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LANGUAGE AND RHETORIC IN THE POLITICAL THEORY OF CARL SCHMITT

Thesis summary

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I. The topic and aims of this dissertation

This dissertation discusses the role of language and rhetoric in Carl Schmitt’s political theory. I will attempt to analyze how Schmitt’s position and concepts are informed by their linguistic formulations and how they are determined by language. The connection between the political and the rhetorical, according to Schmitt, is the focus of this study. My question, to paraphrase the famous opening sentence of *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 2002), is whether the concept of the political (das Politische) presupposes any specific understanding of the role of language.

The discussion on Schmitt’s oeuvre is far from easy to survey. Although his works have been examined, read, and re-read in several disciplines and approaches, the role of language has barely been touched upon. In contrast, in my thesis I argue that one can understand Schmitt in more depth once his works and key concepts are subjected to an interpretation that takes their linguistic and rhetorical determination into account.

Whereas with Schmitt it seems almost evident to define words in opposition to action, or, more specifically, in opposition to decision, this simple opposition used so often in politics and occasionally by Schmitt as well, is not what this analysis is about. It is much more about how the Schmittian understanding of decision implies explicit or implicit linguistic presuppositions. However, the concept of decision is only one example from Schmitt’s terminology. My claim is that the role of language is crucial in his entire life’s work, even if Schmitt was far from consistent in explaining and explicating this role.

If Schmitt’s theory can be approached as revealing the complex relations between politics and language, a twofold dilemma emerges. On the one hand, it tells us about how politics have always been determined by language, and how it is dependent on language. On the other hand, following a Schmittian approach, one must take into consideration that language is also determined by politics, the principle of differentiation implied in the concept of the political is working in the very process of signification. Any difference in meaning implies – potentially at least – political differentiation as well.

Thus, the twofold relation between politics and language means separation, differentiation, which, ultimately, turns into an intertwined connection. For, it is possible to separate language from politics, but it is an action that is linguistic and political itself. Politics never dissolves completely in language, and at the same time, language never becomes a neutral medium of politics. This thesis shall discuss this twofold differentiation of politics and language: political and, at the same time, linguistic.

By analyzing well-known pieces of the Schmittian oeuvre and highlighting texts as of yet understudied, I will attempt to show that the role of language was far from marginal in them, rather, it was the focal point of Schmitt’s thinking. Moreover, in his early writings, the relations of language, rhetoric (in the thesis specified as rhetoricity), and politics were stated explicitly, and remained important later on as well. While the presence of these in relation to each other is easy to survey, their significance is an open question.
In the thesis, I argue that the role of language is not merely supplemental but it is closely related to Schmitt’s key concepts such as political theology, decision, state of exception, or the friend/enemy differentiation, which cannot be understood without taking into account their rhetorical implications.

Carl Schmitt’s rhetorically informed political theory is situated within a junction of separations. The general disintegration, rupture, and the dissolving of unity are not only important for Schmitt from a thematic aspect, but also as conditions of his analyses and approaches to understanding those thematic problems.

The most important among them is the rupture of modernity, the general context of separation, which, beyond its historical significance, has always implied a structural level of differentiation for Schmitt as well.

The opposition of politics and language, which, according to my supposition, corresponds to the highest level of rupture in the Schmittian theory, does not mean a fixed separation but a continuous process of connections: the political expressed by the rhetorical and the rhetorical founded on the political. That is, political meanings are always rhetorical because of the separation in signification but, at the same time, this very separation is political from the outset. The peculiarity of Schmitt’s political theory reveals itself in this structure of separations and relatedness, either as they are addressed explicitly by Schmitt, or unintentionally, as they are at work, hidden in his texts.

Following Schmitt’s insights, just as the political is unavoidable the generation of meanings cannot be suspended permanently. Considering the rhetorical aspects, Schmitt’s concept of the political is precisely about generating meanings, understood as points of identification, and the restoration of the dissolved unity. But more importantly, the outcome of this relation cannot be founded in, or traced back to anything other than the political act of signification. The separation of language and politics or, more precisely, their unfounded relatedness, implies an unavoidable and irreversible transition. Seen most clearly from the friend/enemy differentiation, a theoretical and figurative conceptualization becomes substantialized by a political and, at the same time, rhetorical inversion and becomes a literal act.

