

The Concept of *Katechon* in the Thought of Carl Schmitt: Towards a Different Universalism?*

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The concept of *katechon*, in the way it is generally invoked today, only exacerbates already existing political and ideological divisions, pitting ‘conservatism’ against ‘progressivism’, or ‘multipolarity’ against ‘globalism’ and ‘hegemony’. With Carl Schmitt as an unlikely ally, this article argues that the *katechon* might instead offer an alternative — non-liberal and non-revolutionary — universalist political project, thus showing the way out of these oppositions. Contrary to dominant interpretations, Schmittian notion of the *katechon* is not a legitimation of either sovereign state power or international plurality. Instead, it embodies an underappreciated universalist strand in Schmitt’s thought, which stands in tension with the confrontational and pluralist logic of his concept of the political or the idea of the *Grossraum* order. For Schmitt, the *katechon* implies an essentially non-sovereign form of power, which both maintains and renews an existing social order to ensure the continuation of history understood as the realm of ‘infinite singularity’. In modern times, this primarily involves guarding against the threat of technocratic globalization that portends either a collapse of humanity into nature-like regularities or its technological suicide. However, instead of opting for international plurality as a solution, in an often-neglected Spanish version of an essay “The Unity of the World” Schmitt directly links the *katechontic* theology of history to a specific kind of ‘true’ political universalism, opposed both to the ‘false’ universalism of techno-economic liberalism, and to antagonistic pluralism. Although he does not explicitly elaborate the details of this ‘true’ universalism, his work hints at the diarchy of spiritual and temporal powers as a crucial element of *katechontic* world unity.

Keywords: *katechon*, Carl Schmitt, theology of history, universalism, power, order, spiritual powers

A strange, but fashionable concept

The last couple of decades have witnessed a surge of interest in the concept of *katechon*, a mysterious Pauline “restrainer” or “withholder” from the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians¹. According to *Google Books* statistics, the frequency of the term’s usage in the English-language publications increased more than sevenfold from 2004 to 2019. To

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1. “Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know *what is now restraining* him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until *the one who now restrains* it is removed.” (2 Thess. 2:3-7, New Revised Standard Version; italics added by me. — *Ye.U.*)

provide an example, the katechon features prominently in the work of Giorgio Agamben, one of the leading contemporary philosophers, for whom the katechontic de-activation of messianic hope is one of the keys to the genealogy of modernity (2011).

Meanwhile, if in the West this surge of interest has been confined mostly to philosophical and academic circles, in Russia the concept has become popular among a wider conservative public, as evidenced by the existence of two intellectual associations bearing the name “Katechon”, one calling itself “an intellectual club”², and another “a think tank”³. Connected with the latter is a student fraternity of “Academists”, with sections in several universities around the country, which also holds the idea of the katechon as one of the key elements of its ideology⁴. It has even been argued that the concept, in its secularized form, has influenced official Russian foreign policy thinking (Engström, 2014). While the latter thesis seems rather far-fetched, Kirill, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, has indeed recently referred to Russia as “the restrainer” holding against “the forces of the antichrist”⁵.

A characteristic feature of contemporary discussions about the katechon is that they largely boil down to a choice between its positive and negative evaluations, with the meaning of the concept regarded as basically established and fixed. The idea of the katechon is usually interpreted as legitimizing strong conservative government domestically, and multipolarity internationally, which, especially for Russian commentators, also logically implies an opposition to Western hegemony. As a result, the concept feeds into already existing binary oppositions (e.g., “liberalism/progressivism vs. conservatism”, “globalism vs. sovereignty”), seemingly giving to them some philosophical depth. In fact, however, the katechon is simply subsumed by those oppositions, only making the divisions more intractable by adding a layer of theological rhetoric, and failing to provide any novel analytical or persuasive wagers.

This paper argues that the present condition of the debate on the katechon has not been inevitable, but is a result of its having gone in the wrong direction. One of the key causes of this unfortunate outcome has been a misinterpretation of Carl Schmitt. Indeed, Schmitt’s writings of the 1940-50s were, perhaps, the chief factor of the revival of interest in the katechon, at least in the West: “After the Reformation, though, the notion of the katechon tended to be forgotten. Schmitt played a central role in resurrecting it as a central category in the Catholic understanding of history” (Lievens, 2016: 415). The work of Agamben and his followers unfolds in an explicit polemic with Schmitt: seeing Schmitt as an apologist of a reactionary katechon, they aim at de-throning “the restrainer” and re-activating the messianic⁶. The German theorist has been relatively less important for the renaissance of Russian katechontism,

2. *Intellektual’nyi klub “Katechon”* [An Intellectual Club “Katechon”]. URL: <http://katechon.ru/> (accessed 30 September 2023).

3. About us. *Katechon*. URL: <https://katechon.com/en/about-us> (accessed 30 September 2023).

4. Nashi simvoly [Our symbols]. *Academists*. URL: <https://academists.ru/logo> (accessed 30 September 2023).

5. Sviateishii Patriarkh Kirill: Ot budushchego nashego Otechestva i nashei Tserkvi zavisit, v polnom smysle slova, budushchee mira [His Holiness Patriarch Kirill: The Future of the Entire World Depends on the Fate of Our Homeland]. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*, 20 November 2022. URL: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5978803.html> (accessed 30 September 2023).

6. Agamben’s own classical statement is, of course, *The Time That Remains* (2005). For a representative work developing this position see, e.g., Prozorov (2012).

which has its own deep roots in the pre-1917 Orthodox tradition⁷. Still, contemporary Russian thinkers generally regard Schmitt's interpretation of the katechon as being in line with their political Orthodoxy, and sometimes cite his works as well (Dugin, 2021).

Naturally, scholarship on Schmitt has also paid increasing attention to the katechon. A significant number of studies analyze specifically his treatment of the concept⁸, and a few of them will be discussed in more detail further. The katechon has been characterized as a “central” concept for Schmitt, either on the whole (Schmitt, 2015a: 422), or for his post-war writings (Nichols, 2018: e101). It has also been described as Schmitt's “most enigmatic concept” (Hell, 2009: 283). In terms of the interpretation, some of those recent works continue to treat Schmittian katechon as directly connected with “defense of the state” and “stability” (Falk, 2022: 1, 14). In several cases, scholars whose primary focus lies elsewhere (e.g., on analyzing the katechon as “imperial theology” or as an attempt to solve the crisis of legitimacy) still rely on sovereign readings of the katechon (Hell, 2009; Nichols, 2018), which distorts their otherwise illuminating findings⁹.

