

## The Concept of the Political: Between Existential Philosophy and Counter-Revolution

BOOK REVIEW: BASHKOV V. *REPETICIJA POLITICHESKOGO. SEREN K'ERKEGOR I KARL SHMITT* [THE REHEARSAL OF THE POLITICAL: SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND CARL SCHMITT], SAINT-PETERSBURG: VLADIMIR DAL'.

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The review of Vladimir Bashkov's book "The Rehearsal of the Political: Søren Kierkegaard and Carl Schmitt" will begin with a personal quotation from the author, explicitly pointing out the freedom of interpretation granted to the reviewer: "This study is an invitation to shared reflection. We leave it to the reader to decide for himself what conclusions are to be drawn and whether they are necessary with regard to these types of questions" (p. 16). This is an important point because the book claims to be reinterpetive, which means that we have to judge whether the proposed interpretation allows us to understand Carl Schmitt better. To do so, let us turn to the epigraph that precedes Bashkov's study, in which Kierkegaard claims, objecting to his readers, that he is primarily interested in the beginning itself. It is fair to say that what matters for existential philosophy is the pathos of the beginning, how and why one decides to begin at all. But can we continue this claim by saying that the pathos of the beginning is important only for existential philosophy, or that existential philosophy would be the best name to define the pathos underlying the beginning of human action? These are the questions from which we propose to proceed, analyzing both Bashkov's book and Schmitt's writings.

The basis of Bashkov's interpretation is that Schmitt, despite some distortions, introduces Kierkegaard's thought into political philosophy, the most important part of which rests on the delineation of different existential spheres: the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious. Being at these different stages, a person acts in very different ways, and the ground of their action or inaction changes. The author guides us through Schmitt's work, using these stages as an interpretive canvas. It is easy to see in Schmitt's critique of political romanticism a demand that correlates with the ethical stage, where self-determination occurs through the making of a judgment and the acceptance of the obligations associated with that judgment. Unlike the real politician, even the romantic one, the political romantic always tries to avoid establishing anything definite. Their political thought is contradictory, eclectic, and not at all demanding in relation to real politics, in which it is always important to stand firm, to make a decision. The political romantic avoids making a choice, because in doing so he deprives himself of an infinite number of possibilities. It is worth remembering that Schmitt uses the example of Adam Müller

to show how the political romantic can easily contradict himself, adapt to the “winds of change”, and see the guarantee of their creative freedom even in Metternich’s police state. Not only that, but it is the reactionary regimes that freeze all activity that are most attractive to the political romantic, because the outward absence of conflict and the increased value of abstraction and loyalty support their reluctance to make a decision. Reality is merely an occasion where only a romantic subjectivity has any real value. As Bashkov convincingly shows, what counts for Schmitt in “Political Romanticism” is historical concreteness, a norm that exists independently of the romantic subject’s creative energy. But it is not only political romanticism that asserts the primacy of the possible over the actual, the intrusion of one into the other.

The author’s next step is to move from political romanticism to a sovereign dictatorship. Unlike the commissary dictatorship, the sovereign dictatorship is not rooted in the existing political order, and does not owe anything to the present, since it completely abolishes the current order of things. It unleashes the enormous energy of political activity, which is necessary not so much for the affirmation of its agent, as for the complete transformation of the object of activity. Accordingly, despite its resemblance to political romanticism, a sovereign dictatorship takes both reality and its own decisions seriously. Bashkov, following Schmitt and Kierkegaard, describes seriousness in terms of tension, energy and existentiality. Thus sovereign dictatorship, which in the texts of ‘Political Theology’ and ‘The Concept of the Political’ is simply transformed into sovereign power, constitutes an action at the ethical level. Bashkov characterizes the ethical position of the political by acknowledging its final distinction (p. 94). The ethical self makes distinctions not between good and evil, but rather between their recognition and non-recognition.

