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GEOPOLITICS AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE¹

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Abstract

The article argues that the spatial dimension of politics exists and is manifested in the geopolitical and geo-economic pluralism of the Great States; that globalisation does not imply the standardisation of the world; that the dynamics of international relations, and those within the European Union, can also be interpreted and criticised through spatial thinking, which is concrete but not deterministic.

Keywords

Space, Geopolitics, Geoeconomy, globalization, European Union.

Resumen

El artículo sostiene que la dimensión espacial de la política existe, y se manifiesta en el pluralismo geopolítico y geoeconómico de los Grandes Estados; que la globalización no implica la uniformidad del mundo; que las dinámicas de las relaciones internacionales, y las de la Unión Europea, también pueden interpretarse y criticarse a través de un pensamiento espacial, concreto pero no determinista.

Palabras clave

Espacio, geopolítica, geoeconomía, globalización, Unión Europea.

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Introduction

What we deal with geopolitics? What do critical philosophers have to deal with a geographical domain that seems, at best, to be an aid to international relations studies?

In some cases —Schmitt's is well known— it was an inquiry for space as an ordering category, that provides stability, certainties and guidance, that other conceptual pillars of modern philosophy —Subject, State, Class, History, Freedom— can no longer provide. While they vanish, Space remains; it is presence; indeed, it is the refuge for their phantasmal existences. A notion of space that turns it into a substitute of the Being, or at least makes the two concepts closer; the space of ethology as an essential/existential dimension of man, as a “territorial animal”, instead, doesn't fall into this topic, if not as anthropological sign that man inhabits the world in a space context, despite his migratory origins.

However, Schmitt himself —who also, by space concept, gained access to the land-sea dichotomy (in fact first introduced by geopolitics)— did not find the “simple” space, enough to provide a stable key to solving the core issue behind the “turn towards space”: how to determine the form and substance of the world.

Indeed, not even in his “spatial” phase, can Schmitt neglect the political action and its inner instability: in the very notion of *nomos*, in fact, the physical elements of land and sea appear as a broken foundation; far from being static and empty, space is not an immediacy that can remain so: it is the politics' basic element, but yet, it is the decision —the taking, dividing, producing— that mediates and orients it, while being conditioned by it (Schmitt, 2003). Or rather, according to other interpreting keys, if there are no “places” —i.e., anthropized spaces mediated by power— then “space” is nothing.

Once we have acquired Schmitt's insights —leaving aside his great mistakes and bitter disappointments— we too must deal with the problem of the measure of politics, of its achievability, however it has much changed in its forms today. We too must try to identify centers, if any, in which politics condenses its energy, becoming somehow intelligible. So, the question is “can politics be a space of action, in the modern sense of a *praxis* that has within itself (or not only outside at least) purpose, awareness and sharing?” and if so, whose action? The question of political space arises not only as a question about foundations, but also as a question of action and its subjects.

The categories of political modernity

Despite modernity was conceived mainly along the coordinate of time —i.e. progressive history— space was part of its conceptual structures in an implicit form. Indeed, alongside the chronological axis “past-future”, the anthropological axis “man-nature”, the epistemological axis “true-false”, and the practical axis “subjective profit-common good” (i.e. “private-public”), Modernity is informed by State-centered spatial relations: “internal-external” (to which the opposition between inclusion and exclusion also pertains, internal law and external war, as the relationship between Europe and colonies), “top-bottom” (the relationship between political elites and the people, mediated by political institutions and socio-political intermediary bodies), “movement-stability” (the dynamism of economy and subjectivities and the order of the State) (Galli, 2010). The “color line” and the “sex line”, while being strongly political, are not strictly spatial but ubiquitous, as the “capital-labour” line: they do not fall into geopolitics, but into bio-politics (in a broader sense) and into political economy.

These spatial axes of modern power —or rather its battlefield’s elements— are quite clearly changed. Indeed, it is said that globalization erased the difference between internal and external, weakening the political actor in charge of it: i.e. the State sovereignty; and the spread of electronics, with its “virtual” feature, has heavily compromised the possibility of distinguish the true from the false; not to say the past-future axis, swept away by the “end of history” and fixed in an eternal present; or the relationship between private and public, redesigned to the former’s advantage.

