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Virtual plurality and polemical synthesis: Carl Schmitt and the staging of a public

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In this essay I derive a theory of virtual publics from Carl Schmitt's discussions of polemical identification. In Schmitt's well-known formulations, a public is distinguished from private individuals and groupings by an existential opposition to an enemy. As I show, the polemical formation of the public involves the channeling of intensities from diverse pre-political or private conflicts. Adopting the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, I argue that these intensities harbor a plurality of incipient or 'virtual' polemical alignments. As this reading suggests, the public can be polemically opposed to its antithesis only insofar as it is selected from and so excludes other modes of itself.

Keywords: Deleuze; Massumi; people; pluralism; Schmitt; sovereignty

> The People exist only in the sphere of publicity. The unanimous opinion of one hundred million private persons is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed just as well and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence, than through the statistical apparatus that has been constructed with such meticulousness in the last 50 years.
>
> –Carl Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*

> The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to a collectivity of men … becomes public by virtue of such a relationship.
>
> –Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political*

The attempt to derive a theory of the public as a virtual plurality from Carl Schmitt's discussions of polemical identification might seem an unlikely exercise. For Schmitt, after all, the public is defined precisely against pluralism and abstraction. It is the direct and immediate appearance of the People, a unity that transcends the diverse interests and affiliations that characterize modern, liberal societies. In Schmitt's best-known formulations, this unity is hostile. The public appears in an existential opposition of 'friend and enemy' that transcends the lesser struggles of various individuals and groupings. But on

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what basis, and by what means, are these individuals and groupings divided into friend and enemy? What relationship among them becomes public, and how does this public distinguish itself as the basis of intense, even lethal alignments? Schmitt provides varying answers to these questions.[1] In *The crisis of parliamentary democracy* (1923), he describes the polemical formation of political opponents by a 'myth' that evokes and combines hostilities from a plurality of lesser struggles. In *The concept of the political* (1927, revised 1932), by contrast, the opposition of friend and enemy is ostensibly the result of a sovereign decision. However, the decision also draws on intensities in play among diverse individuals groupings. Furthermore, as I show, these intensities harbor a plurality of potential or incipient polemical alignments. Adopting the terms of Gilles Deleuze (1994) and Brian Massumi (2002), I describe this plurality as 'virtual'. As this reading suggests, the public can be polemically opposed to its antithesis only insofar as it is selected from and so excludes other modes of itself.

Schmitt viewed the mobile plurality of such publics as a threat to the integrity of the nation and the sovereignty of the state. In his attempt to link a homogeneous people to a decisive sovereign, he therefore dissimulated the selective, synthetic character of polemical oppositions and the diverse agents and techniques involved in their staging. Against Schmitt, and with recent thinkers such as William Connolly, Michael Warner and Samuel Delaney, I argue for a democratic politics in which the virtual plurality of polemically differentiated publics is itself publicized, making the staging of a people a matter of collective reflection and contest.

Rationalism and representation

In *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, Schmitt rejects out of hand the notion of a self-organizing public. Millions of people cannot enact but only acclaim their public identity, which must be staged by way of a representative. As he explains, democratic identification always involves a 'dialectical' or 'Jacobin logic', whereby the sovereign, constituent power (*pouvoir constituant*) of the people as a whole is granted to a representative faction, be it the majority, wise elites, or a personal sovereign, which is charged with giving the will of the people a positive, public form (1988a, p. 26). The identification of the people's will, Schmitt emphasizes, is not denotative but constative. The unity of the people 'is not a matter of something actually equal legally, politically or sociologically, but rather of identifications' (pp. 26–27). Only, if the people do not precede the identification of their will, if it can only be staged, who, or what, does the acclaiming? Here arises the familiar paradox of democratic founding – famously articulated by Rousseau – namely, that the power to constitute the general will must itself be authorized by the general will.[2] As Schmitt puts it, 'In particular, only political power, which should come from the people's will, can form the people's will in the first place'

(1988a, p. 29). Paradoxically, the sovereign must at once represent and constitute the public. Or, seen from the other side, the public must acclaim its own appearance, recognizing itself in the act that constitutes it.

