussion of 'European jurisprudence' and Schmitt's defence of this line of thought (470). Here, there is an uncritical, or at least unreflective, conceptualisation of 'European juridical civilisation' (470) as humanising and rationalising war; in fact, as the 'masterpiece of Western rationalism' (471). Some sense of Schmitt's historical grounding would have been useful here, as he traced international law's development as a product of clashes of interest and power relations, recognising that this was, in essence, the legal idealisation of the development of European colonialism. When Odysseos and Petito suggest that Schmitt's work has much to offer contemporary IR theory and our understanding of global politics, it seems clear that they seek to take Schmitt out of context and to mystify and essentialise 'European jurisprudence' as implicitly having a progressive (pluralist?) role to play in today's (US dominated?) world.

Because textual readings engage with the author at a superficial level, as if they were in a conversation with us today – or could be put in dehistoricised 'dialogue' with Foucault, Derrida or whoever (466 note 11) – all manner of contingent aspects of their work can be taken out of context and agreed or disagreed with. A critical reading is more concerned with the consistency or otherwise of the methodology and basic ontological framework of an author. It is only through critique that we can appreciate

political theorists who lived and worked in times and contexts very different from ourselves. We would miss a lot, as academics – whether we are engaging with an author theoretically or using texts as teaching materials – if we neglected to explain why the author understood the world in the way that he/she did, and instead pretended that the texts were timeless and free-floating.

Odysseos and Petito dehistoricise Schmitt, wrenching him out of his context. Rather than understand what gave Schmitt his power and coherence they seek to deny that there is anything beyond the texts themselves. For this reason they argue literally that: 'It is this heterodox, sometimes ambiguous, and not easily classifiable nature of Schmitt's work that renders it of such interest and particular relevance to IR in the present condition of crisis in international order and epoch-making changes in the normative structures of international society' (466). Apparently, Schmitt can only help us understand the present if we read him as heterodox and ambiguous. This would make for very poor pedagogy and tells us more about his interlocutors than Schmitt himself. Reading Schmitt, or any other thinker, is a much more useful exercise when we clarify what the differences are in the contexts and questions being considered; this sharpens our own understanding of the historical specificity of the questions we are engaged in and also allows us to appreciate the insights of previous theorists. It is our search for clarity which enables us to productively 'read' past theorists today, not their 'topicality', their alleged 'relevance', or their allegedly 'ambiguous' and 'heterodox' nature.

### **Narrow Reductionism and 'Forehaving'**

It seems that Odysseos and Petito are more concerned with defending their particular approach to textual reading, than with critically understanding Schmitt's analytical insights. They go to such lengths to dispute a basic point – that inter-imperialist rivalries were of central concern to Schmitt's international theorising – that they expose themselves by 'protesting too much'. The 'critical link between the juridical and (geo)political dimensions' is essentially one of managing competing claims between expropriating foreign powers. However, Odysseos and Petito assert that: 'If there is a historical context which can help us understand Schmitt's international thought' (are they asserting here that historical context is not necessary for understanding a political theorist? Or, equally problematically, that Schmitt's work is exceptional in being trans-historical?), then: 'it is not the inter-imperialist rivalry, but the wider context of the short 20th century, experienced by Schmitt as a "European civil war", that sanctioned the end of the centrality of Europe in world politics and history' (470). To argue that 'European civil war' was a major concern but not 'inter-imperialist

rivalries' seems to be an inability to see the wood for the trees on this point.

For self-appointed gatekeepers of the 'heterodoxy' of Schmittian theorising in IR, Odysseos and Petito appear quite heavy-handed in their attempts to close down interpretations which challenge their approach to textual reading. It seems that any critique which seeks to present Schmitt as the author of a coherent and consistent body of thought is implicitly assailed for bringing to bear extra-textual material, and therefore for a narrow 'reductionism'. This appears to lie at the heart of their use of Heidegger's concept of 'forehaving'. I have apparently brought into my reading of Schmitt a 'standpoint' which pre-exists outside of the text itself. At one level this point is correct: I bring into my reading my own understanding of the historical relationship between (geo)politics and law. However, at a deeper level this point is misplaced: any grounded theoretical critique relies upon going beyond the text itself.

Odysseos and Petito's own response highlights the limits of criticism through textual and marginal textual interpretations. They conflate my political critique of Schmitt with that of narrow textual exegesis, arguing that my criticisms of Schmitt stem from the fact that I am reading Schmitt incorrectly (through Kautsky and Lenin). They may disagree with my political critique of Schmitt, for romanticising and idealising the international legal framework of the 'golden age' of the European colonial order, but this is not a question which can be resolved by textual exegesis. Critique is not a matter of 'reading' a text correctly or incorrectly, but of understanding theorising within its historical and political context. Odysseos and Petito seek to restrict our intellectual engagement with international political theory to the level of narrow textual interpretation; in doing this they not only dehistoricise Schmitt, denuding him of critical content, they also seek to decontextualise my original article, locating it in a debate of a hundred years ago, on the grounds that I footnote Kautsky and Lenin. Where Odysseos and Petito do not wish to engage is with today's specific historical and political context, which might have enabled them to reflect upon Schmitt's revival and perhaps their own contribution to the theoretical poverty of 'critical' IR.

## Conclusion

Odysseos and Petito's evasive and confused defence of Schmitt as heterodox and ambiguous is an unnecessary and misleading one. His work, especially *Nomos*, speaks rather more powerfully for itself without the decontextualising 'topicality' and 'relevance' ascribed to him by Odysseos and Petito. What they defensively describe as 'Leninist' and 'reductionist' appears to be little more than the call for a critical rather than textual interpretation of theoretical texts. In Schmitt's case

this is the claim made in the original article that it is possible to argue for Schmitt's value as a theorist at the same time as being capable of critiquing him at the level of his political conclusions.

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