



Tito's No to Schmitt

Against the compatibility of the partisan figures, against *Blut und Boden* ideology of populism

GAL KIRN

This text intervenes into recent readings of Carl Schmitt, especially Chantal Mouffe's turn to populist politics and dualist construction of the political field. It challenges Schmitt's notion of the 'telluric' that runs dangerously close to Blut-und-Boden ideology and has left some sedimentation into allegedly formal notion of 'the people.' The theoretical challenge is supplemented by concrete analysis of Yugoslav partisan liberation struggle.

In (1) recent years the name and work of Carl Schmitt have often appeared in discussions around Giorgio Agamben and his figure of “homo sacer” and in Bruno Latour’s recurring splitting on friends and enemies of Earth.(2) Yet perhaps more surprisingly, we can trace Schmitt around the work of Chantal Mouffe and in a more authoritarian or decisionist tendency in leftist thought. How is it possible that Carl Schmitt, who was the most important fascist legal and political theorist of the Third Reich, has become so popular today? Moreover, why has his theory of the partisan (figure) received such a potent status among some researchers of twentieth-century militant struggles who are aware of his otherwise cynical and conservative opinion on anticolonial struggles? (3) Briefly answering these questions, I contend that the current interest in, and even obsession with, Schmitt has to do with his formalist and and decisionist stance. This points to two evident deadlocks on the part of recent critical theory: firstly, if such position is flirting with decisionism and state of exception as the only possible lens to think about politics, it speaks about the internal political crisis of left after 1989, a disillusionment with party politics and ignoring of a painstaking long political labour that needs to be taken in order to transform society (delegation of power on almost external, divine force and leader). The theoretical position that primarily embraces decisionism threatens to remain on the abstract level, which points to its own separation from material forces; secondly, the problem with left-Schmittian positions is, then, that they indeed ignore the kernel of Schmitt’s counter-revolutionary ideology. As I show, the figure of the partisan in Schmitt was never conceived as a purely formalist figure; rather it is overdetermined by the dimension of the “telluric”, which brings it in close proximity with fascist ideology (*Boden*, soil). This intervention is thus a contribution to dismantling Schmitt’s popularity for left struggle and theory, in the mentioned return of Chantal Mouffe and other thinkers aligned to this return in the name of populism/decisionism.(4)

Chantal Mouffe, who together with Ernesto Laclau in the mid-1980s, performed a turn towards a post-Marxist reading within a socialist strategy of the political,(5) has recently performed a turn into this highly problematical appropriation of Schmitt. The question is then, whether we could speak about a turn from socialist to populist strategy? If in the mid-1980s Mouffe and Laclau’s theory of class antagonisms was relativized by the logic of equivalents, their later push in understanding emancipatory politics has become completely grounded in the vague notion of “people” and a defence of formalist populism. Mouffe’s reading does not critically problematize the “telluric” as substantialist inscription in Schmitt,(6) rather she can take uncritically the formalism of the partisan, which is then a pathway to a formalist conception of the people in

particular and of a populist politics in general that, taken to the extreme, can be twisted either to the left or to the right. In Mouffe’s view the field of politics is constructed by the split between “us” and “them”, between the “people” and “elite” (establishment), where elite becomes an enemy of people. This positioning – despite her stress of pluralist agonism and promotion of left populism – fails to grasp a major criterion for distinguishing between left and right. What is especially missing from this construction of the political is the class antagonism. Here, one can yet again repeat an old trope that Marx directed at idealists: one cannot, like baron Munchausen, grab populism by the hair out of the telluric shores of a quagmire. A populism without a clear global orientation towards social transformation, openly class orientation and intersectional struggles cannot tackle the current urgent task of critically addressing (neo)fascism and the authoritarian use of populist politics of late neoliberalism. Rather, it is contributing to growing blurring of the distinction between left and right populism and can be easily appropriated by the general antipolitical constellation ‘people against a corrupt evil elite.’⁽⁷⁾ Furthermore, even if critical scholarship finds part of Schmitt’s theoretical legacy important for thinking about the distinction between politics and the political, state of exception, the relationship between liberalism and democracy, and the history of political ideas, we ought not to lose our clear sight of who our theoretical *enemy* is: Schmitt’s political aims/views, especially concerning the figure of the partisan, point to his obscurantist-conservative politics that expressed nothing but cynicism over anti-colonial and liberation struggles. There are thus several reasons for warning against an appropriation of Schmitt’s theory of the partisan.



