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Carl Schmitt's 'Hamlet oder Hekuba' and the question of a philosophy of history

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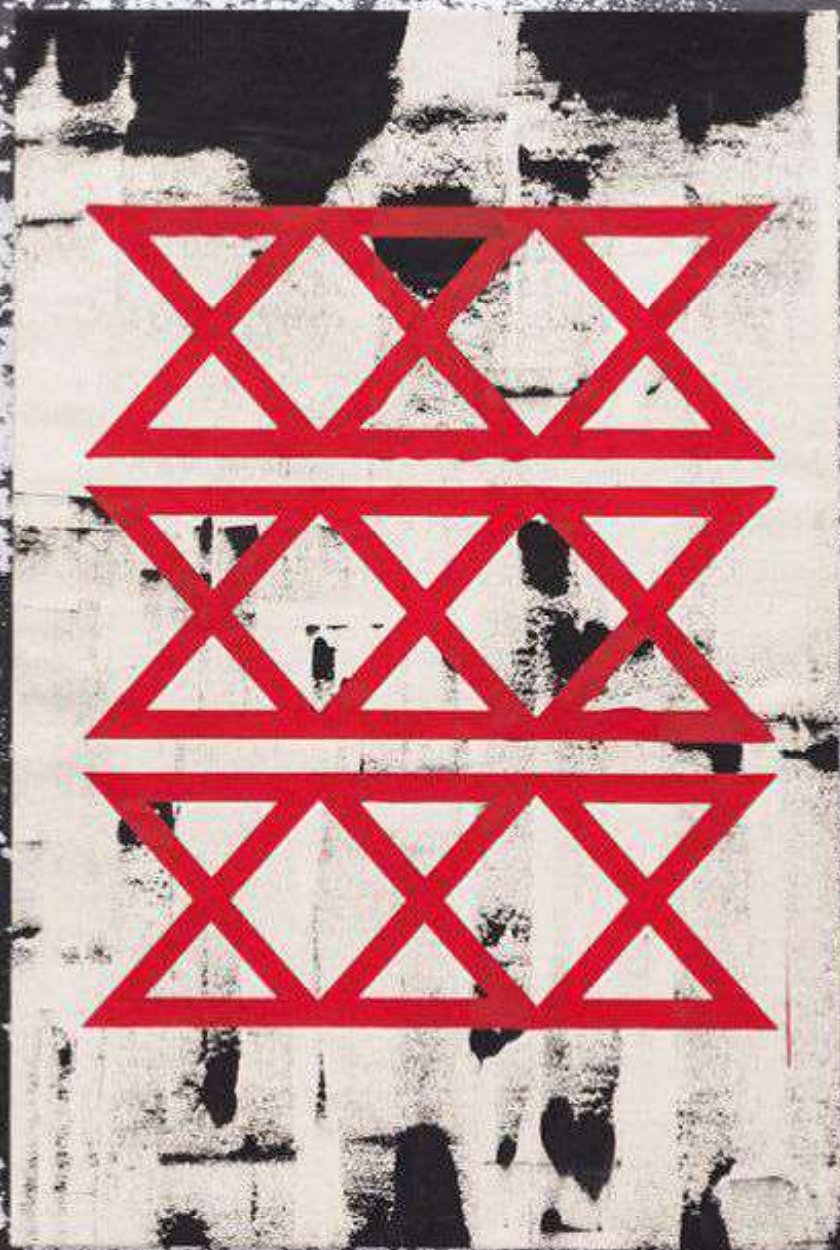
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Carl Schmitt's Hamlet oder Hekuba and the Question of a Philosophy of History