But on the other hand, it’s also true that the spaceless world of endless trade and unlimited production, of rampant multitudes and permanent confusing war and peace, mobility and simultaneity, has been opposed by the emergence of spatiality as a decisive interpretative key of the world; Atlantic studies and post-colonial studies attest the basic role —in the past and also, in different ways, in the present— of spatial difference in the building of the Modern political unity, which is in fact a duality, a field of tensions and biunivocal interactions between different spaces (Benton, 2010); Border studies understand the political relevance of borders: far from disappearing or rather fixing original ethno-territorial identities, borders are nowadays lines of tension and conflict between different and opposing interests: between migrants and the holders of access keys to the labour market; but also between the logic of political control of the territory and the logistical needs of “value chains” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

Moreover, space become central again —and therefore the sovereignty that opens, closes and regulates it— during the pandemic, when it was the only available resource to fight the disease or to mitigate it: distancing, confinement and isolation, decided by politics, took shape within the space, until the vaccination (a biopolitical benefit *par excellence*, albeit mediated by real powers of collective political subjects, negotiating the precious drug with each other and with Big Pharma). The “sovereign” virus, in the improper sense of ubiquitous and invincible, has been opposed —albeit with limited success— by the space managed by territorial “sovereign” bodies, in the proper, determined sense. So, on the one hand, subjects have in fact increasingly turned into masked and bodiless ghosts, losing their ability to relate, approach and meet each other (the ban on assemblages) save, of course, as digital pictures on web platforms whose disintermediation is actually a new mediation that exposes the users to big data’s algorithms control (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), becoming web appendages, while *de facto* society is replaced by social media and the vanishing of intermediary social bodies puts individuals in direct contact with political-bureaucratic power; but on the other hand, subjects have resumed the ancient struggle for the *habeas corpus*, to oppose (rightly or wrongly) the biopolitics of the vaccine and to dispute with the sovereign for spaces of freedom. Space, therefore, still is the stake and the battlefield where sovereignty and freedom, bodies and representations, face each other off. Or rather it is where the need for security (not only imposed from above, but also demanded from below) and the search for escape routes from the devices (public and private) that cage citizens in the house-arrest and surveillance, collide. “Sovereignty” here, means the intertwining, in a specific space, of economic, political and media-communicative powers —what I have called the “trihedron of power” (Galli, 2018b)—, and its irrefutable self-asserting as self-justifying presence: the immediacy of total mediation (the “system”, in its internal contradictions) is the contemporary form of political theology.

So, we can say that substance and form of modernity —i.e. the subject and the State, and the notion of human progress— crashed “against the wall of time”, in their implicit nihilism; but it must also said that we live in two-sided dynamics: on the one hand, electronics dissolves the space (but also the time, as well as body, providing countless flash transactions of international finance); it defuses the social relationship, i.e. the public sphere (producing a society without individuals and individuals without society); it abolishes the distinction between true and false within the virtual dominion (fake news, far from being simply a lie, are actually a parallel world —or rather infinite worlds).

On the other hand, space still remains a political factor, referring to a complex and contradictory materiality that can hardly be concealed.

In short, space is one of the modern and postmodern categories, co-determining political economy, political theology, bio-politics (which in a broad sense, also includes the critique of a biology used to build power through subaltern inclusion or exclusion), techno-politics, political ecology (i.e. the reverse of the modern “implantation” of the artifice over nature, and the warning that, if it becomes an “abuse”, the man-nature relationship can really turn out as a defeat for humanity) and, indeed, geo-politics. These ways of being of politics and thinking about it, all together, critically intercept trends, contradictions and ambiguities of the current historical phase, floating between universal and conflictual, unity and division, freedom and security, openness and closure, virtual and concrete, material and immaterial, absence and presence, human, post-human and non-human. And all together, these ways of thinking about politics are the internal lines of a “critical realism”: that is the effort to think about politics in a concrete way, within its nexus of mediation and immediacy.

Geopolitics

Of course, each of these critical attitudes, has a specific focus; and namely geopolitics —which is not the only area where space is meaningful (see the urban planning, for example), but it is the most macroscopic— is a powerful key to capture some of the sides of contemporary politics. Here, space is the immediacy that lies at the origin of mediations, actions and strategies: that is their cogent (though not mechanically determinant) beginning.