According to classical principles, parliament could perform this complex role, insofar as it discovered and revealed a public will already latent among a multitude of private individuals by way of rational discussion. 'Parliament is […] the place in which particles of reason that are strewn unequally among human beings gather themselves and bring public power under their control' (Schmitt 1988a, p. 35). Although private wills are not themselves rational, they collectively harbor a proto-rational will in the form of these particles. Private individuals, or elements within them, are already participants in the abstract unity that only need be made visible, or public. Once assembled by parliamentary discussion, public reason also becomes the ruling power in (and over) the private wills of individual citizens. 'The simple meaning of the principle of representation is that the members of parliament are representatives of the whole people and thus have an independent authority *vis-à-vis* the voters' (Schmitt 1996, p. 26).

In Weimar, however, Schmitt finds only private or 'objective' interests and groupings, channeled by fiercely polarized parties. The pretense according to which parliamentary representatives engaged in a rational search for the common good, Schmitt claims, had been thoroughly discredited in an age of party propaganda, mass media, bureaucratic specialization, political professionalism and violent class struggle. Under such conditions, procedural norms supposedly guaranteeing free and disinterested dialogue appeared 'useless and even embarrassing, as though someone had painted the radiator of a modern central heating system with red flames' (Schmitt 1988a, p. 6). Absent popular faith in rational discussion, parliament had lost its claim on the democratic idea of the General Will and hence its ability to constitute or represent a public. However, in terms that would later become central to his *Concept of the political*, Schmitt argues that faith in discussion had never itself been rational. Public confidence in parliament was formed not by a latent consensus among particles of reason but by shared hostilities to a common enemy. 'So long as it was essentially a polemical concept (that is, the negation of established monarchy), democratic convictions could be joined to and reconciled with various other political aspirations. But to the extent that it was realized, democracy was seen to serve many masters and not in any way to have a substantial, clear goal' (Schmitt 1988a, p. 24) In Weimar, parliament was challenged from within and without by radical parties on both left and right. Each claimed to speak for the people and to know their true enemies.

Myth and polemic

How and by whom would the people and their enemy be distinguished? In *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, Schmitt critically analyzes the

polemical construction of a class enemy on the part of the Marxists. He argues that this construction rests on a political 'myth,' as described by George Sorel. For Sorel, a myth acts as a force of collective mobilization transcending individual calculations of interest.[3] As Schmitt argues, Sorel's myth of the 'General Strike' draws out the messianic and polemical significance of Marxist dialectics. Rather than his technical analysis of capitalism, Marx's genuine political contribution was his synthesis of various struggles in the polemical opposition of labor and capital. 'The contradictions of many classes were thus simplified into a single, final contradiction … This simplification signified a powerful increase in intensity' (Schmitt 1998a, p. 59). As Schmitt explains, the Marxist unification of diverse struggles was achieved by a world outlook concentrated in a powerful 'image' (*Bild*) of the bourgeois enemy and linked to a messianic historical mission.

> The great psychological and historical meaning of the social theory of myth cannot be denied. And the construction of the bourgeois by means of Hegelian Dialectic has served to create an image of the enemy that was capable of intensifying all the emotions of hatred and contempt. I believe that the history of this image of the bourgeois is just as important as the history of the bourgeoisie itself. (Schmitt 1998a, pp. 73–74)

As Schmitt describes it, the image of the bourgeois enemy evokes and combines hostilities from diverse sources, blending the aristocratic and aesthetic contempt of French literature with the scientific-evolutionary condemnation of Marx and Engels. 'All the energies that had created this image were united on Russian soil. Both the Russian and the Proletarian saw now in the bourgeois the incarnation of everything that sought to enslave life's art in a deadly mechanism' (Schmitt 1998a, p.74). As it migrated eastward, however, the image of the bourgeois also became associated with national struggles. Schmitt argues that nationalist myths trumped those of a global class struggle by virtue of their greater resonance with various affiliations. 'The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent, the apparently more typical *terrisme* of the Celtic and romance peoples, the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations – all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today' (Schmitt 1998a, p. 75). Once again, these affiliations are evoked by an image of the enemy. 'Wherever it comes to an open confrontation of the two myths, such as in Italy, the national myth has until today always been victorious. Italian Fascism depicted its communist enemy with a horrific face, the Mongolian face of Bolshevism; this has made a stronger impact and has evoked more powerful emotions than the socialist image of the bourgeois' (Schmitt 1998a, p. 75).

