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The Partisan, or the Man of Exception

Schmitt believed that Hobbes had offered an insightful analysis of the political during the Westphalian period, but that in the context of the twentieth century his diagnosis was no longer valid. Hobbes's identification of political and state had become problematic; the primary task of the political is to provide protection in return for obedience, but the twentieth-century state was becoming increasingly incapable of performing such a role.

The Westphalian absolute state appealed to Schmitt: thanks to the separation of morality and politics, for a time it embodied the friend/enemy principle; there were no obvious domestic challenges to its authority; all enmity was outside its borders, all politics was inter-state politics and all hostility was limited and regulated by *jus publicum europaeum*.

Fuelled by multiple historical forces, including economic progress, technological advancements in communications and weaponry, and the return of just war thinking, the absolute state of the eighteenth century had, according to Schmitt, turned into the liberal constitutional state. This in Schmitt’s eyes brought about all manner of unwelcome consequences, the most obvious of which was the birth of the state’s greatest challenger: the partisan.

In this chapter I am going to introduce the concept of the partisan and to suggest that it affords us special insights into Schmitt’s theory. My overall aim is to ask questions such as: who is the Partisan? Can the Partisan be considered a political form? Can the partisan rescue the political in Schmitt’s sense of the word?
The chapter, broadly speaking, proceeds in three steps, each of which in turn admits further subdivision. The first two steps are more exegetical in scope, the third more interpretative.

I start by highlighting some aspects of Schmitt’s argument: (i) his appeal to historical evidence to support the view that the partisan is a modern phenomenon; (ii) his account of how the symbol of the partisan gradually filtered into the European consciousness through official documents, literary writings and the works and deeds of great practitioners such as Clausewitz, Lenin and Mao; and (iii) his assessment of the way in which European jurisprudence reacted to the emergence of this new actor on the international scene.

Next, I aim to show how, on the basis of analysing both historical texts and the rich body of societal self-interpretation, Schmitt arrives by critical clarification at a conceptualization of partisanship; we will see that Schmitt (iv) constructs a four-point characterization of the partisan, (v) offers a typology of the partisan and distinguishes between the ‘telluric’ and ‘global’ varieties, and (vi) discusses the new dimensions of domestic and international politics bought about by the phenomenon of partisanship.

Then, in section (vii), I argue that, for Schmitt, the partisan is a broad political concept, an umbrella term which covers a variety of non-state actors who resort to violence or terror to pursue their political aims; they range from revolutionary parties to terrorist cells, from insurgents or resistance groups to liberation movements. Indeed, Schmitt’s theory of the partisan is much more than a theory of guerrilla warfare, as many specialized works on terrorism have suggested. I will also argue, in section (viii), that Schmitt’s account implies an under-stated yet all-important criterion for differentiating the telluric and the global partisan: while the former aims to replace an existing state with a different one, the latter undermines the state as a political form. As a result, the two types of partisan offer very different challenges for the state. Finally, in section (ix) I will address the question: is the Schmittian partisan – the man of exception who has challenged all norms of the twentieth century – the new form of the political? And can this actor save the political in Schmitt’s sense of the word?

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According to Schmitt, from the Peace of 1649 at Westphalia to the First World War, the state was the embodiment of the political. It