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The Invisible Enemy as Absolute Enemy: What Can Carl Schmitt Teach Us about War against a Virus?

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Through a discussion of Carl Schmitt's work this paper explores the theoretical implications of a war fought against a non-human enemy and suggests that Schmitt's work provides a useful framework of analysis for understanding the martial rhetoric that has surrounded Covid-19 policies. In Schmitt's work we can identify the intricate relation between the absolutization and dehumanization of the enemy on the one hand and the dissolution of the distinction between the public and private sphere on the other. Schmitt's warnings about the dangers of a global war in the name of humanity prove relevant to the war against a virus.

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I. Introduction

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic we have witnessed the emergence of an interesting kind of political rhetoric that has accompanied the policies aimed at tackling this medical crisis. Governments' responses to the pandemic have often been communicated through the use of warlike rhetoric. Emmanuel Macron claimed: "we are at war," Xi Jinping spoke of "a people's war"¹ and Donald Trump of a "medical war."² This martial rhetoric has consistently been supported by calls for solidarity — reminiscent of warlike scenarios. Indeed, the measures that were taken as part of either partial or complete lockdowns — such as mandatory quarantines, curfews, emergency laws and decrees to bypass parliament — were for many countries unseen since the end of the Second World War. Angela Merkel declared the challenge of Covid to be the most serious one in Germany since the Second World War.³

¹ Robert Peckham, "War of the Worlds: Covid-19 and Pandemic Belligerence," *Items*, August 13, 2020, <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/mediated-crisis/war-of-the-worlds-covid-19-and-pandemic-belligerence/>.

² Yuval Ben-Zion, "Winning the 'Battle' and 'Beating' the COVID-19 'Enemy': Leaders' Use of War Frames to Define the Pandemic," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2020): 249. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac000494>.

³ Peckham, "War of the Worlds: Covid-19 and Pandemic Belligerence."

Political leaders often stressed the specific nature of the peculiar enemy with which we are at war. Trump described it as a “hidden enemy,”⁴ Macron claimed that the war is being waged with an “invisible enemy”⁵ and similarly, Boris Johnson said that “the enemy is invisible.”⁶ While war rhetoric is of course as old as mankind itself, its use during the Covid pandemic gave it a new twist: this time, the war was against a non-human entity, against a virus. This raises the question — in the first place — whether a non-human entity can at all be a political enemy and particularly, what such an invocation might entail.

This question calls for a reflection on the concept of enmity and an elaboration of the theoretical implications of a confrontation with a non-human enemy. Towards these aims we will lay the requisite conceptual groundwork for the notion of war against a non-human entity through a discussion of selected works of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985).⁷ In *Der Begriff des Politischen* Schmitt claims that the political revolves around the distinction between friend and enemy and hence, fundamentally depends on war.⁸ Schmitt displays a very clear understanding of the distinction between friend and enemy and understands them in terms of human collectivities. Nevertheless, the concept of the non-human enemy has a significant place in Schmitt’s work — due to the notion of a dehumanized enemy. The mutual recognition of enemies as enemies presumes some sense of shared humanity.⁹ As part of his critique of liberalism, Schmitt argues that the liberal rejection of the notion of political enmity results in the dehumanization of the enemy. When the enemy is no longer recognized as such, it is placed outside of humanity. Schmitt warns of the gravity and brutality of a war fought against such an enemy. While this topic was first raised by Schmitt in his *Begriff des Politischen*, it remained a guiding topic throughout his work, and more than thirty years later, he still felt the need to further delineate this specific type of enmity by introducing the category of “absolute enmity” in his *Theorie des Partisanen*.¹⁰

Crucial to Schmitt’s definition of the enemy as a *human* collectivity is its dependence on the distinction between the private and public spheres. Since political conflict is a conflict between groups of people, it is always a public matter. The political enemy is not a private enemy. In Schmitt’s analysis the rejection of enmity by liberalism is the result of liberalism’s individualist morality rooted in the private sphere. Without political enemies this morality upholds a claim to universality. Consequently, the dehumanization of the enemy goes hand in hand with its justification on the basis of a universally valid, individualist morality which causes a dissolution of the distinction between the public and private spheres. Schmitt has traced the liberal tendency to mobilize the private sphere against the state both internally in his book on Hobbes’ *Leviathan*¹¹ and externally through the concept of sea power in international relations. The resulting theoretical framework can provide lessons about our current ‘war against a virus.’ Can the same logic — i.e., the political mobilization of the private

⁴ Benziman, “‘Winning’ the ‘Battle’ and ‘Beating’ the COVID-19 ‘Enemy,’” 249.

⁵ Peckham, “War of the Worlds: Covid-19 and Pandemic Belligerence.”

⁶ Benziman, “‘Winning’ the ‘Battle’ and ‘Beating’ the COVID-19 ‘Enemy,’” 249.

⁷ References pertain to the original German editions. Literal quotes are taken from the standard translations in English, unless stated differently. Quotes from texts with no available translation are self-translated, with the original text provided in a footnote.

⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009).

⁹ Compare Matthias Lievens, “Carl Schmitt’s Two Concepts of Humanity,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 8 (2010): 917-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453710375591>.

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung zum Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2017).

¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes: Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2018).

sphere and the dissolution of the distinction between private and public — that causes liberalism to place its enemy outside of humanity be the result of a declaration of war against an enemy that is already non-human (as is the case with the Covid pandemic)?¹²

In this paper I will demonstrate how in Schmitt's work the dehumanization and absolutization of the enemy entails a dissolution of the distinction between the private and public spheres. Ultimately, I will attempt to identify some features in the politics of the pandemic that show a similar development and suggest some points of relevance of Schmitt's framework for the 'war against the virus.' First, I will outline the conceptual framework offered by Schmitt, focusing on the dependence of the political on the distinction between the private and public spheres. Second, I will look at the theoretical implications for enmity which emerge once the political is derived from a morality rooted in the private domain, which Schmitt thematizes through his critique of liberalism. Using a simultaneously individualist and universalist vocabulary, liberalism transforms the pluralism of human collectivities into the dualism that is characteristic of absolute enmity. Third, I will look at Schmitt's discussions of Hobbes and of sea power, as two historical examples of the political mobilization of the private sphere in Schmitt's work, that illustrate the relationship between individualism and universalism. Fourth, I will identify some features of the war against Covid and show how it similarly invokes the notion of absolute enmity. The paper will conclude that, by bypassing the plurality of human political collectivities, the war against Covid has the potential to dissolve the political distinction between private and public, and makes way for a war fought by private individuals instead of political collectivities.