For Sorel, of course, the aim was to stimulate and mobilize the masses, rather than lead them. The authoritarian potential of Marxist myths was

however realized by Lenin, who also rejects economistic reductions of political motives to objective class position (see Schmitt 1976, p. 63). As Lenin argues, the hostility of the masses is stimulated by many local struggles, but they have to be unified and given political significance by Marxist doctrine and leadership. He dismisses the syndicalists' hope that violent attacks on the bourgeoisie might provoke a backlash, and in turn spark a spontaneous revolution (the aim of Sorel's General Strike). Such provocations are unnecessary and fruitless. Everyday life is replete not only with great outrages but with a multiplicity of 'social evils'. Nevertheless, 'we are unable to gather, if one may so put it, and concentrate all these drops and streamlets of popular resentment that are brought forth to a far larger extent than we imagine by the conditions of Russian life, and that must be combined into a single gigantic torrent' (Lenin 1969, pp. 76–77).

By framing various local struggles in the messianic terms of a world-historical class war, the Marxist myth transcends petty conflicts over wages and working hours, while at the same time drawing from them palpable intensities. Schmitt clearly found affinities with Lenin, and his description of the Marxist predilection for a radical polemics is strikingly similar to that he later gives of political or 'public' oppositions as such.

> For socialism and its ideas of class struggle there is no greater danger than professional politics and participation in parliamentary business. These wear down great enthusiasm into chatter and intrigue and kill the genuine instincts and intuitions that produce a moral decision. Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those who are inspired by great mythical images … But the momentum must come from the masses themselves. (Schmitt 1998a, p. 71)

The 'momentum' of the masses, it would seem, has little direction of its own, as it consists of fluid intensities circulating among various private or 'social' antagonisms that are then captured and channeled by myth. The power of that myth, however, still depends upon its resonance with the elements of *terrisme* it combines and fuses. Given the localizing tendencies of speech, education, etc., national myths have greater resonance than those appealing to broader class affiliations. Not all myths are created equal, and (as Benedict Anderson has shown) the national myth draws on a plurality of cultural and linguistic affinities (cf. Anderson, 1991).

From myth to decision

In *The Concept of the political*, it is no longer clear which myth will prevail, which antagonism will become political or 'public'. In this text, polemical distinctions are divorced from stable traditions of affiliation and 'the political' is instead characterized by an existential (*seinsmäßige*) confrontation of 'friend and enemy'. While allowing that any of a number of positive conflicts

can combine in and give rise to such a confrontation, whether religious, economic, or ethno-cultural, Schmitt no longer privileges one source of collective affiliation over another. Instead, he distinguishes a general logic or process of the political as such from that of other struggles. Antagonism becomes political or 'public' at a crucial threshold of intensity beyond which it transcends the normative or ideological distinctions from which it arose (cf. Schmitt 1976, p. 26).

> The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations. The real friend-enemy grouping is existentially so strong and decisive that the nonpolitical antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives to the conditions and conclusions of the political situation at hand. In any event, that grouping is always political which orients itself toward this most extreme possibility. (Schmitt 1976, p. 38)

The political, so understood, can emerge 'from every domain' (Schmitt 1976, p. 62). Hence, Schmitt rejects the liberal de-politicization of aesthetic, economic and moral spheres of action. All these realms, while not themselves political, harbor fluid intensities. Once they resonate with others in a polemical opposition, the plurality of religious, economic and ethnic antagonisms become so many catalysts for a conflict that transcends particular interests or values. Rather than specific content, these catalysts contribute to a fund of affective accumulation. '*Emotionally* the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of the distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support. This does not alter the autonomy of such distinctions' (Schmitt 1976, p. 27, emphasis added).

Schmitt's claim regarding the 'autonomy' of political distinctions bears closer inspection. As he allows, they draw on a plurality of non-political distinctions. Further, it seems at times that the political and other forms of association differ in degree rather than kind.[4] 'Every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping' (Schmitt 1976, p. 29, cf. p. 36).[5] However, as Schmitt emphasizes, the heightened intensity of political conflict involves not only a change of quantity but also one of quality. In Schmitt's terms, the political enmity is the 'public enemy', a case of *hostis* rather than *inimicus* (p. 28). When a conflict becomes political it sheds the 'normative' (moral, aesthetic, etc.) discriminations from which it arose. The political other is not a familiar opponent, a competitor on the same field, but a stranger (cf. p. 28). Schmitt compares the friend-enemy antithesis to Hegel's