Thus, a Schmittian political theory concerning the nature of politics is faced with a subject it cannot approach as something external to it. The rhetoric of the approach and the political implied in the meaning-giving act results in the totalization of the political aspect. It is wrong to think that Schmitt’s understanding of politics means the totalization of the formalization of differentiations; it is not a mere differentiation, for what becomes totalized is not this or that actual meaning, but the very setting of meanings, which, however, cannot be founded from outside of itself.
The consequences of this pattern are crucial for any political science that attempts to take Schmitt’s political theory seriously, as it becomes impossible to describe any political phenomenon or politics itself without the prevailing of the political. Description becomes a political act simply because it raises the possibilities of differences and alternatives.

The language of politics and the politics of language, or the fact that the separation of the rhetorical and the political cannot be founded, means, at least potentially, intervention, that is, a political setting of meanings. In case of the political, however, this possibility, or, more precisely, eventuality is always actualization; even if it is conditional it is already present and determining. The totalization of the political is the result of this eventuality.

Overall, Schmitt’s political thinking is a middle road in linguistic skepticism, which is partly characterized by constructivism, and, paradoxically, partly by political essentialism. At the same time, signification is subjected to unfounded political arbitrariness. The thesis addresses this set of seeming contradictions.

It might seem that Schmitt attempted the impossible when he tried to circumscribe concepts that reveal precisely the futility of any such effort. For example, both the concept of decision originating from the normative void and the pure concept of the political are conceptual endeavors that strive at formalization, as if it would be possible to avoid the non-formal attributes of this very act. Since the concept of the political that is built on differentiation means limitation, it is hardly possible to limit its meaning from an outer position, avoiding the limitations implied in the political within conceptualization too.
II. The approach and methods of the thesis

The problems outlined above point towards political theory, as, on the one hand, they refer to the nature of politics, while, on the other hand, they raise questions about the knowledge of politics. The role of language, however, is defining from both aspects.

In this thesis, the approach to political theory can be understood as a reply to the seemingly simple question: “What is politics?” Obviously, this question implies an inquiry into the nature of politics but the possibility of any answer, following Schmitt, is far from straightforward. Any attempt to establish knowledge about politics presupposes a certain theory of politics, or, more precisely, an understanding of the political, therefore, as a result, the epistemology of politics is, at the same time, the politics of epistemology as well. In other words, one can formulate questions about the nature of politics, but it has to be taken into account that the question cannot exempt itself from the functioning of its subject.

It follows then, that it is very easy to misunderstand Schmitt’s political thinking, and end up at aporetic, resigned, or merely totalitarian conclusions. It might be difficult to acknowledge that final and founded knowledge of the world out there is impossible, and even if something is gained from such a limited capacity, it is constrained by the logic and patterns of the political, that is, precisely what we wanted to limit and constrain. To put it simply, what Schmitt taught us is the untenability of this effort. However, considering the consequences of this while facing the problem of language, Schmitt touched upon the ways of aporia, resignation, and totalitarianism, of which the aporetic might be his constant attribute, provided one is not satisfied with the seemingly all-embracing judgment of inconsistency or opportunism.

The thesis, focusing on the problem of language, suggests explanations to this problem. It is not about solving the relationship between politics and language in general, but only about the interpretation of this twofold problem in regards to Schmitt. It is about pointing out how Schmitt can be approached through this crucial relationship.

In a narrower sense, it calls for a textual analysis, in which the points of departure were taken directly from Schmitt’s works and not from any comprehensive approach to his political theory. That means that the thesis is concerned with the internal structure of texts by Schmitt and with those linguistic and political acts that occur within the texts. From a methodological point of view, the fitting approach is philological, which, in turn, needs to be specified.

Close to its usual understanding, philology means a historical study of texts; a reconstruction of fragments and original meanings to reveal what a text could have meant at the time of its production and reception. However, the thesis does not follow this concept of philology, because two of its presuppositions would rather hinder the analysis. One of them is the idea of an ultimate meaning that can be recovered exhaustively in a concluding process. It will become clear that supposing established and closed meanings cannot explain the Schmittian differentiation of politics and language. The other presupposition of a usual understanding of philology that needs to be tackled is the intention of the author behind the original meaning. One problem with this is that between intention and interpretation there is language. Again it would raise the question once more instead of answering it. Besides, the presupposition of an
intention would lead us out of the text to establish an external authoritative perspective, a sovereign interpretation (Kiss 2000: 78) – another Schmittian concept to be explained after the role of language has been taken into account and not before.

