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Climate Katechon Politics: Carl Schmitt in Narratives of the Environmental Crisis

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Abstract

Narratives of the anthropogenic environmental crisis (Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene) are driven by the same structural logic: they all locate the theoretical origins of the environmental crisis in an improper relationship between a class of human subjects and 'natural' objects. Some scholars like Latour attempt to use Schmitt's political thought to address this dualism and build an emancipatory political framework. However, I argue that this project is necessarily doomed to failure because Schmitt's political and legal thought, once plugged into the eschatological character of the environmental crisis, cannot escape his authoritarian political theology. Arguments that try to detach Schmitt from his authoritarian and apocalypse-withholding katechon fail because the internal logics of Schmitt's thought always drive towards state consolidation and internal homogenization in the face of existential crisis. Therefore, I argue that Schmitt's thought cannot be used for an emancipatory politics in the context of the environmental crisis.

Keywords

climate change, Climate Leviathan, environment, Hobbes, katechon, Latour, Schmitt

Introduction

The prevalence of Carl Schmitt in political literature examining the environmental crisis is perplexing. Schmitt never explicitly wrote about ecology or demonstrated serious concern with the anthropogenic destruction of the environment. Further, political literature about the environmental crisis typically aims for emancipatory resolutions, contrary to Schmitt's conservative-agonistic authoritarian political project (Wolin, 1990). Nonetheless,

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prominent scholars like Latour have appropriated Schmitt's work to address contemporary political shortcomings towards the environmental crisis (e.g. Kelly, 2022; Latour, 1993, 2004, 2017, 2021).

However, do the narratives of the anthropogenic environmental crisis point towards a Schmittian solution? Have scholars successfully used Schmitt's political thought to construct a political framework to navigate the environmental crisis that does not rely on the emergence of an authoritarian Schmittian state? Is such a framework even possible to arrive at through Schmitt's political thought?

This article addresses those questions and illuminates whether applying Schmitt's thought to political theorizing about the environmental crisis is appropriate. The key tension unpacked by this article is why scholars like Latour are drawn to the theorizing of Schmitt in their analysis of the environmental crisis. Using Latour as a representative, this article will argue that Schmitt's ontologically egalitarian political metaphysics appears as a preferable alternative to the politically deadlocked subject-object distinction located in much modernist theorizing. However, despite appearances, Schmitt's concept of the political and of *nomos* ultimately acts as a Trojan horse for theories of domination that overwhelm emancipatory conclusions drawn from his theorizing.

The article is structured as follows. The first section explores dominant narratives of the environmental crisis and identifies their structural similarities through their mutual reference to the subject-object distinction. It demonstrates how the subject-object distinction paralyses political action towards the environmental crisis. The second and third sections will explore how Latour, as the Schmitt-inclined environmental theorist *par excellence*, attempted to use Schmitt's political thought to build a robust response to the theoretical challenges of the environmental crisis but ultimately failed. The final section will argue that Schmitt's political thought cannot be employed to produce an emancipatory political framework in the context of the environmental crisis and instead leads to the formulation of the Climate Katechon. Climate Katechon is not presented as a desirable alternative. Rather, it is a manifestation of the Schmittian argument taken to its logical conclusion.

Narratives of the Environmental Crisis and the Subject-Object Distinction

To understand the application of Schmitt's thought to the environmental crisis, it is important to understand the theoretical niche that Schmitt is being invited into. Political theorizing about the environmental crisis is situated within narratives. Far from obfuscating our understanding, narratives are critical for understanding how and why the environmental crisis unfolded over time, identifying the relevant subjects that have contributed to the crisis, and what can be done to ameliorate it (Bonneuil, 2015).

The Anthropocene has become a standard account of the environmental crisis. It not only demarcates geologic time but is also a narrative about the relationship between humans and Earth (Cronon, 1992). It portrays humanity as the primary subject responsible for bringing about the environmental crisis (Crutzen, 2002a). In this account, humanity's relationship with the planet changed with the Industrial Revolution. Since then,

humans have exponentially consumed more resources to fuel their increasingly complex lifestyles (Crutzen, 2002b). Rising global human development corresponds to environmental degradation (Steffen et al., 2015). Steffen therefore identifies the environmental crisis as the consequence of the human desire for improved material conditions (Crutzen, 2002a). The whole 'anthropos' is responsible for the Anthropocene.

Two alternative narratives are the Capitalocene and the Plantationocene. They challenge the Anthropocene's account of the environmental crisis. The Capitalocene places the responsibility for the overexploitation that drives the environmental crisis on capitalists rather than all humanity (Moore, 2017a, 2017b). The capitalist overexploitation of the four 'cheaps' (labour, food, energy, and raw materials) is the primary cause of the environmental crisis. The Plantationocene argues that colonial plantation capitalism serves as the productive model that drives the environmental crisis (Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Wolford, 2021). The extractive model of the plantation governs not only production but also seeks to organize life itself for profit. As such, the biosphere becomes a valid target for biopolitical interventions typically overlooked by a classical Marxian analysis of capitalism, leading to disastrous consequences like genocide and mass extinction (Yusoff, 2018: 27–9).

All three narratives comprise a particular subject-object distinction. Within the Anthropocene, humanity constitutes the subject and natural resources constitute objects (Steffen et al., 2011). Within the Capitalocene, capitalists constitute subjects and the four 'cheaps' constitute objects (Moore, 2017a). Within the Plantationocene, Global Northern colonists are subjects and, in addition to the four 'cheaps', non-white humans, nonhumans, and other biological entities are objects (Wolford, 2021). Each narrative then argues that the environmental crisis is caused by defined subjects exploiting defined objects. Thus, despite defining subjects and objects differently, all three narratives argue that subjects exploiting objects sustain the environmental crisis. Only through understanding how the subject-object distinction sustains the environmental crisis can an appropriate understanding of the relationship between politics and the environmental crisis emerge.

The roots of the subject-object distinction can be traced to the Enlightenment (Macintyre, 2014). A major project of Enlightenment thinking was attempting to establish objective science and universal morality, each according to its own autonomous internal logic (Habermas, 1983). This implied that objective and universal truths existed and were accessible to willing subjects through reason (Smith, 2017: 41–3). The recognition of this willing and rational subject also dialectically produced the passive object incapable of reason.