conception of war as mutual negation. 'This war is not a war of families against families, but between peoples, and hatred becomes thereby undifferentiated and freed from all particular personality' (p. 63). Once the line is crossed, Schmitt claims, the accumulation of affectively laden oppositions gives way to an orientation to physical struggle. This struggle is not only more intense, but also different in kind. Indeed, intensity itself, having brought antagonism to this point, bows to the existential perspective it has wrought. Once identified, the enemy need not be hated (though he, she or they may well be), only fought. 'A private enemy is a person who hates us, whereas a public enemy is a person who fights against us' (p. 29, fn. 9). Thus, the absolute, singular and qualitative character of the political rests on a constitutive forgetting of its plural, contingent and incremental origins.

Contrary to some misconceptions, Schmitt did not identify the political with the practice of war *per se*. 'War is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics' (1976, p. 34, cf. fn. 14). Rather, the political character of an entity resides in its capacity to distinguish friend and enemy, that is, the capacity for the *decision* that distinguishes the properly war-inducing situation from the banalities of everyday 'competitions and intrigues'. 'What always matters is the possibility of the extreme case taking place, the real war, and the decision whether this situation has or has not arrived' (p. 35, cf. p. 37). In principle, the political becomes a limiting criterion for the use of physical violence, distinguishing those conflicts justifying mortal struggle. Only, how can one know when the situation is at hand? As Schmitt makes clear, there is no objective view of what constitutes an ontological threat. 'Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life (*seinsmässige Art von Leben*) and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence (*Art Existenz*)' (Schmitt 1976, p. 27, Schmitt 2002, p. 27). Any antagonism can potentially become a source of violent struggle. Of course, this does not validate the pluralist critique of sovereignty which emphasizes the many associations that influence social behavior. The latter fails to comprehend the transition described above, in which a plurality of antagonisms fuses in a conflict that transcends them all. The political is always the limit of pluralism, regardless of the plurality of its sources. Where competing associations negate the capacity of any one to declare war, the political is merely (temporarily) suppressed (cf. Schmitt 1976, p. 39). Once again: 'The political entity is by its very nature the decisive entity, regardless of the sources from which it derives its last psychic motives. It exists or it does not exist. If it exists, it is the supreme, that is, in the decisive case, the authoritative entity' (Schmitt 1976, pp. 43–44).

Although the political so understood may not be eliminated, it becomes difficult if not impossible to situate. Every grouping not only carries proto-political intensities but can also become a site of decision, and hence sovereign. Nor can one distinguish as political the grouping most relevant for other aspects of life (see Schmitt 1976, pp. 38–39) The salience of our many affiliations is

always circumstantial, and under some conditions their priority can rapidly shift. As Schmitt's emphasis on intensity suggests, a given association can become increasingly political. 'Every religious, moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy' (Schmitt 1976, p. 37). However, it is by no means clear when, or whether, it will reach the critical point. At what threshold will private enmities become public conflicts, and what or who brings about or restrains their transformation? Schmitt paradoxically describes a group as sovereign which 'orients itself' (*sich … orientiert*) toward the threshold, namely that at which it first appears as such, but it is unclear, on the face of it, just what this would mean. 'However one may look at it, in the orientation toward the possible extreme case of an actual battle against a real enemy, the political entity is essential, and it is the decisive entity for the friend-enemy grouping; and in this (and not in any kind of absolutist sense), it is sovereign' (Schmitt 1976, p. 39) It would appear that an orientation to the decision could only be verified retroactively, once a properly political distinction has emerged. Only then will it be evident that every friend-enemy distinction will have been made by the sovereign (decisive) entity it defines.

Despite Schmitt's reference to a political 'orientation', the polemical public he describes is not so much latent as emergent. The status of the political is not an attribute of particular affiliations but a widespread tendency that can be dampened or catalyzed by diverse environmental factors. Along these lines, William Connolly argues that 'the sovereign is not … he (or she) who first decides there is an exception and then how to resolve it. … Sovereign is *that* which decides an exception exists and how to decide it, with the *that* composed of a plurality of forces circulating through and under the positional sovereignty of the official arbitrating body' (Connolly 2005, p. 145). Paraphrasing Schmitt's description of parliament, we could say the sovereign is that place where particles of enmity strewn unequally among human beings gather themselves and bring public power under their control. As with reason, public hostility thereby takes precedence over private interests, even lives, which are sacrificed for the greater whole. The decision thus comprises a kind of transcendence from within, an *Aufhebung* of social conflict that simultaneously heightens and sublimates a complex process of emotional intensification.