**Giorgio Agamben,
one of the main
supporters of
Schmitt today, never
discussed the
partisan figure**

We need to be aware that the figure of the partisan and partisan struggle was neutralised and appropriated in a peculiar way in Europe after WW2. Partisans were not seen as communists, socialists, anarchists, or fighters for social and revolutionary struggle. But already during the period of Marshall reconstruction they came to be presented as members of national resistances, as builders of new democratic nation-states, while in the former East the history of partisan struggles was over-written by the Communist Parties, especially Stalinist perspective of liberation. It took a new wave of anticolonial struggles during the 1960s and 70s for the figure of the partisan to be rehabilitated, while since the “end of history” we have seen very few serious politico-theoretical evocations of partisan figures.⁽⁸⁾ The partisan figure should be rehabilitated from both the nostalgic outlook on the immaculate beginnings of the people’s liberation struggle and from Schmitt’s nationalist reappropriation of it. In other words, fascist enemies have to be beaten in their own territory. My proposal to critically

tackle the left Schmittianism is on the one hand, theoretically working through substantialist dimension of the seemingly formalist approach, and on the other hand working through the historical example of Yugoslav partisan struggle during WWII – one of the endeavours pursued in detail in my monograph *Partisan Ruptures*.

It is symptomatic that we can barely find any mention of the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle in Schmitt's book – in fact, there is a single footnote, stating that during World War II a struggle took place between Tito's partisans and the monarchic partisans.⁽⁹⁾ This might be either a historical inaccuracy, or rather an evil deception, otherwise one cannot explain why Schmitt would equate the ultra-nationalist Chetniks of Draža Mihajlović (who were long conceived also by the Allies as the sole legitimate and legal representatives of the old Kingdom of Yugoslavia and of the government-in-exile in London) with a true antifascist partisan struggle. However, this omission is not the book's or Schmitt's main blind spot. Namely, Schmitt's analyses do not contain any thematisation between colonialism and Nazism, as he ignores a broad range of class-related and geopolitical conflicts in the mid-twentieth century.⁽¹⁰⁾ Schmitt remains blind to the critique of Nazism as a radical continuation of colonialism and to the very core of the partisan movement, which (also) involves anti-fascist and anti-colonial moments that can be traced from the 1920s to the formal ending of colonialism in the 1980s. As I have shown on different occasions,⁽¹¹⁾ the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle (PLS) was a name for a revolutionary project, in which the masses in their autonomy did make history. This project exposed the old European project of what is often dubbed "internal colonialism" as promoted by the Congress of Berlin and Western powers, especially Germany and Italy, both of which demanded an equal right to colonise outside and hid nothing of its politico-economic interest in the doctrine of *Drang nach Osten*.⁽¹²⁾ The Yugoslav PLS asserted the political autonomy of the Balkans beyond the negative phantasmagoria and colonial interests of the great powers. Furthermore, the Yugoslav PLS was one of the few successful anti-fascist struggles that not only waged the struggle by relying mostly on their own forces (liberating from fascism on its own, such as were the cases in Greece and Albania), but also transformed a negative struggle into a positive social and cultural revolution. It resulted in a very different – federative and socialist – Yugoslavia that was not dominated by an external power, which considering the overall post-war constellation makes it truly exceptional. The project of Yugoslavia contributed an important part to making a universalist politics that affirmed that "there is an alternative" to the bipolar world and to the Soviet path to socialism.⁽¹³⁾

