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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Carl Schmitt's International Order: A Decolonial Reappraisal

Andrea Mura

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence, Italy

Correspondence: Andrea Mura (andrea.mura@unifi.it)

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Described as both a “dubious figure” and a “useful guide” to the colonial dynamics of modern politics, Carl Schmitt has recently begun to be read outside the confines of the European critical tradition (Gilroy 2004, 81). Some scholars have identified colonial politics as a central concern in his work but, in analysing modern political formations, have sought to foreground local epistemologies and the specific, situated histories of colonial encounter (Legg 2011; Blanco and del Valle 2014; Luisetti, Pickles, and Kaiser 2015). Others discern in his theory of international politics an anticipatory articulation of what later came to be described as a “postcolonial imaginary” (Kalyvas 2018).

While engaging with these broader interpretive tendencies in contemporary scholarship, this article seeks to foreground the Eurocentric and overtly colonial premises underlying Schmitt's spatial conception of world order. Drawing on *abyssal thinking* and *coloniality* as critical frameworks, the analytical focus is redirected away from his geopolitical representation of modernity and toward a reassessment of his conceptualization of the international order. Conventional readings within the continental tradition have largely privileged, following Schmitt, an account of it focused almost exclusively on intra-European dynamics and actors, and on the centrality of the category of war. At the apex of what Schmitt calls the first *Nomos of the earth*, a world-ordering principle grounded in an original act of spatial appropriation and partition, war is conceived in its modern sense: limited, non-discriminatory, and rationally constrained. Schmitt's incisive formula, “the history of international law is a history of the concept of war,” unequivocally foregrounds the centrality of this concept in his geopolitical analysis, pointing to the emergence of a system of *temperamenta belli* designed to limit and discipline force among European states (Schmitt 2011a, 31). The political order that emerged with modernity is thus conceived as a

formidable juridical effort to regulate war through international law, even as it acknowledges the extra-legal character of interstate confrontation in colonial settings (Ruschi 2024). By contrast, a decolonial reading of the *Nomos* reveals the complementary role that a stringent logic of exclusion, racialization and genocidal practices beyond Europe has long played in constituting modern politics. This study maintains that, from the outset, such a logic has operated both in structural conjunction with the idea of war and beneath the juridical and spatial order delineated by Schmitt.

In a time of dramatic change in the international order, Schmitt's geopolitical reflections have regained contemporary prominence. A critical reappraisal, however, can help assess whether these reflections serve as a suitable framework, however uncomfortable, to understanding ongoing transformations, while also revealing which aspects of his analysis have remained overlooked. In advancing this inquiry, I begin by offering a systematic account of Schmitt's interpretation of the modern international order as predicated upon the concept of the *Nomos*. Emphasis will be given to the spatial-historical developments of what Schmitt terms “global linear thinking,” a new practice of spatialization presiding over “the first attempts in international law to divide the earth as a whole” (Schmitt 2003, 87). For Schmitt, political modernity can in fact be best understood as “the age of the global lines” (Schmitt 2016, 322). These were cartographic and legal divisions through which European powers partitioned and organized the entire planet. Their configuration reflects, among other things, the development of a fundamental tension between *land* and *sea*, which the German jurist sees as two conflicting worldviews irreducible to one another in the modern political order. The article focuses on Schmitt's first two types of global lines, namely, the *raya* and the *amity lines*, which were delineated and implemented during the formative period of modern international law.¹

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By combining historical analysis with a critical rereading of Schmitt, the article interprets Schmitt's conceptualization of the *Nomos* as an illustrative example of what Dipesh Chakrabarty described as an *imaginary* Europe: an abstract construction that presents Europe as the universal origin of modernity, science, and reason (2000). A major effect of this Eurocentric standpoint in Carl Schmitt is that, of course, it effaces and marginalizes non-European and non-state contributions to global history and knowledge. Building on this, the second section introduces the notion of abyssal lines to foreground the logic of exclusion underpinning Schmitt's account of modern spatialization. While highlighting how war shapes Europe as a system of mutually recognizable actors mediating their relations through international law, the section turns to the constitution of colonial space as *res nullius*: an abyssal domain of invisibility and radical alterity. In doing so, it complicates Schmitt's land-sea polarity, exploring the status of colonial land and bringing to light the Eurocentric and colonial assumptions of his framework.

Bridging Schmitt with decolonial scholarship, the final part of the article pursues a conceptual countermapping from modernity to coloniality. This approach aims to challenge modernity's claims to self-sufficiency, exposing an intertwined logics of racialization and genocidal practices embedded in the *Nomos*. The article contributes to critical engagements with Schmitt's geopolitical thought, especially within the continental tradition, and to analyses of the modern international order shaped by his theory.

1 | From Land to Sea: *Rayas* and *Amity Lines*

Rooted in an originary nexus between land, law, and collective identity, and articulated by Schmitt as the essential unity of Order (*Ordnung*) and Orientation (*Ortung*), the concept of *Nomos* designates a fundamental spatial arrangement founded on a new principle for the partition of the Earth: first through conquest and land-appropriation (*Landnahme*), then through division and distribution, and finally through utilization and incorporation into production.² For Schmitt, the inception of a new fundamental order in modern politics was precipitated by the discovery of America and the concomitant emergence of a novel planetary conception of the world. "Arguably, for centuries, humankind has held a mythical image of the earth as a totality but not a scientific experience of it. However, as soon as the image of the earth as a globe emerged as a practical reality, thanks to Christopher Columbus's discovery of America, the radically new question of an international ordering of the whole terrestrial globe was posed anew. Suddenly, the struggle for the distribution of new lands and seas began" (Schmitt 2016, 310).