Reference to universal truths enables constructing a framework in which different expressions of knowledge can be hierarchically arranged according to how well they conform to those truths (Foucault, 2020 [1975]: 177–84). Subjects were definitionally capable of grasping universal truth through applying their will and reason, whereas objects were definitionally unable to do so. Since subjects act according to reasons derived from their access to universal truth, they possess 'superior' reasons. Therefore, subjects were justified in imposing their will on objects, even against the explicit desire of those 'objects' (Yusoff, 2015). Thus, the epistemic hierarchy of the subject-object distinction transforms into an ontological one.

However, the ontological superiority of subjects over objects was not based on innate qualities subjects possessed and objects did not. Instead, those who considered themselves ontologically superior justified exploitation through the subject-object distinction (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 2014 [1982]: 208–12). Subjects and objects are artificial and historically contingent categories shaped by power more than by essence (Foucault, 1982). Historically, white male European urban elites portrayed themselves as rational, willing subjects and all they wished to control as objects (Mills, 2017).

The subject-object distinction has been used to legitimize the overexploitation of the environment. In pre-Enlightenment Europe, the environment was thought of as possessing its own subjectivity endowed by divinity (Merchant, 1989 [1980]: 29–41). This conception led ancient and mediaeval scholars to regularly argue against overexploiting natural resources or over-polluting. However, with Cartesian dualism, subjectivity became confined to the human 'mind' (Northcott, 2013: 62–5). Since only the human mind could reason, external entities were deprived of their subjectivity and became objects (Papastephanou, 2000). The environment became particularly objectified. Though the material world was governed by physical laws, and animals acted autonomously, the environment cannot reason and by extension cannot exercise meaningful, agency-granting will in the same way humans can. This rendered the environment an ontologically inferior and passive object to be experienced by subjects (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997 [1944]: 19–23). The environment becomes purposeless without human interpretation.

Since the environment is an object which precedes human existence, it was also conceived of as transcendent, stable, and unchanging (Latour, 1993: 30–32). Whilst local environmental damage or depletion was widely recognized during and after the Enlightenment, the possibility that human activity could alter planetary conditions was not evident (Northcott, 2013: 60–70). Planetary conditions that supported agriculture and societal development remained relatively stable until recent decades (Chapin et al., 2009: 295–315). If human activity had not directly produced dramatic planetary changes during the Enlightenment, there was little reason to assume it would do so in the future. Thus, environmental exploitation was merely redirected from depleted local environments to pristine and profitable ones (Foster, 1992).

This conceptualization of the environment leads to the Baconian perception of nature as merely an instrument for satisfying human ends (Hamilton, 2015). The planet is conceived of as an endless deposit of resources that humans draw upon and manipulate to suit their purposes (Crutzen, 2002a). Thus, exploiting the environment to satisfy human ends, be that industrialization, capital accumulation, or colonial extraction, is justified through rendering the environment itself as an unwilling and passive object. This overexploitation then directly drives the environmental crisis.

Not only did the subject-object distinction that emerged with the Enlightenment facilitate instrumentalizing the environment, it also had reverberating impacts on the environment in political thought. Modern political thought combines rejecting the past with a vision for a new future for society (Scott, 1998: 87–90). Developing and adopting a vision of the future by political authorities influences 'making the objects of governance, making the instruments of intervention, and making political subjects and polities' (Jasanoff, 2020). Thus, a major consequence of the rise of modern political thought was

'the trend towards re-imagining the future as a permanently "open" site for the realization of utopias within historical time' (Griffin, 2008: 54).

Historical time is particularly important for modern political thinking. Political visions of the future which can guide contemporary action must be situated within humanly comprehensible timeframes of decades or centuries to remain motivating (Nordblad, 2021). Temporal horizons are limited this way because attempting to realize a political vision of the future depends on reasonably forecasting how current actions impact future outcomes. Such forecasting becomes less accurate the farther the future is projected. Thus, historical time is key for a modernist understanding of the world because it facilitates a coherent narrative continuity between the present and the future (Hartog, 2021).

The subject-object distinction interfaces with political theorizing within historical time. Subjects, whether individuals, a class, the state, or some other human group, possess a vision for a future political order and the ability to manipulate objects around them (Loureiro, 2014). The range of entities that constitute valid objects for manipulation varies depending on the political vision and has historically included humans themselves (Foucault, 2020 [1975]). Subjects manipulate objects to facilitate the realization of the subject's political vision within historical time (Latour, 2017: 14–15).

The environment plays a crucial role in this framework because it serves as the hospitable physical background against which modern political visions are realized (Latour, 1993: 35–7). The environment as an object predates and transcends human existence and therefore exists outside of historical time (Latour, 1993: 32). Since the environment exists outside of historical time, it was considered immune to serious anthropogenic disturbance. It is only upon this hospitable and unchanging environmental background that modernist political visions can be realized.

Thus, modern political theorizing depends on a framework where as much of the present as possible is submitted to rational planning and organization with the express intent of bringing about a particular vision of the future ostensibly derived from universal reason (Griffin, 2008: 126–8). It achieves this through mapping the appropriate relationship between subjects who confront each other as equals and the relationship between subjects and objects (Hickey and Robeyns, 2020). Subjects manipulating objects to realize a political vision is inextricably linked to an account of the environment as a stable and hospitable background against which those visions can be realized (Griffin, 2008: 109–17). This account of the environment is only possible itself through reducing the environment to a passive object whose only purpose is to be instrumentalized by human beings via the subject-object distinction.

Latour observes that the subject-object distinction 'led only to paralysis' (Latour, 2004: 53) in dealing with the environmental crisis. Overcoming this paralysis requires moving past the subject-object distinction which sustains it. To understand why Latour takes an explicitly Schmittian turn to address this paralysis, it is important to examine why non-Schmittian theorizing points towards a Schmittian solution, as the rest of this section will demonstrate.