Schmitt's argument in favour of the partisan figure contradicts some of the main theses of his previous works, in which he firmly defended the concept of sovereignty and the primacy of the state of emergency during the establishment of a state authority. His theory of the partisan figure

does not exhibit merely a critique of liberal democratic institutions: the partisan figure allows him to sever the umbilical cord of Westphalian state sovereignty, which allegedly no longer corresponded to the new international reality of the twentieth century. The partisan political and military strategy shook the ground beneath the (inter)state sovereignty and the state monopoly on the use of violence: namely, partisans as a political force undermined the international state legal order at the point where enemies are seen as other states.⁽¹⁴⁾ If international law recognises clearly defined state borders, partisan warfare does not necessarily observe them. Moreover, partisans became the greatest threat to the sovereign order because they failed to settle for an easy integration into the state apparatuses. Here we can also dwell upon the fact that Giorgio Agamben, one of the main supporters of Schmitt today, never discussed the partisan figure. Agamben constructs his theory of sovereign authority through the figures of the sovereign on the one hand and of ‘homo sacer’ on the other.⁽¹⁵⁾ According to the logic of sovereignty, ‘homo sacer’ is subjected to the mechanism of ‘inclusive exclusion’ and represents the most internal element of the sovereign order (a sovereign may designate anyone as an exception) and consequently also the most external element (which can be killed rather than sacrificed). Due to his insistence on desubjectification and a more passive dimension of in-determinate politics, Agamben does not thematise the partisans, as the latter pushes the logic of sovereignty beyond its limits.

According to Schmitt, the main characteristics of the partisan figure include the following: dedication to the struggle, mobility, irregular military forces, and the telluric character of the struggle. Schmitt’s definition is partially accurate, as he correctly points out that the novelty of the partisan struggle is that it subverts the conventional framework of the war between two or more countries. I also agree with his definition of two otherwise secondary characteristics of the partisan struggle: the mobility of the struggle and the irregularity of the military forces. Schmitt does not elaborate further on these two moments. I can only add that the irregularity of the partisan struggle results from the shortage of material resources and the availability of fighting men and women, which primarily depends on the seasons, the situation during offensives, and the support of the local population. Neither is the thesis of the mobility of partisan operations in question, as partisan units attempt – in light of their deficient weaponry and inferior numbers – to surprise the occupiers by means of various tactics: impeding the



Mouffe’s reading does not critically problematize the “telluric” as substantialist inscription in Schmitt, rather she can take uncritically the formalism of the partisan, which is then a pathway to a formalist conception of the people in particular and of a populist politics in general

occupiers' strike forces, in particular by destroying their infrastructure, while simultaneously organising a decent, even passionate resistance in case of open confrontations with the enemy forces. The typology of the military actions varies – from diversions, infiltrations, and sabotage, to assassinations and lightning-quick actions – which points to the peculiarities involved in partisan warfare which have long ceased to be restricted merely to the partisan struggle itself.

The next characteristic is perhaps more surprising, as Schmitt underlined the partisans' political and even revolutionary dedication. It is also interesting that Schmitt referred to Mao Tse-Tung as the main protagonist of his theory. What were the reasons behind Schmitt's choice? As Alberto Toscano has correctly ascertained,⁽¹⁶⁾ Schmitt's key goal was to destroy the bipolarity of the world, and thus open three extensive areas of civilisations. His vision of a new world would then be profoundly depoliticising and approach the orientalist-culturalist vision found in Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations*. It is interesting that Mao's China is supposed to play an important role in this new multipolarity.⁽¹⁷⁾ Here it is important to note that Schmitt is not interested in the experiences of the anti-colonial movement or the Non-Aligned Movement. Moreover, he cynically equates these movements with 'zones of neutrality' that promote 'planetary liberalism.' In this respect I fully agree with Slavoj Žižek, who points out how Schmitt keeps looking for the enemies of the bipolar world and for eternal conflicts,⁽¹⁸⁾ which culminates in a depoliticised vision of the world and the re-establishment of the authority of the major sovereign states. Paradoxically, the figure of the partisan (with Mao on Schmitt's banner) and his revolutionary dedication fall back to the model of sovereignty in a Huntingtonian, racialised civilisational order. The partisan figure here acts to re-strengthen the old national sovereigntist paradigm, and it is not difficult to see how this resonates with today's right-wing populism, which takes an empty criticism of the elite and cheap anti-Americanism as means to strengthen the hegemony over its national body.



Schmitt is not interested in the experiences of the anti-colonial movement or the Non-Aligned Movement. Moreover, he cynically equates these movements with 'zones of neutrality' that promote 'planetary liberalism.'