Geopolitics is a rather old discipline that today finds its new role in providing one of the pieces to decode the ontological status of the real politics, intercepting cores of consistency that could not be found by navigating only in the virtual sea. It is a key that makes it possible to oppose the competing narratives that, from the right and the left, from neoliberalism and the multitudinous, speak about the disappearance of State, sovereignty, strategic political action and its specific sources: narratives that draw the current world only in terms of connections and connections of connections (between men, between men and things, between everything with everything else, in an infinite connective vertigo).

Since its arose at the end of the 19th century, geopolitics thinks of the world as a unity, and both as split and conflict; space is, for it, a network of powers, a theatre of power projections on a large-scale—in short, not just a microphysics (Foucault, 1977) but a macro power relationship between powers—. Far from any determinism, it highlights the playing field of world powers: politics sets rules and game strategies, always changing means and goals; geopolitics holds both geography and decision, connection and disconnection, the specific political subjectivity (the power) and the global references of its action. It provides not so much a solution to the problems of politics, as one of the keys to deciphering them: the spatial key, which constitutes the frame of both politics and economics (and indeed geopolitics and geo-economics go together). In short, it makes politics concrete, removing the illusion that it consists of the moment, that it exhausts in the gesture, or in a “click” marking a phantasmal presence in the virtual world; and of course, geopolitics also removes the now unfeasible illusion that world politics can be defined in universal terms. By showing that globalization is today at the same time also de-globalization, geopolitics gives politics pragmatism, seriousness, and also, no paradoxically, durability. Indeed, it is quite possible to trace and decipher historical trends and turning points in a geopolitical key: space coexists with movement, with the changing of its political interpretation.

Globalisation

Freed from ideological zeal and positivistic naiveté that coated it by “iron laws”, or have, in a fully abstract way, built the “pan-regions” that would ensure world stability, geopolitics arose during the first globalization, between 1870 and 1914, when a group of powers entered the world stage, recognizing that the world was one, but not unified. The founding fathers (Mackinder, Haushofer, Mahan, Spykman, and earlier the geographer Ratzel) foresaw that politics requires subjects capable—due to geographical extension or economic predominance— of *Weltmacht* and *Kampf um Raum*, and it develops and projects itself according a few structural data. One is that some powers—defined as “maritime” although they can also have a land-based consistency— control the seas, commercial and military routes and geographical essential gateway: Gibraltar, Suez, Djibouti, Bab el Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, Ceylon, Singapore, Panama, the Cape of Good Hope, Skaggerak and Kattegat, the Denmark Strait, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. The other structural datum is that maritime powers prevent (or try to prevent)

land powers from gaining access to the open sea. That means that the Heartland rulers—Russia, China, Germany— must join, or at least, control (or even be controlled by) countries of Rimland, the outer belt. What must be avoided, and conversely what the land powers are striving for, is the emergence of a continental superpower having also maritime power (Graziano, 2019).

These imperative rules account the policy of the United States. It firstly set itself up as a continental space closed to foreign intrusions, according to the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and the Spanish-American War (1898), and, unlike the Asian and the European cases, it succeed quite easily. Then, US affirmed itself as a maritime power, in the Atlantic, in a latent rivalry against Great Britain which lasted until the Second World War. Above all, these imperative rules explain the constants and the unquestionable axioms of its policy, once it became a world player: preserving the freedom of the seas, over which it wields an incomparable power, and preventing other similar power conglomerates. American exceptionalism is not just isolationism, and democratic interventionism is not just moralistic-capitalistic universalism: more or less hidden, the reasons of geopolitics deeply operate inside the US policy.

Three world wars have been fought by the US to such aims. The first, to prevent Germany from dominating (with Turkey as a subordinate ally) the Balkans and the Pontus-Baltic isthmus, and to constantly threaten France, the Atlantic access holder. The second was fought in order to stop a German Grossraum (or Lebensraum) from Moscow on the eastward to Norway and the French coast on the westward (indeed, Germany too had understood that a Weltpolitik requires a continental size and a sea access, which it used to cut the routes from the US to England by submarines). At the same time - and the very contemporaneity shows the immense power of America - the Second World War also aimed to prevent Japan from a similar operation: the building of a Japanese land empire (the 'Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'), from Burma to Manchuria, including Indochina, part of mainland China and all of Indonesia, an empire supported by an adequate maritime power that would block the eastern Pacific to the US.