Importantly, however, a few studies have begun to “part ways with approaches that interpret the katechon as being the centerpiece of a conservative or authoritarian outlook” (Lievens, 2016: 415). Using these studies as a starting point, and supplementing them with my own analysis of Schmitt's relevant texts, I will argue that for Schmitt *the katechon is a (political) force tasked with ensuring the continuation of history, which requires both maintaining and renewing an existing order. Moreover, the katechontic mission implies a specific — non-revolutionary and non-utopian — vision of world unity; in other words, it is a universalist political project*. As such, the idea of the katechon stands in tension with other, more confrontational and antagonistic aspects of Schmitt's thought, such as friend-enemy logic of the political, the plurality of “large spaces” (*Grossraum*), or the opposition between land and sea. It is perhaps due to this tension that the concept of the katechon remained underdeveloped in Schmitt's writings. Taking the katechon over from Schmitt thus holds the promise of opening up new paths of thinking about international political universalism in its relation to history. At a time when the very continuation of history might be threatened, this is no minor promise.

The paper is organized into six sections, including this introduction. The next section briefly overviews all Schmitt's writings mentioning the katechon. The third section explains

7. On those roots see, for example, Shnirelman (2019).

8. The following list includes some of the most recent works, and it is not exhaustive: Hell (2009); Lievens (2016); Nicoletti, (2017); Nichols (2018); Falk (2022); Collison (2023).

9. It has to be mentioned at the outset that I was not able to consult first-hand several book-length studies of the Schmittian katechon, namely, Felix Grosssheutschi's *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996), Günter Meuter's *Der Katechon: Zu Carl Schmitts fundamentalistischer Kritik der Zeit* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), and Théodore Paleologue's *Sous l'oeil du grand inquisiteur: Carl Schmitt et l'héritage de la théologie politique* (Paris: Cerf, 2004). However, if the secondary sources are correct, Grosssheutschi argues that the notion of the katechon “functions very differently” in each of the nine Schmitt's texts he analyzes, thus not forming any coherent conception (Lievens, 2016: 416); Meuter “theorized the katechon as an institution that averts chaos and has the capacity to re-establish a concrete social order” (cited in Meierhenrich, Simons, 2016: 48); and Paleologue combined these two views, arguing that “properly speaking, there is no doctrine of the katechon in Schmitt” (cited in Lievens, 2016: 415-416), but if one looks for the most important conceptual connection, it is the one with the law: “the katechon is . . . the guarantee of a legal order” (Ibid: 421). All these views are addressed throughout the paper, in one way or another.

why Schmittian interpretation of the concept does not legitimize all authorities, nor all sovereign authorities, nor all authorities that maintain order. In the fourth section, a katechontic conception of history is outlined, with an emphasis on the problems of the end of history and the identity of the katechon. The fifth section traces the link between this conception of history and a specific vision of political universalism, opposed both to nihilistic universalism of technocratic civilization and to antagonistic pluralism. The conclusion summarizes the implications of the present study, on the one hand, for our understanding of Schmitt's thought and, on the other hand, for further thinking about the katechon.

Schmitt on the katechon: an overview of texts

First, a brief overview of relevant works is in order. Apart from private correspondence and some notes in the *Nachlass*, still unedited, the *katechon* appears in ten Schmitt's texts (the table below contains 11 entries as the *Glossarium* is listed twice for chronological reasons).

Table 1. Schmitt's published works containing mentions of the katechon¹⁰

Work		Date
"Beschleuniger wider Willen oder: Problematik der westlichen Hemisphäre"	–	April 1942
<i>Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation</i>	–	1942
" <i>Historiographia in nuce: Alexis de Tocqueville</i> " in <i>Ex Captivitate Salus</i>	–	Summer of 1946
10 fragments in <i>Glossarium</i>	–	From December 1947 to October 1949
<i>The Nomos of the Earth</i>	–	1950
"Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History"	–	1950
"La Unidad del Mundo"	–	1951
3 fragments in <i>Glossarium</i>	–	February 1953, April 1955, August 1957
"The Other Hegel-Line"	–	1957
Author's note to "The Situation of European Jurisprudence" in <i>Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924 — 1954</i>	–	1958
<i>Political Theology II</i>	–	1970

Data source: compiled by the author on the basis of Nicoletti (2017).

10. All the dates are dates of publication, except for the *Glossarium* notes and "*Historiographia in nuce*", for which Schmitt provides explicit dates of writing.

The table shows that Schmitt's engagement with the topic had a clear peak from the end of 1947 to 1951¹¹, and perhaps a second — smaller one — in 1957-58. Both before 1947 and after 1958 we encounter only passing references to the subject.

A focus on the writings of 1947-51 is further justified by the substantive content of the works in question. Both texts of 1942 are exploratory in regard to the katechon, the concept is used there allegorically or by analogy: Emperor Franz Joseph is portrayed as performing the katechontic function for Austria-Hungary (1995: 436); Joseph Pilsudski, for Poland (Ibid); Byzantium, for Italy against Islam (2015b: 17-18). Similar usages are also found in later works: Thomas Masaryk as the katechon for Europe and for western liberal democracy (2015a: 85); England, “for certain areas of the Mediterranean and the passage to India” (2006: 238). Schmitt's purpose here is to clarify for the readers the meaning of a new and potentially obscure concept — “to indicate the political and historical sense of the role of the delayer” (1995: 436) — rather than to define it directly. Therefore, these instances are better interpreted as analogies (that is, Franz Joseph was for Austria-Hungary what the katechon is for the world), and *not as examples of the katechon per se*¹². Such a reading is further corroborated if we consider the case of Masaryk in particular: how could the person sustaining liberal democracy (which Schmitt consistently opposed throughout his life) be *an example* of the katechon?

