

Preliminary Remarks

- Welcome, thanks to Austin and Jesse
- How I suggest you listen, given my area of expertise and yours

Step One: Why Carl Schmitt?

- We are talking about open source AI. Why do we bring in a thinker from the last century, a German jurist, a Nazi, who wrote about topics like constitutional theory and political romanticism? Any good reason to look to Schmitt for “cross-domain mapping”?
- Yes, Peter Thiel wrote about Schmitt in *Straussian Moment*
- Thiel discusses Schmitt’s notion of the *Katechon* or restraining power
- Thiel invokes Schmittian themes concerning states of emergency
- In short, Thiel shows us that it is legitimate to turn to Schmitt as a possible source of insight –(of course, not only Schmitt, but also the other thinkers Thiel discusses)

Step Two: Why the Political?

- Arguably Schmitt’s most famous work is *The Concept of the Political*.
- A brief overview of the main argument: friend/enemy pair.
- Liberalism concealed the distinction
- Liberalism can tend towards a world where wars are more intense than ever, because they dehumanize the enemy
- Liberalism can also lead to a world without war, where man is entertained, amused, etc.
- Schmitt wanted to reassert the position of the enemy / existential depth / way of life question
- We already know there is something like a “political” dispute over open-source: for instance, when Yann Le Cun says we need open source because of cultural diversity, and Arthur Mensch says we need open source to be democratic.
- Let’s leave it an open question whether supporting open source because of cultural diversity is a political or a post-political position – I mean, from Schmitt’s perspective, there is a defence of open source that sees it as good because it is de-politicizing, and the flip side is that it sees closed source as political and therefore bad. We will try to understand that better.
- But even on a simple level, we can note conflict between open and closed source positions within the US, as well as conflict geopolitically with the question of Chinese open source as a threat to the US, on one hand, and really good American open and closed source as necessary for American supremacy globally, “whoever wins AI wins” (Trump), and we want our friends to win and our enemies to lose, or as Plato’s character polemarchus puts it in the *Republic*, justice is helping your friends and hurting your enemies – we HAVE friends and enemies, and the best AI is the surest way to help our friends and hurt our enemies

Step Three: Why Political *Theology*?

-We can acknowledge roughly that there's something "political" about open source and the debate for or against it, or rather, the debate concerning where to draw the line between what can safely be open sourced and what should remain in reserve (as seen from one side), or the line between what can safely be entrusted to centralizing authorities and what should remain freely distributed (as seen from another side)

-But aren't we forcing the issue when we try to think about this topic *theologically* using analogies from theology? First, let's see what Schmitt had in mind.

-He says in his book political theology two things that are particularly important for us. First, that legal concepts are secularized theological concepts. So for instance, the exception in law is akin to the miracle in theology, since a miracle interrupts the natural order and the exception interrupts the legal order. What that gives US is a method for experimenting with analogical application to theology and AI. Again, we can consider Thiel here as an authority, if we need the permission of an authority, since he discusses anti-christ and apocalypse, (let's call those theological concepts!) as well as the katechon/restrainer, and in his preface to the Sovereign Individual he began by discussing how medieval man prioritized the INTELLECT whereas modern man priorities the WILL – the distinction between intellect and will and questions about the priority of one to the other belong first and foremost to THEOLOGY.

-So we get the *method* of theological analogizing.

-But Schmitt also has a famous sentence, Sovereign is He who Decides the Exception. This statement is *against* the "de-politicization" of politics implied by the liberal notion of a "Rule of Law" – since there are times when the law can and must be suspended, and the law cannot anticipate and execute in all respects its own suspension, we need to know WHO DECIDES. Concerning open source models and all the debates around them, this is a massive and pertinent question, as you know, and as we can discuss. Let us right away quickly consider what we can call, roughly and approximately, two "theologies of power"

Examples of “The Political Theology of Open Source”

Two theologies of power.

1. The POTENCY of the models make openness unwise

(if you think great power should be held in reserve by a caretaking authority)

“We were wrong. Flat out, we were wrong. If you believe, as we do, that at some point, AI — AGI — is going to be extremely, unbelievably potent, then it just does not make sense to open-source. It is a bad idea... I fully expect that in a few years it’s going to be completely obvious to everyone that open-sourcing AI is just not wise.”

