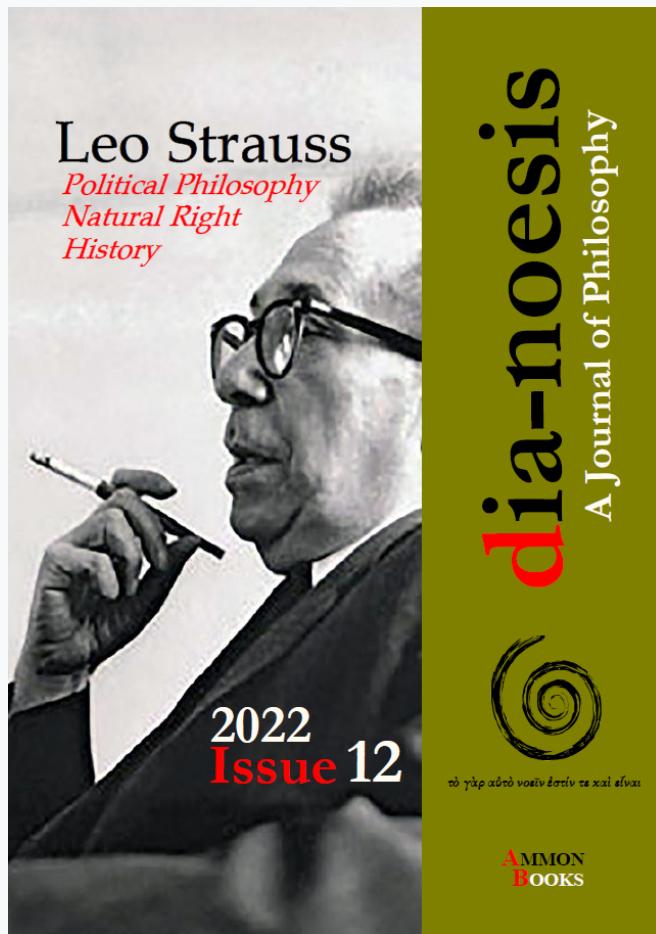


## dianoesis

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**Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt**

*Montserrat Herrero, Miguel Vatter*

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## Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt

Interview with  
Montserrat Herrero

By **Miguel Vatter**,  
*Professor in Political Science,*  
*Deakin University*  
miguel.vatter@deakin.edu.au

Montserrat Herrero is Full Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Navarra (Spain). She is the Principal Investigator of a Project on Religion and Civil Society at the Institute Culture and Society at the same University. Editor of the journal *Anuario Filosófico*.

Her main books are *The Political Discourse of Carl Schmitt. A Mystic of Order* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), *Poder, gobierno, autoridad* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2015), *La política revolucionaria de John Locke* [Revolutionary Politics of John Locke] (Madrid, Tecnos, 2015), *Ficciones políticas: el eco de Thomas Hobbes en el ocaso de la modernidad* [Political Fictions: Hobbes' Influence at the End of Modernity], (Buenos Aires, Madrid, Katz, 2012), *El nomos y lo político: la filosofía política de Carl Schmitt* [The Nomos and The Political: Political Philosophy of Carl Schmitt] (Pamplona, Eunsa, 2007, 2ª ed.), *Carl Schmitt und Álvaro d'Ors Briefwechsel* [Correspondence between Carl Schmitt and Álvaro d'Ors] (Berlín, Duncker & Humblot, 2004).

## 1. What is your interest in the relationship between Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt?

I have devoted part of my work to the political thought of Carl Schmitt, in my opinion one of the most enlightened minds of the 20th century, not only because of his intellectual acuteness, but also because the historical point of view from which he spoke was exceptional: the collapse of the Second Reich, i.e. the absolute end of a world centred on the imperial idea, the rise of the Weimar Republic and its agony in the arms of the Third Reich, and the new international order that took shape after its fall with the total humiliation of Germany, which Schmitt saw as the triumph of liberal Americanist imperialism. Many were Carl Schmitt's correspondents during his lifetime. Thousands of letters can be found in Schmitt's archive. Three of these letters were from Leo Strauss. We cannot find the correlative letters of Schmitt. But from the content of the letters we have to deduce that Schmitt did not reply to Strauss, at least not to these three letters. Strange for someone who was in the habit of always replying to letters. These letters were sent between 1932 and 1933 and inform us of an opinion written by Schmitt to evaluate Strauss's research on Hobbes before the Rockefeller Foundation in order to Strauss to apply for a grant. Strauss won the grant and thanks Schmitt. Many scholars speculate on the idea of Schmitt's silence and put it down to the dangers of corresponding with a Jew like Strauss at that time. There is undoubtedly a good biographical argument there, but that does not interest me as much as the content of their relationship through their texts.