Furthermore, the only abstract meaning of the katechon — as a general designation of delaying, as opposed to accelerating, forces — that can be extracted from the 1942 writings, is later explicitly disavowed by Schmitt himself: “We must not use it to add, along with the concept of restrainer and deferrer, a couple of exemplars to Dilthey's typological collection of historicism” (2009: 169). As we shall see, what will be at stake in Schmitt's later works on the katechon is not the slowing *vs.* acceleration of history, but the very possibility of its continuation. For this reason, treatments of the katechon that focus on this “accelerator-delayer” dichotomy (e.g., Bradley, 2019: 141-162), though potentially fruitful in themselves, cannot be seen as accurate analyses of the concept's functioning in Schmitt's thought.¹³

A 1946 essay on de Tocqueville belongs to another category of writings that in itself is also of little help in figuring out the meaning of the katechon for Schmitt: lamentations that particular thinkers were not familiar with the concept: “Europe was lost without the idea of a *katechon*. Tocqueville knew no *katechon*” (2017: 29). Other remarks of this kind can be found in the *Glossarium* and refer to such figures as Juan Donoso Cortés, Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon (2015a: 52, 207). As for Schmitt's post-1951 works,

11. See a similar conclusion in Nicoletti (2017: 378)

12. Treating those instances as *examples* remains a widespread approach, even in the otherwise innovative works (e.g., Lievens, 2016: 416; Nicoletti, 2017: 369-372). This has likely added a lot of unnecessary confusion to the debate. Sergei Prozorov has been one of the few scholars so far to point out the allegorical nature of those designations (2012: 485).

13. For the same reason, the debate on the positive *vs.* negative evaluation of the katechon by Schmitt in “Beschleuniger wider Willen oder” is of little importance for our purposes. For arguments in favor of negative evaluation (with which I concur), see Hell (2009: 303-305). For a more ambivalent assessment, see Nicoletti (2017: 369-370).

there we find either very brief (sometimes just a sentence-long) remarks on the subject, or references to what other authors, namely Hans Freyer, Eusebius of Caesarea and Erik Peterson, meant by the katechon, without any elaboration or detailed commentary (2008, 2022).

Four works thus end up being central for understanding Schmitt's concept of the katechon: 1) *The Nomos of the Earth* (in particular, chapter 3 of its first part, titled "International Law in the Christian Middle Ages"); 2) relevant passages of the *Glossarium*; 3) a short 1950 essay "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History", written as a review of Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History*, and 4) a lecture "The Unity of the World" [*La unidad del mundo*] that Schmitt delivered in several Spanish universities in the summer of 1951¹⁴. Interestingly, the German-language version of this lecture, published in January 1952 in *Merkur* under the title "Die Einheit der Welt", differs from the original Spanish text, lacking precisely the last section that initially discussed the katechon. It is perhaps due to this change in the German text that many of the scholars who analyzed Schmitt's concept of the katechon did not pay attention to "The Unity"¹⁵. As will be shown later, the Spanish version of the lecture is crucial in uncovering a previously unnoticed link between the katechon and a specific kind of universalism that Schmitt seemed to endorse.

Meanwhile, this brief overview of the relevant texts has already yielded some provisional results. It has shown that katechon is far from ubiquitous in Schmitt's writings: it is absent from all the major works before 1940s, as well as from *Theory of the Partisan*, nor does it occupy a particularly prominent place in *Political Theology II*, as we have seen. This observation seems to put in question assessments of the katechon as somehow central to the whole of Schmitt's thought, or even to its post-1945 phase. More puzzling is the fact that one such assessment belongs to Schmitt himself. In a 1974 letter to Hans Blumenberg, he wrote about the katechon: "I am searching for a human ear which will listen to and understand this question—for me the key question of (my) political theology" (cited in Nicoletti, 2017: 377). Furthermore, in a letter to Pierre Linn, reproduced in the *Glossarium*, Schmitt writes that his interest in the subject dated back to 1932 (2015a: 61), while his correspondence shows that the katechon continued to occupy his thoughts well into the early 1980s (Nicoletti, 2017: 377). Given all that, why are there so few publications reflecting the 50-year-long interest and research?

Concerning the letter to Blumenberg, let us, however, note that Schmitt refers specifically to his *political theology*, not to the entirety of his *oeuvre*, and uses the word "question". As will be discussed in the conclusion, the katechon may indeed be seen as the crucial — and unresolved — question of Schmitt's political theology.

14. The first, third, and fourth of those works are further contracted throughout the paper as *Nomos*, "Three Possibilities", and "The Unity", respectively.

15. "La unidad del mundo" is not even included in the list of Schmitt's writings in a recent *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (Meierhenrich, Simons (eds.), 2016: xxxi-xliii). It is easier, in fact, to mention those who *did* pay meaningful attention to the Spanish original of the essay, as the list would probably include just Martti Koskeniemi (2004). Nicoletti (2017) also takes note of it, but fails to notice its universalist implications.

Katechon, power, and order: clarifying misconceptions

One of the most widespread misconceptions about Schmitt's understanding of the *katechon* is its reduction to justification and legitimation of any power, or of any supreme (sovereign) power, or of the modern state's power. For instance, Jacob Taubes interprets the Schmittian *katechon* as a way of thinking "apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers that be" (2013: 13) and believes it to embody the purpose of saving the state "at whatever cost" (Ibid: 54). According to Giorgio Agamben, Schmitt "finds in 2 Thessalonians 2 the only possible foundation for a Christian doctrine of State power" (2005: 109). Although the influence of these thinkers may partly explain the popularity of a straightforward power-legitimizing interpretation of Schmitt's concept of the *katechon*, its persistence is in the end striking¹⁶ — given that a careful reading of Schmitt's texts easily and unequivocally refutes it.

Firstly, and most importantly, the features attributed to the *katechon* in the *Nomos* differ remarkably from those of the sovereign state, or, indeed, of any supreme power: "It was the elevation of a crown, not a vertical intensification — not a Kingdom over Kings, not a Crown of Crowns, not a prolongation of the monarch's power, not even, as was the case later, a bit of dynastic power — but a commission that stemmed from a completely different sphere than did the dignity of the monarchy" (2006: 62). *Katechon* "did not signify a position of absorbing or consuming power *vis-à-vis* all other offices", but was connected with "concrete tasks and missions" (Ibid).