¹² Another type of Schmittian analysis of the Covid pandemic that is particularly fruitful deserves a short mention. Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as the one that decides on the exception and proclaims the temporary suspension of the legal order has become highly topical. See Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie, vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015). His work on the state of exception has been taken up by Giorgio Agamben in *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). And indeed, Agamben has developed into perhaps the most vocal critic of lockdowns among philosophers and sees in the current pandemic policies the affirmation of his thesis that the state of exception has become the rule, see Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 26-30. For another critical position, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschuhe ab: ausgewählte Gespräche und Beiträge 2020-2021* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021). For a justification of Covid lockdowns on the basis of Schmitt's definition of sovereignty, see Seyed Alireza Mousavi, "Die Corona-Pandemie Und Die Rechte," *Sezession* (April 30, 2020), <https://sezession.de/62729/die-corona-pandemie-und-die-rechte>. Interestingly, Schmitt himself never made any connection between his work on the exception and a medical crisis, even though the development of his work on sovereignty coincided with the Spanish flu epidemic. On the basis of Schmitt's scholarly work as well as private correspondence, Reinhard Mehring concludes that "Schmitt did not thematize the medical state of exception in his writings, although he encountered the problem [i.e. the Spanish flu pandemic] before and after 1918 in Munich" (original text in German: "Schmitt den medizinischen Ausnahmezustand in seinen Schriften nicht thematisierte, obgleich er dem Problem [i.e. the Spanish flu pandemic] vor und nach 1918 in München begegnete"), see Reinhard Mehring, "Carl Schmitt und die Pandemie: Teil I," *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional* (May 11, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17176/20200512-013323-0>. Nevertheless, despite the historical absence of the application of his work to the epidemiological situation of his time, Schmitt's categories can still be usefully applied to our current situation, see Reinhard Mehring, "Carl Schmitt und die Pandemie: Teil II," *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional* (May 12, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17176/20200513-013533-0>.

II. *Hostis versus Inimicus*

In *Der Begriff des Politischen*, first published in 1932, Carl Schmitt takes up the task of conceptually clarifying ‘the political’ — a task made necessary by the lack of clarity that at the time resulted from the habit of equating the political with the state. Yet, according to Schmitt, the state presupposes the political and can only be understood properly if there is a clear understanding of the political.¹³ Therefore, a conceptual differentiation between the two lies at the base of Schmitt’s inquiry into the concept of the political. Rather than giving a definition of the political, Schmitt searches for those categories that are specifically political and distinguish the political from other domains of human thought and activity. The domains of morality, aesthetics and economy all revolve around a final distinction. Morality revolves around the distinction between good and evil, aesthetics around beauty and ugliness, and the domain of economy depends on the distinction between what is useful and harmful or profitable and non-profitable. It is necessary to find a similar distinction of political categories that cannot be derived from the categories of other domains of human life and to which everything political can be reduced. Schmitt finds these specifically political categories in the distinction between the friend and the enemy.¹⁴

As political categories, ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ are autonomous concepts. Hence the enemy does not need to be morally bad, aesthetically ugly or an economic competitor.¹⁵ The enemy is the stranger, and it suffices for the enemy to be “in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien”¹⁶ enabling the possibility of a conflict with it in exceptional cases. Conflict consists in the necessity to fight the enemy in order to safeguard “one’s own form of existence” when “the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life.”¹⁷ Whether this is actually the case can only be determined by those partaking in the conflict itself, and not by a third party or according to a higher norm. Knowledge about the enemy is therefore grounded in what Schmitt describes as “existential participation.”¹⁸ Unlike categories pertaining to other domains the political categories do not denote a specific content. Rather, “the distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation.”¹⁹ As a degree of intensity, “the political” constitutes an ‘open’ concept and can draw its power from different domains of human life. Morality, economy and religion, for example, can thus motivate a political friend-enemy distinction. Once a distinction (be it moral, religious, etc.) is powerful enough to turn people into friends and enemies, it changes into a political distinction.²⁰ In short anything can become political.²¹ In any case, the categories of friend and enemy refer to groups of people: “An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity.”²²

¹³ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 19-20.

¹⁴ Carl Schmitt, “Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen,” in *Der Begriff des Politischen: Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009), 25.

¹⁵ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 25-26.

¹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ The expression has been omitted in the English translation. In the German text Schmitt writes: “das existenzielle Teilhaben und Teilnehmen”, Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 26.

¹⁹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

²⁰ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 35-36.

²¹ Carl Schmitt, “Politik,” in *Gesammelte Schriften 1933-1936: mit ergänzenden Beiträgen aus der Zeit des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2021), 405.

²² Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 28.

