READING CARL SCHMITT IN BERLIN
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I chose to be one of the first to present in the year's regular Tuesday Colloquium, partly because I wanted to get the one formal obligation the Wissenschaftskolleg imposes upon the Fellows over as quickly as possible and partly because I thought my colleagues might have something useful to say about my work – and, if so, I had better hear it sooner rather than later. I had come to the Wissenschaftskolleg to work on two, linked, projects – one a comprehensive study of the mandates system of the League of Nations, and the second a short synthetic book summarizing the work and significance of the League in general. The mandates project, I knew, would inevitably be a capacious, multi-year affair, involving research in archives in a dozen countries across six continents, so my time at Wiko would be spent mostly reading for the second project. The talk I gave that November 29th, 2005 was thus a kind of blueprint for that book, advancing a mildly revisionist argument about the usefulness of seeing the League less as a failed security system than as a mechanism for the creation and propagation of international norms and the construction of networks of co-

operation on issues ranging from drug trafficking to epidemic control to colonial administration to minority rights.

Presenting early was a good decision: I did get lots of useful feedback, including from Mark Beissinger, whose project on the meaning of empire in a formally post-imperial world bore some family resemblance to mine. But two responses, in the days and weeks that followed, particularly stayed with me. First, I was struck by the degree to which the perceived injustices of the Versailles settlement were, especially for the Germans among us, still very much a live issue: surely the League's weakness, quite a few of my interlocutors pointed out, had less to do with the deficiencies of collective security as such than with the fact that the institution was founded as an alliance of victor states and not as a true "society of nations", and hence lacked legitimacy from the start. Second, a whole contingent of voices were raised urging me to read Carl Schmitt.

I have to admit that this latter directive didn't please me very much. Between the usual burdens of parenthood, teaching and administration, and what I thought would probably be a visceral antipathy anyway, I had been quite happy to let the current vogue for Schmitt among left-leaning American academia pass me by. Some of my colleagues at Wiko privately told me that was just fine. Schmitt was "terribly overrated", one distinguished philosopher among us insisted. Most of his support came from those coteries of ex-left-Nietzschians and ex-Derridians forever in search of a new spiritual home, said another. But it bothered me that the pressure to read Carl Schmitt was coming mostly from within the group that I thought of as "my tribe" at Wiko – that is, from that collection of godless liberals and unapologetic defenders of the Enlightenment (high priestess: Carla Hesse) with which I, as a self-consciously apostate child of Lutheran missionaries, instinctively felt an affiliation. (There was a good-tempered but serious intellectual divide on questions of cultural politics this year between this group and the members of the *Schwerpunkt* working on – or really against – the theory of secularization.) So, rather reluctantly, I decided I probably had to read Carl Schmitt.

I wasn't particularly fanatical about it. I didn't switch projects to one on Schmitt, or even work my way comprehensively through his major writings. But I did read *The Concept of the Political*, *The Nomos of the Earth*, and a few other translated and untranslated writings, along with a new intellectual biography and a handful of critical essays. I did this reading haphazardly and sporadically, picking the books up and putting them down again, but with enough persistence and attention that, even though I spent 95% of my working time reading biographies of League officials and minutes of various commissions and commit-

tees, I can nevertheless detect Schmitt's presence as a peculiar *Leitmotiv* running through the year. My work and also my experience here were shaped – sometimes in unanticipated ways – by this reading. How, exactly?

Let's take the unexpected first, the things I got from reading Schmitt that weren't what he intended. One of the characteristics that drives other scholars crazy about historians is that we are less interested in reading a text for what it tells us about the subject under discussion than for what it tells us about the presuppositions and preoccupations of the author and his or her milieu. So it was, for me, with Schmitt. I didn't find Schmitt's analysis of the League particularly earth-shattering (more on that below), but his sheer obsession with the League, his splenetic prose about it, his inability to resist any opportunity to get in a little dig at its pretensions or inconsistencies, did strike me as meaningful and revealing. For that very obsessiveness, coupled with the fact that the content was not greatly distinguishable from the analysis one would find in most center to right-of-center German publications of the twenties and thirties, usefully shifted my optic, reminding me of the need to see the League not only from the standpoint of Geneva, London, or Paris, but equally through the narrowed eyes of disgruntled and increasingly revanchist observers in Berlin or Budapest.

Schmitt's second gift to me was more prosaic: he helped me with my German. Now, German and I have an odd relationship. Almost 25 years ago I had a single year of German instruction, a requirement of my doctoral program at Harvard, which I then promptly forgot. In 1989, when I married Tom Ertman, I revived enough conversational ability to communicate with some new in-laws in Kassel, but that communication soon dwindled. But then, in 1997, when we had our first child, Tom stunned me with the announcement that he proposed to raise Saskia bilingually and would therefore speak to her (and, after 1999, to Carl as well), only in German. Now, Tom is nothing if not, as the Germans say, *konsequent*, and from the day of Saskia's birth until today, he has not spoken an English word, sung an English song, or read an English story to the children. (Saskia was four before she quite realized that Tom spoke English.) This particular piece of social engineering was successful too: both children are perfectly bilingual, and sailed smoothly this year into the soccer-obsessed life of children at the Evangelische Schule Berlin Mitte. I, as always, struggle in their linguistic wake. Because the babble of German going on around me, I acquired over the years a kind of fluency: I can chatter away, and the challenges that bring many foreigners up short (talking on the telephone, say, or bringing children to the doctor) hold no terrors. But my German is, to say the least, strange. Denuded of proper case and adjec-

tival agreements, it is a constant source of merriment for my children, and must have been positively painful for Herr Grimm, Frau Bottomley and Wiko's wonderful staff, although they politely carried on speaking with me anyway. The problem (besides sheer laziness on my part) was that I had never used German academically, and as any scholar knows, academic German and *Alltagsdeutsch* are entirely different languages. But here, finally, Schmitt helped me, for the simple reason that his main writings on the League have not been translated. Reading Schmitt's *Die Kernfrage des Völkerbundes* and *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar – Genf – Versailles* is surely the long way round to improving one's German, but it did help. By April, I could give one of Wiko's evening lectures in German (albeit from a translated text), and while anyone listening to me probably realized this was *ein Schritt zu weit*, I was nevertheless glad I did it.