Schmitt's 'decisionism' is often presumed to involve a secularized act of creation *ex nihilo*, reducing normative order to an effect of transcendent power. Instead, as we can see, his account of the relationship between the political entity and the decision recapitulates the dynamic relationship between substantial and constituent sources of political identity at work in the national myth. Like a myth, the existential antagonism draws on prevailing enmities and affections. However, the latter are increasingly detached from territorial or institutional locations. An amorphous fund of hostility, 'freed from all particular personality', can intensify any local grouping, thereby transforming it. Hence, political potentials begin to circulate in the polemical

contents of 'daily speech' (Schmitt 1976, p. 30) 'Terminological questions become thereby highly political. A word or expression can simultaneously be reflex, signal, password, and weapon in a hostile confrontation' (Schmitt 1976, p. 31 fn. 12). Polemical intensities, once detached form ritual institutions and affiliations, are thus caught up in de-centered enactments. In Weimar, this meant nothing less than that the capacity to mobilize collective struggle was no longer monopolized by the state. In the late 1920s, intense forms of association multiplied, with class and party movements challenging the Republic for the status of a representative group (cf. Schmitt 1976, p. 32).

Fearing the chaotic proliferation of polemical groupings, Schmitt sought to restrict the identification of friend and enemy to a stable locus of authority and decision. His aim was to preserve the state's monopoly of public representation. In his *Theory of the constitution* (*Verfassungslehre*, 1928), Schmitt draws a continuum across the people, the public, and state. 'There is no state without representation [and]…there can be no representation without the public, and no public without the people (*Volk*)' (Schmitt 1928, pp. 206–208, cf. Kennedy 2004, pp. 132–133). In *Legalität und Legitimität* [Legality and legitimacy] (1932), he links unity of the people and their public appearance to the figure of the executive (see Schmitt 2004, Shapiro 2008). Echoing his remark in *The crisis of parliamentary democracy,* quoted above, he argues that public acclamation of executive decrees is a more viable and compelling form of democratic representation than parliamentary legislation. He describes this acclaim as an expression of popular 'confidence' (*Vertrauen*) in the president. In effect, he participates in the kind of nationalist mythology he formerly merely described, grounding public confidence in the affinities that made such myths more effective than their class-focused competitors. In good Jacobin form, he thus places the fluid character of public identification in the service of the flexible measures of an executive empowered to give the people a concrete form. Of course, there remain many questions regarding the sources of this supposed confidence in the executive, whether on the part of Schmitt or the public. The former was, at a minimum, misplaced. The latter was a myth sustained not only by intensive propaganda and image making but also by massive and coordinated violence.[6] Nor was this enough to create a stable political order. Far from it, the attempt to distinguish a people from their enemies took the form of a continuous and ultimately catastrophic intensification of antagonism.

Virtual and polemical publics

We are now in a better position to understand how the diverse interests and groupings of modern society can yield polemically unified publics. Such publics precede their definitive appearance in the form of loosely structured intensities dispersed among multiple groupings. Political conflict emerges from a combination and amplification of these energies in 'private' struggles

that are politically 'oriented', that is, incipient or proto-public, insofar as they resonate with others and provide momentum to polemical oppositions. Once antagonisms intensify and become political, their specific content gives way to the vague but powerful unity known as a 'public'. While the public does not preserve intact the differences from which it draws its sustenance, and cannot properly be said to express a prior homogeneity, it is nonetheless imbued with the palpable reality of intense attachments and hostilities.