The confrontation with an enemy is caused by a threat to a group's own way of life — a threat posed by another group of people which necessitates a fight. The radical result of this is war. War is a crucial notion in Schmitt's concept of the political since it constitutes the “most extreme consequence of enmity.”²³ Moreover, the notion of war reveals Schmitt's methodological approach of the exception. The categories of friend and enemy derive their meaning from war. Yet Schmitt is eager to explain that by no means does this imply that war is therefore the purpose of the political, an ideal or in any way desirable; nor does it have to be a common occurrence. Rather, war is the presupposition that determines the political by being an exceptional possibility. As an exceptional situation, war is the moment of truth that reveals the nature of the political.²⁴ The mere possibility of an actual and real fight in the extreme case of war determines political life in all situations. Given the existential nature of the friend and enemy distinction, war cannot be justified by norms but always has an existential meaning. War is a fight for existence.²⁵

To demarcate what is specifically political Schmitt makes a clear distinction between the political enemy and the private enemy. This distinction reveals the dependence of his thesis on the precursory distinction between a public and a private sphere. Since friends and enemies are groups of people, the political enemy is necessarily a public enemy. This is something very different from the type of enmity that is rooted in individual feelings or preferences. In many languages, including German, there is an absence of a clear differentiation between the two.²⁶ Hence Schmitt refers to the Latin distinction between *hostis* and *inimicus*, and the Greek *polemios* and *echthros*. The political, and thus public, enemy is *hostis* or *polemios*, while the private enemy is *inimicus* or *echthros*. The biblical adage ‘love your enemy,’ for example, speaks of the latter and not of a political enemy. Waging war with an enemy does not conflict with biblical teachings.²⁷ It only makes sense to love one's enemy on a private level. A political enemy does not have to be hated in order for it to be the enemy.²⁸

Julien Freund stresses that the public and collective nature of friends and enemies as political categories can already be found in the writings of Rousseau, who emphasized that wars are fought between public persons and that states can have as their enemies only other states. Political life is constituted by a multitude of human collectivities that can only have each other as their enemy. Political enmity occurs neither between individuals nor between a collectivity and an individual, stresses Freund.²⁹ Consequently, the political world is a *pluriverse*

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 31-33; See also Schmitt, *Politische Theologie, vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 21.

²⁵ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 46.

²⁶ In Schmitt's foreword to the 1963 edition he refers to the return of the use of the word “foe” in English, aside from the commonly used “enemy” (ibid., 17). Since the semantical evolution of its use in English is rather complex (see G. Schwab, “Enemy or Foe: A Conflict of Modern Politics,” *Telos* 72 (1987): 194-201), we will continue to use the English word ‘enemy’ in this paper. Whenever ‘enemy’ refers to the private enemy instead of the political enemy, this will be specified.

²⁷ George Schwab adds the Hebrew distinction between private “*sonel*” and public “*ojel*”. Schwab, “Enemy or Foe,” 194-95.

²⁸ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 27-28.

²⁹ Julien Freund, *L'essence Du Politique* (Paris: Éditions Sirey, 1965), 491. Schmitt will later (1938) emphasize that it is not enmity as such that forms the core of the political but the *distinction* between friend and enemy. The ‘friend’ is therefore just as important as the ‘enemy,’ and Schmitt even points out that in some languages, etymologically, the word ‘enemy’ is the negation of ‘friend,’ implying the primacy of friendship. This is, among others, also the case for the Latin word for private enmity, ‘amicus-inimicus’, and its Romance descendants, as well as for the Slavic ‘pritateľj-neprijatelj,’ see Carl Schmitt, “Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind (1938),” in *Positionen und Begriffe: im Kampf*

and not a universe. Any political unity presupposes the opposition of another political unity in the form of the enemy. The world is constituted by a plurality of states, and the hypothetical notion of a single, global state that encompasses all humans would imply the end of politics and states altogether.³⁰ Schmitt's concept of the political thus presents to us a pluriverse of public collectivities that engage with one another as friends and enemies, while being grounded in a clear distinction between the public sphere of political enmity and a non-political private sphere.

III. Liberal Anti-Politics and the Absolute Enemy

In Schmitt's conceptual framework the political, as it were, 'imposes' itself as an existential reality upon the public realm. As such, it serves as a clear indicator of demarcation of what is non-political or private. Yet historically, a different, even opposite, approach has proven very powerful, which from a Schmittian perspective can be called anti-political. In liberalism we can observe an inversion of the relation between the public and the private spheres. Liberalism constructs the political from the private domain and, in Schmitt's analysis, fails to appreciate the political friend-enemy distinction. Instead, it attempts to give an individualist and universalist justification for its political theory. Schmitt's criticism of liberalism is therefore not a critique based on ideological disagreement, but it follows from the structure of the political itself. Like Schmitt's concept of the political, liberalism as anti-politics should be understood on the basis of its specific appreciation of the distinction between public and private and their mutual relation. Ultimately, liberalism's insistence on the primacy of the private sphere has radical theoretical consequences for its understanding of enmity.

As an individualist theory, Schmitt argues, liberalism entails a "negation of the political." Political enmity does not exist for an individualist theory since the individual as such has no political enemy. Enmity implies the possibility of demanding the sacrifice of an individual's life in battle for the sake of the political collectivity it is part of. From an individualist perspective this makes no sense because it places the power over one's life into the hands of someone other than the individual in question. Such a sacrifice would be at odds with the liberal insistence on individual freedom and autonomy. Liberalism thus leads "to a political practice of distrust toward all conceivable political forces and forms of state and government," but it is unable to develop its own positive theory of state and politics. Instead, liberal theory presents us with methods to curb political power for the sake of safeguarding individual freedom and property. Its 'politics' consists in polemical opposition to all political barriers to individual freedom; rather than "liberal politics," there is "only a liberal critique of politics."³¹

As an individualist theory, liberalism's specific content is determined by the "polarity of economy and ethics" that emerges out of the central concept of private property. As such, it depoliticizes the political vocabulary by replacing it with ethical and economic substitutes. For example: a political 'battle' becomes either 'competition' (economically) or 'discussion' (ethically). The 'state' becomes 'society,' either ethically understood in terms of 'humanity' or economically in terms of a 'system of production and traffic.' Liberalism robs political categories of their specific political nature and attempts to subdue them to the logic of

mit Weimar - Genf - Versailles, 1923 - 1939 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 280. What is crucial here is that the core of the political is thus constituted by an opposition of *public* groups, compare G. L. Ulmen, "Return of the Foe," *Telos* 72 (1987), 189.

³⁰ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 50-51.