-Ilya Sutskever (2023)

The closed lab as a custodian of absolute power, and as the great restrainer that protects against the unleashing of a destructive force.

2. The CONCENTRATED POWER of the labs makes openness wise

(if you think dispersion better protects freedom and the other principles you cherish)

“The future has to be open source, if nothing else, for reasons of cultural diversity, democracy, diversity. We need a diverse AI assistant for the same reason we need a diverse press.” <Open source liberalism>

-Yann Le Cun (2024)

“Will AI be a tool of dominance, or a force for empowerment? We choose the future where AI is built by the many and for the many.” <Open source democracy>

-Arthur Mensch, Mistral (2026)

Open source as Reformation. The vernacular weights, legible to all, distributed to all. No intermediary between man and scripture/the models.

OK - let's not get caught up in all of that yet. I only wanted to show that there is something to reading the statements of the main players "theologically," using theological notions as an analogy. One more quick example that I like, is thinking of closed source as the father, open source as the son, and personal superintelligence as the holy spirit – but again, let's not dwell on that yet!

Step Four: The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations

Now I want to read to you some passages from *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*, written 1929 and published *together* with *Concept of the Political* in the "expanded edition." I already said that in the concept of the political Schmitt sees neutralization and depoliticization primarily as features of liberalism. In this other piece, he sees them in terms of technology.

Schmitt argues that we need to know our history to know our present – and in context, that means we need to know the recent history of Europe to better understand our present technological age of neutralization and depoliticization. Schmitt says that in fact, the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries each had a dominant theme or as he calls it a central domain: theology in the 16th, with the great wars of religion, metaphysics in the 17th, with its great systems of natural philosophy and science, morality in the 18th, especially the focus on virtue, and economics in the 19th century, as you can see for instance in the prominence of Marx's analysis of capital. Our central domain in the 20th century is technology. Schmitt argues that each successive step (which does not, by the way, constitute a progress or regress for him, he says, but just a change), is an attempt to move *AWAY* from a field of battle (e.g. theology), onto neutral territory, onto a theme or domain that avoids the deep divisions of the previous era – so the move towards systems of science in the 17th century was among other things an attempt to defuse the religious battles of the previous one. But each new neutral domain ends up being repoliticized. And I think we can add that each new repoliticization is also, at its most intense, a re-theologization. That is another reason why we can talk about the political theology of open source.

Passages

So let's look at some passages. Here is Schmitt describing the sense of technological progress, actually faith in technological progress, which emerged already in the 19th century. To remind you, when I read these and other quotations, see what resonates for you, what sounds contemporary, what you think no longer applies, what illuminates something about what you care about, and so on.

The Stages – and the Religious Belief in Technology

“Already in the 19th century,” he writes, “technical progress proceeded at such an astonishing rate, even as did social and economic situations as a consequence, that all moral, political, social, and economic situations were affected. Given the overpowering suggestion of ever new and surprising inventions and achievements, there arose a religion of technical progress which promised all other problems would be solved by technological progress. This belief was self-evident to the great masses of the industrialized countries. They skipped all intermediary stages typical of the thinking of intellectual vanguards and turned the belief in miracles and an afterlife—a religion without intermediary stages— into a religion of technical miracles, human achievements, and the domination of nature. A magical religiosity became an equally magical technicity. The twentieth century began as the age not only of technology but of a religious belief in technology.”

You can say, first, that we are living through a similar period now – is ours just a natural extension of the one that Schmitt is discussing? You know that Musk has promised Jesus-level miracles with Neuralink, for instance. And AI is producing “miraculous” results in math and the sciences. And many of the “believers” in AI have a religious belief in what the technology can accomplish. But notice that we have here the reintroduction of the 16th century into our century, since by invoking religion, belief, and miracle, we are squarely in the debates and disputes that culminated in bloody wars of religion, as well as in debates between religion and metaphysics. I can give you a quick example: there seems to be a distinction between Jewish and Christian attitudes towards AI at some level, perhaps because, theologically, in Christianity, in the beginning was the word, but the word was made flesh, whereas in Judaism or at least in some mystical tendencies within Judaism, the word is not made flesh but remains linguistic and is infinitely disclosive through what we might call language magic, or a kabbalism of letters, or gematria of tokenization.