Secondly, in some cases Schmitt explicitly argued that certain manifestations of power had nothing to do with the *katechon*, be it individual figures, such as Winston Churchill, Georges Clemenceau, or John Forster Dalles (2015a: 47, 94), or forms of rule: "All such renovations, reproductions, and revivals disregarded the *katechon*. Consequently, instead of leading to a Christian empire, they led only to Caesarism. But, Caesarism is a typically non-Christian form of power, even if it concludes concordats" (2006: 63).

Thirdly, as it would logically follow, Schmitt himself never equated the *katechon* to power as such, nor to sovereign power, nor to the state as such¹⁷. In general, while the state for him was a concrete-historical phenomenon belonging to Modernity, Schmitt always hesitated to identify the *katechon* in the Modern age, in contrast to his confident description of the Holy Roman Empire as the *katechon* of the Middle Ages.

16. Apart from Taubes and Agamben, a non-exhaustive list of authors sharing this interpretation would include Roberto Esposito (2015: 76-82), Fedor Nekhaenko (2022), Julia Hell (2009), Sergei Prozorov (2012), Joshua Nichols (2018), Hjalmar Falk (2022), the last four having already been mentioned in the introduction.

17. In one Glossarium note Schmitt wrote a short phrase: "The neutral state as *katechon*" (2015a: 313), which could potentially mean at least two things. If he meant international neutrality, then he later rejected this possibility himself: "Switzerland is not really a *katechon*" (Ibid: 364). The context of the whole note from April 16, 1955 implies that Schmitt might in fact mean that the state "neutralizes" the primary distinction between friend and enemy through "secondary differentiations" between state and society, economy and politics (Ibid: 313). If he used the word "*katechon*" there seriously, not allegorically, it would imply a 180-degree reversal of his attitude to neutralization and depoliticization. Although it is not impossible that he could entertain such a thought for a while, there is no evidence of such a reversal eventually taking place.

Therefore, Schmittian concept of the katechon is definitely not a legitimation of absolute power and rule. We could even say the katechon was for Schmitt an essentially non-sovereign form of power, given the emphasis on “concrete tasks” and the lack of “absorption” of “other offices”. This has recently led Luke Collison to draw parallels between the katechon and commissary dictatorship, seeing both as reflecting Schmitt’s continuous concern with intermediate authority (2023). Such an interpretation logically entails a shift from power to order as the core idea behind the katechon, a move advocated by Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons in their introductory chapter to *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*: “the katechon is a figure that seeks to maintain a concrete order” (2016: 46). This would offer us a seemingly coherent interpretation of the katechon as intermediate authority tasked with maintaining existing order¹⁸. However, I argue that this “order-maintaining” reading of the katechon, despite no doubt being closer to Schmitt’s logic than a simplistic “autocratic” interpretation, still misses important aspects of the German thinker’s argument.

To begin with, let us note one difference between the commissary dictator and the katechon: the former presupposes the existence of a higher, i.e., supreme, worldly authority that authorizes a dictator to act, while the latter has no other worldly authority above them. The commission of a Medieval Christian emperor “stemmed from a completely different sphere” (2006: 62), from an other-worldly realm. It is again indicative that Schmitt himself never treats commissary dictators as examples of the katechon. For some reason, while speculating that Jesuits or the Catholic Church could be potential candidates for the role (2015a: 52, 192), he never mentions, let’s say, Albrecht von Wallenstein in the similar context.

Furthermore, Schmitt’s phrasings make an impression that, for him, katechon is tasked not simply with maintaining an existing order, but also with reforming and renewing it. In “Three Possibilities”, he warns against reducing the concept to “a generalized designation of simply conservative or reactionary tendencies” (2009: 169). This distinction is repeated in a short piece from 1957, written as a tribute to Hans Freyer on his 70th anniversary: “Everything that has been deemed “conservative” since the 19th century (and which calls itself so) is surpassed and outmaneuvered by this notion of a katechon found in Freyer’s world-history” (2022: 4). We can find similar reasoning in the *Nomos*: the Medieval Christian Empire is described there as a “great historical force” [*großartigen Geschichtsmächtigkeit*] (1974: 29), while its becoming “a merely conservative upholder and preserver” [*nur noch konservativer Erhalter und Bewahrer*] meant the

18. Conforming to such an interpretation is also the view of Viacheslav Kondurov, who, highlighting the differences between Schmitt’s approach to sovereignty in *Dictatorship* and *Political Theology*, argues that in *Political Theology* “the concept of the sovereign fulfils the role of katechon (κατέχων) because the sovereign (1) seeks to contain the ‘political’ and preserve order; (2) exists in the space of historical time, not even metaphorically being the ‘zero point’ of history; (3) does not exercise a ‘messianic’ salvific function, since the latter involves a qualitative change in state, whereas the sovereign seeks to preserve the status quo” (2021a: 240). As described there, the sovereign of *Political Theology* appears to be closer to the commissary dictator, than to the sovereign dictator, of *Dictatorship*. On the specifics of Kondurov’s approach to Schmitt’s political theology see also note 28 below.

weakening of the *katechon* (Ibid: 33)¹⁹. Indeed, Charlemagne or the Ottonian Emperors did not just maintain imperial order, they first (re)created it. “For Konrad Weiss, the merely restraining forces are not sufficient. He claims that historical circumstances are more often to be seized rather than to be restrained”, writes Schmitt (2009: 170), and he seems to support the view he is citing.

Finally (and, perhaps, most surprisingly), two passages from *Glossarium* radically sever the link between the *katechon* and both order and power²⁰. A note dated June 16, 1948 reads: “Anarchic chaos is better than nihilistic centralization and ordering by statutes. The *katechon* is recognizable by the fact that it does not aspire to this unity of the world, but lays the imperial crown” (Schmitt 2015a: 124). And on September 25, 1949 Schmitt writes down: “The *katechon*, it is deprivation, it is hunger, need and powerlessness. It is those who do not rule, they are people. Everything else is mass and object of planification” (Ibid: 206). Therefore, if order is achieved via “nihilistic centralization” and “planification”, then maintaining such an order would not be *katechontic*, on the contrary, in this situation the *katechon* might manifest itself in those who manage to stay outside the order, to avoid becoming the object of planning. But what is the purpose of such a *katechontic* break with order and power? Schmitt’s answer would be simple: to keep history going.

