

Groups vary in their response to external threats. In some cases, they stand firm and restate their collective capacity. In other cases, they yield, collapse, or even legitimize their own subversion. The challenge is to account for this variation. Contra substantialist representations, I would argue that the anthropological conception that best fits the record displayed by such variation is one that hypothesizes malleability within relational and historical contexts. If so, the thrust of the matter is to figure out, and explore, how this malleability gets shaped. Recall Robert Musil who, witnessing the cataclysms of the twentieth century, conceived human beings as fundamentally lacking any “shape” (*Gestalt*) in the form of essential attributes, and who proposed to view this absence of shape as the only theorem of the human condition (*das Theorem der Gestaltlosigkeit*).

Response to Ivan Ermakoff’s review of *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action*

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I would like to thank Ivan Ermakoff for his comments and Jeff Isaac for inviting us to participate in this critical exchange about our work. As Ermakoff points out, the continuity of negative association in the history of political thought is striking, and this continuity is an important part of my argument about the role of negative association in collective action and the lessons that ought to be drawn from this. The precise nature, extent, and limits of this continuity, however, are indispensable parts of my story, ones that Ermakoff leaves out. As I note in *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action*, when one looks more closely, one realizes that the genealogy of negative association consists of episodes of action and reaction. The thinkers I study agree about much, but they also disagree quite strongly. Taken together, the continuity and disagreement show that it is a mistake to consider the discourse, as Ermakoff does, to be simply atemporal and represented by any single thinker.

The continuity, for instance, makes it clear that an examination of the antagonistic nature of politics is not a Schmittian exercise, and that Schmitt has no special claim to enmity, threat, and fear, terms that can be assigned more

plausibly, and more profitably, to Thucydides, Sallust, or Machiavelli. This may seem a merely antiquarian concern, but its significance is great, because it shows how it is possible for thinkers with different conceptions of human nature and very different aims to chart radically divergent paths from a common point of departure. Here, therefore, it is the disagreement that becomes important. There is an entire range of activity that is not captured by Schmitt’s limit—and limited—cases but is nevertheless fundamentally political, and includes the strategies and compromises that allow antagonisms of all sorts to be channeled, regulated, and checked, before they escalate into mortal combat. Moreover, how one structures an adversarial relationship makes all the difference. As Machiavelli shows, marrying the *metus hostilis* with different sets of principles can yield offspring as diverse as principalities, republics, and sects. The choice of enemy, then, is crucial and formative. Liberals, for instance, pit themselves against tyranny, domination, and injustice, and, as Shklar points out, the recognition of fear and harm forms the basis of the struggle to establish political institutions and defend rights. I am interested in the full extent of negative association, and Schmitt’s concept of the political is insufficient for the task.

Realizing that one can choose how to view and react to negative association also bears on the issue of how the fundamental and unchanging aspects of human nature interact with the environment, and how one shapes the other. There is no question that human beings are shaped by their environments, but to recognize this is not to deny the existence of fixed properties, and indeed, even Musil warns against going that far. To understand how what is malleable can be shaped, therefore, it is necessary to know both the environment and the constraints imposed by those fixed properties. Otherwise, it is hard to understand what Ermakoff means when he declares that his own theory of collective abdications “has no time and space” (xix). Negative association provides important insight into the formation and preservation of groups precisely because it draws attention to the point at which the environment (the threats, outgroups, potential allies, and enemies) shapes individuals and makes collective action possible. By paying attention to who is identified as an outsider and why, we learn something crucial about a group and the individuals that make it up.