With the role and scope of philological interpretation reconsidered in the 20th century, and due to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s account of philology (Gadamer 2003), the presuppositions mentioned above were subjected to reappraisal. Recent approaches to philology conceive of texts as having a non-exhaustible meaning, while explication, instead of interpretation, is understood as commentary implying a return and, at the same time, a transformation of the original concept of philology. Among others, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht can be mentioned here, who emancipated commentary from the authority of interpretation and elevated it from being a mere tool to an autonomous method. Whereas, topologically conceived, interpretation means a vertical approach that arrives from above to find meanings beneath the surface of the text, commentary, in contrast, runs parallel with texts, establishing knowledge by associating them, thereby questioning the possibility of objectivity implied by the external perspective (Gumbrecht 2003: 43). Gumbrecht’s approach to philology is rooted in deconstructionist practice (Gumbrecht 2003: 49-50), finding similarities in their text-oriented methods as opposed to authorship and invention.

Philological analysis, as it is understood in this thesis, is about reading texts and observing the logic and means of their structure, even if they are unintended and independent from any authorial intention. More precisely, philological analysis here, attempts to identify the rhetorical devices that bring about the structure of Schmitt’s works. The concept of rhetoric is borrowed from Paul de Man, a literary theorist who is not known in political science, but whose understanding of language is analogous to the Schmittian understanding of politics. To a large extent, the thesis is based on an in-depth comparison between Carl Schmitt and Paul de Man, or, to put it simply, it is a reading of Schmitt from a de Manian perspective (de Man 1996; 2006).

Comparison reveals not the theoretical and thematic distance between Schmitt and de Man, rather, the opposite, the somewhat surprising proximity of their political-legal and literary scholarship. As it is shown in the thesis, Schmitt is much closer to de Man’s rhetorically informed deconstructive literary theory, as such a connection between a political theorist and a literary theorist would be acknowledged in political science.

Beyond an abstract-contextual proximity, there are further reasons that might explain a rhetorical-literary understanding of Schmitt’s works.

First, there should be nothing uncommon in explaining politics from literature or vice versa, and lately, the reception of Schmitt underpins this supposition. Second, my thesis focuses precisely on this question. The relationship between language, rhetoric, and sometimes even literature is what needs to be discussed.

Lastly, if those whose works will be discussed also complained about the separation of the two domains, because of the resulting limitation of knowledge, it seems legitimate to take it as a warning of a study to be accomplished. As Schmitt, in his book on Hamlet, wrote about the
drawbacks of the separation, so did de Man argue in his readings of Rousseau for a reconciliation of literary and political perspectives. Both of them referred to methodological deficiencies beyond local setbacks of interpretation (Schmitt 2008 [1956]: 33; de Man 2006: 159). Schmitt frequently discussed literary topics or used literary references in his writings, just like de Man discussed political problems in his rhetorical analyses.

In this thesis, Schmitt’s political theory and de Man’s understanding of rhetoric will not only be compared but the latter will be used to explain the former. I shall attempt to answer the question of their relationship.
III. The structure and results of the thesis

The thesis consists of three main parts. The first one discusses the concepts of language and rhetoric in general and specifically as they were conceived of by Schmitt. The second attempts a rhetorical reconsideration of Schmitt’s key concepts, while the third shows what role they play in a few analyses by Schmitt.

Chapter I. discusses the theoretical context of the study and narrows down the general problem of language to rhetoric. This chapter outlines the concept of rhetoric that will be related to Schmitt’s political theory. Certainly, rhetoric could be considered from several different aspects, but in this thesis I accept two limitations. First, rhetoric is conceived of as a problem of political theory, that is, rhetoric is not external to politics, rather, politics is already implied in rhetoric, or, more precisely, rhetoric implies the problem of the political. Second, only a limited understanding of rhetoric is discussed due to the constraints of space and content. Three particular – one ancient and two modern – theories of rhetoric are considered in light of the fundamental dilemmas of Schmitt’s political theory. They are Aristotle’s explicitly political understanding (Arisztotelész 1982), Kenneth Burke’s dialectic approach to rhetoric (Burke 1969), and the already mentioned literary rhetoric of Paul de Man. While the first two highlight inconsistencies with Schmitt, in case of de Man, it is possible to establish the means of the proposed comparison. Finally, based on theoretical survey, a specific understanding of rhetoric is proposed which conceives of it not merely as figurative use of language or means of persuasion. Rather, it is what de Man calls rhetoricity, the passage between the two aspects whose functioning is structurally similar to Schmitt’s attempt to abstract the political. At this point, however, the relationships between rhetoric and Schmitt’s political theory are not discussed in detail, for the aim of the study is to reveal them in actual texts.