A first cartographic representation of the new partition of the Earth was produced, for Schmitt, with the so-called Bulls of Donation issued by Pope Alexander VI in May 1493. Also known as *Inter caetera*, the bulls set forth a missionary mandate for the Crown of Spain, outlining her role of evangelization, custody, and diffusion of the Christian faith in the newly discovered islands. Considering that the people of these lands, according to what Columbus had reported, "seemed sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith," the Spanish monarchy was asked to send "worthy, God-fearing, learned, skilled, and experienced men, in order to instruct the aforesaid inhabitants and residents

in the Catholic faith and train them in good morals" (Inter Caetera 1493). In return, Spain was granted "full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind." Moreover, *Inter caetera* intervened in the dispute between Spain and Portugal over the possessions of these lands. Modifying old papal provisions, *Inter caetera* would now redefine the spheres of influence between the two Catholic powers establishing an imaginary line (*raya*) drawn from the Arctic to the Antarctic, "one hundred leagues to the west and south from any of the islands that are usually called the Azores and Cape Verde" (Inter Caetera 1493). Spain was granted all present and future discoveries to the West of the line, whereas Portugal was recognized those on the East. Although founded on cartographic assumptions that were still approximate, an agreement signed by the two powers at Tordesillas in 1494 finally moved the *raya* to 370 leagues west of Cape Verde, effectively confirming the creation of two planetary hemispheres.

According to Schmitt, the *raya* marked an important step in that path of progressive rationalization of space that, following a well-entrenched historical tradition, would characterize the era of the great modern empires.³ An element of novelty lay in its *distributive* function, its capacity to divide and allocate land across the Earth. This function rested on a purely *geometric* partitioning of planetary space: "The 'Alexandrine' Papal Bulls of 1493 are the first examples of what appear to us as, and what was over a number of generations to become, in effect, a stark abstract metrical territorial definition of social relationships [...] For the first time in history an abstract geometric system had been used to define a vast—global—area of control" (Sack 1986, 131–132). Yet, while bearing witness to the emergence of a new planetary vision, this first global line still lay at the juncture of the Old World and the New World—not only geographically, but also temporally. Launched into the future, the demarcation of the *raya* was still an expression of the *respublica Christiana*'s medieval conception of order, which allowed Christian princes and peoples to find "common ground in their Christian faith and a common authority in the head of the Church, the Roman pope" (Schmitt 2003, 92).

Another pre-modern limit of the *raya* concerned its inability to distinguish between sea and land. Indeed, for Schmitt, the roots of the *raya*'s contractual framework were still grounded in the land and in a conception of the known world bound by terrestrial finitude. Here, law was strictly tied to the land: the world ended where the oceans began. The *raya* served to regulate those oceanic spaces that, for centuries, the *respublica Christiana* had regarded as mere barriers to human action: a qualitatively different, anomic domain, lying outside the legal and political logic of the human community. For this reason, the *raya* has insightfully been interpreted as effecting a *tellurisation* of the sea: "It was a grandiose effort at discipline, implying a purely quantitative subdivision of space and denying any specificity to the sea: dominion over the ocean expanse, the 'closure' of the seas and their consequent attribution to the Iberian kingdoms, could only be based on the denial of their 'liquid' identity" (Ruschi 2024, 9).

As is well known and as was magniloquently recited in the subtitle of a 1942 short essay, *Land and Sea*, the "elements" of land and sea in these years provided the conceptual tools for attempting "a world-historical meditation" (Schmitt 2015a). Despite the important role that rivers and seas had long played

in the socio-political development of civilizations, for Schmitt the relationship with them was inevitably conditioned by humanity's terrestrial mentality. As "land-beings," humans reproduced their special connection with the "firmly grounded earth" in their construction of law and order: "the true, actual fundamental order touches in its essential core upon particular spatial boundaries and separations, upon particular quantities and a particular partition of the earth" (Schmitt 2015a, 60). Within this localized space, law is, for the German jurist, inseparable from the concrete reality of a community and its historical development. As a concrete and historical manifestation of life, it continually renews itself on the basis of the historical conditions of a community and its conflicts. Every order is both *localized* and *oriented* by these conditions and by the caesuras, separations, and boundaries they inscribe.

And yet, along with the modern state and the rationalization of territorial borders in Europe, the discovery of America also brought about new possibilities for overseas conquest that effectively put an end to the essentially terrestrial conception of humanity. The foundations were laid for what Schmitt considered to be "the first *nomos* of the earth." As noted in a critical passage, this "was based on a particular relation between the spatial order of firm land and the spatial order of free sea, and for 400 years it supported a Eurocentric international law: the *jus publicum Europaeum*" (Schmitt 2003, 49). For Schmitt, the delineation of this new *Nomos*, which sustained the formation of European international law, coincided with new developments. The Protestant Reformation called into question the order of partition that had been inaugurated with the demarcation of the *rayas*, highlighting the emergence of new actors, first and foremost England, which were no longer subjected to papal authority or bound to the Catholic faith. But England was also key to another major shift. Originally integrated into the telluric horizon of Europe, it turned away from solid land, embracing a purely maritime existence that ushered in a novel conception of the relationship between space and sociopolitical life. The opening of the oceans paved the way for a new approach to inhabiting and engaging with the marine environment, which was no longer constrained by the tendency to reduce it to land-based categories. This was the genesis of an irreconcilable tension within the *jus publicum Europaeum* which, coinciding with the new system of European states, ended up sustaining a difficult balance between two separate and struggling elements: on the one hand, the *land* and its idea of a striated order, a space of containment, borders and measures, and on the other, the *sea*, as a place of excess, of anomic and unlimitable spaces, a horizon that was open, as we shall see, to the free unfolding of violence and conquest.