The permanent and non-negotiable imperative of the US policy, is the control—direct or through alliances— of both sides of both oceans on which their “island of the world” (the second one, the first being the ancient continent) overlooks.

It's now obvious that the Third World War—the first Cold War— was fought with every non-military means (nuclear terror included) to prevent the victorious USSR

from replacing Germany as the strategic geopolitical challenger, which could perhaps be achieved both by the military force in the Eastern European territories occupied in 1945 and the ideological penetration into Western Europe. To this threat the US did not oppose a direct engagement, preferring, on the geopolitical basis of George Kennan's "long telegram" of 1946, a containment policy and the NATO alliance system, which assigns the European Atlantic coast to the US military control. At the same time, the US was building a strategic belt in the East and in Oceania, thanks to a set of treaties with Japan, South Korea (also with a war in this case), Taiwan, the Philippines, and even Vietnam, and through alliance systems such as Anzus and Seato: a strategic belt that closed (and closes) Russia and China, preventing them from accessing the ocean.

At the same time, the US actively worked to stop superpowers rising in the Heartland, avoiding the political and military welding between China and Japan (whichever side was acting) and between Russia and China: so the Nixon's trip to Beijing in 1972, pushed by Kissinger. In the West, US worked in the same way to detach Germany from Russia (or the Soviet Union) —whichever of the two was in a hegemonic position— and also to avoid a too close partnership between Russia and Europe (the case of Ukraine is typical), and a real strategic self-sufficiency of the EU. The more the EU feels threatened by Russia, the more, in fact, it militarily clings to the US. The paradoxical result is that Russia is, whether it wants it or not, both in Europe (against the EU) and in East Asia (against China) a valuable ally of the US, a card it plays in the policy of dividing the Heartland.

Moreover, this policy is a partial pursuit of that of the other maritime power of the past, Great Britain, which, however, lacked a true land dimension and has always been driven by the need of preventing a hegemonic power on the European continent —from which it has now broken away, with American approval, for the European power that it perceived as excessive. When Britain's world power did exist, it did not stem from a broad European territorial base (unlike the US), but from its sea dominion and its great industrial primacy on the world, which lasted throughout the 19th century, and was then challenged by lateral powers such as Japan and the US. A primacy that —in the British case as in any other— can take the form of imperialism, i.e. as the hegemonic building of an influence area, as well as colonialism, i.e. as the political-military control of vast lands. It is the cost-benefit calculus, along with the changing forms of political legitimacy, that decides which path to choose.

Europe

This geopolitical interpretative framework might seem out of date today, since the military power becomes de-spatialized in two opposite ways: from above, the nuclear threat by aircraft and missiles, clearly beyond the geographical space; from below, the terrorist challenge which —unlike what Schmitt foretold about the partisan— is (or has been) ubiquitous in many ways and has infiltrated into territories, rather than being based there (the self-proclaimed “Islamic State”, Isis, failed just because it was territorially defined). Moreover, certainly just after the Second World War, the powers shifted from much of the territorial competition (decolonization took hold) towards ideological, economic and cultural levels. Universalist, all of them: even the post-War bipolarism was actually a struggle between two universalisms, the liberal-democratic and the communist one, balanced on the unstable dualistic form of *cuius regio eius oeconomia*.

But the post-bipolar age has no longer been a unitary and homogeneous world time, as law, ethics, economics, finance, and the official institutions of universalistic world governance, such as the UN and the WTO, would have wished and still do: it turned out quite soon into an age of plural and contradictory world politics (Petroni, 2021) that the universalisms are no longer able to compose. Even in the almost two decades of triumphing, euphoric globalization —from 1990 to 2008— the logics of geopolitics, albeit under cover, worked: the spreading unipolarity of the American hyperpower, the Washington consensus, the confrontation between public powers (governments) replaced by negotiation between private powers (informal governance) had the most weight; but after 2008, during the crisis of globalization, geopolitics fully re-emerges, its logics become the most evident, making politics easier to read: and more people recognize them. This, if anything, makes geopolitics more complex as it is also geoeconomics, without changing its feature: that is, again, the failure of reading world politics by assuming an universalist unity or a dual conflict between universalisms, whereas the right viewpoint is a plural, composite and agonistic unity.