In fact, the most important content of the relationship between the two intellectuals concerns Leo Strauss's review of Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*. In fact, in a 1932 letter to the editor of Duncker und Humblot, Schmitt pointed out that Strauss's commentary was one of the best that had been made on his book, although he was in fact very critical of it. It must be said that Schmitt was not one to shy away from criticism. On the contrary, he was saddened if his work did not receive a critical response. Strauss's review appeared

in the same journal in which Schmitt published the first edition of his *Begriff des Politischen* in 1927, the *Archive für Sozialwissenschaft*.

Strauss' critical commentary on *The Concept of the Political*, where Schmitt defines the friend-enemy distinction as the criterion for recognising a political situation, has been the subject of several writings, the most extensive being that of Heinrich Meier, published first in German, but also in other languages entitled *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss. The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1995), where also Strauss's *Anmerkungen* can be found. Other scholars have considered the topic, as is your own case in "Strauss and Schmitt as Readers of Hobbes and Spinoza," *The New Centennial Review* 4/3 (2004); Claudia Hilb, "Beyond Liberalism. A note on Leo Strauss's *Anmerkungen* to Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*," in J. Dotti/J. Pinto, *Carl Schmitt. Su época y su pensamiento* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2002); or myself in "La posición de lo político. Schmitt frente a Strauss," in *Estudios sobre Leo Strauss* (Mendoza: Centro de Estudios de Filosofía Clásica, 2010).

## **2. In your view, what is the most important theoretical dispute between Schmitt and Strauss?**

In Chapter III of the *Anmerkungen*, Strauss makes a strong judgement against Schmitt: Carl Schmitt founds the political in a liberal world, i.e. neutralised by the civil state, and his aim is to restore the state of nature. To this thesis he consequently links the position of human dangerousness presupposed by Schmitt. The affirmation of dangerousness, he continues in his commentary, is the approval of force, of *virtu* in the Machiavellian sense, as the cornerstone of the State edifice. For all these reasons, Strauss says that however illiberal he may consider himself, Schmitt cannot escape from liberalism.

In my view Strauss converts Schmitt's descriptive theses into normative ones. This is, in my view, the great error of his interpretation. What Hobbes denies in the construction of his civil state becomes, in Strauss's view, normative in Schmitt's political conception. In this sense and from this point of view,

Schmitt appears to Strauss as an anti-Hobbes, strangely Hobbesian.

**3. Hobbes is really the point of contention between the two political theorists?**

I think so. Their dialogue is primarily about Hobbes and in particular about two aspects: his anthropological individualism, which Strauss describes as liberal; and his political theology.

**4. What is Strauss' position on Hobbesian liberal individualism?**

Strauss fixes his attention on the Hobbesian affirmation of the *status civilis*, which he understands as the position of culture opposed to nature and its consequent oblivion of nature, as the central characteristic of later liberalism, which operates the neutralisation of the political. This is what you yourself point out in your article on the dispute between Schmitt and Strauss, and I think you are right: the question of the neutralisation of the political is settled in the transition from the state of nature to the state of artifice, precisely because the latter as an artificial state can proceed to the levelling out of differences and thus to the neutrality of all qualities. In this sense, neutralisation has to do with the construction of the civil state. Schmitt would agree with this analysis. For him technification and neutralisation are the consequence of state artifice. This is the foundation of the modern liberal state. Strauss is against Hobbes on this point because his scientific apparatus, the institution of politics as a new deductive science, makes political reflection and deliberation about the just and the good irrelevant.

Schmitt, on the other hand, admires Hobbes' ability to neutralise political-religious conflict through the construction of the Leviathan, which, however, in his view, does not establish neutrality, for it keeps the concept of the enemy alive.

As he points out in his book on Hobbes, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, the Commonwealth is for Hobbes the permanent avoidance of civil war through gigantic power. Hence one of the monsters, Leviathan, always subjugates the other, the Behemoth, the Revolution. In other words, Schmitt does not so much focus on the artifice of the Hobbesian state apparatus as on the fact that it has a real enemy and is not itself neutralising at the time. But he would agree with Strauss on the general judgement about the danger of making the discussion about the real enemy or about what is just, superfluous in politics.