The history of the new European *Nomos* is thus the history of an irreducible struggle, at the heart of modernity, between land powers and sea powers; a struggle that, aiming precisely at the occupation and division of the earth as a whole, reconfigured Schmitt's original concerns for friend-enemy groupings, which were now rearticulated "starting from the dynamics of appropriation and division of the geographical areas of the globe" (Portinaro 1982, 164). Central to this is, in fact, the idea of a battle forged on the emerging global conception of the planet, played out mainly between the two forces capable of regrouping the elementary orientations of the new order: on the one hand,

Protestantism and the new global powers of "French Huguenots, Dutch heroes of liberty, and English Puritans" as representatives of the new maritime forces. These new actors of global history had begun to sail and dominate the oceans harnessing the private and spontaneous initiative of "sea dogs of all kinds, pirates, corsairs, sea-trade-practicing adventurers," who composed, "alongside the whale hunters and the sailors, the advance column of the elementary turn to the sea" in the 16th and 17th centuries (2015a, 34). On the other hand, Catholicism, which, together with Spain and Portugal, had inaugurated the era of conquests, effectively rooting it in a telluric conception of the world. This was the great contention that, at the height of the colonial conquest, would finally reassert itself as a "much deeper and more precise" contrast between Jesuitism and Calvinism. "This was now the dominant world-political friend-enemy distinction" (Schmitt 2015a, 68).

In a context irreversibly shaped by the Reformation—and, by extension, by the conflict between maritime and terrestrial powers—the *rayas* soon ceased to constitute a legitimate partition of the world and were supplanted by the so-called *amity lines*. Historically, the first demarcation of this second type of global lines dates back to the stipulation of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559, which ended the Italian Wars and realized, in Europe, a precarious peace between France and Spain. Alongside the general settlement, a secret clause was supposedly negotiated—but only verbally agreed upon—which addressed the issue of overseas territories in a context now dominated by the religious wars in France and the fear that French privateers could threaten the interests of Spain and Portugal in the Indies. Allegedly, it was agreed that "the French would navigate west of the prime meridian and south of the tropic of Cancer at their own risk, and that what was done in those regions would not be regarded as violating international amity, since treaties would have no force beyond these lines" (Davenport 1917, 3). Some have noted that the precise location of the amity lines remained contested for a long time (Mattingly 1963). Yet, despite this ambiguity, references to Cateau-Cambrésis in subsequent years helped to affirm the principle that, once these lines were crossed, a state establishing a settlement in a territory not yet occupied by another European power—Catholic or Protestant—would acquire sovereignty over it (Green 1989). What lay *beyond the lines* was ultimately a reality governed by a logic of competition among European powers, fundamentally defined by "fighting, raiding, or privateering" (Branch 2013, 110).

In examining the specific contribution of the amity lines to the development of a global linear thinking, it should be emphasized that, although they too were drawn according to a logic of conquest, they differed from the *rayas* in being shaped by a principle that was no longer *distributive* but *agonal*. No longer merely quantitative and geometric demarcations for the division of land, the amity lines now reflected a more qualitatively conception of space. What was most fundamentally distinct was that part of the planet where the conquest of land and sea, and the contest among European powers, was absolute, and therefore free from the constraints of international law and European conventions: a space of freedom and conquest, but also of violence and irreducible antagonism. As Schmitt emphasizes, their essential feature consisted in marking the frontier on this side of which lay Europe, with its system of legal and political

values, and beyond which there now extended a new type of free space: “At this ‘line,’ Europe ended and the ‘New World’ began. At any rate, European law, i.e., ‘European public law,’ ended here. Consequently, so, too, did the bracketing of war achieved by traditional European international law, meaning that here the struggle for land-appropriations knew no bounds. Beyond the line was an ‘overseas’ zone in which, for want of any legal limits to war, only the law of the stronger applied” (2003, 93). On a qualitative level, the amity lines thus expressed the demarcation of a *threshold*. At stake was the delimitation of a European space only rhetorically defined as one of peace and friendship, but more concretely functioning as a space of war: a war, however, finally understood, within the roughly defined limits of European spatiality, as limited and regulated by the *law of nations*. Beyond this threshold lay what the amity lines indicated, by contrast, as an open space of rivalry: a place of irreducible conflict, released from the constraints of law. From this followed the broader qualitative generalization articulated by Richelieu, according to which this threshold would ultimately come to distinguish the sphere of “reason” itself from that of “force”.⁴ It was a generalization destined to gather around it the great representations of colonial deviance elaborated in the modern period.

No longer endowed with a superior power of arbitration capable of transcending them, European powers had left behind the horizon of the Catholic and medieval *ordo spiritualis*, which had previously served as the basis for dividing the world. They were now finding common ground in the recognition of an external space that was open to free conquest, and determining themselves in relation to this space. As Netzloff noted, “the amity lines held an imaginary currency because they served as a moving horizon that could maintain a conceptual boundary separating Europe from its messy entanglements across the globe” (2019, 55). Hence, for Schmitt, the amity lines implied a sense of “tremendous exoneration” (2003, 94). It was now possible to demarcate a space outside the moral and legal order of Europe, in which the principle of might prevailed, and where intra-European tensions could assume a contingent and peripheral character, discharging without threatening internal stability.

I have shown how Schmitt’s account of the modern international order is grounded in global linear thinking and how each global line embodies specific historical and conceptual features within it: the distributive character of the *rayas* and the agonal quality of the amity lines. As we have seen, they furthermore reflect different ways of engaging with the elements of land and sea which Schmitt places at the heart of his “world-historical meditation.” Having presented Schmitt’s theory of the *Nomos*, the following section examines what, from a critical perspective, appears as an element of complexity in the polarity between land and sea and in the definition of the amity lines. Not ascribable to the idea of a simple substance or to that of mere environmental force, for Schmitt, land and sea served the function of distinct modes of socio-historical existence upon which the human character is forged: “the human is a being which is not completely taken up with its environment. The human has the strength to historically conquer his existence [*Dasein*] and consciousness. The human is aware not only of birth but also of the possibility of rebirth” (2015a, 10). Yet if the decision over the element shapes humanity’s destiny in a subjective sense,

Schmitt’s epic narrative nonetheless attributes the historical capacity to conquer new forms of existence solely to Europe—above all to England, with its “decision” for the sea. The task, then, is to bring to light the lines of exclusion that Schmitt’s “world-historical meditation” merely evokes. It is necessary to ask whether and to what extent that same rebirth suggested for the European man at the genesis of modernity does not first imply, more than just the discovery of new distant lands and the opening of the oceans, the invention of a great other space, assumed as a place of absolute undecidability, out of this world and outside history. Shifting perspective from Schmitt’s amity lines to Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ concept of abyssal lines enables a departure from the purely political and territorial understanding of “conquest” examined here. While exposing the Eurocentric foundations of the *Nomos* as an essentially intra-European affair, this shift also brings into focus the deeper logic of exclusion that informs Schmitt’s account of modern spatialization.