In this regard, geopolitics follows the fortunes of sovereignty: first, the absolute core of all politics, then overwhelmed by the super-sovereignty of super-powers, but yet still triumphing, at least in formal terms, in the de-colonization phase, since the ex-colonies political independence demanded sovereignty; then denied by the globalist narrative about a smooth and homogeneous world, crossed by free capitalist exchanges and also free flows of money, goods and people; and lastly resurged, both as a protest ideology

(the so-called sovereignism) and as a interpretative key to some differential dynamics of the presumed smooth globe space (Somma, 2018; Galli, 2019). A differing that stems as much from traditional spatiality —the plurality of world public power— as from the unequal distribution of economic power among the different regions of the world.

This structural inequality of colonial legacy endured and grew during decolonization, when all the already scant investments of the motherlands turned to western markets, leaving the weak economic centers of colonies in great trouble. So, that inequality, in the global age, becomes a “dependence” of global South, which is in fact just a producer of raw materials, on the North, the center of creativity, development and financial activity (Visalli, 2020). Globalization indeed has been not only the deregulation of capital flows; but also, the shift of dependence into the subaltern involvement of vast areas of the world in the new, raging global productive development (neo-liberalism), that since early meant the Western production delocalization to once peripheral areas where labour cost was low.

The universal unification of the global world by economy, has always been an ideological narrative; difference, dependence and heterogeneity, have always been the very face of universality. Global capitalism does achieve a planetary network, but it produces (and it increases) local disconnections and inequalities. The spatial differentiation never disappeared: extraction and expulsion —the very core of the economic logic of neo-liberalism— are space-specific processes. Capital takes something away from one space towards another and attempts to prevent or control an autonomous productive capability in subaltern spaces (Sassen, 2014; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019).

China (which, however, was never formally a colony) is a different case of economic development in areas previously cut off from it: here, from the late 1970s onwards, Deng’s reforms (“Marxism with Chinese features” i.e. capitalism driven only by the Communist party) produced a bottom-up growth of light industry (starting up from productive districts following their own tradition). Thus, the country quickly became the “factory of the world”, whose potential for export and internal investment, led it to standards (quantitative, not yet qualitative) similar to those of American economy. And this (with its entry into the WTO) has meant not only China’s exit from the “century of humiliation” (1839-1949: from the first opium war to the proclamation of the People’s Republic) but also its emerging as an international political pole alongside the others already present, such as the US, India and Russia. I called them “Great States”, because of their vast territorial extent and, although they are formally federations or empires, by

the strategic unity of their sovereign political power. This greatness allows them, in different degrees, to govern, direct and drive their economies (Galli, 2018a; Galli, 2018b); in short, they are able to enforce (of course, not always) the strategic territorial needs alongside big corporation's business private profit. So, these centers of political power as well as hierarchizing the planet (medium-sized powers, vassal states and failed states support them, while terrorism and guerrilla warfare oppose them) can also attract and flex the course of economy, adapting to their political needs. Just as economic needs demand that politics intervenes in this or that way, they also set in a hierarchical way the world scene (geo-economics). The lack of coincidence between universalism of capital and particularism of political subject, the Great State, is a matter of fact: the former goes wherever it hopes to make a profit; the latter seeks to channel (broadly speaking) the capital flows towards its own strategic goals. Global space has never been smooth, and less today: world capitalism is actually American, Chinese, German, etc.

This does not mean the arising of “Great Spaces that prevent the interdiction of foreign power's interference” (Schmitt, 1941): given the current world economic connection, this is at present impossible. But it means that geopolitical and geo-economic areas of influence emerge; that is disagreeable to the US: indeed, it tends to be universalist in economics —and also in political ideology, although, as said, it practices in fact a strong geopolitical strategy— but it is forced to confront China as a strategic rival, and to threaten protectionist trade wars and even decoupling, (the stark economic separation of the American and Chinese spheres) because of weakening of the western economies after 2008, and the concurrent strengthening of the Chinese and Indian economies (Blustein, 2019; Davis - Lingling Wei, 2020). In a world divided into areas of political and economic influence, the US, however, does not feel at ease: this is still a possible choice, the other is a second “dual” cold war with China, but it is a quite risky scenario, because China owns part of the US public debt.