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Preface

In 2009 I was working on a lengthy essay devoted to an all-forgotten but essential theological concept, that is, the Greek notion of *homoousios*¹. As I was delving into extremely complex matters, such as the ones related to the quarrel ignited by Arianism, I found myself puzzled at the moment of studying the revisiting of such debate in a famous twentieth century political discussion. Its main interlocutors, Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt, championed if it was possible—or impossible—the coming of a “political theology” government in modern Europe. Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie* I was not only a thought-provoking, erudite piece on classic theological thinking from an ius-philosophical standpoint, but also an elegant set of arguments sustained by a tragic view of existence. And while already from the early 2000s the theme “political theology” was once again brought up to life by neo-Foucaultian, post-Benjaminian, leftist Heideggerian thinkers and their numerous acolytes—English and Latin-American philosophers and political scientists—Schmitt’s thesis somehow stood out the trend itself. Later on, I bumped onto his *Hamlet oder Hekuba*. This time, his theses on history and tragedy, presented through a particular comprehension of art—the Shakespearean theater—, somehow shed new light onto his 1921 monograph on “political theology”.

Even then, I asked myself an obvious question: “why Carl Schmitt?” Why even bothering with a prominent brain trust of Nazi Germany? Why not just dismiss this cryptic, baroque thinker, whose political choices stained any intellectual bona fide of his work? Would it not have been a better choice to pay attention to the major contributions of Hans Urs von Balthasar² or Jean Daniélou³? It seemed, as it is now, that one needed to glove on at the moment of dealing with any segment of the oeuvre of Carl Schmitt. However, how much control can we grant to morality at the moment of facing important philosophical discussions? Would not this mean that we should immediately ban the poetry of Stefan George or the reconstruction of Kant’s third critique by Alfred Baeumler? Moreover, why

1. Rowan Williams, *Arius. Heresy and Tradition*, Revised Edition (SCM Press: Cambridge, U.K., 2001), 68-72; Pier Franco Beatrice, “*Homoousios*” from *Hellenism to Christianity*, in *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2002, 252.

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory. III. Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, translated by Graham Harrison (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1992).

3. Jean Daniélou, *La Trinité et le mystère de l'existence* (Desclée de Brouwer: Paris, 1968).

the contemporary scholar would omit the mental and conceptual connections of key historical moments? It is certainly true that an Alfred Rosenberg advocate or a jurist who theoretically justified the Röhm purge cannot perform in the slightest sense as intellectual guides for any kind of politics or civil action. Nonetheless, and in the case of Schmitt, the breadth and length of his work can positively elicit a good number of reflections akin to the current political and philosophical debates. Compulsory ethical policies demanded inside and outside academic discussions are often moral prescriptions performed in hindsight. And as long these uncomfortable themes are discussed within the “author and work” framework, they will be still circumscribed in the narrow margins of morality.

As for Carl Schmitt goes, his work does not have to be sanitized or merely condemned to a permanent exile from the modern intellectual grandstand. Like any other thinker, his contributions need to be questioned, that is, they have to be pondered according to what they mean—namely, to what extent and according to which criteria they connect to its immediate background—, how they theoretically perform, and what do they have to offer to present times. Conversely, this type of reconstruction has to tackle the inner meaning of its semantics, style, and both its visible and non-visible political stands. Put differently, any scientific reconstruction of morally tarnished thinkers must confront them through its conceptual dimension. To support—or even withheld—their actions evidently lead to an epistemic faux pas⁴. Nonetheless, to blindly loathe both their thought and work, should be a good reminder of how a moral a priori demands abiding and obedience from the social community that contemporary academy aims and longs for.

In 2015, I was granted with the Instituto de Filosofía (Diego Portales University) / Institute for Philosophy (Universiteit Leiden) joint program scholarship. The first drafts of my investigation proposed a point-by-point analysis of Schmitt’s concepts of “play” [*Spiel*] and “seriousness” [*Ernst*]. While my former thesis supervisor, Hugo Herrera Arellano, encouraged me to embark on such a theme, I soon noted the theoretical narrowness of an investigation of this kind. It was not until 2018 that Reinhard Mehring, who kindly invited me to his home at Düsseldorf—right by the Rhine—, that I dared to expand my investigation to a broader—and more challenging—problem, that is, the importance of *Hamlet oder*

4. Manfred Frank, *Gott im Exil. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie. II. Teil* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1988), 107ff.