This process of distinction is also present in politics. Here it draws the line between friend and enemy. The author goes on to reveal similarities. Bashkov’s parallel reading and translation of one concept into the other helps him to identify the structure of the influence of despair on the political. The political contours of despair are already evident in one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, namely Anti-Climacus, who appeared at the moment when Kierkegaard had become an outcast and failed to become a Protestant pastor. Anti-Climacus saw despair everywhere, expressed in the expulsion of sin from the spiritual life of the self. Sinlessness appears to be guaranteed by history and progress. The sinless Self knows neither sin nor redemption any longer. This order is maintained by a public that is united as never before and that assumes the impossibility of individual judgment. To overcome despair, it is necessary to bring sin back into the realm of politics, into the very heart of political life. This requires, first of all, the return of the singular, the one who is brought to judgment. Bashkov notes (p. 106) that, according to Anti-Climacus, despair will not vanish, so it must be taken seriously as an intrinsic human trait. Ultimately, sin is a generic human feature, but man must identify himself as separate from the generic, as a singularity, in order to discover his own sinful nature. And this is where Schmitt comes in! Bashkov discovers that for Schmitt, despair takes on approximately the same features as for Anti-Climacus, but in Schmitt’s era the scale of this attitude toward the world and the self had grown to even more catastrophic proportions. In ‘The Concept of the Po-

litical' and 'Theory of the Partisan', we find a critique of pacifism, which denies the evil ("dangerous") nature of human beings, thereby arguing that with the progress of society, violence is no longer necessary, and that institutions, which exist only to restrain the dangers of mankind, actually do nothing but oppress human nature, which is essentially good. Seen through this lens, the political identification of enemies becomes absolute evil, a total rejection of humanity. "War against war" assumes the characteristics of a humanitarian massacre against "non-humans." In contrast, Schmitt suggests that human beings are seen as inherently dangerous and prone to sin, and that the recognition of political hostilities actually reveals the intrinsic truth of humanity. And here we do not contradict the Christian commandment, because it speaks of private, not public hostilities.

At this point we should note that Bashkov's further study becomes somewhat value-oriented. There are passages in the text that express open solidarity with the evaluations made by Schmitt and Kierkegaard. Towards the end of the book this becomes quite clear, but at this point we cannot proceed to the author's conclusions. First of all, we need to look at how he interprets Schmitt's reading of Hobbes. The key point is as follows: for Bashkov, Kierkegaard is also similar to Schmitt in that the latter tries to save the singularity from the dictates of the public or any other part pretending to be the whole (e.g. a political party). The political union created by the collective, decision-based identification of friends and enemies has homogeneous and individualistic character at the same time. In the homogeneity of the state of emergency, the individual would be able to get rid of the circumstantial bodies that claim total power in the technocratic state. These bodies are not responsible for political power, but claim total dictatorship over private life. Thus, a situation of civil war arises when the sovereign, long lost in the routine of technocracy, lets power slip out of his hands. The leap to the intense experience of sin, and thus to the identification of the Other as potentially dangerous, is juxtaposed with the critique of Descartes and the subsequent mechanistic philosophy of the human and the state. The connection between the critique of Leviathan and the freedom of the singular seems obvious. It is easily found not only in 'The Concept of the Political', but also in 'The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes'. If Descartes presented man as a mechanism, Thomas Hobbes did the same thing, but with a political union. The further development of Leviathan led to this cold and regular machine becoming less and less in need of an explicitly sovereign judgment. This is expressed in the perception of legal law as similar to the law of natural science. The purpose of this mechanism was to prevent religious wars, for its remarkable feature was the concentration of all the power of the people in the hands of the sovereign, who thus gained power over their religion. The authority of the Pope or of the independent congregations of Protestant sects crumbled before the combined power of the One who alone had the right to determine the rules of collective worship. Thomas Hobbes, however, leaves the subject the right to retain inward freedom of belief, and only outward respect for an official religion only insofar as it serves the stability of the political order. This raises two questions. In the first place, the state of nature is not the historical existence of peoples at a certain stage of their development, but a theoretical description of relations between abstract solitary individuals already devoid

of any particular corporate or patrimonial ties. Why did they suddenly become solitary, when from a historical perspective it is difficult to detect the state of nature of this type? They realized that they might lose what they needed to survive as a result of a possible conflict with others like themselves (and human beings are equal because they are of the same nature). Second, the state of nature is a constant threat that is always present in the idea of sovereignty, from which the sovereign builds himself up. When the gap between the inside and the outside became apparent, it was the primacy of the inside that began to be emphasized.