The most straightforward way of addressing this paralysis is by constructing alternative ontologies. Alternative proposals to the subject-object distinction often draw upon the study of indigenous communities (Descola, 1996; Strathern, 2014; Viveiros de Castro,

2019a). Arguing that there is 'no need to presuppose some original fault line' (Descola, 2013) between natural objects and animate subjects, concepts like ontological anarchism (Viveiros de Castro, 2019b) are advanced as alternatives which may address the exploitative relationship humans have towards the environment. However, new ontologies that reject the subject-object often fail at creating political conditions capable of addressing the environmental crisis. Haraway's concept of the chthulucene exemplifies this.

Haraway's chthulucene attempts to move past the subject-object distinction through 'mak[ing] kin, not babies' (Haraway, 2015). Instead of having biological children, individuals should extend radical networks of care and support traditionally reserved for biological family members to both nonhuman and non-related kin (Haraway, 2016a). This broader kinship challenges anthropocentrism and leads to a more compassionate, symbiotic relationship between humans and nonhumans (Haraway, 2016b). Additionally, reduced birth rates through kin-making would lower human demand on resources, easing environmental pressures (Haraway, 2015). Normative questions about sustainable development and a material desert could be avoided altogether with population reduction.

However, the chthulucene retreats into an atomistic modernist individualism and does not establish global networks of collective action to address the ongoing environmental crisis (Dow and Lamoreaux, 2020). Haraway does not offer prescriptions of how such kinship groups would look nor how they will be significantly less exploitative than their cis-heteronormative counterparts. Given the plurality of possible kinship configurations, it is impossible to guarantee that exploitation will not occur within or between them. This leads to an insurmountable political uncertainty: by their idiosyncratic character, it is impossible to know whether the aggregate impact of these new kinship groups will be sufficient to ameliorate the ongoing environmental crisis.

This uncertainty explains Haraway's use of population rhetoric: '[B]laming Capitalism, Imperialism, Neoliberalism, Modernization, or some other "not us" for ongoing destruction webbed with human numbers will not work' (Haraway, 2015). Eventually reducing the human population to around three billion in the future is reflective of the modernist core of Haraway's project: navigating the environmental crisis ultimately requires population control to overcome the epistemic uncertainty of the impact of the proliferation of billions of new subjectivities (Ojeda et al., 2020). Population as an aggregate of subjectivities is an object to be manipulated and controlled (Foucault, 2014). Population control is the only guarantee for a decline in total human demand for resources from the planet. With this decline in demand, destructive human activities are scaled back, and the environmental crisis is ameliorated.

Despite rejecting eco-fascistic interpretations of her work, it is impossible to separate population rhetoric from those associations (Murphy, 2017: 137). Population reduction cannot be separated from the practice of population management it implies (Subramaniam, 2018). To paraphrase Murphy, population management does not have to be named to make a case for population management (Murphy, 2017: 12). The subject-object distinction therefore reappears with the population being the object waiting to be managed by an unspecified subject. Thus, the chthulucene does not transcend modernist political thought. Though Haraway may explicitly deny the use of coercive top-down methods of enforcing this reduction in population (Haraway, 2016a), the success of her political vision of the future is built upon a foundation of calculated modernist outcomes.

This failure represents a wider structural shortcoming in addressing the subject-object distinction in the context of the environmental crisis. Resolving this crisis requires dismantling the ontological hierarchy that legitimates human exploitation of the environment. However, as Haraway's chthulucene illustrates, constructing alternative ontologies alone neither repairs existing ecological damage (Folkers, 2021) nor offers a viable political solution for large-scale coordination. Thus, resolving the environmental crisis requires modern political frameworks wherein subjects can rationally plan current actions to produce predictable future results in accordance with a particular vision of the future. This requires the subjects to manipulate objects in a stable space to produce predictable results. However, such theorizing preserves the subject-object distinction.

Moving past this double bind would require a framework capable of rejecting the ontological hierarchy of the subject-object distinction whilst preserving its powers of political planning. In such a framework, the environment becomes a bounded category for engagement, not infinite exploitation. Theorists like Latour turn to Carl Schmitt to construct such a framework.

A Schmittian Toolbox for the Environmental Crisis

Though other authors have employed Schmitt when writing about the environmental crisis (Connolly, 2017; Northcott, 2013; Rossi, 2017; Scherle, 2022; Wouters, 2022), I focus on Latour because he is one of the most influential voices in the political analysis of this crisis. He also tries not only to move beyond the subject-object distinction but also to develop a political framework for what emerges afterwards (Latour, 1993, 2004, 2017).

Latour uses Schmitt's concept of the *nomos* to operationalize a new space where the environment can engage as political and ontological equals with humans, moving beyond the subject-object distinction (Latour, 2017: 238). Latour then employs Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction to limit and make conflict productive between politically and ontologically equal humans and the environment, creating a dynamic political order and un-paralysing the politics of the environmental crisis (Latour, 2017: 239–41). The remainder of this section will examine how Latour utilizes Schmitt in detail.

Latour argues precisely because 'Schmitt does not think even for a second about what will become of the ecological question', that '*The Nomos of the Earth* can be used to conceptualize the successor to the political, scientific, and theological notion of "nature"' (Latour, 2017: 230). This reasoning situates Latour within a current of theory-making that includes Bratton (2016) and Jameson (2005), who use Schmitt to endow the earth itself with political significance and move past limited contemporary paradigms. The 'toxic and nevertheless indispensable Carl Schmitt' (Latour, 2017: 228) is employed by Latour to escape the 'paralysis' (Latour, 2004: 53) generated by the subject-object distinction to tackle the environmental crisis and to forge a dynamic political framework encompassing ontological equals.

Nomos facilitates a more sophisticated appreciation of how modern political subjectivity is linked to the environment (Pottage, 2019). Within the modern *nomos*, human engagement in the politically constitutive acts of appropriation, distribution, and production is predicated upon conceiving of the environment as a stable object (Latour, 2017:

250). However, the environmental crisis demonstrates that 'the Dome of Nature, under which all the old conflicts took place, has disappeared' (Latour, 2017: 237). Rising sea levels, increasingly inhospitable climates, and other environmental phenomena that threaten human life can be interpreted as the environment's way of engaging in Schmittian appropriation, the fundamental act of politics. Via the *nomos* framework, the environment itself transforms from an inert substrate into a multitude of political agents, occupying 'a position other than that of *what is taken*!' (Latour, 2017: 250). The modern *nomos* is collapsing (Latour, 2017: 233) and its disintegration 'will call for a historically original production of a new legal superstructure or Novum. This call then lays in place the notion of an active moment of constitutive power' (Jameson, 2005). Latour wishes to access this active moment of constitutive power through engagement with Schmitt's thought.