Adopting the terms Gilles Deleuze takes from Henri Bergson (whose philosophy also informed Sorel's conception of myth), we might describe the 'orientation' that precedes a public identification as *virtual*. As Deleuze uses the term, the virtual refers neither to the materially nor the logically possible, nor to a 'potential' that unfolds along a prescribed path. Instead, it denotes an indeterminate (but not infinite) plurality of such paths. In Deleuze's terms, a virtual public is already differentiated, and its actualization in points and relations is a positive process. The differentiation of the virtual is not expressed in actual oppositions, but selectively affirmed. Opposition and negation are therefore 'derived and represented', rather than original sources of difference (Deleuze 1994, p. 207). Furthermore, the differentiation of the virtual is not thereby canceled but remains co-present with the actual, and is itself 'real'. And because difference is preserved along with synthesis, it can be actualized by 'neighboring integral curves' (p. 210). By implication, polemical groupings can be dis- and re-aggregated, or in terms Deleuze adopts elsewhere, de- and re-territorialized. The distinction of friend and enemy results when an accumulation of intensities from various sources is expressed in the perception of an existential threat and an orientation to physical violence. Such perceptions and orientations, however, are already present in virtual form amidst a variety of 'private' antagonisms. To be opposed to its enemy, a public must therefore be distinguished from (other variants of) itself. The nationalist myth, for example, does not simply oppose that of the proletariat but refigures economic antagonisms (the everyday outrages to which Lenin refers) and combines them with other distinctions.[7]

What does all this contribute to a general theory of the public? If we take the movement from the virtual to the actual as a model for the polemical synthesis of a public, we find such a public is always beside itself. Every multitude harbors a plurality of adjacent polemical distinctions in virtual or incipient form, each of which can be selectively amplified and expressed. A variety of proto-public personae inhabit us all the time, more or less perceptible, not only at the level of percepts, but also of associated feelings of affection, suspicion or hatred. We have many orientations, many virtual friends and enemies that resonate at varying intensities amidst our private interests, volitions and sentiments. They abide in our tensed muscles and nervous glances like so many particles of larger constellations. Few become the basis of explicit memberships, much less sites of violent conflict, but it is out of their contention and combination that our various affinities and antagonisms rise and fall.

The existential opposition Schmitt describes involves a radical simplification, a forgetting of these contending lines of affiliation and antagonism that inhabit every multitude of individuals, as well as the means of their selective and incremental amplification. As we have seen, he alternately analyzes and conspires with such amplifications, ultimately depicting the public as the unmediated appearance of a prior unity (the People, or *Volk*). He reduces these many stages involved in a public identification to a singular appearance.

How might the virtual plurality of polemically defined publics instead become a resource for a non-lethal pluralism? Seeking such a pluralism, a variety of democratic thinkers have sought to derive a 'reasonable,' 'postconventional' or 'agonistic' politics from the same dislocations Schmitt feared. They affirm the openness of a democracy that lacks a 'substantial' goal and reject the manifestation of the people as an 'obvious and unchallenged' presence, instead favoring the on-going contestation of public representation. How is such contestation distinguished from the violent struggles Schmitt sought to pre-empt? Some authors (including, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Seyla Benhabib and Chantal Mouffe) presume the polemical intensity of political antagonisms will be mitigated by the dislocation of *terrisme* that follows from the global circulation of images, texts, speech, music and populations in modern, cosmopolitan societies. For them, a general mitigation of polemical oppositions both results from and enables democratic pluralism. There is insufficient space here to explore the complexities of these authors' varying departures from Schmitt. However, it can be noted that none disavows the polemical dimensions of democratic identification (the need to distinguish an 'undemocratic' other) altogether, though their avowals take very different forms. Where Habermas tentatively endorses a version of 'constitutional patriotism', Mouffe openly embraces Schmittian polemics (cf. Habermas 1996, p. 500, Mouffe 2000, pp. 95–96). One could argue their affinity in this regard bears out Schmitt's insights regarding the polemical coherence of diverse interests and values at work in political distinctions. In the same gesture by which they reject organic models of political community, critics of Schmitt conspire, however unwittingly, with prevailing oppositions between secular, western states (the privileged bearers of a democratic ethos) and purportedly conventional or 'fundamentalist' others whose hostilities preclude friendly modes of struggle.[8] In a move whose irony Schmitt was fond of pointing out, they set up a polemical opposition to polemical groupings.

As Schmitt understood, the polemical synthesis of a public does not require a homogeneous or organic culture, but can draw on relatively fluid intensities that circulate amongst fragmented constituencies. Indeed, 'post-conventional' publics based on mobile affinities and antagonisms can readily amplify and erupt into existential conflicts. It is because the people can never be fully self-present that they can always shatter into hostile groupings. Few today hold the hope briefly kindled by the end of the Cold War, that

polemical oppositions will dissolve as the affinities and antagonisms on which they draw are spread across the globe by way of international media, migrations and markets. Instead, they become increasingly mobile and volatile (see Appadurai 1996, Tambiah 1996). As was the case when Schmitt wrote, the capacity to mobilize polemical groupings is hardly monopolized by the state. They are called forth by party leaders, activist networks and terrorist organizations.