2 | From Amity Lines to Abyssal Lines: The Making of *Res Nullius*

Drawing further on the themes of his previous writings, a short 1955 essay recalled that, having replaced the system of domination that had reigned until then, the new spatial order emerged with the discovery of America was in fact a “second” *nomos*, and was characterized by its Eurocentric approach: “The discoveries,” Schmitt claimed, “were not invited [...] The discoverers were Europeans, who appropriated, divided, and utilized the planet. Thus, the second *nomos* of the earth became Eurocentric” (Schmitt 2003, 352). To the series of appropriation, division and production considered here, Schmitt should have added a further element: that of *substitution*. If the second *nomos* became Eurocentric, this was mainly because its appropriative logic was carried out in favor of a substitutive rather than a cumulative dynamic. Substitution was first and foremost epistemic and relied on the production of knowledge that European empires have generated and disseminated since the 16th century. It was not simply a matter of conceiving the second *nomos* of history as the replacement for a fictitious first *nomos* of Greek derivation, a substitution that Walter Mignolo intended to correct with the decolonial version of “a polycentric world in which no one civilisation is imposed over all the rest” (2011, 28). At the heart of the substitutive logic articulated here lay the occupation of knowledge which, accompanying the great “appropriation of land and sea,” transformed the Age of Discovery into a vast process of erasing of colonial difference, ultimately rendered invisible behind what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has insightfully called the *abyssal lines* of modern politics (2016). The new *Nomos* that emerged with the demarcation of the global lines also coincided with the construction of abyssal lines, through which a visible system of differences was produced, affirmed, and valorized. What lay beyond them, by contrast, was rendered void, unintelligible, and subject to radical exclusion. For Santos, what has most notably characterized the modern order is “the impossibility of the copresence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, nondialectical absence” (2016, 118).

The two sides of the abyssal line can then be analyzed, beginning with the status that war assumes on the positive, visible side. We saw that, in tracing the concrete foundations of the new order, Schmitt's historical analysis relies on the familiar narrative of a modern state shaped primarily by intra-European dynamics and conflicts. This antagonistic framework encompasses both European civil and religious wars, long seen as the backdrop for any meta-discourse on modernity, and the systemic conflicts that, in various forms, structured the international order, pitting Catholics against Protestants and sea powers against land powers. On this point, Angelo Bolaffi has noted a "conceptual isomorphy" between the domestic dimension of the political in Schmitt's early work and his conception of international politics in the late 1930s. In both cases, the "absolute essentiality of the friend-enemy relationship" stands, even if the scope of conflict changes as war is now waged by one order against another one (Bolaffi 1986, 10). If, at first, the focus of reflection was "stasisology" and thus the need to neutralize the possibility of civil war within the organized political unit, the shift toward the analysis of international phenomena introduces a change of perspective. The task of shaping conflict is now externalized and entrusted to the *jus publicum Europaeum* through which relations between sovereign states are regulated and rationalized. As emphasized by Schmitt, "The purely state war of the new European international law sought to neutralize and, thereby, to overcome the conflicts between religious factions; it sought to end both religious wars and civil wars. War now became a 'war in form', *une guerre en forme*" (2003, 141). Understood in its modern sense as *limited* and *non-discriminatory*, and as the historical overcoming of civil and religious violence, war stands at the core of the modern political order. On the domestic side, the historical spasms of the exception allowed Schmitt to examine the relationship between order and disorder, highlighting a persistent tension that is both *destituent* and *ordinative* for the establishment of the political unit. This tension defines modernity negatively, highlighting its "lack of any substantive foundation" (Galli 2023, 20). Conflict here is that which disrupts the unit while simultaneously enabling its recomposition. Seen from the perspective of European international law, instead, war poses the question of a new form of disorder, now externalized and rendered invisible behind what a system of rival European states articulates as an absolute outside. Within a legally mediated European space, the historical concretization of *enmity* can take only the public form of war between states. The belligerent parties recognize each other as a *justi hostes*, meaning that the opponent is not cast as a criminal or as the embodiment of evil, as in religious war, but as a peer with equal rights to be engaged in a juridically regulated conflict. This suggested that European states existed as recognized counterparts within the genealogically structured antagonism of the *family of nations*. They saw, symbolized, and acknowledged their systemic difference on this side of the abyssal line.

Yet, for Schmitt, this picture would be incomplete if it were not projected against the empty space of a land that provided European warfare with both its scope and its sustenance. The idea of European space as a space of international law giving expression to subjective and antagonistic relations is counterweighted here by the essentially colonial idea of overseas land as *res nullius*, an inert container in which the strategies of conquest and expansion of European powers are played out. Whereas European states form a system of recognizable and mutually

recognized differences on the visible side of the abyssal line, non-European territories and peoples sink into an invisible, formless space. For Schmitt, this is the same concept of space shaped by scientific and rationalist developments in Europe between the 16th and 17th centuries, "a mere dimension of depth, empty of every conceivable content" (2015a, 92).