Katechon and history

That it is a certain idea of history that constitutes the conceptual core of the *katechon* is stated explicitly more than once in several Schmitt’s works. A connection to history is already visible in the “Beschleuniger wider Willen oder” (1995: 436). Later, in the *Nomos* *katechon* is called a “historical concept” (2006: 60), in “Three Possibilities”, a form of “historical consciousness” (2009: 169), and in “The Unity”, “a Christian conception of history” (1951: 353). This clear emphasis has recently been noted by several commentators (Lievens, 2016; Nicoletti, 2017).

Schmitt’s general definition of the *katechontic* conception of history is a fairly traditional one, following Apostle Paul: *katechon* is “a force, which defers the end and suppresses the evil one” (2009: 169, see also 1951: 353; 2006: 60). In other words, it ensures the continuation of history. However, this general definition does not yet shed light on three crucial (and interrelated) questions: 1) How could history end? 2) Who (or what) is “the evil one”? 3) Who (or what) is the *katechon*? What are the key features of this mysterious force?

We would not find a single, unified answer to these questions in Schmitt’s writings, but rather two distinct (though connected, as I will argue) conceptual schemes, related to the Middle Ages, and Modernity, respectively. In the first scheme, Christian empire of the Middle Ages was the *katechon*, acting as “the historical power to *restrain* the appear-

19. The translation of these passages in the existing English edition of the *Nomos* is rather confusing (Schmitt 2006: 60, 64).

20. Lievens (2016: 415) also points out this break.

ance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon” (2006: 59-60). While in the *Nomos* and most other works Schmitt seems to advance a merely historical thesis that the Holy Roman Empire *understood itself to be the katechon* and was seen as such by its contemporaries (Ibid; 2009: 169; 1951: 353-354; 1995: 436), in the *Glossarium* he also claims that *it in fact was the katechon* (2015a: 47). According to Walter Warnach, in the early 1980s Schmitt was concerned with “anchoring the medieval Empire and its world mission in the Scriptures as convincingly as possible” [*das mittelalterliche Reich und seinen Weltauftrag möglichst in der Schrift zu verankern*] (cited in Schmitt, 2015a: 422).

The relevance of this historical analysis for the modern times may not be immediately clear. Here it is worth paying attention to the so-called “great historical parallel”, which Schmitt repeatedly refers to. He points out that it has been characteristic of the self-understanding of the 19th and 20th century to compare its historical situation with that of early Christianity (2006: 63; 2009: 168-169). Beyond mere observation, Schmitt affirms that it is indeed the right way for the people of the last two centuries to see their place in history (1951: 353). If so, they, like the early Christians, face the challenge of “overcoming the ... eschatological paralysis” (2009: 169). That is how the problem of the katechon emerges for the modern age.

However, in this second scheme, which relates to Modernity, little (if any) attention is paid to the Antichrist and a literal Christian meaning of “the end of the world”, as Schmitt’s attention shifts to more human-induced scenarios of the closure of history. His chief concern now is the threat of a final and complete triumph of techno-economic civilization. It is this threat that we may legitimately call Schmitt’s primary image of “the end of history” in relation to the modern times.

Schmitt’s opposition to and criticism of a society organized around the imperatives of technical rationality and economic efficiency is clearly expressed already in his 1920s works, for example, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1996: 13-15, 34-36). From the start, this opposition was also connected with an understanding of history “as an open, creative process, in which the spirit obtains new strength to respond to the challenges of the present” (Nicoletti, 2017: 367-368). This theme is taken up again in the later writings on the katechon. A potential arrival at the condition of “pure technicity” is described there as a “shipwreck” (Schmitt, 1951: 354), as it would transform human life into a bunch of regularities, governed by the immanent laws of economic and technological development. This would mean the end of history because “historical reality”, for Schmitt, is characterized by “the infinite singularity” of events (2009: 169), that is, by the emergence of real novelty in the course of history: “the essential and specific content [of history] is the event that happens just ones and does not repeat itself”²¹ (1951: 354). If society became “a mere piece of nature circling around itself” (Ibid: 170), it would no longer belong to history in the proper sense of the term.

There is one more reason to treat techno-economic society as heralding the end of history: it has supplied humanity with the means to literally destroy the world. Although

21. “Su contenido esencial y específico es el acontecer que sólo una vez sucede y no se repite”.

nuclear *problématique* never became central for Schmitt, in contrast to such thinkers as Karl Jaspers (1961) or Hans Morgenthau²², it still surfaced briefly in his writings of the early 1950s. *The Nomos* warned about the danger of “atomic and hydrogen bombs” falling beyond “new amity lines” unless “a new normative order of the earth” was found (2006: 49). Techno-economic civilization was to blame here because it provided to the powerful the means of extermination, but could not possibly provide knowledge about when, if ever, and against whom, if anybody, they could be used justly (1951: 355; 2009: 167). As a consequence, “the technical unity of the world also makes possible a technical death of humanity”²³ (1951: 352).

To sum up, a techno-economic unification of the world, its total functionalization would be the end of history for Schmitt — both in itself and as a possible harbinger of the mankind’s nuclear suicide. Therefore, social forces and tendencies that advance such a scenario could be logically regarded as “the evil”, which needs to be restrained.

Restrained by whom or what? To this question we will not find a conclusive answer, if any answer at all. As I have pointed out earlier, Schmitt finds it extremely difficult to identify any katechontic force (or figure) in the Modern age. In a *Glossarium* note dated December 19, 1947 he famously writes that “one must be able to identify the *katechon* for every epoch of the last 1948 years. The place was never unoccupied, otherwise we would no longer exist” (2015a: 47). Few sentences further we also read: “I am sure that as soon as the concept is sufficiently clarified we can even agree on the many names concretely and up to the present day” (Ibid). However, the task of clarification must have proved to be more challenging than Schmitt expected, for he eventually does not provide any concrete “name” apart from the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages, and even that restricted mainly to “Frankish, Saxonian, and Salic times” (2006: 64). By 1953, Schmitt seems to have changed his mind, as he composes a blank verse containing the following lines: “Don’t delude yourself, the last Christian / was Hegel, the last Katechon” (2015a: 293). Perhaps, the steady expansion of technology and economic organization of society since the early 19th century meant there simply were no countervailing forces left.