Hekuba within Schmitt's intellectual order, but also its place and meaning amidst Germany's postwar pummeled self-consciousness. Herr Mehring gently brought to my attention the unattended question of Schmitt's own vision of art, tragedy, history, and politics, from an aesthetical viewpoint. Likewise, Prof. Mehring pointed out the crucial role that *Political Romanticism* played for Schmitt's 1956 essay on *Hamlet*, but also the esoteric dialogue that Schmitt developed with Max Kommerell's 1934 essay on Schiller. To his uninterested suggestions, hospitality, and to his friendly advice, I am deeply indebted. The fifth and last chapter of this thesis—which profits from Prof. Mehring's guidance—is dedicated to him.

The theme of *Hamlet* in Germany has been thoroughly studied by Andreas Höfele. In his 2016 book on the subject, Höfele dedicated two chapters to Schmitt's interpretation and usage of Shakespeare—first, in his identification with *Otello*, and then with Schmitt's great reflections on *Hamlet*. Whether reading Höfele's book or other like-minded investigations, one could think that maybe some other choices would have been more interesting take into account, like Schlegel, Tieck, Stefan George, Friedrich Gundolf⁵—or even the French and contemporary English interpretations⁶. However, the impact of *Hamlet* in Schmitt's late thought is manifolded. He was not simply dabbling in literature—like he did from the very beginning of his academic career⁷—when he wrote *Hamlet oder Hekuba*. On the contrary, the *Mona Lisa* of theatre awe-struck Schmitt as a powerful, historical model for contemporary events. The copious amounts of entries and annotations in his personal diaries and correspondence, radiobroadcasts, and talks, are massively entangled in a non-systematic yet cohesive comprehension of a philosophy of history. *Hamlet* became both an existential and cultural model to Schmitt. I think this reason alone is sufficient to justify a lengthy reconstruction of this theme in his late thought. In this perspective, I have certainly picked up the gauntlet apropos this suggestion of Schmitt himself: “A desirable subject of dissertation for young, diligent male and female German students of the Federal Republic of West Germany of the year 1950: Carlo Schmid et les beaux arts”⁸.

5. Béatrice Dumiche, *Shakespeare und kein ende?*, in Béatrice Dumiche, *Shakespeare und kein Ende? Beiträge zur Shakespeare – Rezeption in Deutschland und in Frankreich vom 18. Bis 20 Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Romantischer Verlag, 2012).

6. Jennifer E. Nicholson, *Hamlet's French Philosophy*, in Aidan Norrie and Mark Houllahan (eds.), *New Directions in Early Modern English Drama. Edges, Spaces, Intersections* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter – Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 178ff.

7. Andreas Höfele 2022, 9-17.

8. Schmitt 2015e, 235.

In the following, I propose a painstakingly account of Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet oder Hekuba*. In the first part, I offer an alternative method of reading and interpreting this rare monograph on Shakespeare's essential drama. By surveying its conceptual architecture—mapping out its main theoretical elements and all of its bibliographical ecology—I explore each one of its sections, in order to offer to the reader an exhaustive and detailed analysis of *Hamlet oder Hekuba* as a singular theoretical piece. The second part of my investigation displays a chronological review of Schmitt's work in the 1950s. I champion that Schmitt—just after his detentions by U.S. Forces between late 1945 and early 1947—developed across the 1950s an esoteric, unsystematic, and nonetheless original vision of a philosophy of history. Such a level of comprehension was possible due to a very particular mindset of Schmitt, namely, that greater political events could escalate through a series of historical singularities, all of them politically chained. This kind of philosophy of history—which eschewed itself from the leftist Hegelian, Marxist, and Spenglerian historical models—could be named as inceptional, for its inner dynamics surges from a unique, unseen, massive event, that continuously implodes through—at first sight—unrelated political, cultural, and historical episodes. What Schmitt sought and reflect on from the late 1940s and through all the 1950s, was the morphology of the century that began with the social revolution of 1848, and the dreadful European aftermath of both WWI and WWII. The figures of Hamlet and Demetrius became to him not masks but mirrors of doom.