Latour uses this moment to sketch 'the "new *nomos* of the earth"' (Latour, 2004: 255). According to Latour, since the environment cannot simultaneously be the appropriating subject and the appropriated object, it cannot remain the backdrop against which politics occurs. To accommodate for the expansion of political agency to the environment, Latour constructs an alternative background for the political activity of both humans and the environment – Gaia (Latour, 2017: 238). Whereas Schmitt's account of *nomos* frames human political contestation against the background of the environment (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]: 45–6), Latour conceptualizes Gaia as an alternative background where both humans and the environment compete politically. Within Gaia, the environment is decomposed from a 'mononaturalism' (Latour, 2004: 219–20) into its constitutive nonhuman entities and imbued with political agency on par with human beings (Latour, 2004: 61–2). Latour proposes this as a 'new *nomos* of the Earth' (Latour, 2017: 255).

This new *nomos* illuminates the global, inescapable impact of the environmental crisis on humanity (Latour, 2017: 245–53). In Latour's reframing, humans must now account for the interests of nonhumans when appropriating, distributing, and producing. Nonhumans cannot be taken for granted and must also be confronted as political agents with their own interests within Gaia (Latour, 2004: 69–70). Should human activity sufficiently disrespect their interests, nonhumans will react and prevent the fulfilment of human interests by appropriating Gaia from humans through adverse environmental disasters or other consequences. These reactions give nonhumans bargaining chips and political power. The new *nomos* of the Earth is one in which humans and nonhumans engage as equal political agents through their mutual contestation of Gaia (Latour, 2017: 251–2).

Latour employs Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction to limit conflict through realizing ontological equality between humans and nonhumans in this new *nomos* (Latour, 2004: 179). To Latour, it is precisely 'the dissimulation of the friend/enemy relation in the guise of simple policing operations that leads . . . to the transformation of limited wars into *wars of extermination*' (Latour, 2017: 239). Schmitt believed that his friend-enemy distinction moderated and limited conflicts for two reasons. First, friends and enemies, like subjects and objects, are not categories with fixed substances. Instead, their composition is artificially determined from within the relational groups themselves (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 27). Second, because friends and enemies are completely contingent, it debases all reasons for conflict to the same epistemic plane, regardless of what each

claim substantively entails (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 26–7). Each side must recognize that neither possesses inherent right over the other. Instead, conflicts are motivated by self-interest. Neither side has access to superior reasons which justifies epistemic superiority and therefore ontological superiority. (Schmitt, 1987). This recognition enables the treatment of enemies as ontological equals and avoids wars of annihilation driven by claims of ontological hierarchy (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 53–4). Latour accepts this reasoning when he states that 'the expression "political enemy" no longer has the meaning of "subhuman," "lecherous viper," or some other insult, but that it is henceforth used as a term of respect' (Latour, 2004: 279). Latour's new *nomos* recognizes humans and nonhumans as different but ontologically equal through Schmitt (Latour, 2004: 282).

Latour envisions a future where nonhumans like the atmosphere, rivers, or ecosystems will have appointed legal and political representatives with equal standing to their conventional human-representing counterparts (Latour, 2017: 262–70). These representatives will agitate for nonhuman interests just as they would fight for human interests (Latour, 2017: 258–260). Latour argues nonhuman representation is as legitimate as human representation because '[t]hat a human should speak in the name of several others is as great a mystery' (Latour, 2004: 70) as humans speaking in the name of nonhumans. If one accepts humans representing other humans, one must also accept humans representing nonhumans. 'From the spokesperson's point of view there is thus no distinction to be made between representing people and representing things' (Latour, 1987: 72). Therefore, within Latour's framework the key issue becomes the quality of representation and not the principle of representation itself (Latour, 2017: 264). When represented in the new *nomos*, nonhumans become ontological equals to humans and a potent political force, transforming from something inert into 'powerful interests capable of designating the other interested parties as their enemies' (Latour, 2017: 262).

Representatives of nonhumans advocate their interests effectively by identifying appropriate and ontologically equal enemies such as polluting countries or destructive industries (Latour, 2017: 262). Since, under the framework of the friend-enemy distinction, non-human and human representatives confront each other as equals, their enmity grants 'aptitude to compromise' (Latour, 2004: 145) and diplomatic resolutions within formal institutions (Latour, 2004: 212–20). Latour hopes to take advantage of the conflict-limiting capabilities of the friend-enemy distinction in this way (Latour, 2017: 240).

In summary, Latour uses both *nomos* and the friend-enemy distinction to elaborate a political framework where conflicts between human and environmental interests can be addressed diplomatically. Latour's application of Schmitt's political thought to the environmental crisis appears to offer valid and emancipatory political frameworks that overcome the subject-object distinction. However, the next section problematizes that notion through demonstrating how applying Schmitt ultimately undermines any emancipatory politics in the environmental crisis, leading to the final section which shows how applying Schmitt's thought to the environmental crisis gestures towards the Climate Katechon.

False Schmittian Promises

Latour's use of Schmitt in the context of the environmental crisis is counterproductive for the emancipatory political framework Latour sketches. Instead of resolving the

problems of the subject-object distinction and providing a framework for navigating the environmental crisis, Schmitt's theorizing leads to the reaffirmation of the subject-object distinction's most hierarchical and exploitative elements.

Integral to Latour's adaptation of Schmitt's thought is the capacity for negotiation between humans and nonhumans within Gaia. Nonhumans must possess a particular political agency for the conflict-mitigating effects of the friend-enemy distinction to apply (Latour, 2017: 251–2). The friend-enemy distinction limits conflict between two groups when both groups recognize that reckless and unequivocal pursuit of their conflicting interests will lead to mutual destruction (Latour, 2017: 241). Since both groups value their survival over completely satisfying any particular interest, they are willing to compromise to avoid annihilation (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 53–4). Both parties must be capable of having interests and knowing when to compromise those interests to mitigate conflict. Latour attempts to ascribe these capabilities to nonhumans through assigning them human representatives to fight for their interests (Latour, 2017: 262). However, Latour's formulation of nonhuman interests as fixed matters of scientific observation, and therefore not open to compromise or negotiation, short-circuits Schmitt's conflict-mitigating mechanism within the friend-enemy distinction.