³¹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 70; Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 64-65.

individualist morality and economic categories.³² “Liberalism . . . has attempted only to tie the political to the ethical and to subjugate it to economics.”³³ The endeavor to construct a political theory on the basis of these intrinsically non-political domains, Schmitt argues, makes it impossible for liberals to see what is actually political: the distinction between friend and enemy. The relevance of this thesis can be illustrated by contemporary liberal political theory. For example: the attempt to identify the notion of state neutrality as the “constitutive political morality”³⁴ of liberalism often follows a consistent Schmittian logic. Gerald Gaus explicitly argues that the argument for a neutral state follows by derivation from moral principles deduced from interpersonal relations. In Gaus’ view the moral rules of engagement that regulate behavior between individuals also hold true for the relation between state and individual.³⁵ The public-private relation underlying Schmitt’s concept of the political is thereby inverted, and the political — no longer understood as an existential reality demanding physical battle and self-sacrifice of individuals for the sake of the political collectivity³⁶ — is justified only to the extent that it follows the moral logic that guides behavior between private individuals.

Once liberal anti-politics constructs its theory of the state on an individualist logic that is rooted in the private sphere, this has far-reaching consequences for political enmity. According to Schmitt, the liberal and moral depoliticization of political concepts leads to the substitution of the concept of the state with the concept of humanity. When the individualist approach is applied to a supra-individual level, the only possible collectivity that can be imagined is that of humanity. The liberal negation of the principle of enmity creates a dialectic between individual and humanity — one that substitutes the Schmittian pluriverse of political entities with a universe of human individuals. Nevertheless, Schmitt warns, the adoption of the non-political terminology of ethics and morality does not make the political disappear.³⁷ On the contrary, the political struggle is intensified. Although the notion of humanity precludes the principle of enmity (because humanity as such has no enemy), wars can be waged in the name of humanity. This eventually proves to be a particularly useful ideological justification for war. A political entity adopting such humanitarian rhetoric is able to identify itself with all mankind and gives its war a universalist justification. At the same time, it is implied that the enemy being fought does not represent humanity. The enemy is, in other words, dehumanized, which enables the war to be fought in even more inhuman ways.³⁸ The ultimate consequence of liberal anti-politics is not the disappearance of political enmity but rather the emergence of a new friend-enemy distinction in which one party denies its enemy

³² Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 65-66. Schmitt sees this as part of a trend toward neutralization of political conflict in modern European history, in which the domains of morality and economy played a crucial role in the development of the liberal neutral state, see Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 68-69, 73-87.

³³ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 61.

³⁴ Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism,” in *A Matter of Principle* (London: Harvard University Press, 1985).

³⁵ Gerald F. Gaus, “Liberal Neutrality: A Compelling and Radical Principle,” in *Perfectionism and Neutrality: Essays in Liberal Theory*, ed. George Klosko and Steven Wall (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 137-65.

³⁶ In an early work first published in 1914 Schmitt already laid out a theory of the state in which the individual is merely the function of the state, not the other way around. Carl Schmitt, *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015).

³⁷ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 71.

³⁸ Schmitt, 51-52. Schmitt’s rejection of the inhumanity that is entailed in the negation of enmity presupposes another concept of humanity that manifests itself in the mutual recognition of enemies as human enemies, as argued by Matthias Lievens in “Carl Schmitt’s Two Concepts of Humanity,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 8 (2010): 917-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453710375591>.

the qualification of “enemy,” placing it outside of humanity and legitimizing a “last war of humanity.”³⁹ The mutual recognition of enemies is abandoned for the sake of the asymmetrical enmity between humanity and the non-human. Liberal enmity invokes the quality of ‘humanity’ and therefore produces a ‘discriminating’ categorization of friends and enemies, similar to the discriminatory judgment underlying such distinctions as “Greek-Barbarian,” “Christian-Pagan,” “human-inhuman,” and “*Übermensch-Untermensch*.”⁴⁰

The dehumanized and criminalized enemy corresponds to what Schmitt in his later work describes as the absolute enemy.⁴¹ The absolute enemy stands in complete contrast to the conventional enemy of the classical *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, in the context of which Schmitt positions his book on the political.⁴² Modern European international law managed to achieve something unique through the “bracketing of war”: “renunciation of the criminalization of the opponent, i.e., the relativization of enmity, the negation of absolute enmity.”⁴³ The absolute enemy, on the other hand, is the last enemy of mankind. ‘Enemy’ becomes a moral category, enabling a particularly inhumane war, since the enemy has to be destroyed at all costs. This logic of the negation of political enmity for the sake of a final war to end all wars is observed by Schmitt in ideological currents as distinct as liberalism, pacifism and Leninism.⁴⁴ While they may be ideologically different, their structural similarity becomes clear once we analyze them on the basis of the principle of enmity. The crux of the argument lies in the fact that political enmity is turned into a moral concept. Because the political is absorbed into the hitherto unpolitical domain of morality, it is intensified. In the case of liberalism, the absolute enemy is defined on the basis of an individualist theory that draws on the non-political spheres of ethics and economy. The pluralism of states is substituted by the moral notion of humanity which can only have the non-human as its enemy.

IV. Political Mobilization of the Private Sphere

Schmitt’s theoretical exposition of the dynamic between public and private is continued in his later work via discussions of concrete historical developments. It appears that this dynamic is a leitmotiv throughout Schmitt’s oeuvre. We will briefly discuss two main historical examples offered by Schmitt.⁴⁵ These examples are theoretically significant, given the fact that they respectively correspond to the anti-political categories of ‘individual’ and ‘humanity.’ The first example is the dissolution of the modern state through an internal mobilization of the private sphere, centered around the notion of individual freedom, that Schmitt discusses in his book on Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. The second example is the mobilization of the moral

³⁹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 79.

⁴⁰ Carl Schmitt, “Die legale Weltrevolution. Politischer Mehrwert als Prämie auf juristische Legalität und Superlegalität (1978),” in *Frieden oder Pazifismus? Arbeiten zum Völkerrecht und zur internationalen Politik, 1924 - 1978*, ed. Günter Maschke (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 935-36.