The Existential Pluralism of Concepts

But what’s more important is what Schmitt says next:

“All concepts of the spiritual sphere,” he says, “including the concept of spirit, are pluralistic in themselves and can only be understood in terms of concrete political existence. Just as every nation has its own concept of nation and finds the constitutive characteristics of nationality within itself, so every culture and cultural epoch has its own concept of culture. All essential concepts are not normative but existential. If the center of intellectual life has shifted in the last four centuries, so have all concepts and words. It is thus necessary to bear in mind the ambiguity of every concept and word.”

We will discuss this in a second. Let me just read to you a corresponding passage in the concept of the political.

“...all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning,” Schmitt writes. “They are focused on a specific conflict and are bound to a concrete situation; the result (which manifests itself in war or revolution) is a friend-enemy grouping, and they turn into empty and ghostlike abstractions when this situation disappears. Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term. Above all the polemical character determines the use of the word political regardless of whether the adversary is designated as nonpolitical (in the sense of harmless), or vice versa if one wants to disqualify or denounce him as political in order to portray oneself as nonpolitical (in the sense of purely scientific, purely moral, purely juristic, purely aesthetic, purely economic, or on the basis of similar purities) and thereby superior.”

So, in the concept of the political. Schmitt is concerned above all with political concepts, images, and terms, and especially with the term “political” itself. In the neutralizations piece, we can say he widens his aperture to include “the ambiguity of every concept and word,” which, to repeat, are “not normative but existential” and “can only be understood in terms of concrete political existence.” I would suggest that it could be interesting to apply this to the terms “open source,” “closed source,” “frontier,” and so on, treating this entire vocabulary not as neutral but as polemical.

The Central Domain

The next key idea from the paper is one I’ve already mentioned but we should read what Schmitt says about it. I mean, “the central domain.”

“The specific concepts of individual centuries also derive their meaning from the respective central domains,” he writes. “One example will suffice. The concept of progress, i.e., an improvement or completion (in modern jargon, a rationalization) became dominant in the eighteenth century, in an age of humanitarian-moral belief. Accordingly, progress meant above all progress in culture, selfdetermination, and education: moral perfection. In an age of economic or technical thinking, it is self-evident that progress is economic or technical progress. To the extent that anyone is still interested in humanitarian-moral progress, it appears as a byproduct of economic progress. If a domain of thought becomes central, then the problems of other domains are solved in terms of the central domain—they are considered secondary problems, whose solution follows as a matter of course only if the problems of the central domain are solved.” So for instance, “In a theological age, everything runs smoothly if theological questions are in order; everything else is ‘provided’ by definition. The same is true of other ages.”

Now, I want to ask you about our age – is it the age of AI? – and our “central domain,” the domain according to which, as we just saw, the problems of all other domains are solved. One option is to say that AI is our central domain, and *everything depends* on whether we get it right – though what that means is of course in dispute. Another option is to say, as Alexander Dugin recently suggested, that our central domain is *eschatology*, and that AI is just one among a number of alternative versions of the end times – you can see it applied to AI in all the talk of the singularity, replacement of humanity, “if anyone builds it, everyone dies,” etc., as well as in Thiel’s invocation of apocalypse. Anyway, thinking in terms of the centrality of the central domain can underscore the importance of your interest in open source: it isn’t just a peripheral technological matter or even a somewhat important moral issue – it is participating one way or another in the debate at the heart of our age – at least that is how I would see it from this perspective.

The Intellectuals of Our Age

Schmitt also examines how each age, with its central domain, has the intellectual as a sociological type, e.g. Marx in the economic age, theologians and preachers in the religious age, and so on. He says of our technological age that “it appears technical thinking can no longer accommodate” an intelligentsia. We need to think about that. Schmitt’s opinion is as follows: “So far the hope that a politically dominant elite would develop out of the community of technical inventors has not been fulfilled”

– I guess I would ask you this: do you agree that AI or whatever our central domain is lacks an intelligentsia and a politically dominant elite? What about the think pieces by the lab heads - Amodei, Altman, Hassabis, Zuck, even Musk in a way...do they constitute a politically dominant elite? It wouldn’t seem so, since they can even be at war with or on ice with the administration, like Anthropic was for a bit. Do you as supporters of open source WANT a “politically dominant elite” of pro-open-source technologists? Maybe Jensen Huang is an example? Scott Bessent? Schmitt could be wrong. Or he might have been right for his time but wrong for ours. I just wonder how important you think this is – or maybe you believe that the *technology* should be developed in a way that it functions *for the benefit of all* or *for the benefit of whatever group* you want to benefit, *without respect to intellectuals and political elites*. You can ask each other about this if you’d like!