The key problem of Schmitt's partisan figure lies in the last of the three aforementioned characteristics: the supposed 'telluric character' of the struggle. The telluric character points to an important foundation of its position, which, in turn, reveals a very important feature. Namely, the telluric character overdetermines all other elements – including the revolutionary dedication of the partisan struggle. The partisan's adherence and attachment

to the land points out the exceedingly conservative character of Schmitt's deliberations, referred to as a 'counter-revolutionary position' by Toscano.⁽¹⁹⁾ The telluric nature of partisans thus remains intimately associated with their native soil, for which they are ready to fight to the bitter end. This sort of emphasis neutralises or even denies the political and revolutionary engagement of the national liberation struggles, which have defined the revolutionary political theory and practice in the twentieth century. The definition of 'earth' and 'soil' transforms radically in the partisan struggles. To put this differently: new political communities and new political subjectivities that did not exist before the struggle or have since been built on new foundations can only arise through this struggle. The case of Yugoslav partisans points to the only veritable existence of mass democratic people's councils being able to organise political and cultural life and military struggle on the liberated territories. Masses for the first time in twentieth-century Yugoslavia entered the stage of history, the masses became subjectified and not reduced to a nation or to the interest of hegemonic bourgeois class. Together with militants of Communist Party of Yugoslavia (which was, along with the Antifascist Women Organisation and Youth Communist Organisation, undoubtedly the most vital and important organisational force of the PLS), they imagined a radically new Yugoslavia that had nothing to do with Kingdom of Yugoslavia, at the time synonymous with the exploitation and oppression of nations and nationalities. Contrary to these political principle and experiences, Schmitt's conception of the telluric is set within the imaginary of a new race or nation, while the broader transformative dynamics and the inclusion of the partisan figure in anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, or anti-colonial struggle remain absent.

The points at which Schmitt's supposedly formal theory turns to focus on history and presents a few key examples of partisan struggles, provide more evidence of the privileged position he accords to the telluric. Schmitt likes to discuss Spanish guerrilla warfare against Napoleon and Mao's aforementioned global struggle for geopolitical areas. He does not theorise the possibility that tensions can arise between different conceptions of telluric and their inscriptions in opposed political engagements/organisations. However, his ambivalence can be used for a more precise definition of the partisan figure. It is precisely this internal tension between the telluric and the revolutionary that severs the partisan figure in two: we are either dealing with a strictly defined national struggle,⁽²⁰⁾ or we are discussing a revolutionary partisan struggle. This does not mean that a revolutionary struggle



The partisan figure should be rehabilitated from both the nostalgic outlook on the immaculate beginnings of the people's liberation struggle and from Schmitt's nationalist reappropriation of it.

cannot contain telluric moments, nor that a partisan struggle cannot also be a national struggle. It only means that for the analysis at hand, the awareness of the other aspect – i.e. the place and time in which the revolutionary struggle ‘overdetermines’ the telluric dimension – is more important. As a rule,

the telluric-national dimension applies to the struggle against the oppression of national and ethnic minorities, and against foreign occupiers – be it fascist, colonial, and/or imperialist. The differentiation of the partisan figure from the revolutionary and national struggle is beneficial if we can evaluate whether a certain partisan struggle also practices more universal and revolutionary politics besides its national-telluric dimensions. These moments can only be determined by analysing the political actions and demands and by establishing whether the struggle has indeed transformed the existing social relations, or whether it has remained merely within the framework of the (national) reaction to occupation. Has the struggle resulted in liberation or a compromise with the existing regime? Has the partisan movement in question ended up in the position of the old political structures and been reintegrated into the political system, or has a wider transformative process been at work? When partisan movements preserve their merely telluric and national dimensions, they can readily succumb to ‘phobic nationalism.’(21)



If Tito’s answer to Stalin was a resolute no in 1948, a no that meant, ‘do not to meddle in the political and economic autonomy of the new Yugoslavia,’ Tito also would also respond with *no* to Schmitt’s telluric image of the national partisan

The Yugoslav partisans – the movement as well as the leadership of this revolutionary project – were well aware of this fact.