On the other hand, Schmitt does not at any point enter into a judgement of Hobbes' materialist anthropological theory as such. For Schmitt, the natural state is primarily the situation in which States live among themselves and not individuals among themselves, and this natural state among States presupposes their institution, i.e. the *status civilis*. This is what he stresses in chapter 7 of *The Concept of the Political* in relation to Hobbes: the relevant natural state, the one that cannot be overcome without distorting reality, is the natural state between Commonwealths. This is explained by the close connection between political anthropology and what the political philosophers of the 17th century (Hobbes, Spinoza, Pufendorff) called the natural state, the situation in which the various states live among themselves, and which is one of constant danger and threat.

Strauss in his critique does not emphasise this distinction and interprets Hobbes and Schmitt as understanding the state of nature in different ways and that what Hobbes wants to overcome with respect to the state of nature between individuals, Schmitt affirms with respect to communities. No, Mr Strauss, Hobbes also affirms it with respect to communities. In any case, the state of nature between individuals and between states, as I argued at length in my book *The Echo of Thomas Hobbes in the Twilight of Modernity*, is in almost no respect the same. States are rational actors and can deliberate dispassionately. In this natural situation pacts and oaths and, of course, international trade are possible. They do not, however, provide any definite security, because they are not

based on a supreme power. They are simply certain hypothetical regulations, i.e., which may or may not be fulfilled and which guide the action of those who represent the sovereign power in the multiple Commonwealths.

In sum, the state of nature that Schmitt finds insurmountable using Hobbesian terminology is that of the *Law of Nations*, but this does not imply affirming the state of nature of individuals against the *status civilis*, as is the case in Hobbes' approach. At no point in his great work does Hobbes deny the state of nature in this sense. Moreover, this state of nature between states, which Hobbes calls the *Law of Nations*, does not imply a situation of anomie, since in it natural laws are in force; nor, by the way, is the state of nature between individuals, since in it there is a natural reign of God and, therefore, in its natural laws are in force, without which, as Strauss himself acknowledges in his last commentary on Hobbes in *What is Political Philosophy*, the transition to the civil state would never be possible. This, however, seems never to be considered in Strauss's interpretation of the state of nature as an "anti-theological" situation in *Natural Law and History*.

## 5. What is the dispute over political theology?

It is sometimes said that Strauss and Schmitt had a veiled dialogue between the lines of their texts on Hobbes. Certainly nothing assures us that by the figure of the "chatterbox" referred to in *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, Schmitt was referring to Strauss. Rather, his references to him, where they exist, are laudatory. On the general topic "Hobbes", the first stone was thrown by Strauss in 1936 with the publication of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*; in 1938 Schmitt published *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. At no point does Schmitt cite this book by Strauss, although another of his books, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, published in 1930, is cited with praise. Strauss published two more texts on Hobbes, one in *Natural Law and History*, in 1953, and another in 1959, in *What is Political*

*Philosophy?* with the title “On the Basis of Hobbes’ Political Philosophy,” which is above all a commentary on Raymond Polin’s book on Hobbes, *Politique et philosophie chez Thomas Hobbes* of the same year. Finally, Schmitt ratifies his own position on Hobbes in *Die vollendete Reformation* [The accomplished Reformation] of 1965. It is true that their interpretations along these texts are divergent, but in a particular way with regard to political theology.

At least we have a clear statement from Schmitt regarding Strauss’s interpretation of Hobbes: Strauss reduces Hobbes’ exposition to the simple contrast between Jews and pagans, whereas Hobbes fights against typical Judeo-Christian doctrines and *in concreto* argues in an Erastian pagan-Christian way, presupposing in his argumentation a Christian community, the *civitas Christiana*, in which the sovereign not only does not touch the one essential article of faith – “that Jesus is the Christ” – but protects it, merely putting an end to the theological speculations and distinctions of clerics and sectarians thirsting for dominion. Strauss, in Schmitt’s view, meanwhile aspires to the original and natural unity of politics and religion. For him the recovery of the theological-political problem means the restitution of the question of what is good and what is just. Hence, Strauss is mainly concerned with the relationship between politics and philosophy and not so much with the relationship between religion and politics. Claudia Hilb describes the relation of religion to politics in Strauss by pointing out that for him both faith and reason occur in a political context and determine the question of obedience.

As a strictly political philosopher, as Meier defend, Strauss is not in position of understanding Schmitt’s view of Hobbes’ political theology. Is Schmitt really as much on Hobbes’ side on the theological-political question as Strauss thinks?