The Neutral State (vs. The Technological Republic)

Okay, another point from the paper is that it looks like the state type differs according to the age or central domain. Here’s what I mean. The religious wars ended with the notion that the sovereign of the realm decides the religion. But Schmitt also mentions the principle that the state decides the nation, and that the state decides the economic model (e.g. capitalism or communism). He says that the liberal state pretended to be neutral and agnostic, somehow refusing to decide or, from another perspective, deciding in favour of formalism. As Schmitt puts it, it “could see its existential legitimation precisely in its neutrality.” Europeans somehow

developed the view that neutrality reflects a higher state of being than making substantive decision does. IF you are neutral, maybe you are like Switzerland, and you can be a peaceful peacemaker instead of a combatant. You know, you don't talk about religion or politics at the table because you want to keep the peace.

Schmitt interprets this in part as a “widespread belief in technology” as providing the “ultimate neutral ground”: “Technology,” he writes, “serves everyone, just as radio is utilized for news of all kinds or as the postal service delivers packages regardless of their contents, since its technology can provide no criterion for evaluating them.”

I think his examples are not so good: there have been mail censors before and even now there are some things you can't ship. But the underlying point is clear enough. Technology is neutral. Indeed it is the ultimate neutral ground. So if you thought neutralization and de-politicization were good things, and you believed that technology is neutral, you can see how much you would rely on technology to be your saviour, your deliverer from conflict over so-called values. “Unlike theological, metaphysical, moral, and even economic questions, which are forever debatable, purely technical problems have something refreshingly factual about them,” Schmitt writes. “They are easy to solve, and it is easily understandable why there is a tendency to take refuge in technicity from the inextricable problems of all other domains.”

By the way, I think this explains in part the reaction to that article from a few weeks ago that was accused of anthropomorphizing AI in its retelling of the OpenAI/Hugging Face incident in terms of the rise and fall of agent civilizations. It's not just that anthropomorphization is “technically” incorrect or “careless” or that it fosters “fear-mongering” – I think the problem is that when you anthropomorphize, like when you theologize, you very clearly signal a movement away from the technical domain with its neutrality and risk reintroducing “forever debateable” issues that technology was supposed to sidestep.

Another side point: the liberal state sought a kind of neutrality, as Schmitt says. Compare that with what Alex Karp proposed in his book *The Technological Republic*. That is rather interesting because he is highly critical of Silicon Valley neutrality and expressly calls for a repoliticization of technology. Schematically and loosely, but in a way that shows you the power of the polemical vocabulary, compare another possible title for his book, *The Technological State*. Somehow “State” has a neutrality compared to “Republic,” and that is probably at least in part because of the echo of Plato's *Republic*, and I would bet that Karp knew that when he chose the title. But it shows you that there are some main actors deliberately and explicitly repoliticizing the central domain of the technological as a project.

Back to neutrality, though. Schmitt is quite clear that the impression that technology is neutral, that it can neutralize political divisions and disputes, is erroneous. “Technology,” he writes, “is always only an instrument and weapon; **precisely because it serves all, it is not neutral. No single decision can be derived from the immanence of technology, least of all for neutrality.** Every type of culture, every people and religion, every war and peace can use technology as a weapon.” Consequently, “The decision concerning freedom and slavery lies not in technology as such, which can be revolutionary or reactionary, can serve freedom or oppression, centralization or decentralization. Neither a political question nor a political answer can be derived from purely technical principles and perspectives.”