Following the theoretical-rhetorical context, the second chapter highlights some of Schmitt’s earlier writings in which the problems of language and rhetoric play a primary role. First, it is showed that the problem of language defined his earliest works. Second, I examined whether these might serve as points of departure for the analysis of Schmitt’s later key concepts. Although the texts were all chosen from the 1910s, chronological order is only of secondary importance. Obviously, it is not without significance whether there is a trajectory in Schmitt’s thinking with regards to language, from the early writings to his relatively late book on Hamlet. The four texts that Schmitt wrote during and shortly after World War I – his habilitation thesis Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen (Schmitt 1914), his interpretation of Theodor Däubler’s poem Nordlicht (Schmitt 1916), the satire, Buribunken (Schmitt 1918), and the Politische Romantik (Schmitt 1998 [1919]) – despite all concerned with the role of language, are strikingly diverse. The totalization and the devaluation of language, as well as its designation as the enemy of the political, are all present in these writings. These different approaches to language will be reflected on in the later chapters to explain their role in the formulation of such Schmittian key concepts as political theology, sovereignty, or decision.
Schmitt’s later writings from the 1920s and 1930s or those after 1945 can be regarded as answers to these early dilemmas even if his analyses do not result in the resolving of the contradictions between the shifting positions. However diverse his explanations are of the role of language, the general context within which Schmitt attempts to formulate an answer is the same: it is the critique of modernity that frames his understanding between language and politics.

In the second part, the thesis focuses on three of Schmitt’s most contested concepts closely following their evolution and function in the original texts. In the three respective chapters which deliver the core analyses of the thesis, the problem of the relationship between the rhetorical and the political becomes specifically distinct.

The third chapter, dealing with the concept of political theology, places the neglected problem of analogy in the foreground. To explain Schmitt’s approach to sovereignty, I study to what extent the analogical relationship between politics and theology are rooted in the rhetorical concept of analogy. Schmitt’s use of the analogy is inaccurate and politically loaded; a rhetorical device originally aimed to establish knowledge precisely when success in connecting politics and theology brings about a political act. Although this paradoxical pattern of cognition and position reveals a transition between the rhetorical and the political, it is partly a problem within rhetoric. Moreover, traced back to its theological roots, the concept of analogy shows that the rupture mentioned above plays a theoretical role in Schmitt. Theology itself plays an analogous role in Schmitt’s explanation of the metaphysical background, which, according to him, determines thinking about the nature of politics in every epoch. The analogy persists in the similarly indescribable and still unavoidable character of the theological and the metaphysical background. The function of the Schmittian analogy concerns the impossible yet necessary pursuit of grasping this background. It is indescribable and impossible because it cannot be founded outside of itself but it is unavoidable and necessary because without it no political and meaning-giving act would be possible. In this regard it is much more an allegory of the relation between language and politics.

Chapter four discusses the political relationship between the position of the sovereign, the decision, and the order depending on that decision. Analogically conceived, it is about the role of the rupture that appears at the verge of impossibility and unavoidability of meaning-giving that is structurally similar to the relationship between the decision of the sovereign and the resulting order. In the chapter, the concept of crisis is directly connected to problems of signification and interpretation in order to reveal how the decision of the sovereign is at the same time internal and external to the order created by it and whichever meaning is given is that sovereign act. Ultimately, from this it follows that the state of exception can precede neither the political nor the implied conflict of meanings that are defining precisely because they are founded on the rupture, as they become unavoidable through heterogeneity instead of homogeneity. Although, according to Schmitt, the state of exception is the result of a normative void, politically it cannot remain neutral since the separation of the sovereign and its reinscription into the correlative order takes place through the political. To a certain extent, the political functions as a medium that supposes and posits the bridging of heterogeneity still, it cannot bring about the ultimate homogeneity of sovereignty and order.
The next chapter focuses on the key problem of the thesis, namely the Schmittian concept of the political and its linguistic presuppositions. According to my analysis, when Schmitt attempts to find the pure concept of the political he is faced with an irresolvable paradox that reappears in his writings. On the one hand, Schmitt is dealing with the conceptual, cognitive aspect of the friend/enemy distinction that, rhetorically, can be understood as the tropological and figurative use of language. However, on the other hand, he excludes any rhetorical, non-literal understanding of the differentiation, because he suggests the concepts of friend and enemy to be conceived of in their substantial meaning. His book, *The Concept of the Political* gives the most specific description of Schmitt’s thinking while the text opens up for rhetorical and political events that even the author cannot control. Because of the rhetorical contradiction mentioned above, Schmitt’s attempt to delimit and to suspend the political proves to be impossible. It might seem like a failure of Schmitt’s theoretical efforts, however, it turns out that the impossibility of delimiting and grasping the pure concept of the political actually exemplifies its totalization precisely as Schmitt suggested. As the rhetorical moments of Schmitt’s text succeed, the author proves that the pure concept of the political is unattainable. The crucial question is whether the friend/enemy distinction is literal or metaphorical because it is what allows or excludes the formalization of the political as pure differentiation. The intertwining of the political and the rhetorical becomes critical at this moment; however, despite Schmitt’s literal understanding, the totalization of the political can be shown only at this junction in its function. The only way to grasp the expansive nature of politics is to reveal it in the structure of the very text that attempts and fails to describe it.