Shifting attention to the invisible side of the abyssal lines, one must then ask what legal and cultural forms of exclusion the empty space of coloniality enacted. In exploring this, it might be important to foreground the crucial role that a salvific horizon played in driving the expansionist impulse of the new modern order. For Schmitt, the global image ignited by Columbus's discovery drew on profound technological, scientific, and astronomical innovations that had enabled Europe to move beyond its medieval grounding in the firm land and to rethink every aspect of human existence. Yet it is important to complicate Schmitt's insistence on the polarity between land and sea by connecting this pair to a third element, one that in the events of *the sky* found its capacity for orientation. Assuming the symbolic form of an economy of salvation, this third element played a decisive role in the incipient formation of modern consciousness, linking the conquest of the earth to the conquest of the soul. Fading behind the elemental struggle between land and sea described by Schmitt is the mixture of increasingly refined astronomical and rational calculations with apocalyptic imagination, prophetic visions, and propitiatory signs that the self-proclaimed "Christ-bearer" Christopher Columbus had articulated so effectively in his *Book of Prophecies* (Prosperi 1999). What today appears as the discovery of a new world was once also the discovery of a new paradise. Central was the conquest not only of lands but also of populations, whose conversion through the "magical effect of administered baptism" was seen as a necessary eschatological precondition for the end of time. In a fairly widespread 16th-century image of the Indies, the missionary could be imagined flying like a "dove" to remote islands where the "sons from afar, with their silver and gold" awaited him, to be led "to the Name of God" (Isaiah, 60:9). As John Martin notes: "the colonization of the Americas was always—in Spain and beyond—more than a quest for gold and other resources and more than a quest for political power. It was also always a providential undertaking. But this was not, at least for many, an abstract or rationalized framework for the colonial enterprise. To some at least—and Columbus among them—faith in Providence was at the core of their inner life and a springboard both for moments of otherwise inexplicable courage and for moments of the most extreme cruelty" (2022, 58). What is important to stress here is then the idea of a European rationalism incapable of fully ridding itself of those imaginative impressions, fuelled by apocalyptic and eschatological anticipations, which the thinker of *Political Theology* seems to leave in the background: "That which is called the rational superiority of the European, that which has been termed the European spirit and 'Occidental rationalism', now advances irresistibly. It develops in the western and central European peoples, destroys the medieval forms of human community, builds new states, fleets, and armies, invents new machines, subjugates the non-European peoples" (Schmitt 2015a, 59). It is in progressing along a trajectory of pure necessity that Schmitt's account of the modern struggle between the elements and his conception of the historical process unfold, revealing a certain proximity to the perspective of the philosophy of history (Volpi 2011).

From the outset, the framework of *Inter caetera* and the establishment of the *raya* was geared toward the relation between conquest and evangelization. By mobilizing this salvific framework, the abyssal lines immediately enacted their dynamics of invisibility and exclusion in the colonial space, establishing a widely acknowledged distinction between Christian conquerors and missionaries on the one hand and the “savages” of the Indies on the other. This was effectively a distinction between subjects and objects of both conquest and salvation. In subsequent articulations of the *Nomos*, the separation between Europe on “this side of the line” and the *res nullius* “beyond the line” reinforced this distinction, which, as Schmitt himself noted, took the secularized form of a division “between civilized and non-civilized peoples (in the Christian-European sense)” (2015a, 62), with the former positioned as subjects and the latter as objects of law. By favoring the progressive rationalization of the providential imaginary modeled on the economy of salvation, the people that were discovered in the new World became the recipients of the new civilizing mission of the Europeans, which was at once political and legal. “A people that was not civilized in this sense could not be a member of this community of the law of peoples; it was not a subject but, rather, only an object of this law of peoples, i.e., it belonged among the possessions of one of the civilized peoples as a colony or as a colonial protectorate” (Schmitt 2015a, 62–63).

Reduced to a mere object of law and exploitation and excluded from the system of visible distinctions of the *jus publicum Europaeum*, this empty space was finally conceived as excessive and anomic.⁵ To further complicate the polarity of land and sea, colonial land displayed some of the irreducible qualities that were proper to the maritime element: a space of disorder, hybridity and irrationality, “other” and open to the free unfolding of violence. It is no coincidence that, in defining the type of “free” space revealed by the amity lines, Schmitt emphasized that two distinct yet interconnected spatial forms emerged “beyond the line.” On one side was the “free sea,” which Protestant powers, drawing on Grotius’s doctrine of *Mare Liberum*, understood as a “realm of freedom” for navigation, trade, and conquest. On the other was the New World, conceived as an “immeasurable space of free land,” onto which Schmitt projected a Hobbesian state of nature (2003, 94): “Hobbes obviously was influenced not only by the creedal civil wars in Europe, but also by the New World. He speaks of the ‘state of nature’, but not at all in the sense of a spaceless utopia. His state of nature is a *no man’s land*, but this does not mean it exists *nowhere*. It can be located, and Hobbes locates it, among other places, in the New World” (Schmitt 2003, 96). In an instructive remark, Schmitt draws a structural analogy between this conceptualization of the state of nature “beyond the line” and the English enactment of the state of exception: “the idea of amity lines and of an area designated as free of law easily becomes understandable as an antithesis to law in the Old World, i.e., to an old law in a particular location. The English construction of a state of exception, of so-called martial law, obviously is analogous to the idea of a designated zone of free and empty space” (Schmitt 2003, 98).

Overall, the German jurist recognized with some “uncanny lucidity” this abyssal instantiation of colonial alterity as a realm of exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 106). Andreas Kalyvas’s

insightful analysis of Schmitt’s international politics stresses, in this direction, the preeminent role that the colony enjoys as “a master concept of Schmitt’s political and legal theory” (2018, 36). Kalyvas’s claim is straightforward. As a “spatial correlate analogous” to the domestic exception, the colony holds conceptual primacy over the norm. This means, in international terms, that the colony grounds and is constitutive of European International Law. I agree with the general assertion that Schmitt’s analysis helps expose the colonial underpinnings of the modern international system. For Kalyvas, however, this reveals some unexpected proximity between Schmitt and the “postcolonial” view that modernity and colonialism are in fact “co-original and co-constitutive” (Kalyvas 2018, 37). I am much less persuaded on this count. Any recognition of “Schmitt’s postcolonial imagination” would demand confronting the Eurocentric assumptions underlying his work. As demonstrated here, these assumptions hinge on the centrality of the modern state and a linear conception of history—one that “destroys medieval forms” of existence, culminates in European rationalism, and paves the way for global conquest. Modernity is here the *engine of history*, the reason for all discoveries, and the primary cause of colonial exceptionalism. European law and colonial disorder, when interwoven, are the effects of European rationalism and find their irreducible point of reference in the European man and the European state. Schmitt’s imagination remains, to that end, eminently *colonial*, not post-colonial.