China itself is behaving politically as a “Great State” opposing to what it sees as the American universalist imperialism, by strengthening its presence in the South China Sea and seeking from there an oceanic access, that still does not have. In fact, China does not contest the principle of free seas and trade, as much as the trade wars and geopolitical closure around Asia —consciously converging with Schmitt's thought (Zheng, 2015) both about the one party and on the topic of the Great Spaces, whose autarchic closure, however, it does not agree—. Political particularism and economic universalism are the core of Chinese politics: a “Great State”, communist inside and liberalist

outside, open and closed. This can be clearly seen from the China claiming sovereignty over its coastal seas, while seeking its own area of influence in East Asia (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, 2020), and pursuing a long-range economic strategy through the “Silk Road” (Jingfeng, 2016): across the Middle East, in its final stretch the Silk Road it allows China to reach Europe (which is already the object of its attentions and investments, bypassing the American strategic bloc and surrounding its Indian rival) with which it signed a major trade treaty in December 2020. Moreover, China has deeply penetrated into Africa, where it is competing with Russia. It is also linked to Russia by the Shanghai Pact (1996), aimed to form an unitary Heartland. China, in short, is pursuing many geopolitical and geo-economic strategies: an exit from the South China Sea; an approach with Russia and Japan; the Silk Road; the relationship with Europe; an involvement in Africa. But it does not seem able to pursue a cultural hegemony, to exercise soft power, either as a model of civilisation (splendid but true remote, even linguistically), or as a political ideology (Chinese communism today has very little political appeal in the world).

However, on a global level it is hard to deny an increasing power shift from West to East; the US perceiving of a decline in its past hegemony, is, to some degree, right. Indeed, the US has not yet defined its strategy, having lost, after the collapse of the USSR, its main point of support and challenge, and it no longer is the only center of planetary power. It must therefore choose between a cold war with China —according to a dual scheme it prefers (the American-led West versus the “yellow danger”)—, the enhancement of its presence in the Pacific, the re-establishing of a strong transatlantic alliance or a multilateralism among Great States where it would play an important but not exclusive role (Galli, 2021). As well as, of course, the isolationism, that is now, in fact, impossible for the US.

Of course, their overwhelming military power still remains, as the system of alliances surrounding the ancient continent; but some of these alliances are no longer exclusive (Australia and Japan just joined the RCEP) and others have broken down: the Iran loss in 1979 has never been balanced by a Middle East stabilization, both Bush wars notwithstanding and despite the “Abraham Accords” between Israel and some Sunni Arab states, signed by Trump. Of course, that Arabia and Israel are in effect allies of each other and of the US, is a gain for it, but it does not balance the Iranian *vulnus* that provided a “Shia corridor” to the Mediterranean, through Syria and Gaza. Iran is a breach in American control of the Indian Ocean and (partly) of the Mediterranean, as well as of the oil route through the Strait of Hormuz. That makes Iran a *de facto* ally

of China, which needs that oil, and partly also of Russia, if only in an anti-Turkish and anti-American contest.

It is still true that US failed in Afghanistan —as did the powers that tried to control it (czarist Russia, imperialist UK, USSR)—; US has not achieved any success with Iran, and has not yet decided what to do about China; Obama and Trump have almost neglected the Mediterranean (except for the Sigonella base upgrading): so, the Turkey's emerging power is opposed only by France and Russia. US has almost taken no interest in Africa, where moreover, in Sahel states, there is the risk of an Islamic-extremist power center emerging, pressing on the Mediterranean; and Libya is today almost a power vacuum facing the sea. In the worst hypothesis —an Islamic state that reaches Tripoli— for the first time since the Second World War, the powers of the Northern shore would not control also the Southern shore. This is a geopolitical rule for a Mediterranean hegemony: so the struggle between Rome and Carthage —*Litora litoribus contraria* (Aen. 4, 628)—, because one or the other, but not both, could survive, since neither could escape the strategic need of mastering the two shores; anyway, the real end of the Western Roman Empire was the battle of Cape Bon, in 468 a. C., where a thousand imperial ships and a hundred thousand men perished in the flames, so the Roman forces could not free Tunisia from the Vandals: without the African shore, Italy and Europe are bottled —rightly, Pirenne (1997) considered the Arab closure of the Mediterranean as the end of the ancient world—. It's clear that migrations have its geopolitical source in the power struggles for the African center; another one is the climate change, i.e., a critical non-spatial front: the failure and reverse of dominion of man over nature.

