A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought

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Carl Schmitt haunts European thought as a diagnostician and a danger. This is the lasting message from Jan-Werner Müller’s recent book. Müller has taken an alternative approach to the task of biography. There are Schmitt biographies that try to sketch some relations between the private Schmitt and his public manifestations.¹ In Müller’s text — part biography and part encyclopaedia of Schmitt’s interlocutors, disciples and citers — Schmitt the man is lost to Schmitt the influence. In part this comes from the period of Schmitt’s life on which Müller focuses. Most Anglo-American Schmitt scholarship concerns the halcyon days of the Weimer Republic and the transformation of a Catholic, conservative, public legal theorist into the ‘Crown Jurist’ of the Reich.² Post-1945, banned from holding a professorship by his refusal to undergo de-Nazification, Schmitt lived the remaining 40 years of his life sequestered in his home, the Machiavelli-inspired ‘San Casciano’ in Plettenberg (p 54). From San Casciano, Müller’s Schmitt devoted his considerable energies to self-promotion, the cultivation of followers and extensive correspondence with many postwar intellectuals (pp 58–59). If a reader goes in search of Schmitt the man in Müller’s text, a fragmented and ugly picture emerges of a bitter, self-absorbed opportunist forever ready to receive the fawning attention of acolytes, rewriting past work and seizing any opportunity to revel in the public eye. However, attempts to paint a realistic portrait of Schmitt, or offer historical or psychological assessments of Schmitt’s complicity and complexities, remains outside of Müller’s declared brief. Instead, Müller’s Schmitt emerges during the Cold War as a shadowy figure, talking and influencing in particular German but also European intellectual life. The apt image could be borrowed from the Cold War spy genre of a supra-national ‘movement’ positioning itself in as the enemy of both liberal Western Europe and the Soviet East.

Mapping Schmitt’s influences is both Müller’s strength and weakness. Müller has worked through mountains of material from Schmitt’s rather lengthy published oeuvre (Müller’s description), Schmitt’s private notes and correspondence, to the public and private work of Schmitt’s followers and correspondents, as well as personal interviews. In his chronological presentation, Müller presents how Schmitt, over each decade of the Cold War, remained an engaged participant in the public debates of the day. In this, Müller’s discussion of Schmitt’s interaction with Alexandre Kojève during the late 1950s (pp 90–98) and the German and Italian New Left in the late 1960s (pp. 167–80) are engaging. The strength of these sections is in Müller’s demonstration of how theorists, obstinately not sharing Schmitt’s politics,

¹ Schwab (1989); Bendersky (1983).
² McCormick (1997); Kennedy (2004).
could correspond with and draw inspiration from an 'old Nazi' through a heady mixture of Schmitt's personal charm, his polemical, yet vague, writing, and a perception that in his attacks on liberalism there was a common 'enemy'. However, these were interspersed with less engaging sections on Schmitt's reception within the right. Schmitt's fame and reception in Franco's Spain (pp 133–43) is an interesting insight into the man's need for acknowledgment, but would appear, even in Müller's own final assessment of the general trend of postwar European thought, as a footnote. Similar sentiments come from the pages devoted to Schmitt's followers, such as Ernst Forsthoff (pp 73–79) who, aside from particular German interest, does not stand tall among postwar intellectuals. In this, Müller seems caught between being a catalogue of Schmitt's influences and an assessment of Schmitt within the complexity of postwar thinking. The text seems to gesture towards both; however, it is the later that Müller emphasises in the afterword (pp 244–50). Given this concluding direction, there are some obvious under-analysed relations. Schmitt's influence on Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, while mentioned, would have required more then a few pages of passing observation. Furthermore, given the postwar reception of Walter Benjamin, an examination of his correspondence with Schmitt in the 1920s would have proved illuminating, both on Schmitt's ability to gather admirers and correspondents from across the religious and political spectrum and also on how Schmitt via Benjamin has influenced contemporary critical theory.

As a work on Schmitt and the intellectual project of postwar Europe, Müller argues that postwar thought can be read as a coming to an agreement with liberal legality (p 247). In this narrative, Schmitt's attraction is as diagnosis and danger. Müller concludes that Schmitt's lasting influence is as a critic of liberalism. Schmitt identified that liberalism failed to prioritise the political in its desire to treat all disagreements as private matters of ethics or economy. This meant that liberalism could not identify its enemies, the illiberals from the extreme left or right. For Schmitt liberalism undermined the state, in that liberalism gave illiberals legitimacy. These observations capture Schmitt's diagnosis of the cancer that ate up Weimar, and the ever-present weaknesses of liberal democracy. In this, Müller tracks how liberal writers were to tame Schmitt as embodying a challenge to liberalism — for it to deal with its enemies — so as to ground the post-war enterprise of rearticulating liberal values. However, in Schmitt's gleeful celebration of impotent, terminal liberalism, or his view that for liberalism to survive it must limit its own liberalism, and his various celebrations of die Diktatur, sovereign decision, the Volk-Further complex, or 'organic' Catholic absolute states, Schmitt embodies the ever-present danger of authoritarianism. Hence the paradox of Schmitt in postwar thought which Müller well exposes. Schmitt is referenced by liberals as someone who sets out the limits of liberalism, and who, through engaging with, can strengthen liberalism; however, he is also referenced as a danger and a consequence if strengthening is not undertaken. While Müller presents this

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3 Sluga (2004).

adequately, it is muted by the parallel, and much less interesting, cataloguing of Schmitt’s influences, and the condensation and admissions noted above.

That is not to say that there are not other things of value to be found in Müller’s text. His remembering of Schmitt on the partisan (pp 144–55) and Schmitt’s influence surrounding the responses in Germany and Italy to the domestic terrorism of the 1970s (pp 181–93) takes on a new perspective post-9/11. Further, Müller’s own suggestions concerning Schmitt’s influence, through his thinking on territory, people and law, on the responses to American globalisation and the ‘war on terror’ (pp 221–43) were interesting but, like the sections on Kojève and the New Left, were all too brief. Also as a cataloguing of Schmittian influences, Müller has provided Anglo-American scholars with a resource tracking the various directions that Schmitt has manifested in thinking over the past 50 years.

In the final reading, Müller has essentially written two books, both with individual merit. The first is a mapping and summary of some of some of the intellectual relationships and influences that Schmitt has had on European thought predominately during the Cold War. The second is a more grand narrative of Schmitt’s place within the ‘liberalising’ of European thought postwar. This later project seems to be the one Müller preferred, but unfortunately has been compromised by the cataloguing of significant and seemingly insignificant influences. It is hoped that Müller will have a chance to revisit and strengthen this second thesis in a second edition.

References


— KIERAN TRANTER