Latour recognizes that 'the whole problem . . . lies in defining [nonhuman] interest' (Latour, 2017: 98). Nonhuman interest is intimately tied to Latour's understanding of agency. To Latour, humans and nonhumans share ontologically equal agency as entities capable of acting and impacting other entities around them (Latour, 2014). Both human and nonhuman interests can therefore be best understood as 'the same power to act' (Latour, 2017: 98). Nonhuman interests are actions performed by nonhumans under a given set of circumstances.

Latour asserts that appropriate spokespersons can identify nonhuman interests. These spokespersons function to 'make [nonhumans] articulable and to *make them speak*' (Latour, 2004: 89). There are no others 'better able than scientists to make the world speak' (2004: 137) because 'through the intermediary of instruments and the artifice of the laboratory . . . [scientists] know how to *make irreversible* what has long been the object of a controversy and that has just become the object of an agreement' (Latour, 2004: 138, 140). Scientists fix the 'essences, and casualties and responsibilities' (p. 140) of nonhumans such as the infectiousness of prion disease, how animal conservation affects indigenous populations, or how a dam impacts a river ecosystem (p. 179). Once these qualities are discovered, 'their function will no longer be subject to discussion. The [nonhuman] and its attachments will henceforth have an essence with fixed boundaries' (p. 114). Fixing essences is critical because 'one must be able to use the obvious presence of these states of the world as indisputable premises for all the reasoning to come. Without this . . . the discussion would never come to an end, and one would never succeed in knowing in what common, self-evident, certain world collective life ought to take place' (p. 111). Fixing nonhuman actions-as-interests is critical for their appropriate political consideration alongside human interests.

Human representatives of nonhumans within the new *nomos* animate these fixed interests and politicize them. Historically, '[t]he data were there . . . they were not agents [but] [e]verything changes when agents are given a voice *compatible* with those of other

agents' (Latour, 2017: 263). Giving nonhumans such a voice will trigger the conflict-mitigating function of the friend-enemy distinction.

However, granting nonhumans a voice does not automatically render human-nonhuman conflict subject to conflict mitigation and political negotiation. The friend-enemy distinction is only conflict-mitigating when two groups are not only ontologically equal but also roughly equal in material power (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 47–8). Schmitt's advocacy for the conflict-mitigating characteristics of the friend-enemy distinction occurs almost exclusively in reference to inter-state relations. States come into conflict without a higher power capable of restraining them or authoritatively adjudicating the dispute (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 66–7). If neither can totally dominate the other, then both have a mutual interest in limiting conflict. The conflicting parties face each other as ontological and material equals.

However, when a stark power asymmetry exists between two conflicting groups, Schmitt abandons the conflict-limiting mechanism of the friend-enemy distinction. Instead, stronger powers dominate weaker powers, forming hegemonic *großraum*s (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]: 281–93). *Großraum* is a vital component of Schmitt's apologetics for imperial Nazi ambitions because it promotes a 'core' state's dominance over peripheral states within a self-proclaimed sphere of influence. It is a geopolitical form of might makes right which legitimates far right and authoritarian imperial projects. This right of stronger powers to dominate weaker powers is rooted in the idea of appropriation integral to *nomos*. Since appropriation requires only capability, there is no normative reason as to why a stronger state should refrain from appropriating from a weaker state if it can, especially if doing so protects its own interests (Barnes and Minca, 2012).

By fixing the interests of nonhumans as a condition for their political representation, Latour renders nonhumans incapable of the negotiations critical for conflict-mitigation. Nonhuman reactions to human activity become non-negotiable facts, independent of politics (Chakrabarty, 2019). No amount of political recognition alters the scientific conclusion that '[g]lobal warming, reaching 1.5°C in the near-term would cause unavoidable increases in multiple climate hazards and present multiple risks to ecosystems and humans' (IPCC, 2022) once that observation is fixed. In Latour's account, nonhuman interests are ultimately apolitical because they do not change through political conflict in the new *nomos*. Once this apolitical character of nonhumans and the material realities of the environmental crisis are acknowledged, Latour's visions of negotiation within his new *nomos* collapses. Nonhumans with fixed interests cannot take advantage of the conflict-mitigating effects of the friend-enemy distinction from within a Schmittian framework.

Fixed nonhuman interests present as ultimatums. Humans cannot challenge those ultimatums, only modify their own interests, expectations, and risk analysis. Humans must either accept and adapt to nonhuman ultimatums or suffer the scientifically attested consequences. Humans do not negotiate with nonhumans because they cannot. Rather, humans negotiate amongst themselves whether to accept nonhuman ultimatums. Conflict remains unlimited as the consequence of ignoring nonhuman interests is the eradication of human life. In this framework, nonhumans are at a significant political advantage.

Further, given that nonhuman interests are fixed, humans remain the sole agents within the environmental crisis. Even if adverse nonhuman reactions are viewed as

nonhuman political action (as Latour does), those reactions can be predicted through proper scientific analysis (as Latour argues). This mechanistic element of nonhuman interests renders only humans as capable of voluntary and intentional action. Nonhumans, insensitive to reason and a site of human intervention, remain objects within this schema, reaffirming the subject-object distinction.

Therefore, the conflict-mitigation mechanism of the friend-enemy distinction does not apply. Latour's employment of Schmitt fails to produce a framework based on ontological equality, negotiation, and diplomacy. Instead, it reveals how asymmetrically political power is distributed between humans and the environment, making negotiations impossible. Where negotiation and compromise are impossible, conflict ensues. What is left is an unlimited conflict waged for survival by humans against nonhumans.