Nevertheless, we are still here, which makes it necessary to clarify the relationship between the katechon and the end of times. Do the lines cited above imply that Schmitt abandoned the view that the katechon was indispensable for preventing the end? It is unlikely, as the katechon’s indispensability is an essential feature of the concept, without which it ceases to be meaningful. If Schmitt had changed his view on that issue, he would have had no reason to continue working on the subject almost till the very death. (And he did continue, as we know). Should we then conclude that a 1953 verse simply reflected a temporary “loss of faith”, after which he returned to the belief in the uninterrupted presence of the katechon? We can neither exclude nor claim that, as there are no unequivocal indications in his writings.

22. On Morgenthau’s struggling with the nuclear challenge, which led to him endorsing a world state, see Craig (2003).

23. “La unidad técnica del mundo hace también posible la muerte técnica de la humanidad”

Still, I would like to point out yet another available option: katechon can be regarded as both indispensable and, at the same time, not necessarily present at every moment. Historical reality is a dynamic one, where all the processes, including the ones leading to its end, unfold in time, and take time²⁴. In this conceptualization, a temporary absence of the katechon would unleash destructive trends, but if the restrainer is restored not too late, these trends could be reversed. In my view, such a dynamic and processual understanding of the katechon's indispensability is preferable²⁵ to "the uninterrupted existence" interpretation for two main reasons. First, it provides a more coherent account of a relationship between *the idea of the katechon* and the katechon as *a real historical force*. Second, it allows to better comprehend the katechon's *institutional specificity*.

Schmitt explicitly writes that the idea of the katechon provided "a sense of an historical epoch" to the Middle Ages (2006: 60), and was gradually forgotten or rejected during a transition to Modernity (Ibid: 63-66). Therefore, the "uninterrupted presence" interpretation implies that katechontic forces can exist without understanding themselves as such, that is, without having the idea of the katechon. However, it is not clear how an actor could restrain "the evil one" and defer the end in the absence of at least a minimum understanding of this task.

As for the specificity, it follows logically from Schmitt's writings that not all forms of rule can be the katechon. Caesarism, for instance, is essentially incompatible with the katechontic mission (2006: 63). The doctrine of "uninterrupted presence" would require identifying a succession of sufficiently similar institutionalized authorities for the last two millennia, which would leave the Roman Church as the only plausible candidate. Schmitt, however, has always been reluctant to consider the Church itself as the katechon, even in the Medieval context opting for the Empire, and not the Papacy.

In contrast, the proposed processual interpretation suggests that katechontic forces probably ceased to be active in the late Middle Ages along with the abandonment of the idea of the katechon. Furthermore, their revival would likely require a restoration of a specific form of rule (of course, adapted to the changed circumstances).

Katechon and 'the unity of the world'

The last thesis I'm going to defend is that the specific form of rule, characteristic of the *katechon*, is a universalist one. In other words, I argue that the katechon implies a particular conception of a political unity of the world.

It is obviously a controversial thesis. While some of the previous arguments regarding the non-sovereign nature of the katechon and its relation to history have already been made by other scholars (see, e.g., Nicoletti, 2017; Lievens, 2016), universalist interpretations of Schmitt have been remarkably rare. One such interpretation is presented in a recent essay by John Milbank, who identifies three "idioms" in Schmitt's thought: "a

24. One may recall here Agamben's analysis of the messianic time as "the time that time takes to come to an end" (2005: 67).

25. Both in general and in the particular context of Schmitt's thought.

Catholic universalism”, a Wespthalian defense of the nation-state, and a more “civilizational” approach (2023). He further argues that, although Schmitt “early associated Catholicism with the internationalism of justice, linked not just to the idea of natural law, but also with the representation of the person of Christ”, he later “continually suppressed” the first idiom. Milbank does not consider the idea of the katechon to be representative of this universalist idiom, treating it as belonging rather to the third — civilizational/imperial idiom. Nor does he pay attention to the Spanish text of “The Unity”. In the end, Milbank does not seem to provide an adequate account of the functioning of universalism in Schmitt’s writings²⁶.

Martti Koskenniemi comes closest to the thesis of the present paper: Schmitt “does not attack the Anglo-American, liberal world order because of its universalism, but because of its *false* and *nihilistic* universalism” (2004: 501). Koskenniemi sees the “distinction between a “false” and a “genuine” universalism” (Ibid: 495) operating already in the *Nomos*, but yet in an unarticulated form. He further argues that this distinction is fleshed out in more detail in “The Unity” — precisely in connection with Christian view of history and the katechon (Ibid: 501-502). However, Koskenniemi concludes that Schmitt’s “genuine” universalism “is from beginning to end based on an unquestioned faith” (Ibid: 502), which seemingly precludes the possibility of reasoned engagement with it. In any case, Koskenniemi does not attempt to describe what this universalism might mean in practice.

So, could it all be a phantasm, an illusion? Maybe there is, in reality, no “genuine” or “suppressed” universalism in Schmitt? This is a dominant view of his international thought, according to which the German thinker was a staunch defender of international political pluralism²⁷. Schmitt’s perhaps most famous work seems to straightforwardly support this view: “A world state which embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exist. The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe. <...> The political entity cannot by its very nature be universal in the sense of embracing all of humanity and the entire world” (2007: 53). Similarly, the notion of “a large space” (*Grossraum*) also implies a pluralistic world order, since there are supposed to be multiple large spaces (Hooker, 2009: 126-155). All this follows from the fundamental definition of the political as a distinction between friend and enemy: “The political entity presupposes the real existence of an enemy and therefore coexistence with another political entity” (Schmitt, 2007: 53). In a condition of world unity, if ever achieved, “what remains is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc.” (Ibid). Schmitt is, however, highly skeptical about the ability of people, even in such a condition, to “escape the logic of the political” (Ibid: 79).