To have insisted solely on the telluric moment would not have resulted in Tito’s victory. It would have perhaps united a specific resistance within a regional and national community, and as such remained close to other nationalistic military formations. In this way, it would have not spoken to everyone invested in the struggle for transformational project, to everyone that exceeds its mere national belonging. Thinking and existing about the telluric as future ethnical base would also not have had much in common with the idea and policy of international solidarity or the creation of a new egalitarian world.

The scope of Schmitt’s ideas has much more to do with the politics of the substantialisation of the enemy and the exclusion of the Other than with the watershed achievements that could be observed in Spain, Yugoslavia, Greece, and other anti-colonial struggles following the end of World War II.(22)

Benjamin Noys is right in opposing Schmitt's apparent support for the revolutionary dedication of the partisans that are actually much closer to the definition of telluric given by Johann Gottlieb Fichte.⁽²³⁾ Schmitt thus concludes that the core of the partisan struggle lies in the defence of the telluric, while the partisans must by no means become a "manipulated cog in the wheel of world-revolutionary aggression."⁽²⁴⁾ This is the strategic point in Schmitt which marks a clear shift from the revolutionary towards the telluric. Instead of the telluric differentiation between enemies and friends, the partisan struggle can also be defined, in Toscano's words, as "practices of antagonism that do not substantialize friendship and enmity,"⁽²⁵⁾ but instead attempt "to revisit the idea of solidarity, which combines the reference to an abstract principle, collective action and a widening circle of allegiances."⁽²⁶⁾ In political reality, the ideal partisan figure does not exist, or rather it is at the outset characterised by the collective dimension of the partisan struggle. The latter consists of a multitude of individuals – fighting women and men, supporters, and groups with exceedingly diverse political convictions and, as always in struggle, with multiple individual motivations. All of these actors are resolved to take a position that also has consequences for the (re)definition of the relationship between the telluric and the international, between class exploitation and gender and national oppressions.

Conclusion

When returning to the partisan rupture of the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle (PLS) one should evaluate it in accordance with two theses: firstly, the PLS was not simply a rupture that would end with a mere overthrow of the old powers. Rather, it was a rupture with long-term effects that would shake Yugoslavia during World War II, and be felt globally after World War II; secondly, the strategy of the liberation struggle was successful because it productively and dialectically tackled both the national as well as the class question. If Tito's answer to Stalin was a resolute no in 1948, a no that meant, 'do not to meddle in the political and economic autonomy of the new Yugoslavia,' Tito also would also respond with no to Schmitt's telluric image of the national partisan. Instead, Tito embarked on a path of international struggle alongside oppressed and colonised nations, which becomes clearer after World War II, in the support of anticolonial struggles across the world. The figure of the partisan and partisan politics in general were thus internally connected to a much larger project of decolonisation that included ending forms of oppressions and exploitation. Partisan politics was pursued with other means after the split with Stalin: on the one hand, yet another independent road to socialism was opened up with the initiative around workers' self-management, while on the other Yugoslavia, alongside Egypt and India, became a founding partner of the non-aligned movement. The supposed decisionism of great leader Tito was not done in some abstract way, coming from the top of History, rather it was based

in and departed from a broad mass support, from the very concrete experiences and mobilisation of women and men active in the partisan struggle, and later in transitory forms of socialism.

Today, it is the dominance of authoritarian neoliberalism that has enabled the “telluric” and quasi-formalist indifference between left and right populism to strike back with a vengeance. Instead of building solid intersectional coalitions between the oppressed that entail class, race, and gender on international plane, we seem to be constantly pushed on the old trope of totalitarianism and extremism: fascists against antifascists, Nazis against communists, right against left populism. This not only expresses fear of masses and radical democracy from below, but also a very partisan demarcation: a determined belief that we need to radically transform our societies. Today this belief is not absent, however, it should be more organized. Diverse and dispersed political bodies and organisations vesting their powers into building alliances for democratic and ecological socialism should be yet again re-built in a more international horizon, moving from criticism to affirmation.