Thus the unexpected outcomes; but what of the content of Schmitt's analysis itself? Schmitt loathed the League of Nations, not simply because it was charged to enforce a settlement imposed against Germany's interests, but also because its presuppositions contravened what he held to be core truths of political life. As we know, Schmitt considered the distinction between "friend" and "enemy" to lie at the heart of all politics: without that distinction, the struggle (and ultimately war) intrinsic to political practice would be impossible. An association of states could truly be "universal", then – as the League insisted it sought to be – if it abandoned the realm of politics to concentrate entirely on questions of social and civic cooperation: if it wished however to work politically, and to mediate disputes or decide wars, it would necessarily have to align itself with specific "friends" and against specific "enemies". And the League was, Schmitt pointed out, structured precisely to do that: in cases of aggression, it was to identify the aggressor – the "enemy" – and organize common measures amongst the "friends" against them. In doing so, of course, the League was simply acting as alliances had always done, and, should it have admitted to that "alliance" character, Schmitt in fact would have had no quarrel with it. His objection was not that the League was a partisan alliance, but rather that it cloaked its partisan interests with a rhetoric of universality, claiming to act in the interests of "peace" and "humanity" as a whole. But by doing so, Schmitt warned, the League made possible not simply war but the worst sort of war – the war fought for "humanity", against an enemy now defined not only as the sole "aggressor" but also as no longer "human".

This analysis holds a particular resonance today, of course, when we find that rhetoric of the war-fought-for-peace, the war-fought-for-humanity, retailed so shamelessly by the Bush administration. It is that resonance, no doubt, that accounts for Schmitt's blossoming

popularity among Western intellectuals disenchanted with what they see to be a hegemonic liberalism blind to its own particularism and self-interestedness. But before we sign on to that analysis, it is worth asking: was Schmitt right? By this I mean that we should ask *not* whether Schmitt grasped a core tension in the language of liberal universalism (he did), but rather whether his analysis about the character of liberal universalist politics was borne out in practice. The answer is: it was not. Schmitt, like so many other observers at the time (and like many historians today) paid attention to the League's language and ignored its practice: to put it crudely, he made the common but historically quite unsustainable assumption that political institutions do what they say. Schmitt did grasp something about the "logic" of the League's rhetoric: what he failed to ask, however, was whether its capacities and practices bore much relation to those claims. The League did indeed promise to identify the "aggressor", the outlaw against civilization, and organize collective action against them. But actually, as we know, to the despair of liberals who believed its words and to the glee of Japan's Kwantung Army in Manchuria and the Italians in Abyssinia four years later, when it came to the test, the aggressor was only most reluctantly named and no effective action was taken. And this was because the League's own processes and practices – its commitment to internal discussion, its requirement of unanimity – got in the way.

Schmitt ought to have expected this. The League was a liberal institution, and liberalism, as he himself wrote, sought tirelessly for compromise, to turn the "enemy" into the "competitor", to displace political conflict onto the realm of economics. Indeed, since those liberal practices neutralized the threat encapsulated in universalist language, one might think that Schmitt would have appreciated them. Perversely, however, he didn't: that gap between rhetoric and practice simply struck him as another sign of bad faith and pusillanimity. Faced with the question, "Christ or Barabbas," Schmitt once wrote, "the liberal answers with a motion to adjourn the meeting or set up an investigative committee." Precisely so: faced with a choice or an ultimatum, the League almost invariably adjourned the meeting. But why, exactly, is this so discreditable? Schmitt himself insisted that the distinction between "friend" and "enemy" – or between Christ and Barabbas – was a political and situational, and not a normative or moral one: my Christ is your Barabbas. But if this is so, and if the crusade-for-civilization has no universal value, what could be more sensible than to form the (preferably ponderous, voluble and dilatory) committee? The aim of such a group, after all, is not to decide "Christ or Barabbas", but rather to pass enough time and spin enough words so that when the committee's report, proceedings, minutes of evidence and supplementary appendices are all published, the impassioned partisans of either side

will have become absorbed in their jobs and their children and have trouble remembering precisely why they found this choice so urgent in the first place. Those who follow Schmitt in finding the language of liberal universalism ominous, then, might want to take heart from the fact that international institutions are so very incapable of acting upon it.

When it comes to understanding the League, then, and perhaps to understanding the predicament of liberal universalism itself, the interpretive glass offered us by Carl Schmitt turns out to be less than half full. Schmitt did grasp the inconsistencies of League rhetoric, but he overlooked the quite different tendencies of its practice. And it was League practice, quite as much as League rhetoric, that proved to be habit-forming. As empirical political scientists have shown, for all the Bush administration's adventurism, the world is much less warlike than it was half a century ago; to a considerable extent, we are in the habit of reaching for the pen rather than the gun. I remain persuaded that a study of the practice (rather than the rhetoric) of the League will help to explain that propensity. But if I am, in the end, not persuaded by Carl Schmitt, I wanted at least to take this opportunity to explain why not, and to say thank you to the many Fellows – especially Oliver Primavesi, Horst Bredekamp, Horst Dreier, Motta Kremnitzer, and Irad Kimhi – who insisted that I read him.