## 6. ¿ It is not, then?

It does not seem so, since he accuses him of being an Erastian heterodox, something he does not consider himself to be.

## 7. So what is it about Hobbes' political theology that interests Schmitt, then?

The radical relationship between the theological and the political, that Strauss fail to see. What was originally a Hobbes' interpretation, becomes the central theme of Schmitt's political theology: there is a theological-political substance, a *res mixta*, which makes a total delimitation of the spheres of the religious and the political difficult. However, this inextricable relationship need not be historically as Hobbes desired, that is, as a unity in the head of the political sovereign. The Hobbesian construction is the starting point, as Schmitt himself acknowledges, of the successive secularisation of the religious, not only of the political. The privatisation of religion, its confinement to the realm of conscience without any public manifestation or relevance other than that demanded by the public-political confession, is in his view liberal. In contrast to this cancellation of the theological-political tension of the liberal tradition, Schmitt discovers a theological-political factor of retention: the catholic church. The Roman church, insofar as it is instituted, is the visible representation of the power of the secret, of the invisible, of the intimate, because it speaks in the name of God to consciences and from consciences. The opposition that Hobbes tries to set up between the invisible Christian church and the visible political authority is the fruit of his desire to make the church politically irrelevant. The visibility of the church is inadmissible for Hobbes, precisely because that is, as Schmitt points out in his short essay *The Visibility of the Church*, its political value. Insofar as it makes the tension between the religious and the political institutionally possible, it is a real check on the process of secularisation. The church presupposes the institutional

impossibility of annihilating conscience, as Schmitt points out in *Political Theology II*. Where these verifiable institutionalised subjects no longer exist, neither does dogma properly exist, and the wall of separation between the spiritual and the earthly dissolves; the two Augustinian cities cease to walk together and dissolve into each other. That in the case of Leviathan this was done in favour of a political religion and in democratic liberalism in favour of civil religion is almost indifferent. What is common to both approaches is the dissolution of the theological-political tension.

**8. In what sense then is the church an anti-secularist retaining power, i.e. an enemy of liberalism?**

In that it preserves the tension between the theological and the political - that is, the possibility of a legitimate conflict between the two spheres - in the first place, in its specific rationality.

But secondly, and this is what Schmitt devotes most attention to in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, from the point of view of representation, the church possesses the pathos of authority in all its purity. The church is a personal and concrete representation of a person, who is Christ, God. The church is a mediator insofar as it makes visible and historically effective the truth of God himself, an incarnate God. It is she who coins transcendent truth in manageable currency, through the voice and decision of a person. To the extent that it is outside of mercantilist exchange and political domination, it is an anti-secularist holding power. The church would be politically neutralised if it conceived of Christ as a private individual and Christianity as a purely private affair and an event of pure intimacy.

**9. So in your view, it seem that Strauss commentary on Schmitt was not a right one?**

The fraud of Strauss's *Anmerkungen* is to have interpreted Schmittian political philosophy in a Hobbesian key in general and, in particular, in terms of the state of nature. As much as Strauss is interested in political anthropology, which is the approach he takes in most of his texts, this is not Schmitt's way of approaching the political and, consequently, it distorts his approach.

Strauss rightly comments that Hobbes, in understanding men as beasts, speaks of an innocent evil, and with the idea of innocence, the distinction between moral good and moral evil loses its sharpness. A sharpness, seriousness and radicalness that Schmitt wants to restore, from Strauss's point of view, thus restoring morality behind the mask of the political. Strauss is certainly right on this point, at least because the affirmation of the possibility of combat is consubstantial with the defence of the political and moral order. When one stops fighting altogether it is because there is no longer anything to defend, and that implies that there is no longer any dignity. But why, then, does Strauss say that Schmitt shuns deliberation about what is just? Both would agree that politics should not dissolve the question of what is just and devote itself only to the question of the means, because the cost is the meaning of human life. Strauss is not right in saying that Schmitt's approval of the struggle is indifferent to the motives for which it is fought and that, therefore, this statement moves in the realm of the means. And he is wrong, because if there is no serious case there is no struggle. Combat, knowing whether to fight or not, depends on how the serious case is defined. It is true that, as Strauss points out at the end of his commentary, Schmitt does not discriminate between serious cases, but logically this must be the case, because the political situation is always concrete. Generally, the serious case is experienced as an exception and is indeterminable beforehand.