This also implies that Schmitt considers the problem of violence “beyond the line” primarily through the lens of agonal dynamics, which allow European powers to be “exonerated” from the rules of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* and to compete within an anomic and unregulated space. “In the sixteenth century, e.g., in Florida, the Spanish and the French massacred each other for years in the most gruesome manner and spared neither women nor children. The Spanish and the English conducted one hundred years of bitter war against each other, in which the brutal enmity of which humans are capable appeared to reach its highest degree of intensity.” (Schmitt 2015a, 63). The focus on European subjects foregrounds this indiscriminate violence, whereas its effects on indigenous populations are largely overlooked. Although Schmitt makes passing remarks on the “atrocities” of the conquest, on the legal status of the Indios, and on Francisco de Vitoria’s more elaborate discussion of just war, the question of what the demarcation of a “beyond” actually concealed from the perspective of the Indios remains unaddressed. It is literally as if nothing lies there apart from humans living, deprived of any cultural and scientific character, not *in* but *as* a manifestation of a state of nature.

Using the notion of abyssal lines, this section has sought to recast Schmitt’s analysis of modern spatialization as one in which international law allows European states to figure as recognizable subjects within a system of differences predicated on war and conflict. By contrast, colonial space has been described as *res nullius*: an abyssal plane of pure invisibility and objectivity. Conquest and evangelization have been treated here as two essential drives enabling the ongoing reproduction of colonial space as a form of excessive alterity. This has allowed a complication of Schmitt’s land–sea polarity, shedding light on the ontological and legal status of colonial land and more clearly exposing his Eurocentric and colonialist assumptions.

Adopting the perspective of coloniality, the following section revisits the framework outlined above in light of the critical questions that decolonial thought has raised in recent decades. Doing so allows a reconsideration of the spatial and juridical architecture that Schmitt describes, bringing into sharper focus what in his own interpretation remains largely consigned to silence and reduced, through a cursory glance, to a mere *no man's land*. From this standpoint, the colonial frontier of the *Nomos*, far from simply delineating an external reserve of land—the free, neutral, and empty space where intra-European tensions could be discharged—reveals instead the constitutive operation of a deeper and pervasive logic of dispossession, racialization, and genocidal violence at the heart of political modernity.

3 | Modernity-Coloniality: A Critical Reappraisal

We have just seen that, from the perspective of modern spatialization, what appears beyond the lines of amity as a colonial *Rest* translates, at the abyssal level, into a realm of radical exclusion and erasure. Yet it is precisely the existence of this outer space that allowed European powers—united in the constitutive movement of conquest—to be conceived as a whole, as an identity grounded in law, and as a “community of the Christian-European peoples” (Schmitt 2015a, 63). With respect to that *beyond*, what had been conceptualized as the dominant and decisive friend-enemy distinction in world politics, that is, the division between Calvinism and Catholicism, and on that basis, between maritime and land powers, is now recomposed as a unified community. Inconceivable as a symbolized difference within the established order, the colonial *Rest* appeared instead as a difference of a more excessive kind—a constitutive outside relative to which European nations could function as a *system*. An abyssal reading of Schmitt reveals that, under the logic of the European *Nomos*, the units of the *system of nations* were not only different from one another but also equivalent. Their systemic differences could, in fact, be reconciled on a plane of equivalence as equally internal identities relative to the radical beyond—the colonial outside—from which the entire system derived its condition of possibility.

Schmitt surely understood and emphasized this pivotal role of colonial space when he affirmed, in a short 1941 writing, that “*The colony is the basic spatial fact of hitherto existing European international law*” (Schmitt 2011b, 114). Not only did the colony provide European states with a fundamental space of exoneration and expansion beyond the amity lines but its relation to them was also so inextricable that any change to its legal status would produce a knock-on effect on the general system of European international law.⁶ As noted by Kalyvas, overseas colonies “at once sustained the Eurocentric order, set off its dissolution, and brought the demand for another order. The centrality of the colony thus operates both in the making and unmaking of international public law, from its beginnings to its downfall” (2018, 35). Yet, in this article we have privileged an interpretation of Schmitt’s international politics that foregrounds the primacy of the European state. This is not understood as a self-sufficient territorial domain in Europe, but as an entity overdetermined by its reserved areas of influence in the colonies, which functioned as spaces of exception and orientation. The colonial enterprise remains, here, the necessary outcome of a historical process whose point of origin and arrival is in fact European modernity.

It is in relation to European modernity that the state shows its primary role, fuelling the movement of history as *justus hostis*, the internationally recognized enemy of intra-European limited war. It is not by chance that Schmitt defines the *justus hostis* as “the core concept of the *jus publicum Europaeum*” (2003, 170).

In this framework, a key task for decolonial critique is not only to emphasize the central role that the colony holds in the historical unfolding of modern politics, but also to expose, as we shall see shortly, the relation of structural co-determination that ties modernity and coloniality together, questioning the privileged position normally ascribed to modernity as the sole driver of history. This involves recognizing, alongside the abyssal reading privileged here, the constitutive function that the colonial *Rest* fulfills as a condition of possibility for political modernity. In addition, at stake is the need to reveal what underlies and shape the colony, beneath its Eurocentric façade of being a *res nullius* or a state reserve area. Reading Schmitt from this perspective entails recognizing a complex historical process that accounts for internal, diachronic developments in Europe and for external, co-extensive dynamics outside it, particularly the material power instantiated through colonial domination. To that end, Aníbal Quijano’s critical insights in the 1990s stressed the need to re-evaluate conceptual and historical categories as modernity, colonialism, and imperialism, tracing out the formation of what he called a “colonial structure of power” (*estructura colonial de poder*) or, as for later denominations, a colonial “matrix” of power (*patrón de poder*) (Quijano 1992, 2000). The aim is to retrieve the mechanisms of association that, through the elaboration, formalization, and interrelation of spheres such as economy, authority, sexuality, and knowledge/subjectivity, have shaped the development of both modern and colonial forms of management and control (Mignolo 2011). Infusing, yet also transcending, the historical forms of colonial domination, the *coloniality of power* qua embodiment of this matrix manifests itself as the inner logic of development of modern politics, both in knowledge formation and in the broader production of social hierarchies. It transcends the category of colonialism to which it is also semantically bound, reflecting both what endures after that form of historical exploitation has undone through the process of decolonization and what made it possible in the first place. *Coloniality* is understood here as co-extensive with the very idea of European modernity/rationality. For Quijano, the “confluence between coloniality and the elaboration of rationality/modernity was not in any way accidental, as is shown by the very manner in which the European paradigm of rational knowledge was elaborated. In fact, the coloniality of power had decisive implications in the constitution of the paradigm, associated with the emergence of urban and capitalist social relations, which in their turn could not be fully explained outside colonialism and coloniality particularly not as far as Latin America is concerned” (1992, 172).