His public withdrawal from German academy, teaching activities, along the moral punishment of the new democratic European consciousness—a natural consequence of the banishment that he was imposed to after being kept held by American Forces—, led Schmitt towards a non-academic, highly spiritual path of self-awareness. But this existential escape was not encompassed with tepid cultural diagnoses performed with historical justice. Moreover, most—if not all—of his personal considerations are soaked with hatred, loathe, and contempt. But this mood does not comprise the whole intellectual atmosphere where *Hamlet oder Hekuba* came to life. There were also deep personal reasons to endeavor on Shakespeare.

In 1952, his daughter translated to the German Lilian Winstanley's already forgotten investigation on Shakespeare's drama. Carl Schmitt prologued the book, avidly praising Winstanley's thesis. And then something just clicked in Schmitt, for the theme of *Hamlet*

grew on as he started to frequently reflect about contemporary events, modern history, and art—not to mention his private annotations about his fate during and after World War II. Amidst the haplessness and rejection from both German academy and public debate, *Hamlet* irrupted as a chance of spiritual cooperation between father and daughter⁹. Schmitt’s much sanctioned “separation of inner from outer and public from private governed” ironically became to him the only available space to dwell in subterranean, complex matters. The “relegation of the state to an outward cult”¹⁰ was suddenly the obliteration of the self to an inward cult. Thus his *Glossarium* and his late thought of the 1950s.

It is not my intention to offer an aesthetic redemption of the work of Carl Schmitt. Even this mostly unexplored dimension of his thought is sinuously connected with his political choices. In this perspective—and once the reader has been able to disentangle the main theoretical elements and crucial concepts of the monograph on Shakespeare—, *Hamlet oder Hekuba* reveals itself as an obscure political caveat. Its central message reads thus: “WARNING. FLAMMABLE CHEMICALS ARE LOCATED WITHIN THE STATE ENCLOSURE. Political exposure may result in severe injury. Refer to *Hamlet* before servicing”. Schmitt did not provide any kind of therapeutic prescriptions on the theoretical plane. On the contrary, he displayed an upside-down picture of postwar Germany and Europe through the lens of *Hamlet*. The themes of power, law, sovereignty, dictatorship, order, and exception, were now presented in a compact study on the hermeneutic potential of mythic art regarding the historico-political present.

A late but crucial advice came from my new thesis co-supervisor from Leiden, Prof. Susanna Lindberg. Not only she thoroughly read my whole thesis in manuscript—she probably broke the clock—, but also provided me with generous commentaries and insightful observations. Details about stylistics and on the sometimes sloppiness of some of the arguments here presented, I owed her to Prof. Lindberg as well. Likewise, Prof. Ovidiu Stanciu, my new thesis supervisor, gave me important insights regarding the structure and methodology of my investigation. Some crucial, final remarks became possible thanks to Prof. Stanciu.

9. Mehring 2012, 12-3.

10. Schmitt 2008a, 59.

I received support from the Instituto de Filosofía – Universidad Diego Portales, specially of Aïcha Messina, Ovidiu Stanciu, and Hernán Pringe. Although most of my investigation was developed in solitude, the solid friendship and sharp reading at early stages of Víctor Ibarra B. was more than important. I am grateful for the comments and observations of Constanza Terra and Rudy Pradenas. The constant caring and support through my PhD years of Gonzalo Marambio and Alexander Hopkinson cannot be enough appreciated. The love of my grandparents, Raúl Enrique Soto Pardo (†) and Rosa Aretio Núñez (and the rest of my family) is one of the reasons that guided my academic efforts. Sandra Soto Aretio (†), my mother, was present in every stage of this investigation.

The brief dialogue I had with Prof. Mehring in late 2018 was essential at the moment of planning an exhaustive reconstruction of *Hamlet or Hecuba*—just like the damn good coffee and *Mozartkugeln* with which our conversation on Schiller’s *Wallenstein* and Schmitt’s mastery at the subtle art of *Widmungs* was enhanced with.

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Sandro. *May the Giant be with you.*