NOTES

1. This is a revised text from the concluding sections of chapter 1 from my book *Partisan Ruptures*.
2. For a few good remarks on Latour’s Schmittianism see Wark, “Bruno Latour: Occupy Earth.”
3. For quite a generous reading of Schmitt’s ‘innovation’ of the partisan, see Slomp, “The Theory of the Partisan.”
4. See also Hooker, *Carl Schmitt’s International Thought* 210-211; Aureli, *Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Especially Agamben’s theoretical work, unsurprisingly, owns a major debt to Schmitt from his *Homo Sacer* onwards. Žižek’s flirtation with Schmitt comes at the point of encounter with his take on Lenin, while he is generally aware of the depoliticising and conservative tendencies of Schmittian positions. Cf. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*.
5. Cf. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
6. See Mouffe’s *The Return of the Political*, esp. chapters 7-9. In her edited volume *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, the most focused points can be found in Introduction and Chapter 3. For a very good criticism of her treatment of Schmitt, see Wiley, “Mouffe and Schmitt”; Beckstein, “The dissociative and polemical political.”
7. Later, its politico-theoretical shift towards the centre of political field is announced in the late 1990s with the return to Schmitt (Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*), and with Laclau’s book *On Populist Reason*. For a detailed critique of Laclau and Mouffe, their post-Marxist turn into post-socialist period, see Pupovac, “Springtime for Hegemony.”
8. Cf. Malm, “In Wildness is the Liberation of the World”; Kirn, *Partisan Ruptures*; and most importantly Rojava’s revolutionary struggle. Che Guevara, who defines the partisan army as the ‘armed vanguard of the people’ and thus criticises the established model of the contemporaneous socialist politics (the Party - the

- working class), is one of the vital theoretical references. Cf. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*.
9. Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan* 38.
 10. Toscano, "Carl Schmitt in Beijing."
 11. Kirn, *Partisan Ruptures*; Kirn, *Partisan Counter-Archive*.
 12. Manuela Boatcă analyses a deeply engrained racist-colonial trope of representatives of German Nationalökonomie, such as Max Weber. Cf. her "Coloniality of Citizenship and Occidental Epistemology."
 13. See also Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.
 14. Cf. Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan* 14. Within Schmitt's strict legal frame, the partisans were not officially recognised either by the occupying forces or by the Allies, except when they represented the old government. In this sense, the Allies - by waiting for recognition of the Yugoslav partisans - legitimised, in accordance with the legal logic, the Nazi terror against 'the bandits,' whom the fascists failed to treat as regular prisoners of war or as a part of the anti-fascist coalition.
 15. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
 16. Toscano, "Carl Schmitt in Beijing" 430.
 17. Ibid. 426.
 18. Schmitt suspends the antagonism and makes the conflict practically eternal through the optics of the division into friends and enemies, which, after all, results in the depoliticisation of Schmitt's theory. See also criticism made by Žižek in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* ("Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics" 28).
 19. Toscano, "Carl Schmitt in Beijing" 425.
 20. Let me mention the example of the Lithuanian partisans, who, between the end of World War II and 1956, fought against the Soviet army and remained dedicated to the telluric moment. The Soviet liberation, which came at a price in the East, should by no means be idealised. However, at the same time we should be aware that during the war, a part of the Lithuanian military formations collaborated with the German Nazis. If we could conditionally say that the Lithuanian partisans fought against the Soviet imperialism, this does not absolve them of their wartime collaboration, and their struggle by no means qualifies among the revolutionary transformations of social relations.
 21. On 'subjective violence,' see Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*; Žižek, *On Violence*. Should religious foundations be established instead of national ones, a resistance can also turn into religious fundamentalism, which excludes anyone who does not belong to the correct religion.
 22. Toscano advocates an attack against the dominant clichés about fanaticism in politics and the appropriation of militant subjectivities in order to argue in favour of current emancipatory policies (cf. "Carl Schmitt in Beijing").
 23. Noys, "The Arrow and the Compass." If we are more concise, Schmitt's reference to the telluric is largely based on Fichte's interpretation of Niccolò Machiavelli, while the import of Machiavelli into the German context is closely related to the genesis of nationalism. Schmitt's demand for a German Machiavelli calls not only for a unified Germany, but also for a colonialist expansion of the Third Reich (cf. *The Theory of the Partisan* 74).
 24. Noys, "The Arrow and the Compass" 52.
 25. Toscano, "Carl Schmitt in Beijing" 250.
 26. Ibid. 251.