While evidencing a structural codetermination between modernity and coloniality, this article sought to identify a similar relation of depth and constitutive coincidence between the Schmittian amity lines and what we have called, borrowing from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the abyssal lines. If coloniality figures as the “dark side” of modernity (Mignolo 2011), the abyssal lines reveal, on the basis of this inverted cartography, the deep, hidden and in fact “submerged” side of the amity lines. They uncover, from the point of view of coloniality, what the amity lines

subtract from the *scopic* and symbolic dimension of European conquest and discovery and, hence, from that political horizon that was envisioned, even in its most violent determinations, for the European states.

But what is it that the abyssal system of invisible distinctions actually conceals? What is it that the European *Nomos* situates beyond its own “cognitive empire,” whereas decoloniality seeks to symbolize and extract from the epistemic measure of radical excess, of a constitutive, invisible, and unheard absence (Santos 2018)? It can be said, at first, that a decolonial encounter with the abyssal lines exposes not just an abstract distinction between the “dominator” and the “dominated.” What characterizes the colonial matrix of power is the abrupt codification of a general and formless colonial difference as “racial,” “ethnic,” and “anthropological” according to historical-political needs. First, a shapeless and unsymbolized difference was produced and excluded as *res nullius* beyond the lines. Then, whatever escaped an early process of radical suppression and even eradication could only do so by undergoing a biologically derived practice of supremacy on the basis of which it was re-signified, internalized, and “used” as objective difference. Thinking about the modernity/coloniality relationship thus means following the shifts of that abyssal line that presided over the organization of knowledge and hierarchies at the core of the *nomos*, dividing between Europe, as an elective and visible space of rationality, subjectivity and even antagonism, and a biologically different colonial *Rest* reduced to silent corporeity and politically invisible objectivity—the legal-political form of the “object of law,” as stated by Schmitt. Hence also the performative character of the conventional distinction between *humanitas* (European) and *anthropos* (colonial), which rearticulated the providential difference between Christians and “savages” and then, its secularized formulation as civilized and non-civilized peoples. Stressing an ongoing circularity between Europe and its outside, it is worth noting that the abyssal line, as an operator of ontological eradication, differentiation and racialization, already found early expression in the category of *limpieza de sangre*. At the dawn of the modern era, at the critical intersection of overseas conquest and the Spanish Reconquista, the Christian Iberian Peninsula moved to eliminate its so-called internal differences—Jewish and Islamic.⁷

Systematized in the following centuries and subsequently further objectified through the “scientific” concept of race, this process of abyssal and subjective invisibilization allowed the *anthropos* to stand as a natural phenomenon essentially devoid of history.⁸ The taxonomy and production of social identities in the modern colonial world established dominant classifications into “Whites” or “Europeans,” “non-Europeans” (“Indians,” “natives,” “Blacks,” “Arabs,” “Semites,” etc.) and “mestizos” (Creoles, mulattos, etc.). Physiognomic traits, observed in external racialized and sexualized characteristics, could then be fixed into objectified types that were instrumental to the demands of spiritual, political, and economic control. On the basis of this system, all enduring “traces” of colonial difference, having survived predation and eradication, could now be mobilized through their newly racialized characterization. They provided the material and corporeal basis for distributing the labor force required for European economic development (Venn 2009). For Quijano, in fact, central to the codetermination of coloniality and modernity is that racialization radiates into Europe’s emerging

labor organization, tracing a reverse pathway from the New to the Old World and following a logic of counter-mapping:

Over a long period, reaching to the end of the 19th century and encompassing nothing less than the establishment of modernity in Europe, slave and servile labour in the colonial world of capitalism was organised by resorting to non-European ‘races’ and ‘mestizos’, while industrial-mercantile labour was organised by employing ‘Europeans’ or ‘whites’. The division of labour and in particular the relations between wage and non-wage labour consequently followed the same basic lines of the Eurocentric matrix of power. Thus, the ‘enterprise’, the primal and central institution of capital, was a typically colonial form of control over labour and the resources of production: its functionaries and salary workers in Europe; its serfs and slaves in colonial societies (Quijano 1997, 142).

At the intersection of the amity and the abyssal lines, the logic of spatialization that Schmitt helped reveal at the heart of modernity gives way, at an intensive and submerged level, to a hidden and all-pervasive practice of suppression and racialization within the realm of coloniality. It is in light of this constitutive relationship between modernity and coloniality—encompassing appropriation and substitution—that the very point of departure of Schmitt’s exposition, the discovery of the Americas, should be re-examined. Even when regarded as the geopolitical opening of modernity, this “discovery” is largely abstracted, as Quijano observes, from the historical reality that “about 65 million” pre-Columbian Amerindian inhabitants—mainly in Aztec, Maya-Caribbean, and Tawantinsuyu (Inca) territories—“were exterminated” within just over 50 years (1992, 170). When considered in the context of the period’s demography, it represents the extreme point of an irreparable cataclysm, effected through the invisibilization of the symbolic, imaginative, and cultural apparatuses of those “non-civilized” populations now reduced to mere conquering grounds. Testament to the practice of suppression and epistemic erasure beyond the abyssal lines, “the cultural repression and the massive genocide together turned the previous high cultures of America into illiterate, peasant subcultures condemned to orality; that is, deprived of their own patterns of formalized, objectivised, intellectual, and plastic or visual expression” (Quijano 1992, 170).