⁴¹ In the preface to the second edition of *Der Begriff des Politischen* and the newly published monograph *Theorie des Partisanen* Schmitt further developed his work on enmity by distinguishing between the conventional, the real, and the absolute enemy. See Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 16-17; Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen*. For our purpose a complete discussion is not necessary. For a discussion see, for instance, Ernesto Laclau, “On ‘Real’ and ‘Absolute’ Enemies,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5, no. 1 (2005): 1-12.

⁴² Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 12-13.

⁴³ Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political* (New York: Telos Press, 2007), 90.

⁴⁴ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 34-35; 51-52; 72; Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen*, 94.

⁴⁵ While both of these topics deserve far more expansive treatment, we will limit ourselves to a short discussion, sufficient for the purpose of this paper.

category of humanity by sea powers in international politics. The statist and pluralist foundation of modern international law is thus threatened both from ‘within’ and from ‘without.’ Both trends follow the logic of liberal anti-politics by mobilizing the private sphere — respectively through the adoption of an individualist and a humanitarian vocabulary.

Schmitt’s commentary on Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* was published in 1938 and offers a discussion of the legacy of the modern state from the *Leviathan* to its downfall.⁴⁶ This downfall is the result, not of an external threat, but of the internal disintegration caused by the inner structure of the state as originally developed by Hobbes. Crucial to Hobbes’ theory of the state, according to Schmitt, is that he transferred the Cartesian duality between body and soul to the state. The state thus appears as a “great man”: a vast machine constitutes its body, and the sovereign-representative, its soul.⁴⁷ It is created as a rational human construct on the basis of a contractual agreement between individuals in search of security. Yet according to the logic implied by such a consensus between individuals, only an anarchist social contract comes into being, not a state contract, argues Schmitt. The contractual logic leads to the creation of a ‘machine’ of governance but not automatically to the establishment and recognition of a sovereign person. The sovereign person is therefore juridically transcendent to the individuals who have engaged in the contractual agreement. This twofold structure of the modern state stands at the onset of its ultimate dissolution. The Leviathan’s further history is characterized by increasing mechanization of the state — a process that reduces the notion of sovereignty to just another cog in the machine.⁴⁸ “The leviathan thus becomes none other than a huge machine, a gigantic mechanism in the service of ensuring the physical protection of those governed.”⁴⁹

The fate of this machine was determined by a second conceptual-structural problem. Ingrained in Hobbes’ state theory is a clear distinction between public and private reason. While Hobbes’ notion of sovereignty, condensed in the formula “*auctoritas, non veritas, facit legem*,” accomplished a far-reaching unity of political and religious power, a gap was left unfilled in order to allow space for individual conscience.⁵⁰ Schmitt demonstrates this by a discussion of the role of miracles in Hobbes’ theory. According to Hobbes, the power to determine what is or what is not a miracle rests on the sovereign. When another individual claims that the transubstantiation is a miracle, one does not have to believe it. But when the state commands one to believe it, this command has to be obeyed. This illustrates a distinction between ‘public reason’ and ‘private reason’; the former has its origins in the command of the state and cannot be contested, while the latter originates in the belief of a subject of the state and is without political value. “The mortal god has power ... over miracles as well as confession.”⁵¹ But at this crucial moment, Hobbes allows for a distinction between inner belief and outer confession. The miracle is a matter of public reason, and a citizen’s outer confession regarding the truth of a miracle should therefore be in accordance with the state’s claim regarding the truthfulness of a miracle. But the citizen’s private reason remains untouched, and citizens retain the freedom — in accordance with their own conscience — to either believe or not to believe in a miracle. Schmitt traces the origin of the liberal neutral state on the basis of individual freedom (as the successor to the absolutist state) to this distinction between inner belief and outer confession. Liberal theorists, starting with Spinoza,

⁴⁶ Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-54.

⁴⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996), 34-35.

⁵⁰ Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*, 84.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

reversed the relation between public and private that underlies Hobbes' original thesis and developed the idea that private conscience, rather than state authority, lies at the foundation of the state.⁵²

In this way, Schmitt argues, the Leviathan as a sovereign person was destroyed from the inside in the 18th century. But the machine itself — the state apparatus with its army, police and bureaucracy, etc. — remained, and once turned into a liberal constitutional state, it became an instrument to contain state power.⁵³ This instrument guaranteed individual freedom rights, and as a consequence, the private sphere evaded control by the state. The duality between state and society that emerged provided a playing field for non-political, indirect powers to emerge and to engage in a competition over control of the state apparatus. Their struggle for control over the state — in the name of seemingly private domains such as religion, culture and economy — would ultimately destroy it. The plurality of these powers was unable to substitute the unity of political will that lay at the foundation of the Hobbesian state.⁵⁴ “The leviathan, in the sense of a myth of the state as the ‘huge machine,’ collapsed when a distinction was drawn between the state and individual freedom. That happened when the organizations of individual freedom were used like knives by anti-individualistic forces to cut up the leviathan and divide his flesh among themselves. Thus did the mortal god die for a second time.”⁵⁵

The internal mobilization of the private sphere against the state by societal powers finds its counterpart at an international level in Schmitt's concept of ‘sea power.’ At an international level the private sphere is not mobilized against a specific state's power from within, but rather it can be mobilized by specific powers against the pluralism of states as such which makes up the core of classic European international law, the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*. This international order is then substituted by an international order that has turned the “non-discriminative concept of war” waged on the premise of mutual recognition into a discriminative concept of war in which the enemy is criminalized based on a universalist conception of law centered around individual rights, thus legally creating a status of global, civil war.⁵⁶ Schmitt conceptualizes the proponents of this development through the notion of sea power. Ultimately, behind the rhetoric of universality still stands a concrete power with concrete interests that directs its energy against concrete enemies; like Schmitt continuously emphasizes, the negation of political enmity does not make it go away.

Schmitt understands world history as a continuous struggle between land and sea powers.⁵⁷ When the entirety of the planet was gradually explored in the modern age, it was Great Britain that turned away from its previous land-based political existence and transformed into a maritime empire stretching across all the continents,⁵⁸ a role that would be taken up by the United States of America from 1917 onwards.⁵⁹ As a sea power, it distinguished itself from land powers, because of its focus on trade. The reign of a maritime empire does not so much consist in its ruling of a specific territory but rather in its control over the trade routes that connect the different territories of the empire across the globe.