While individuals are subject to competing polemical interpellations, however, they are rarely invited to conceive of themselves as participants in a virtual plurality of alternatives, much less as discerning agents of their selective actualization. How might individuals become attuned to this plurality and encouraged to be such agents, and what might such a publicity look like? For some guidance in this direction, we can turn briefly to Michael Warner's *Publics and counter-publics* (2002). Like Schmitt, Warner distinguishes publics from positive, numerable collectives. A public is not an aggregation of private individuals based on shared interests or values. Rather, it is constituted by a dynamic combination of address and response. As Warner describes this process, an address traces a 'path' crossing a multiplicity of individuals. 'Writing to a public helps make a world insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it. This performative ability depends, however, on that object's being not entirely fictitious – not postulated merely, but recognized as a real path for the circulation of discourse. That path is then treated as a social entity' (2002, p. 92). The path in question involves not only shared ideas, but affections, enmities, or mere 'attention'. Warner emphasizes the creative agency involved in this process. A public, for him, is in principle 'self-organized', a mode of collective self-constitution where 'the disclosure of self partakes of freedom' (p. 61). Following Arendt, Warner describes the public as a site of 'world-disclosing' action and speech. Furthermore, the public is composed through continuous processes of enactment, whereby circulating affinities and differences are selectively objectified in positive identifications, rather than a singular act of identification.

In what sound like Deleuzean terms (though he does not reference them), Warner describes a plurality of 'virtual' publics in play among a multiplicity of private individuals. Publics, he writes, 'are virtual entities, not voluntary associations' (2002, p. 88) While all publics are in some sense partial, selected from among a plurality of adjacent 'paths' of discourse, Warner privileges the resulting heightened 'ethic of estrangement and social poesis in public address' on the part of counterpublics (p. 113). A counterpublic, like any public, is polemically defined in relation to another. However, it does not dream of autonomy. It is set off from a dominant other without thereby presuming to negate or replace it. It therefore 'maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status' (p. 56). This awareness of subordination, Warner suggests, also confers a sense of the

synthetic character of these publics to their members. Whereas 'people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections', this awareness 'forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient for consciousness' (pp. 114, 120). In Warner's terms, counterpublics are not simply different (from the mainstream public), but queer, where 'queerness reads as a public affirmation of the expressive/affective complexities that underwrite personal singularity' (p. 213). Not only is every individual subject to multiple, potentially conflicting interpellations, they are also virtual participants in an indefinite number of publics they may never have explicitly imagined. Encounters with counterpublics can enhance one's attunement to these as-yet-unspoken potentials, encouraging a positive sense of unrealized belonging.

Warner thus reverses Schmitt's dissimulation of the selective, synthetic character of a polemical public, rejecting the identitarian 'culture of sincerity' he finds ascendant in US popular culture in favor or an affirmation of artifice, irony and experimentation. The counterpublics Warner privileges are neither mythological nor rational, but theatrical. They embody a form of participatory democracy at once more robust and more nuanced than formal or deliberative models allow. As Warner argues, the heightened awareness of poesis on the part of counterpublics encourages (or rather requires) reflexive modifications of prevailing media, spaces and discourse. He also suggests counterpublics might be better attuned to non-cognitive dimensions of affiliation and hence model other kinds of agency than rational-critical discourse. (2002, pp. 123–124). Counterpublics 'can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy' (p. 57). Their participation in collective will-formation or constituent power thus extends beyond acclaim not only to dialogue but also to gesture, costume, shading and decoration. They are not embarrassed by simulated flames but geared to active participation in the show. Such a public is 'staged' in more than one sense. First, it is performed, constituted rather than merely expressed by symbolic, strategic and rhetorical acts. Second, the constitution of a public happens in stages, through repeated iterations. Finally, a public can take on a theatrical quality, insofar as its staging in both the former senses is highlighted rather than dissembled.