The two chapters of the last part demonstrate two applications of the Schmittian rhetoric, or the rhetoric of the political in general. Two of Schmitt’s important problems are discussed here; both of which were theoretically and contextually defining for him. The contemporary problem of parliamentary government and the relationship between literature and politics exemplify how the earlier discussed theoretical questions become meaningful through particular issues. The problem of rupture returns in these analyses, but not only in its methodological meaning (in regards regard both to Schmitt’s method and the thesis’ approach) but as a historical problem that explains the role of modernity in Schmitt’s political theory.

At first sight, the discussion of Schmitt’s 1955 book on Hamlet is a reinterpretation of a local historical issue, but on closer examination, the text in question might be regarded as the summary of all his works. In his short book on Shakespeare’s play, Schmitt explicitly returns to the junctions of literature and politics and, revealingly, to the mediationality of the political. In his reading of the most famous fiction of early-modern Britain, Schmitt deals with the historical rupture in the concept of sovereignty and statehood. However, what he actually describes, is how fiction limits cognition and political action not only in terms of literature but as a general framework of knowledge. The theoretical problems discussed in the earlier chapters of the thesis are now traced back to the context of modernity in order to highlight the questionable separation of the description of politics and political action.

This latter problem is addressed in the last chapter which, aside attempting an original interpretation of Schmitt’s analysis of parliamentary government, serves as methodological
self-reflection as well. Reconsidering the relevance of the philological approach, the rhetorical reading of Schmitt’s works actually suggests a deconstructive reading. As it was mentioned, recent understandings of philology are open to the concept of deconstruction, but it is not the theoretical or interpretative perspective that substantiates such a seemingly anachronistic proposal. Indeed, a deconstructive approach seems to be implied in Schmitt’s texts and approaches to different legal and political subjects. Against this background, the chapter addresses Schmitt’s critique of parliamentary government which is rooted both in his political preferences and his linguistically informed analysis. My reading focuses much more on the methods of Schmitt’s analysis of parliamentary government, than their often discussed contents. Thereby, it raises the question of a Schmittian political science founded on the intertwining of the political and the rhetorical. Schmitt’s political science necessarily becomes political theory; inseparable from the question of the nature of politics. This latter question is, however, as I tried to show in this thesis, closely related to Schmitt’s rhetoric: his linguistic approach and his comprehension of rhetoric. Thus, Schmitt’s political science becomes the primary example of the impossibility of pure political knowledge, that is, the unavoidability of the political, especially when the subject of cognition is politics itself. In other words, delimiting, suspending, or excluding politics are not viable ways towards knowledge of politics because they all imply the political. Referring to the main question of the thesis, the conclusion is that the separation of politics and language is irresolvable; neither politics, nor language, nor any third position is conceivable from which such an act would be possible. The political is always already determined by the rhetorical while the rhetorical is political from the very first moment. In this regard, it is really about the highest distinction in Schmitt’s political theory, a division that cannot be founded from an external position.
IV. List of related publications by the author

Articles


Book chapters

„A király afféle izé” – A törés mint esemény és a reneszánsz mint törés Carl Schmitt Hamlet-elemzésében. In (Cs. Kiss Lajos szerk.) Carl Schmitt elméletei kortársi-kritikai kontextusban. Under publication.


Conference presentations


V. References