The fixed character of nonhuman interest undermines Latour's attempt to use Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction as a conflict-mitigating mechanism. Both conflict and appropriation are justifiable on the grounds of pursuing self-interest (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]: 45–8; 2008 [1932]: 49). Humans have an existential self-interest in navigating the environmental crisis. Since only humans can act voluntarily to address the crisis, they must secure the medium through which their actions can be translated into its resolution. That medium is the environment itself, because only through interacting with the environment are humans able to change it. Since the environment cannot effectively resist human encroachment in a politically significant manner, even if the environment and humans were ontologically equal, the continued subjugation of the former by the latter is justifiable on the grounds of necessity and capability (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 46). Therefore, the conflict-mitigating quality of the friend-enemy distinction within a new *nomos* is inapplicable between humans and the environment in the framework Latour presents. Conflict between humans and the environment remains unlimited, and Latour's framework fails.

Climate Katechon, not Climate Leviathan

When Latour employs Schmitt in his theorizing, he clearly does not intend to accept Schmitt's entire framework. This is reflected in his lack of engagement with political theology, arguably the most authoritarian aspect of Schmitt's work. Latour explicitly states that '[he is] not interested in Schmitt so much as the inventor of the overly celebrated principle of exception' (Latour, 2017: 229) – the central theme of Schmitt's *Political Theology* (Schmitt, 2005 [1922]: 5–35). It is the most overtly authoritarian aspect of Schmitt's corpus because it is through reference to political theology that he imbues political and legal concepts with divine authority: the lawgiver as God, the law as the Word of God, the state of exception as miracle (Schmitt, 2005 [1922]: 26–7).

However, Latour's dismissal of Schmitt's political theology does not insulate his theorizing from its effects. Schmitt's works are not a collection of isolated ideas. His corpus inseparably intertwined law, politics, and culture through his political theology (Meierhenrich and Simons, 2016). Excluding Schmitt's political theology when applying his political thought is impossible given the central role it occupies in his theorizing.

Mann and Wainwright (2020: 141–4) capitalize on the authoritarian yet expedient conclusion that emerges from Schmitt's political theological account of sovereignty. The

resulting framework is the Climate Leviathan, which justifies the expansion of state power in the face of the environmental crisis (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 27–30). Set within the context of Moore's Capitalocene, Climate Leviathan is a response to 'existing forms of subjectivity' (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 100) and aims to demonstrate how capitalist states may address the challenges facing the contemporary governance of the environmental crisis.

Capitalism incentivizes the endless exploitation of cheap inputs for maximum profit (Moore, 2017a). This leads to unsustainable exploitation of the environment. Since the cost of negative externalities is small on any individual capitalist, collective inaction persists (Malm, 2016). This results in a coordination problem that sustains the anthropogenic environmental crisis (Dehm, 2023). Addressing the crisis requires coordination spanning multiple levels of socio-political organization (Edwards, 2024). Long-term capitalist interests lie in a regulated planetary system capable of addressing and resolving these issues compared to a world where the environmental crisis prevents further accumulation (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 137). Therefore, as the environmental crisis intensifies, there will be sovereign consolidation to resolve the capitalist coordination problem. Capitalists and state form a Climate Leviathan analogously to individuals in the state of nature forming the classical Hobbesian Leviathan (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 110–19).

A Climate Leviathan must embody Schmittian sovereign characteristics to be effective (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 28–30). A Schmittian sovereign can declare a state of exception when it believes that an existential threat to the political order requires extrajudicial powers to resolve (Schmitt, 2005 [1922]: 6–7). Within the state of exception, the sovereign is empowered to use any means necessary to restore the 'normal' situation (Schmitt, 2005 [1922]: 12–13). The sovereign must decide upon who are friends that need to be protected and who are enemies that must be neutralized (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 51). Once identified, enemies are persecuted by the sovereign until they are neutralized, and the crisis is resolved (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 46–7). As the environmental crisis constitutes such a state of exception, it is only through possessing the ruthless efficiency and unlimited power of the Schmittian sovereign that a Climate Leviathan can hope to resolve the crisis (Mann and Wainwright, 2020: 139–41).

However, Schmitt critiques Hobbes' Leviathan, and by extension Climate Leviathan, as actually incapable of navigating crises (Schmitt, 2008 [1938]: 80–1). Schmitt argued that Hobbes does not imbue the Leviathan with inherent ontological superiority over its subjects (Schmitt, 2008 [1938]: 56). Leviathan's constitution depended entirely upon the consent of the individuals forming it, and individuals disagreeing with the provisions of the Leviathan retained the moral right to revoke their consent, leave Leviathan, and return to the state of nature (Schmitt, 2008 [1938]: 72). To preserve itself, Leviathan depoliticizes and withdraws from various spheres of public life such as economics, art, health, or the environment to avoid upsetting its constituents (Schmitt, 2008 [1938]: xi–xiv). Hobbes' Leviathan inevitably abdicates the power of sovereign decision (Schmitt, 2008 [1938]: 74).

The environment has long been depoliticized and remains depoliticized in most countries (Swyngedouw, 2011), preventing effective responses to the environmental crisis. Addressing the crisis risks upsetting Leviathan's subjects into revoking their

consent for its existence. To Schmitt, this inability to confront crisis renders Leviathan an ineffective theoretical model. Since Climate Leviathan shares the same consent-based foundation, Schmitt's critique also applies, and Climate Leviathan therefore cannot possess the characteristics of a Schmittian sovereign necessary to resolve the environmental crisis because its constitution is grounded upon consent which can be revoked at any moment. Mann and Wainwright (2020: 177) acknowledge Schmitt's dissatisfaction with Leviathan but their engagement with Schmitt ends there. Climate Leviathan is portrayed as the ultimate, but unsatisfactory, Schmittian construct to engage with the environmental crisis.

However, Schmitt's work during the Nazi period elaborates an alternative to Leviathan to overcome its shortcomings: the katechon (Hell, 2009). A novel framework I call the Climate Katechon best captures what the unbridled application of Schmitt's political thought to the environmental crisis will look like. The Climate Katechon must be situated in the idiosyncratic Christian core of Schmittian thought. Schmitt's political thought is set within an eschatological framework. For him, historical time 'is a single long period of waiting, a long interim between two simultaneities, between the coming of the Lord at the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus and the second coming of the Lord at the End of Times' (Schmitt, 2008 [1970]: 86). The approach of the apocalypse and, with it, the end of historical time, destroys the modern conception of the future as 'a permanently "open" site' (Griffin, 2008: 54). This calls into question whether actions in the present are meaningful at all, potentially stopping actions which may otherwise delay or even prevent the apocalypse. There thus appears to be a real 'eschatological paralysis of human events' (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]: 60) when facing the apocalypse. It is in this context that Schmitt believed 'in the katechon. For [Schmitt] [it] is the sole possibility for a Christian to understand history and find it meaningful' (Meier, 2011 [1998]: 162).