Vladimir Bashkov devoted an entire chapter to the interpretation of Hobbes, its connection to Schmitt, and how, in the project of political theology, the rereading and conceptual interaction between the interpretations of Hobbes and Kierkegaard gives us the opportunity to bring the sinful nature of man in general, and original sin in particular, back into the realm of the political. In this interpretation, the failure of the Leviathan project is an opportunity to rethink religion as a profound personal experience, rooted in existentiality and in the recognition of one's own sinfulness. If Hobbes is a profoundly Christian thinker who never forgot the confessional formula "Jesus is the Christ," this means that the state of nature can only be abolished by the singular subjects accepting a covenant based on fear, which is already present everywhere.

Here we can finally move from a modest and general statement of how we see the author's argument to how we see the problem he raises and how relevant his conclusions are.

Bashkov's study is undoubtedly of great value, if only for the fact that it brings to light in great detail a problem that has only been briefly sketched in Russian literature. The author not only interprets Schmitt through Kierkegaard's texts, but also draws on biographical material that shows Schmitt's preoccupation with Kierkegaard at those moments in his life when he needed salvation and affirmation of his individual spiritual experience (divorce, excommunication, imprisonment). This is especially true of the section entitled "Instead of Imprisonment," which shows that Schmitt quite often twisted the meaning of Kierkegaard's texts in order to apply them to the present, a reality that was always his primary concern. Kierkegaard's influence on Schmitt is particularly evident in his diaries.

Reading this study, however, leaves one in doubt. It can be expressed in the following question: is it precisely Kierkegaard who should be the seminal figure in the interpretation of the political theology project? Bashkov writes (p. 20) that we can observe the undeniable influence of the Danish theologian on the text of 'Political Romanticism', yet Kierkegaard is mentioned there only once. This is surprising, especially given that the counterrevolutionary writers Joseph de Mestre, Louis de Bonald, and Juan Donoso Cortés, are cited much more frequently by both Schmitt and Bashkov. By way of contrast, it is worth noting that in "Political Romanticism" Schmitt strikingly contrasted the political fortunes of the romantic Adam Müller and the traditionalist Louis de Bonald. Bashkov states that the references to Catholic counterrevolutionaries conceal "specifically understood Kierkegaard", although he discovers only part of the argument in the Catholic reactionaries. This is a remarkable step, which is not done in the book. The same page

does not refer to any research on this issue, and the author does not return to it afterwards. This gap gives rise to the idea that the interpretation of Schmitt on the basis of Kierkegaard is not so compelling, and that Schmitt could have conceived of the beginning of the political not only and not so much on the basis of existential philosophy (which is certainly present in his texts), but also with regard to Catholic counter-revolutionaries. The similarities are easy to see. For example, Donoso Cortés, in his ‘Speech on Dictatorship’, uses very Schmittian apologetics of dictatorship and the emergency solution. The speech opens by calling for dictatorship in the name of public safety, for the good of a society that is above all else. Laws are not made for their own sake. Legality is inappropriate here and generally serves as a gamble on the part of the opposite, liberal camp. Why is legality inappropriate in these circumstances? Since society demands to be saved, legality is not enough (in other circumstances, more peaceful ones, there is no problem with it). What is needed is a dictatorship, which is, of course, a terrible word, but “revolution”, according to Cortés, is much worse, the most terrible of all. It is the revolution that becomes this terrible circumstance that requires extraordinary governmental measures. In taking on this burden, they are not unreasonable or illegitimate because, as Cortés argues, social life, just like that of human beings, consists of action and reaction, that is, of forces of invasion and forces of resistance. This analogy is not accidental, Donoso Cortés asserts that in society, invading forces (which for humans would be diseases) have two states: one where they “spill over throughout society and are represented by individuals”<sup>1</sup>, and another where things have gone completely wrong, a social disease has taken root, and the invading forces are transformed into political groups. Of course, in the first situation, a legalistic effort is sufficient if the forces of resistance are also distributed throughout society and exert their life-giving effect at all levels. If, on the other hand, we observe a situation which, in the language of Hobbes and Schmitt, can be called a civil war, then “the forces of resistance with all the necessity that nothing can or has the right to hinder are gathered in one hand”<sup>2</sup>. It is not difficult to see that the dictatorship here has a character similar to that of the sovereign in ‘Political Theology’, who suspends the law for the sake of the law itself. Society must be preserved, its foundations must not be shaken, and all destructive forces must be expelled either by law or by sovereign action. Next comes the historical justification for the dictatorship, but this is not very useful for our topic, so let us go straight to the theological argument. According to Cortes, God has left mankind to worldly affairs, and rules the universe through the laws he has established. However, he has repeatedly intervened in this established order to change it. To translate this into the language of worldly affairs, one could argue that God has acted as a dictator. But that is not the end of the story. In the same speech, Donoso Cortés shows us the relationship between secular power and religious authority. Repression is of two kinds: internal and external, or in other words, religious and political. It was the Christian community in its best days, when Christ was alive, that formed a society completely free of external