4 | Concluding Remarks

Earlier, following Schmitt, an analogical link was drawn between the sea and the *colonial* land that the European *nomos* brought under the conceptual category of *res nullius*. What the maritime horizon seems to announce—with its futuristic destiny of biopolitical violence and return to the anomic horizon of unlimited war—is already actualized at the heart of modernity as its blind spot and space of excess.⁹ The modernity/coloniality nexus is thus inscribed in a relationship of insoluble co-determination between race and plunder, conquest and separation of blood, economy of salvation and economy of ethno-salvation. If *war* is understood by political theology as the point of origin and internal dynamic

of modern politics on this side of the amity lines, decoloniality demonstrates that, outside the European context but in a synchronic and constitutive relation with it, it is the figure of *genocide* that polemically marks the meaning of modern history. We saw that, for Schmitt, the distinctive bond that war and law established within the *jus publicum Europaeum*—limiting war while preserving it as a key articulatory force in modern history—did not hold when conflict extended to the colonial *Rest*. If this was true for European powers beyond the amity lines, it was even more so in relation to indigenous peoples. Reduced, through the logic of racialization discussed here, to assets of the conquered land, they became mere objects of domination. As such, the natives were excluded *de jure* from the rules of belligerent action and limited war, which were reserved for European states on the basis of mutual recognition. What they experienced, instead, was the thanato-political dimension of colonial violence, encompassing civilian destruction and sacrifice, and thus echoing the type of maritime warfare that, for Schmitt, no longer distinguished between combatants and non-combatants, now affecting “without distinction, the whole population” (Schmitt 2015a, 74). From a decolonial point of view, to reveal the structural implications of the practices of racialization, even in the most extreme form of genetically motivated extermination — what Foucault defined as ‘colonizing genocide’ (Foucault 2003, 257) — is to unveil the dark and invisible side of modern biopolitics and its origin. At the core of the decolonial option is the attempt to expose the inherent link between modernity and coloniality, while also reactivating ways of being that elude European modernity’s capacity for epistemic capture and assimilation, a “thinking otherwise” that is, as Mignolo suggests, both “resistance and re-existence” (2011, xxv).

Endnotes

¹For reasons of space, this article does not address the subsequent developments of the international order as reflected, for Schmitt, in the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine, in the growing tendency toward a new form of Anglo-American universalism, and in the prospect of a ‘planetary unity of pure technicity’ (Schmitt, 2015b, 283). These developments mark the end of the *Nomos* that emerged with the era of the great discoveries: “It is the end of the age of the global lines and the end of the corresponding structure of international law” (Schmitt 2016, 322).

²The concept of *Nomos*, developed over time in Schmitt’s reflections on international politics, is fully articulated in the five opening corollaries of *The Nomos of the Earth* and further elaborated in the three concluding corollaries of its English translation (“Appropriation/Distribution/Production”; “Nomos–Name–Name”; “The New Nomos of the Earth”). Schmitt’s interpretation shifts the term from its traditional association with law, which he sees as a “problematic translation” of the Greek *Nomos* into Latin *lex* by Cicero, toward an etymological link with land, collective identity and territorial appropriation. Montserrat Herrero notes that Schmitt’s reading aligns with Álvaro d’Ors, who argued that Cicero’s translation imposed “one of the heaviest burdens in the conceptualization and linguistic evolution of the West” (1954, 160). See Herrero (2015) and Ulmen (1993).

³Arguing against a dominant tendency to over-emphasize the spatial rationalization of European empires – something that inexorably also affects Schmitt’s geopolitical analyses – Lauren Benton claims that, for a long time, “Empires did not cover space evenly but composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings.

Even in the most paradigmatic cases, an empire’s spaces were politically fragmented; legally differentiated; and encased in irregular, porous, and sometimes undefined borders” (2010, 2).

⁴The first explicit reference to the designation “amity lines” (*lignes des amitiés et des alliances*) appears in a memorandum drafted in 1634 by Cardinal Richelieu. Prior to this, European diplomacy typically referred to territories lying “beyond the line” traced at Cateau-Cambrésis. It was Richelieu who defined and emphasized the divisive function that two lines—a meridian and a parallel—would come to play on the political and even moral plane (Grewe 2000, 156).

⁵For an emphasis on the existence of a complex and pluralistic legal framework in the colonies, marked by the participation of a range of non-state actors, including, most notably, private trading companies in these regions, see Grewe (2000); Benton (2010), and Netzloff (2019).

⁶For Schmitt, the Berlin Congo Conference (1884–1885) marked a first step in this direction.

⁷A detailed discussion of race is beyond this article, but 1492 marked key turning points: Columbus’s voyage, the fall of Granada, and the Alhambra Decree expelling practicing Jews from Castile, Aragon, and their territories. The expanding power of the Spanish Inquisition and the establishment of “blood purity” statutes further facilitated the evolution of anti-Judaism into an early form of racial discrimination (Prosperi 2011). Assuming the paradigm of modernity-coloniality requires then considering these “internal” measures of exclusion as coextensive with overseas colonial practices.

⁸But even prior to scientific racialisation, modern representations of indigenous alterity long drew on the fictional figure of the *noble savage* – the mythical and philosophical embodiment of natural man – or on the ignoble figure of the *wild man*, descended from either monstrous origins or cursed biblical genealogies. Either way, this “savage” anthropos supplanted real subjects in the colonies, deprived them of their own history, and consistently served, among other things, as a physical receptacle for European fantasies, desires, and anxieties.

⁹This biopolitical characterization would invest both the thanato-political side of civilian devastation, exploitation, and loss as well as the enterprise of a general management of life of colonial populations (Mbembe 2019; Wolfe 2015).

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