Drawing from the Bible, the katechon is an earthly restrainer that forestalls the apocalypse (2 Thess. 2 KJV). Within the eschatological framework that Schmitt's thought is situated, the katechon plays a dual role. First, it restrains the arrival of the apocalypse and therefore delays the onset of eschatological paralysis. Second, the katechon prevents the destruction of the spatial order in the present where its constituents physically exist (Nichols, 2018). The katechon therefore pursues a transcendental good for all: preventing the end of the world both in the present and for as long as possible in the future for all humans.

To that end, the katechon possesses the right to demand total obedience from its constituents to do anything it commands within its role of holding back the apocalypse (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 46). Individuals have no right to disagree with a command which assists in stalling the apocalypse because, in disagreeing, individuals are not rejecting the arbitrary authority of a tyrannical state but rather they are actively hastening the arrival of the apocalypse. They thus become enemies of humanity who must be neutralized (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 66–7). Hobbes' flaw is thereby eliminated in Schmitt's account of the katechon by transforming private disagreement and the revocation of consent for the state from a moral right held by individuals to a crime against humanity. The katechon has no theoretical authority issues because it is ontologically superior over its constituents through its mandate of withholding the apocalypse.

Schmitt's original katechon had limited jurisdiction because it delayed specific apocalypses threatening particular political orders. For instance, the Byzantine Empire was a katechon defending Christendom from the Islamic conquests (Schmitt, 2015 [1942]: 17). The Byzantine Empire defended the particular *nomos* of European Christendom from a clearly defined enemy. However, whilst the Byzantines may have been a katechon to Western Christendom, they certainly were no katechon to the Muslims themselves.

Throughout history, different entities have acted as katechon for different political orders (Schmitt, 2006 [1950]: 60, 238). The apocalypses faced by these katechons were more figurative than literal, denoting the destruction of a long-standing political order. Nonetheless, their roles remained the same: these katechons sought to restrain the destruction of their respective *nomos* (Hell, 2009). This requires the katechon to be able to effectively identify friends to protect and enemies to resist in its mission to restrain the apocalypse.

In the context of the environmental crisis, however, the katechon sheds its limited role. The *nomos* that the Climate Katechon is protecting from the apocalypse is not limited and bounded in the same way as Western Christendom or the British Empire. Rather, the environmental crisis is an apocalypse that quite literally threatens the *nomos* of the entire Earth. Thus, the Climate Katechon restrains the literal planetary apocalypse. Its jurisdiction becomes unlimited.

It is an entity which exercises total sovereign power to withhold the environmental apocalypse. This is akin to how the sovereign is empowered to resolve a state of exception and restore the normal situation using any means necessary (Schmitt, 2005 [1922]: 12–13). However, whereas Schmitt's original concept of the state of exception was conceived as a temporary situation that concludes at some point, the environmental crisis appears to be an intractable problem requiring constant management for the foreseeable future (Crutzen, 2002a). Therefore, the state of exception enacted by the Climate Katechon in the environmental crisis is potentially endless in terms of historic time. Paradoxically, the state of exception becomes the norm (Agamben, 2005: 9). The Climate Katechon possesses all the powers of the Schmittian sovereign in perpetuity.

To exercise its sovereign powers effectively, the Climate Katechon interfaces with Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction. The friend-enemy distinction is necessary for the effective identification of both friends that the Climate Katechon seeks to withhold the apocalypse from and the internal and external enemies who threaten the Climate Katechon's ability to effectively withhold the oncoming environmental apocalypse. Its external enemies manifest in the form of other Climate Katechons and, internally, in the form of individuals or groups such as polluting corporations who continue to worsen the environmental crisis. Since all the Climate Katechons share their interest in withholding the apocalypse, they are all mutual friends and may even coordinate against shared enemies. Enemies must therefore exist internally to the Climate Katechon. Internally, within the Climate Katechon, enemies are those that oppose its mission either by continuing to contribute to the environmental crisis, by denying the existence of the crisis, or by refusing a command of the Climate Katechon to mitigate the crisis (Latour, 2018: 3–21).

However, internal enemies are not really enemies at all. By virtue of these enemies existing within the Climate Katechon, they are trivially ontologically inferior. In that case, the friend-enemy distinction does not mitigate conflict. Instead, the internal

enemies of the Climate Katechon are criminals that oppose the apocalypse withholding mandate of the Climate Katechon and must be stamped out (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 79). The Climate Katechon defends the universal interest of humanity. By opposing its will, one is hastening the arrival of the environmental apocalypse and the end of human life. One abets crimes against humanity (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 66–7). Thus, those who oppose the Climate Katechon are ontologically inferior by virtue of being enemies of humanity which must be neutralized (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 54–5). Conflict-mitigation in the friend-enemy distinction does not apply when an individual confronts a vastly more powerful entity like the Climate Katechon, nor does it apply to enemies of humanity (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 46, 79). One must either obey the commands of the Climate Katechon or be transformed into a criminal and punished as such.

Where is the environment in all of this? Where it has always been in modern political thinking: an object manipulated to attain human needs. There is no political agency for the environment because there is no political agency for anything, including humans. Only the Climate Katechon itself has political agency. The Climate Katechon manages to resolve the pervasive issues of ontological inequality between humans and the environment by placing both on equal ontological footing through objectifying the former identically to the latter. Both humans and the environment are depoliticized in such a schema. They are both objects to be rationally managed by the Climate Katechon for the purposes of human survival (Griffin, 2008: 365–7).