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1. Donoso Cortes.H. (2023) *Rech' o Diktature* [Speech on Dictatorship], Sankt-Petersburg: Vladimir Dal', p.17

2. *Ibid.* p. 18

repression. On the contrary, the whole history of the West before the Revolution is the history of the growth of secular power, and the Revolution merely continues this disastrous trend. As the power of religion declined, secular power consolidated. It is as if only the moment of existential experience of faith is missing from this description, but there is already the historical-theological reasoning that if there were a religious reaction<sup>3</sup>, all the previous consolidation of secular power would come to a halt and then be reversed. But if the opposite happens... And then Donoso Cortes goes on to sound as apocalyptic as possible, predicting the most formidable tyranny we can imagine.

Despite the obvious similarities in formulation, there is a gap between Schmitt and Cortés. To define it, it is worth recalling that for Schmitt, democracy is the totality and identity of the governed and the governing. Out of this identity arises homogeneity that is not peculiar to the society of the old order. This homogeneity could also be the moment of liberation of the individual from the fetters of kinship, estate, class, and other things, opening the way to the existential experience of hostility and sin. In other words, the Leviathan that failed opened the way to a total political union that no longer hides its foundation from itself, no longer distinguishes between the internal and the external. In the short article entitled "Politics" Schmitt writes that if the political world was previously manifested only in the form of the state, now the only adequate description of politics is everything that concerns the people in its integrity, because it is the people, not the state, comprises the regular concept of political unity.

Here we have to take the next step. Schmitt inherits from Kierkegaard the anthropology of sin as a justification for the singularity and possibility of the religious. If this is true, then the return of subjectivity is only possible through (to use Cortes' terminology) a return to religious repression. A rejection of social unity, which cannot tolerate such existential tensions between humans, is produced by the radical opposition of the self to sin. There is no more liberal neutrality. In this case, Kierkegaard, creatively interpreted by Schmitt, is the gap between him and the counterrevolution, which still had something to fight for. To recognize one's own despair, then, and to go all the way into it, is to insist on the authenticity of the anthropology of sin hypocritically concealed by the technocratic state. Ultimately, by insisting on sin, we insist on the state of nature transcended by liberalism.

The political is a state of nature, as Leo Strauss had already observed in his "Notes on Carl Schmitt". In his interpretation, Schmitt overcame Hobbes by going back to the beginning, thus attempting to overcome liberalism. Strauss did not find this attempt to be successful, but what is important for us is not this, but the place that existential motives occupied in this endeavor. If our interpretation is correct, then Kierkegaard's influence on Schmitt only reinforced the counterrevolutionary resolution of the "political theology" project.

This makes Bashkov's conclusions understandable. They have the scent of what one might cautiously call "the politics of despair". The lessons of Kierkegaard and Schmitt are

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3. *Ibid.* p. 50

read as existential, which means that the space of freedom is conceived through overcoming and insisting on singular subjectivity, which only seems brighter in a state of emergency and dictatorship. Beyond the partisan struggle there is a time of normalization. The important thing is to live up to seeing it.

But are we obliged to continue the conservative line, after having been forced to turn to existential philosophy? Or is politics perhaps also a question of what is just? After all, in “Political Romanticism,” Schmitt still allows for such definitions. Could it be that freedom is not only something that is realized exclusively in genuine action, but also the possibility of political participation, which is restricted in all kinds of dictatorships? To clarify these questions would require a study that bridges, within Schmitt’s work, a counterrevolution and Kierkegaard.

## Понятие политического: между экзистенциальной философией и контрреволюцией

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