26. Milbank also describes the second part of his essay as an attempt “to articulate a development of Schmitt’s neglected first idiom”, however it remains unclear what he takes specifically from Schmitt to come to the following thesis: “from the village to the planet, we need to recreate the complex network of gift-exchanging communities and corporations, which naturally and traditionally pursue intrinsic good purpose and virtue, out of which a true and relatively more peaceful order can be distilled” (2023).

27. For a representative sample, see, e.g., Kervégan (1999), Petit (2007), Kökerer (2021).

Some scholars have also tried to explicitly connect Schmitt's defense of international pluralism with his concept of the katechon. For Nicoletti, the katechon "seems to embody the figure of opposition to monist universalism—which can be interpreted theologically as the mark of the reign of the Antichrist, who alone can reduce the earth to a single kingdom—and can thus be seen as the defender of pluralism" (2017: 380). In a similar fashion, Viacheslav Kondurov has recently argued that Schmitt's "legacy offers an atypical non-universalist and anti-messianic view on international law as a heterogeneous global legal order" and that "the pluralistic structure" of this order "can be seen as a katechon that holds back the end of history"²⁸ (2021b: 69).

Such arguments, however, neglect the distinction between "true" and "false" universalism, which, as I will show in a moment, is indeed present in the Spanish text of "The Unity". It is also important to note that Schmitt himself never established a connection between the katechon and any form of pluralist world organization, either *jus publicum europaeum* or *Grossraum* order. In a couple of cases, cited earlier, he opposes the katechon to "nihilistic centralization", but *not to any form of world unity*. Furthermore, the Holy Roman Empire, which he most confidently identifies as the katechon, was a universalist force. So were the Jesuits, an explicitly transnational movement with universalist ambition in an epoch of sovereign states.

Finally, it is in "The Unity" that Schmitt comes closest to outlining his vision of a katechontic universalism. Early in the lecture, two possible scenarios of world unity are described: "The abstract unity may lead to the triumph of evil as well as to the triumph of good"²⁹ (1951: 344). He also highlights at the outset that it is precisely *political unity* — "the unitary organization of human power" (Ibid: 343) — that is in question, not any other (e.g., biological or merely economic) form of unity. "Evil" unity is then analyzed, in an already familiar fashion, as the result of techno-economic centralization, as the unity brought about by the new means of transportation, communication, and destruction, which make the planet smaller (Ibid: 344-345). Evil as such, it has become all the more dangerous by the middle of the 20th century, as the tremendous increase in human's technological power has not been accompanied by commensurate moral progress (Ibid: 350-351).

Schmitt's next move is to connect visions of world unity with conceptions of history: "The problem of world unity is the problem of man's self-understanding in history"³⁰

28. Kondurov's argument is, in fact, a bit more complex (both here and in relation to the sovereign, see note 18 above), as he works within a "methodological" approach to Schmitt's political theology (Kondurov, 2021a: 239-240). Therefore, the most accurate rendition of his argument would be not that the pluralistic structure of heterogeneous legal order *is* the katechon, but that its function in the political-legal realm *is structurally analogous* to the function of the katechon in a theological realm. A detailed discussion of the merits and drawbacks of such an approach is obviously beyond the purview of this article. Nevertheless, I would like to note that its application to the katechon in particular contradicts Schmitt's understanding of the concept. The katechon was for Schmitt the bridge between eschatology and history (2009: 169), which connected the eternal and the temporal: it is thus incompatible with the autonomy of the two realms, which is a necessary condition for drawing structural analogies between them.

29. "La unidad abstracta en cuanto tal lo mismo puede redundar en auge del bien que en auge del mal."

30. "...el problema de la unidad del mundo es un problema de autointerpretación histórica del hombre."

(Ibid: 355). In particular, techno-economic vision of world unity emanates from the Enlightenment — rationalist and progressivist — philosophy of history, of which both Soviet Marxism and Western liberal progressivism are offsprings (Ibid: 348-351). To this philosophy of history Schmitt then opposes some “possibilities for a Christian conception of History”, the katechon being one of the them. He further argues that these possibilities are “the only ones that make History and, together with it, *the right conception of the unity of the world*, possible”³¹ (Ibid: 354). On the contrary, “any world unity that does not follow this Christian image [of history] would herald either the transition to *a new plurality, full of catastrophes*, or the coming of the end of times”³² [italics here and in the previous quote are mine. — *Ye.U.*] (Ibid: 355).

It seems to follow directly from Schmitt’s analysis that there exists a possibility for the true unity of the world, opposed both to “false” techno-economic unity and to catastrophic plurality. Furthermore, this “true unity” is somehow connected with the katechontic conception of history. The only problem is that Schmitt does not provide any details. What would be key features of “the true world unity”? How would it emerge? Nor does he ever return to this topic in his later works. On the contrary, the German version of the same lecture, published in January 1952, nor longer mentions either the katechon or “the true unity”. However, the very fact that the two themes simultaneously disappear from the text confirms the initial connection between them.

As to why Schmitt decided to change the text of “The Unity” in the German edition (and not to develop the theme of katechontic unity later), we can only guess. One explanation could be a misfit between the universalist implications of the katechon and the confrontational and pluralist logic of his theory of the political: a contradiction that demanded a resolution, and was resolved in favor of the political. Such a resolution might have also been aided by Schmitt’s inability to identify contemporary katechontic forces, either actual or potential. In the intensifying flux of modernity, a pluralist picture could at least provide some source of orientation.

In lieu of a conclusion: *loquimini theologi?*

Two sets of implications can be derived from the analysis undertaken in the paper: 1) implications for our understanding of the thought of Carl Schmitt; and 2) implications for our understanding of concept of *katechon*.

First, the paper provides support to the view that there is a universalist strand in Schmitt’s political thought. This strand turns out to be most closely connected with his development of the concept of the katechon: katechontic conception of history leads to a vision of a “true unity of the world”. In the end, however, katechontic universalism remains significantly underdeveloped, and, on the whole, occupies only a secondary place in the overall Schmitt’s *oeuvre*.

31. “... son las únicas que hacen posible la Historia y con ella, la recta concepción de la unidad del mundo.”