A portrait of how Schmitt interfaces with the political analysis of the environmental crisis now crystalizes. The existence of the Climate Katechon is justified and legitimated by a particular narrative of the past and the future. The environmental crisis poses an existential threat to humans. Since existence is a prerequisite for all human good, it is logical to prioritize existence over every other consideration (Schmitt, 2008 [1932]: 54–5). This political prediction of the future, like all political predictions of the future, influences what constitutes legitimate subjects and objects of governance and the instruments of government intervention (Jasanoff, 2020). The Climate Katechon disregards and objectifies the wills and desires of individuals as it arranges them to optimally forestall the oncoming apocalypse. It can use all instruments of intervention to govern. This constitutes the eco-fascist apotheosis, subordinating and objectifying the human population and the planet for its own designs. Thus, the subject-object distinction manifests in its ultimate and ugliest form: everything on Earth is reduced to an object to be managed by the supreme sovereign subject(s). As Mann and Wainwright (2020: 177) aptly put it, '[p]lanetary sovereignty stands, as in some ways it always has, as the completion of modernity'.

Ultimately, the irony of applying Schmitt's political thought to the environmental crisis is that it *does* provide a way of navigating the environmental crisis. However, it does so antithetically to how scholars like Latour desired. Rather than permanently resolving the problems of the subject-object distinction that drives the environmental crisis at the core, Schmitt's framework transforms the environmental crisis into a managerial problem. The Climate Katechon merely 'holds back' the inevitable apocalypse. The subject-object distinction continues to drive the unsustainable human exploitation of the environment and the Climate Katechon mitigates its impact. To that end, the planet and all its inhabitants are objectified by the sovereign Climate Katechon and

subordinated to its managerial power, ostensibly in the name of avoiding the apocalypse. It appears that the Climate Katechon succeeds in staving off the apocalypse at the cost of human freedom and subjectivity.

Thus, a question remains. Despite the whole of Schmitt's political project ultimately being authoritarian and despite the failures of the attempt of scholars to set parts of Schmitt's thought along an emancipatory path, is it possible to set *any* part of Schmitt's work along an emancipatory path? Does Schmitt's authoritarian political project ultimately preclude the use of parts of his political and legal thoughts for emancipatory purposes in the context of the environmental crisis?

Whilst Latour is correct in identifying Schmitt's lack of interest in ecology (Latour, 2017: 229–30), he is wrong to argue that the environmental crisis would be a novel place to apply Schmitt's thinking. This is because narratives of the environmental crisis are eschatological. The improper subject-object relation at the core of those narratives hails 'the biological annihilation of nature and mankind' (Horn, 2018: 227). The unsustainable exploitation of objects by subjects creates an environmental crisis of apocalyptic proportions that threatens life on Earth. Yet, 'the open future of modernity also shifts the weight of responsibility for this future entirely onto human shoulders' (p. 227). This metanarrative mirrors Schmitt's eschatology exactly and therefore facilitates the full emergence of the authoritarian elements of Schmitt's thought, especially the katechon.

Latour was aware of how the environmental crisis invites Christian eschatology and actively embraced the radically transformative character of a religious interpretation of the environmental crisis. A lifelong Catholic, Latour went so far as to argue that Pope Francis' 'sister earth' is analogous to his own account of Gaia (Latour, 2016). He writes: '[W]hen people use "apocalyptic terms" it is safer to go straight to religion' and 'when the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply using a different kind of lightbulb'. In fact, Latour stresses the possibility of 'postpone[ing] this seemingly inevitable Apocalypse' through religions' capacity to conceive of an alternative to the subject-object distinction (Latour, 2009). However, this eschatological thinking invites the Climate Katechon when paired with Schmitt.

Schmitt's political thought argues that an authoritarian state ontologically superior to its constituents is necessary to ward off apocalyptic threats. It follows that the use of Schmitt's political thought in the face of an existential threat produces an authoritarian outcome. After all, it was in these contexts exactly that Schmitt felt that order through any means necessary is justified (Lievens, 2016). Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, *nomos*, and political theology more generally find their purpose in the prevention of the apocalypse (Prozorov, 2012). They are tools Schmitt employs to construct a political framework that aims to preserve political order at any cost in the face of crisis (Meierhenrich and Simons, 2016). Hence, the authoritarian outcomes of Schmittian thought when applied to narratives of the environmental crisis should be completely expected. The use of Schmitt's thought in the context of the environmental crisis reacts to the eschatological narratives of the environmental crisis and builds towards the katechon in any eschatological context.

Conclusion

This article has explored the political theorizing of the environmental crisis and the place of Schmitt's thought within it. Section one showed narratives of the environmental crisis centre on the subject-object distinction. The subject-object distinction legitimates the environment's unsustainable exploitation by human subjects by casting the environment as an object in all explored narratives. This creates a paralysing double-bind where the exploitative relationship between humans and the environment must be overcome, but arresting the environmental crisis necessitates modernist political theorizing predicated on the subject-object distinction. Section two explored uses of Schmitt's thought to escape that bind. Through Latour, this article argues that Schmitt's thought is used because of its potential for recognizing humans and the environment as distinct but ontologically equal.

However, Latour's attempts to use Schmitt's legal and political thought to resolve those tensions merely led to their intensification, as shown in section three. Schmitt, as a theorist of order, was primarily concerned with legitimating the use of any means necessary to preserve the status quo. Since narratives of the environmental crisis are situated within an eschatological context, applying Schmitt's thought activates the overtly authoritarian prescriptions Schmitt developed to maintain the status quo. Thus, section four argues that applying Schmitt's thought leads to what I have called the Climate Katechon. Whilst the Climate Katechon is empowered to stall the environmental apocalypse, the cost is the total oppression of the planet and its inhabitants. There is no room for freedom or emancipation under the rule of the Climate Katechon.

Can applying Schmitt's thought to the environmental crisis tend away from the constitution of the Climate Katechon? I argue that it cannot. The environmental crisis is situated within eschatological narratives with apocalyptic consequences if we fail to act. No redemption follows the literal end of the world, and any political theorizing in the context of the environmental crisis will have to confront this eschatological core. It thus comes as no surprise that any use of Schmitt's thought in this context will point towards the political institutions Schmitt thought were necessary to confront the apocalypse: a katechon that completely subjugates and manages the world. No other interpretation of Schmitt's work in an eschatological context is coherent.

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