Could a queer publicity be cultivated more broadly? Warner imagines it could. He suggests that 'the gap that gay people register within the discourse of the general public might well be an aggravated form, though a lethally aggravated form, of the normal relation to the general public' (2002, p. 182). If we all participate, virtually, in counterpublics alongside our official memberships, it follow that one could aggravate a normally subdued sense of inhibition, what Warner calls 'a kind of closeted vulnerability' (p. 182). Actual counterpublics, by virtue of their multiplicity, might

evoke the virtual multiplicity of our own affiliations if they are allowed to flourish. As Judith Butler suggests, for example, drag can have the effect of thematizing the performative character of everyday gendered styles and comportments (Butler 1993). Along similar lines, William Connolly argues that the organization of individuals into politically effective publics should be balanced by a 'politics of disturbance' that denaturalizes these publics and engenders a 'critical responsiveness' not only toward other established groupings but toward emergent alternatives (Connolly 1995, pp. xxi, 21). One might say the idea is to challenge public oppositions with an infra-polemics, bringing them into contact with the virtual others that traverse them.

Of course, as these authors recognize, vulnerability and disturbance can also provoke reactionary responses (Connolly, p. 98). As we have seen, such responses are conditioned not only by the content of a given locus of identification but by the affective milieu from which it gathers intensities. As Connolly (2005) has argued, the cultivation of generosity toward emergent publics therefore requires not only the legal protections and guarantees of the welfare state, but also 'micro-political' techniques (cinematic, architectural, etc.) that modulate affection and aggression, comfort and disgust. Along these lines, Samuel Delany distinguishes the organization of public spaces and architectures into those either obstructive or conducive to friendly encounters, focusing in particular on the destruction of those (literal) theaters formerly available for public encounters in Times Square. As he puts it, 'Interclass contact conducted in a mode of good will is the locus of democracy as visible social drama' (Delany 1999, p. 198).

Again, good will does not follow from diversity and contact *per se*. Indeed, it cannot be guaranteed by any given set of laws, institutions or ideologies. The flexible intensities at play across the mobile affiliations of cosmopolitan societies can always combine in polemical distinctions. Moreover, even where they do not take the extreme form of existential conflicts, polemical oppositions are rarely made the subject of popular criticism and reflection. More often, they are staged in serial fashion by would be representatives, amplified by commercial or party elites. Although he provides ample evidence of creative self-organization on the part of a variety of counterpublics, Warner allows that the constitution of a public is rarely an egalitarian democratic process, given the hierarchical differentiation of discursive capacities and access to the technologies of circulation in modern state, corporate and party politics. These technological and structural constraints on access and capacity apply to persuasion and performance as much as to rational deliberation. All the more reason, then, to seek ways to direct public attention to the processes and mechanisms by which diverse struggles amongst shifting groupings can exchange intensities and give rise to violent polemics, the everyday 'competitions and intrigues' Schmitt was concerned to distinguish from the political and the public proper.

Notes

1. Note: I expand on the readings of Schmitt presented here in *Carl Schmitt and the intensification of politics* (Rowman and Littlefield 2008).
2. Cf. Connolly (1995), Honig (2007).
3. I discuss this function in Shapiro (2003).
4. William Scheuerman relates Hans Morgenthau's claim to have influenced Schmitt's arguments on this point. He writes, 'In fact, Schmitt's 1932 study tends to drop misleading imagery of politics as a distinct or separate sphere, instead following Morgenthau's conceptualization of politics as concerning conflicts characterized by intense enmity' (Scheuerman, in press). However, we can see that even if responding to such a thesis, Schmitt adopts a more complex view, whereby quantity transforms into quality, preserving both the role of a plurality of antagonisms in generating a political opposition and the clarity of the distinction between such an opposition and other antagonisms.
5. Consider also the following formulation: 'The weight of the political is determined by the intensity of alignments according to which the decisive associations and dissociations adjust themselves' (Schmitt 1976, p. 58).
6. The myth of spontaneous support for fascist leaders was a major subject of propaganda for both Hitler and Mussolini, and persists today in the widespread misconception that the former was elected to power. See, for example, Falasca-Zamponi (1997).
7. Thomas Frank describes such a refiguring of class antagonism in the direction of chauvinistic nationalism by the US Republican party in *What's the matter with Kansas* (2004).
8. Benhabib claims that adherents of 'conventional' morality (e.g. Arabs and Mormons) 'have a cognitive barrier beyond which they will not argue … They cannot distance themselves from their own position' (Benhabib 1992, p. 43). Chantal Mouffe goes further, arguing, 'a left-wing project today can only be a European one' (Mouffe 2000, p. 127).

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