32. “Toda unidad del mundo que no siga esta imagen cristiana podría anunciar o bien la transición a una nueva pluralidad, premiada de catástrofes, o bien la señal de que ha llegado el fin de los tiempos.”

Second, a popular thesis about the centrality of the katechon for the whole of Schmitt's thought is not supported by the evidence. The concept of the katechon does not play any major role in Schmitt's theory of the political, nor in his idea of the *Grossraum*, nor in the opposition of land and sea... Moreover, the idea of the katechon enters into conflict with those concepts, allowing us to see *an important tension at work in Schmitt's thought*. While published works may create an impression that this tension was mostly resolved, and not in favor of the katechon, Schmitt's continued preoccupation with the concept, as evidenced by his private notes and correspondence, points to a more complex intellectual picture.

As for the second set of implications, the concept of the katechon emerges from this study less obscure, but still in the need of further clarification.

First, the relevance of the katechon today is probably even higher than in Schmitt's time. The nuclear danger is alive and well, while techno-economic centralization of the world has intensified drastically in the digital age, and it continues to supply humanity with global threats to its existence, from climate change to a possible malign AI³³.

Second, and connected with this less than inspiring picture, the absence of the katechon may well be an accurate diagnosis of the present condition. If this is correct, and if we agree with Schmitt on the undesirability of both pure technicity and collective suicide (1951: 354), then katechon needs to be revived.

Third, this revival will most likely need to base itself on an alternative — non-liberal and non-utopian — vision of political universalism. To begin with, in the age of techno-economic globality, particularistic projects are dangerous because international antagonism might escalate to world-destroying levels. (And stable coexistence implies finding at least a minimum common ground, a modicum of universality). Moreover, as Schmitt reminds us, mere particularism is easily subsumed into the very techno-economic universality it seeks to challenge (Ibid: 355).

The task of katechontic revival would thus require identifying an ideational legitimation of the non-utopian universality, as well as its institutional form. Schmitt is silent on the details of both, but it does not mean that his works cannot provide some hints. On an ideational level, he points to the significance of *history* itself: for Schmitt, history is “the irruption of the eternal into the course of time, <...> the hope and honor or our existence”³⁴ (Ibid). Contrary to Lievens, it is hardly a “profane” and “minimal” image of history, whose “sole function is a negative one, namely, to keep final ends away and to throw us back onto ourselves here and now” (2016: 418-419)³⁵. The imperative of preventing the end of history could probably seem meaningless, and thus leading to “nihilism” (Ibid: 419), a century ago, but today it is full of meaning.

33. For an up-to-date overview of so-called “existential risks”, see Ord (2020).

34. “... un encuadramiento de lo eterno en el transcurso de los tiempos, <...> la esperanza y el honor de nuestra existencia.” See also Schmitt (2009: 170).

35. Nicoletti is more attentive to Schmitt's text in this regard, as he describes the katechon as “reaffirming a transcendence which is incarnated within—not extraneous to—history” (2017: 379-380).

This idea of history as the meeting point of eternity and time resonates well with the famous question Schmitt poses at the end of *Political Theology II*: “Who answers *in concreto*, on behalf of the concrete, autonomously acting human being, the question of what is spiritual, what is worldly and what is the case with the *res mixtae*, which, in the interval between the first and the second arrival of the Lord, constitute, as a matter of fact, the entire earthly existence of this spiritual-worldly, spiritual-temporal, double-creature called a *human being*?” (2008: 115). It seems that the problem of the katechon, which acts in history but receives his commission from a higher realm, was for Schmitt just another way to pose this same question.

Therefore, on an institutional level, could it be that the medieval katechon was made possible by the existence of “the distinction between *potestas* [power] and *auctoritas* [authority] as two distinct lines of order of the same encompassing unity” (Schmitt 2006: 61)? Could such a “double representation” be a necessary condition for the katechon’s revival? It seems quite plausible: if the ultimate question is “what is spiritual, what is worldly?”, then no concrete order is better suited for navigating those issues than the one which is represented simultaneously by two authoritative hierarchies—one spiritual, another worldly³⁶. So, shall we say: *loquimini theologi in munere vestro*?

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³⁶. For a more detailed analysis of what spiritual authority might look like in a post-liberal world, and why its restoration might be conducive to achieving peaceful international coexistence, see Uchaev and Nikolaev (2023).

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Понятие катехона у Карла Шмитта: в поисках иного универсализма?*

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Идея катехона, как она обычно понимается сегодня, лишь углубляет уже существующие идеологические и политические расколы, резко противопоставляя консерватизм прогрессивизму, а многополярность — глобализму и гегемонии. С опорой на работы Карла Шмитта в статье утверждается, что концепция катехона в действительности содержит в себе корни альтернативного — нелиберального и неревolutionного — универсалистского политического проекта и, тем самым, способна преодолеть указанные бинарные оппозиции. Вопреки доминирующей интерпретации, катехон у Шмитта не означает легитимации суверенной государственной власти или международного плюрализма. Напротив, эта концепция выражает недооцененное универсалистское направление в мысли немецкого теоретика, которое вступает в конфликт с конфронтационной и плюралистской логикой его понятия политического или концепции порядка больших пространств. Для Шмитта катехон подразумевает сущностно не-суверенную форму власти, которая одновременно поддерживает и обновляет существующий социальный порядок, чтобы обеспечить продолжение истории, понимаемой как область уникальных и единичных событий. В современности, эта задача в первую очередь заключается в противостоянии технократической глобализации, которая угрожает либо растворением человечества в квази-естественных поведенческих закономерностях, либо его технологическим самоубийством. В качестве решения этой проблемы Шмитт, однако, предлагает не международно-политический плюрализм, а особое — и напрямую связанное с катехонической теологией истории — «правильное» понимание универсализма, которое в редко рассматриваемой испанской версии статьи «Единство мира» противопоставляется как ложному техноэкономическому либеральному единству, так и антагонистической множественности. Хотя сам Шмитт не разрабатывает в деталях этот проект, его работы указывают на диархию духовных и мирских властей как ключевой элемент катехонического единства мира.³⁷

Ключевые слова: катехон, Карл Шмитт, теология истории, универсализм, власть, порядок, духовная власть

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