⁵² Ibid., 79-86.

⁵³ Ibid., 99-100.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 116-18.

⁵⁵ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 74.

⁵⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Die Wendung zum diskriminierenden Kriegsbegriff* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007).

⁵⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Land und Meer: eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2018).

⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion see Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011), 143-55.

⁵⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte: ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009), 41.

Schmitt argues that such an empire by necessity tends toward a universalist understanding of law. The British Empire had to present its own interests as the interests of humanity in order to safeguard passage between the different parts of the empire. A case in point was the Suez Canal to which free access, at a time when Britain had no control over it, was argued for on the basis of a natural right of all peoples to take part in world trade. The ‘freedom of the seas’ for the sake of free commerce served the interests of the state whose existence depended on it the most, namely the British Empire.⁶⁰ The universalist categories that arise from such sea-power strategy provide the perfect tool for an interventionist policy in the international sphere, warns Schmitt.⁶¹ The concept of sea power thus provides a theoretical framework for a critique of humanitarian interventions.

The politicization of ‘humanity’ by the British Empire does not stand on its own. In fact, it cannot be separated from the specific British relation to the distinction between public and private spheres. Classical international European law was characterized by the distinction between public and private law. Despite the plurality of sovereign states, the private sphere offered an international platform that extended across borders where economic actors from different states engaged with one another as non-state actors. Since British common law did not develop the distinction between public and private law, this enabled Britain to directly engage with the non-state, private actors within other European states. The combination of sea power and free trade thus made it possible for Britain to bypass inter-state law and pursue its interests beyond its own borders through private, non-state actors.⁶² The economy provided a universal justification for British political interests as well as the infrastructure to pursue these interests without being inhibited by the sovereignty of other states.

In this context Schmitt warns of the emergence of, what has earlier been described as, absolute enmity. Because of its appeals to universalist and humanitarian justifications, the sea power facilitates a return to the concept of ‘just war,’ which results in the intensification of conflict. The *Jus Publicum Europaeum* had ousted the *justa causa* — the justness of a war’s cause — from its vocabulary. By invoking it in a humanitarian form, sea powers turn war and enmity into moral categories, and extermination by means of modern technological weaponry becomes justified.⁶³ Ultimately, the sea power’s enemy is an absolute enemy by necessity. Moreover, within the maritime understanding of war, and in tune with the British rejection of the distinction between public and private law, no distinction is recognized between combatants and non-combatants. The disappearance of this distinction does not result in the dominance of the ‘soldier,’ but rather the combatant and non-combatant are sublated dialectically (in the Hegelian sense). The result is a type of total war that is not only waged militarily but also includes the domains of economy, propaganda and the moral as well as psychological support of non-combatants. All individuals, soldiers and civilians alike, stand in the service of the war waged in the name of a worldview centered around trade.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid., 34-41.

⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

⁶² Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011), 183-85.

⁶³ Ibid., 298-99.

⁶⁴ Carl Schmitt, “Totaler Feind, totaler Krieg, totaler Staat (1937),” in *Positionen und Begriffe: im Kampf mit Weimar - Genf - Versailles, 1923 - 1939* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 270-73; Carl Schmitt, “Über das Verhältnis der Begriffe Krieg und Feind (1938),” in *Positionen und Begriffe: im Kampf mit Weimar - Genf - Versailles, 1923 - 1939* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 284.

V. Covid-19: Humanity's Absolute Enemy

The discussion in the previous paragraphs presented a framework for analyzing enmity and its potential to turn into absolute enmity, based on the relation between public and private spheres. The pluralism of states and the distinction between civilian and soldier, combatant and non-combatant were predicated upon the existence of a plurality of public spheres. When this disappears, private individuals are united across the globe in a newly formed struggle with the enemy of humanity. I will propose that this framework is useful to analyze the martial rhetoric that is used to justify Covid policies and that it can reveal its potential consequences. This will be demonstrated on the basis of two examples. But first, it is necessary to clarify the boundaries of the argument.

I shall specifically focus on the *rhetoric* of war that has been used to frame the policies that target the Covid pandemic. While this rhetoric has been very prominent, it has certainly not been used universally. Taking this into consideration, our analysis does not aim to predict the future development of the post-pandemic world but rather to uncover some potentialities that the rhetoric in question can reveal to us. The description of the global political constitution after Covid remains a task for future historians. The objection, then, might be raised that 'it's merely rhetoric' and the relevance of such rhetoric is easily exaggerated. While it should obviously not be expected that a certain type of rhetoric provides a monocausal explanation for political developments, it is equally important not to underestimate its impact on political discourse and its power to mobilize people.⁶⁵ Macron's declaration of war might have been a rhetorical figure, but it was immediately followed by policies — including the confining of people to their homes — that were in tune with the sentiment he had invoked.⁶⁶ It is therefore worthwhile to observe whether some of the developments that followed from Covid policies correspond to the theoretical implications of the declaration of war against a virus and can therefore support the relevance of the Schmittian framework.

The application of the Schmittian framework starts from a simple observation. When the categories of friend and enemy refer to human collectivities that can potentially wage war with each other in order to safeguard their respective forms of existence, these categories obviously do not apply to whatever kind of relation we have to a virus. A virus is not a human collectivity; it is no political subject. Distinctions such as those between private and public have no meaning for a virus. Simply put, "the virus itself does not act."⁶⁷ Hence we repeat our initial question: what does it mean when we declare war against a virus? While a non-human entity does not fit within the Schmittian vocabulary of enmity, Schmitt did however thematize war with an enemy that is not *considered* human. The absolute enemy is the result of the dehumanization of the enemy. In a war against a virus, on the other hand, the enemy is already non-human to begin with. This places two restrictions on the application of Schmitt's analysis. First, the moral objection to an ideology that leads to absolute enmity through the dehumanization of the enemy loses its value. Since the virus is not a moral agent, there is generally no moral objection to be made against its extermination. Second, the causal relation between a political theory that negates enmity on the one hand and the dehumanization of the enemy on the other is no longer valid since the non-humanity of the enemy is not the result of a process of dehumanization in the first place. The question should therefore and rather be whether there is a structural significance entailed in our relationship with a dehumanized enemy — a significance that is equally present in our relationship with a non-

⁶⁵ Benziman, "'Winning' the 'Battle' and 'Beating' the COVID-19 'Enemy,'" 247-49.

