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Carl Schmitt: A Biography

By Reinhard Mehring



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Carl Schmitt is one of the most widely read and influential German thinkers of the twentieth century. His fundamental works on friend and enemy, legality and legitimacy, dictatorship, political theology and the concept of the political are read today with great interest by everyone from conservative Catholic theologians to radical political thinkers on the left.

In his private life, however, Schmitt was haunted by the demons of his wild anti-Semitism, his self-destructive and compulsive sexuality and his deep-seated resentment against the complacency of bourgeois life. As a young man from a modest background, full of social envy, he succeeded in making his way to the top of the academic discipline of law in Germany through his exceptional intellectual prowess. And yet he never felt at home in the academic establishment and among those of high social standing.

In his works, Schmitt unmasked the liberal Rechtsstaat as a constitutional façade and reflected on the legitimacy of dictatorship. When the Nazis seized power Schmitt was susceptible to their ideology. He broke with his Jewish friends, joined the Nazi Party in May 1933 and lent a helping hand to Hitler, thereby becoming deeply entangled with the regime. Schmitt was irrevocably compromised by his role as the ‘crown jurist’ of the Third Reich. But by 1936 he had already lost his influential position. After the war, he led a secluded life in his home town in the Sauerland and became a key background figure in the intellectual scene of postwar Germany.

Reinhard Mehring’s outstanding biography is the most comprehensive work available on the life and work of Carl Schmitt. Based on thorough research and using new sources that were previously unavailable, Mehring portrays Schmitt as a Shakespearean figure at the centre of the German catastrophe.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Mehring's study...lay bare the links between Schmitt's litigious life and his complicated ideas."

Library Journal

"Reinhard Mehring offers the English speaking world the first comprehensive intellectual biography of the highly controversial legal and political theorist, Carl Schmitt. Based on extensive archival research and a vast amount of unpublished material, Mehring identifies the psychological and emotional motivations that drove the intellectual endeavors of the notorious philosopher of "the political" and "the state of exception." Mehring demonstrates conclusively how Schmitt's struggles with, among other issues, his sexual desire and his obsession with the Jews, generated some of the most important, influential and dangerous political writings of the twentieth century."

John P. McCormick, University of Chicago

"In this fascinating biography, Mehring has used Schmitt's only recently available diaries and calendar entries to lay bare the obsessions of this brilliant thinker -- often referred to as the Hobbes of the 20th century. Especially revealing are his struggles to shatter "the Jew in him," which led him to aspire to become Hitler's "pope" with all that that implied. Politically naïve about Nazism, he was severely attacked by the SS in 1936 and marginalized for, among other reasons, his pre-1933 close association with Jews and his anti-Nazism."

George Schwab, President, National Committee on American Foreign Policy

About the Author

Reinhard Mehring is Professor of Political Science at Heidelberg University of Education

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