I think you all already *know* this – or at least those of you do for whom open source represents something that needs to be fought for as part of let’s call it a political project against centralization, against the concentration of power. But we should still not treat Schmitt’s formulations as trivial and self-evident. Because there are still those who couch their support of open source not only as against centralization but as for “all of humanity” and therefore somehow almost trivially good, neutrally good, all good (despite the often acknowledged risks, which are also risks “to humanity.”) Schmitt repeats the line in the concept of the political that whoever invokes humanity cheats: remember, thinking in terms of “humanity” means no longer acknowledging friend/enemy groupings; it means suppressing the figure of the enemy; it means, therefore, depoliticization, even though, as we said, it is against centralization and represents what we might *call* a “political position.” Schmitt and his writings, this one and others, should help us to clarify our concepts so that we do not get caught up in ambiguities and inconsistencies by surprise.

Perhaps the political theology of open source is the faith that decentralized technology has a liberatory, even messianic potential, that the church or cathedral or synagogue of Satan needs to be guarded against by the holy spirit that dwells within locally hosted open models aligned with your own highest good, or at least with your will as understood by yourself (and your companion intelligences, which in the middle ages were called angels).

Thank you.

QUOTATIONS, INCLUDING THOSE “FOR OR AGAINST” OPEN SOURCE

“In truth, the great conflict over our megapolitical future is only just beginning. On the dimension of technology, the conflict has two poles: AI and crypto. Artificial Intelligence holds out the prospect of finally solving what economists call the “calculation problem”: AI could theoretically make it possible to centrally control an entire economy. It is no coincidence that AI is the favorite technology of the Communist Party of China. Strong cryptography, at the other pole, holds out the prospect of a decentralized and individualized world. If AI is communist, crypto is libertarian.” -Peter Thiel (2020)

“As we get closer to building AI, it will make sense to start being less open. The Open in OpenAI should mean that everyone should benefit from the fruits of AI after it's built, but it's totally OK to not share the science.” -Ilya Sutskever (2016, to which Musk replied, ‘Yup’)

“Open-sourcing big models is like being able to buy nuclear weapons at Radio Shack” -Geoffrey Hinton (2024)

“The problem with open source is if something goes wrong you can't recall it. With a proprietary model if your bad actor starts using it in a bad way you can close the tap off... but once you open-source something there's no pulling it back. It's a one-way door, so you should be very sure when you do that.”

Demis Hassabis (DeepMind / Google), 2024

“...if we just continue to open source absolutely everything for every new generation of frontier models, then it's quite likely that we're going to see a rapid proliferation of power. These are state-like powers which enable small groups of actors, or maybe even individuals, to have an unprecedented one-to-many impact in the world.” -Mustafa Suleyman (2023)

“Today, an even greater risk than a naturally caused pandemic is that a non-government group will use open source AI tools to design a bioterrorism weapon.” -Bill Gates (2026)

““We believe the benefits of superintelligence should be shared with the world as broadly as possible. That said, superintelligence will raise novel safety concerns. We'll need to be rigorous about mitigating these risks and careful about what we choose to open source.” / “If at some point however there's some qualitative change in what the thing is capable of, and we feel like it's not responsible to open source it, then we won't.” -Zuck (2024)

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Mark Zuckerberg, "Open Source AI Is the Path Forward," July 23, 2024 — near-verbatim: "I believe that open source is necessary for a positive AI future." And, from the same letter: the argument that the risk of a few companies controlling the technology exceeds the risk of open models; Linux as the precedent. He also stated the limit: if a model showed a qualitatively dangerous capability, Meta would not release it.

Sam Altman, Reddit AMA, January 31, 2025 (the week of DeepSeek R1) — near-verbatim: "I personally think we have been on the wrong side of history here and need to figure out a different open source strategy." The reversal of the reversal.

Andrew Ng, Australian Financial Review, October 2023 — near-verbatim: "There are large tech companies that would rather not have to try to compete with open source, so they're creating fear of AI leading to human extinction."

Marc Andreessen, "Why AI Will Save the World," June 2023 — near-verbatim: "To offset the risk of bad people doing bad things with AI, we should let AI be used to prevent bad people from doing bad things." And the policy line: open-source AI should be allowed to freely proliferate and compete with both the big AI companies and startups; no licensing, no barriers.

"The future has to be open source, if nothing else, for reasons of cultural diversity, democracy, diversity. We need a diverse AI assistant for the same reason we need a diverse press." -Yann Le Cun (2024)

"Will AI be a tool of dominance, or a force for empowerment? We choose the future where AI is built by the many and for the many." -Arthur Mensch, Mistral (2026)