⁶⁶ Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschuhe ab*, 19-20.

⁶⁷ Mehring, "Carl Schmitt und die Pandemie," (May 12, 2020). Original text in German: "Der Virus selbst handelt nicht".

human enemy, specifically a virus. Can the political mobilization of the private sphere which is the cause of absolute enmity also be its result? Or, as Reinhard Mehring suggests, is not the virus, as an enemy, an imaginary projection reflecting our “own question as form”⁶⁸ and does the declaration of war against a virus reveal more about the form of our own political constitution rather than that of the enemy?

The insights gained in the previous sections can shed further light on this. When war has an existential meaning and refers to a fight for existence, the first question to ask is which form of existence is under threat. Since a virus affects all human beings, the existence that is being threatened can only be that of humanity as such. This is reflected by the many calls for international cooperation and global coordination through institutes such as the World Health Organization. What is more relevant to our argument is not so much to what extent this is successfully achieved but rather that it provides a new discourse for political action on an international level.

We thus arrive at the first example that illustrates the relevance of the Schmittian framework: the dissolution of global pluralism. Whereas Benziman, in his analysis of the use of war rhetoric in the pandemic, also identifies a key role for patriotism,⁶⁹ Peter Sloterdijk nuances the importance of national boundaries. Initially, the different responses to the pandemic by individual European countries did seem to point to a possible disintegration of Europe and a return to a more nationalist organization of pandemic policy. But according to Sloterdijk, this is an ‘optical illusion,’ caused by the simple fact that the primary mode of political organization is that of the nation state. Instead, the pandemic demonstrates the possibility to operate on an international, and even a global, level. The medical world appears to be particularly capable of transcending these limitations and cooperating across borders.⁷⁰ The logic of a society focused on immunological risk necessarily demands global solidarity, Sloterdijk argues.⁷¹ William Merrin similarly claims that the war against Covid-19, as a biological war, is “the first global pandemic requiring a truly global response since our recognition of the Anthropocene.” He goes even further by claiming that “it is *the first Anthropocenic World War*.”⁷² Whether this is practically the case remains to be seen. Yet, theoretically, it appears to be the logical outcome of the war discourse. In the face of an enemy that does not distinguish between different political groups, the plurality of political entities loses all value. The enmity invoked by such a war is necessarily absolute since it equally affects all of humanity. Moreover, the war creates the typical asymmetrical relation that characterizes absolute enmity: the enemy needs to be completely destroyed.

In this war policy derives its legitimacy from humanity, whose existence is at stake. As is the case with sea powers, it is the specific political existence that calls for a universalist legitimization of policy. Here, one of Schmitt’s warnings regains significance. The interest of humanity is being reinterpreted in medical terms. Sloterdijk speaks of a new age of “co-immunism,” that is founded on the ethical demand to guarantee mutual, immunological

⁶⁸ Mehring. Original German text: “eigenen Frage als Gestalt”. This rather cryptic formula is used by Schmitt in his later work to describe the enemy. See Carl Schmitt, *Ex captivitate salus: Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945/47* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015), 9; Schmitt, *Theorie des Partisanen*, 87-88.

⁶⁹ Benziman, “‘Winning’ the ‘Battle’ and ‘Beating’ the COVID-19 ‘Enemy,’” 250-51. Benziman’s study analyzes the rhetoric used by governments in the United States and Great Britain, both headed by leaders from conservative parties. An inclusion of other countries might have led to a less prominent presence of patriotic vocabulary.

⁷⁰ Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschube ab*, 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷² William Merrin, “Anthropocenic War: Coronavirus and Total Demobilization,” *Digital War* 1, no. 1-3 (2020): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-020-00016-9>.

protection which ultimately can only materialize on a global scale.⁷³ When there are states that do not sufficiently join the global “anthropocenic world war,” the humanitarian interventions of the past might be substituted by medical interventions. Yet, as Schmitt writes, “whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat.”⁷⁴ Behind humanitarian rhetoric always lies a concrete power, and such rhetoric is particularly prone to instrumentalization for concrete interests. We can hence conclude that the war against a virus invokes the notion of absolute enmity, legitimized in universalist and humanitarian-medical terms. In the name of humanity, the public pluralism of states loses its meaning.

The legitimacy of humanity is at the same time the legitimacy of the individual. Our second example shows how the war against a virus also has the potential to internally dissolve the distinction between private and public. In the war against Covid people aren’t mobilized to wage war. On the contrary they are demobilized. We are waging war by staying at home. This leads Sloterdijk to conclude that the war metaphor is misleading.⁷⁵ But it is only misleading as long as we understand war in the classical sense: a war between states with standing armies. The demobilization of the population rather points to a transformation of war that follows from the specific nature of the “invisible enemy” that we face. Drawing on Jünger’s understanding of modern warfare in terms of “total mobilization,” Merrin claims that the Covid lockdowns have “inaugurated a new era of *total demobilization*.”⁷⁶ Instead of the state of continuous motion that characterized the wars of the past, this particular war is characterized by the demand to demobilize, to stay at home, to do nothing. “The essence of war reverses here from speed into immobility and inertia.”⁷⁷ The war is also total because *everybody* takes part in it — by being inactive. Just like the war of total mobilization, total demobilization erases “the difference between civilian life and military action.”⁷⁸ We are thus confronted with the disappearance of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, public and private actors, that Schmitt observed in the maritime concept of war. By demobilizing we are all combatants in the war fought against the virus. This war is fought by private individuals, and the battlefield is located in the heart of the private domain: people’s homes. Simultaneously, the private sphere is now of great public significance because the existence of mankind depends on it. The distinction between private and public has not only become obsolete, it has dissolved entirely.

Again, Schmitt’s warnings regain significance. We have established that there is no moral objection to dehumanizing a virus. But the absolute enmity that necessarily is the result of a war against a non-human entity creates a worrisome backlash. The political competence to indicate who the enemy is, traditionally belonging to the state, also implies the competence to identify the enemy from within.⁷⁹ In times of total demobilization and absolute enmity collaboration with the enemy takes on a new meaning. When private individuals are combatants by being immobile, merely being mobile becomes a sign of collaboration. The dehumanization of the enemy might not raise moral objections when it affects a virus, but it certainly is not without consequences when it affects its human ‘collaborators.’ “The fellow human appears like a reverse image of the vampire. He does not suck, he infuses something:

⁷³ Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschuhe ab*, 28.

⁷⁴ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54.

⁷⁵ Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschuhe ab*, 20.

⁷⁶ Merrin, “Anthropocenic War,” 37.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁹ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 43.

The next person could unconsciously be a carrier of the virus. With Covid, the asymptomatic 'spreader' will become a permanent figure,"⁸⁰ claims Sloterdijk.

The two examples that have been discussed mutually strengthen each other according to the dialectic between individual and humanity. On the one hand the political plurality of public spheres is substituted by the unity of mankind in opposition to the virus, and on the other, the private sphere is politicized by turning the demobilized individual into a combatant. Together, they enable the emergence of absolute enmity in which the distinction between the private and public spheres has dissolved. War and political conflict have entered the private domain, while political conflict has opened itself up to private categories of hatred and moral judgment. While the enemy as a virus is already non-human itself, absolute enmity enables the dehumanization of those individuals who refuse to align their private lives with the cause of humanity. The asymptomatic spreader becomes the absolute enemy within. This opens up new possibilities for a —potentially violent — intensification of conflict.

More than a year after the first declarations of war against the virus were made, their practical consequences have become even more concrete. The availability of Covid vaccines has caused a transformation of the figure of the spreader into that of the anti-vaxxer. The use of vaccination passes to identify the willingly unvaccinated has given visibility to the invisible enemy. It has allowed for an enforced demobilization of the unvaccinated and for their legal exclusion from (parts of) society. The rhetoric of war has thus culminated in the legalization of the qualification of the internal enemy that collaborates with the virus. Additionally, increasing social antipathy and prejudice towards the unvaccinated has been observed.⁸¹ The identification of the unvaccinated as the enemy intensified significantly when the pandemic itself was relabeled a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" by multiple political leaders. Taking into consideration that this phrase is unjustified from an epidemiological perspective,⁸² it seems to come straight out of the political vocabulary of the total war waged against the absolute enemy: Covid-19. Whereas the rhetoric of war in 2020 was purely directed against the virus itself, now the internal enemy appears to be the main political target. Given the logic of absolute enmity implied by the war against a virus it is perhaps no surprise that two years after his declaration of war, Macron entered his re-election campaign with the phrase: "The unvaccinated, I really want to piss them off."⁸³

Conclusion

Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of the political offers a clear theoretical framework to analyze political conflict. The attempt by some political leaders to frame Covid policies in terms of war leads to the inclusion of these policies in the domain of political conflict rather than in that of domestic policy. Both the initial martial rhetoric as well as the far-reaching consequences of a division of citizens on the basis of their vaccination status call for a reflection on the pandemic in terms of absolute enmity. Discussions that focus on Covid

⁸⁰ Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streift seine Samthandschube ab*, 27. Original text in German: "Der Mitmensch erscheint wie ein Umkehrbild des Vampirs, er saugt nicht ab, er flößt etwas ein: Der nächste könnte unbewußt ein Virenträger sein. Mit Corona wird der symptomfreie *Spreader* zu einer bleibenden Figur werden".

⁸¹ Bor, Jørgensen, and Petersen, "Prejudice Against the Vaccinated and the Unvaccinated During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

⁸² Günter Kampf, "COVID-19: Stigmatising the Unvaccinated Is Not Justified," *The Lancet* 398, no. 10314 (November 2021): 1871, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)02243-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02243-1).

⁸³ Bor, Jørgensen, and Petersen, "Prejudice Against the Vaccinated and the Unvaccinated During the COVID-19 Pandemic," 1.

policy as part of temporary, emergency regulations⁸⁴ do not provide the categories to understand the overall reconfiguration of our political norms that has occurred both rhetorically as well as practically. Furthermore, debates on issues such as ‘vaccine hesitancy’ are predicated upon this reconfiguration without offering the conceptual tools to perceive it.

Schmitt has provided the theoretical vocabulary for studying the transformation of enmity based on the changing relationship between the private and public spheres. He has traced the power of the liberal dialectic between individual and humanity historically in his studies of the downfall of the Hobbesian state and the emergence of a universalist conception of international law enforced by sea powers. While Schmitt’s analysis is predominantly an analysis of liberalism, the underlying dynamic resulting from a mobilization of the private sphere, that adopts a vocabulary of individualism and universalism, is much more fundamental. It is this dynamic that can help us understand how the declaration of war against a virus creates a conflict between absolute enemies — a conflict that operates with the same vocabulary. The pandemic appears as a contemporary expression of Schmitt’s theoretical considerations and, as such, as another historical example that illustrates the possibility — and dangers — of absolute enmity, albeit this time in medical terms.

Although it has not been the topic of this particular paper, Schmitt’s warnings about absolute enmity can motivate us to find an alternative strategy. The conceptualization of the pandemic in terms of war opens up a vast arsenal of potential intensification of conflict brought into the homes of people and into their everyday lives. It therefore seems advisable (to stay within a Schmittian framework) to understand the pandemic-related policies in terms of a ‘state of exception’ that responds to an *internal* crisis. After all, the temporary suspension of the regular order ultimately serves its continuation, whereas the waging of war against a virus can only lead to absolute enmity and results in the complete redefinition of fundamental, political categories — blocking thereby the road to a renewal of the state of normalcy.

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⁸⁴ Compare footnote 12.

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