Conclusions

European history can be read also from a spatial point of view. Once the subject of politics, Europe becomes an object of it, split between the US and the USSR, and after 1956 (the Suez crisis) devoid of autonomous power projection capability, even in those two states formally winners of the world conflict (France and Great Britain), Europe has found a new geo-political complexity since the fall of communism, as it is crossed by many internal fracture lines: North and South, East and West, Euro and non-Euro countries, debtors and creditors, “frugal”, Piigs, sovereignists, etc.: breaking lines that pivot around the German question, around Germany.

Indeed, the conversion of the EEC into the EU (Maastricht, 1992) was driven both by the aim of giving Europe an economic-monetary consistency —so that currencies of member states would not be in the hands of global economic powers— and by preventing the reunified Germany from isolating itself from the Western context. This led to the introduction of the euro, built on the economic-political logic of mark (ordoliberalism): beginning of the economic fracture lines between states that can afford the euro and states that hardly adapt to it. This also led to a growing unbalance of the Franco-German axis, on which the pre-Maastricht geo-economy rested, a quasi-Franco-German-Western “Carolingian” Europe. This unbalance is unspoken, but real and evident to everyone - due to the major economic and demographic power of Germany: quite similar (net of the military violence) to disequilibrium following the German unification of 1871, which broke the European balance of the Congress of Vienna (although Bismarck’s prudent policy had later tried to reassure about Germany’s will to peace - a real will, while he was ruling). Today, the Franco-German axis still holds, but there is no doubt about where the balance hangs.

But German power is limited by the countries of Eastern Europe. Although they are embedded in its economic space —from the Adige to almost Memel (as its national hymn claims) it reaches as far as the Balkans, Greece and Turkey— they pursue policies that are non aligned with those of Germany. The Eastern European States, such as Poland and Baltic States, but also the central Europe “sovereign” States of the Visegrad group, are anti-Russian and pro-American. Indeed, their integration into the EU also stems from a NATO impulse; and of course, NATO’s logic does not coincide at all with European reasons: the US cannot lose its control on both Eastern and Western Europe and cannot let Germany become the political barycenter of Europe. On the other hand, relations with Russia are a geopolitical open issue for Europe, which needs Russian gas and now perhaps Russian vaccine, but is also afraid of Russia, although it may be an attractive market. Moreover, the Franco-German tandem is fuelling more or less silent suspicions in lesser rank states, and also in top ones: even Trump’s US (and hardly the new administration will change this specific policy: US does not want a really united Europe) and the UK of Brexit didn’t endured a German-driven EU.

Let’s be clear: the EU is not a Germanic or Franco-Germanic super-State; but neither it is a real federation; in short, it doesn’t have any political unity. It never knew a continental constituent power, and however its “constitution” (actually its revised Treaties) was rejected in 2005. It is in fact —leaving aside the *vexata quaestio* of the EU’s political

form, which is neither a State, nor a Federation, or Empire, and may not be defined as a “form” (D’Attorre, 2020)— a set of sovereign States, “Lords of the Treaties”: they ceded monetary sovereignty and, partially, budget sovereignty, each having to face the internal effects of this sacrifice. The intergovernmental EU governance method, which of course underlines the different strengths of states, is the political and organizational proof of the inter-state character of the EU. In fact, Germany explicitly asserts its sovereignty since the Lissabon Urteil of its Constitutional Court in 2009, in which the European Union is seen as a “pact between states” (Staatenverbund) i.e., as

[...] a close and lasting union between States that are still sovereign, exercising public power on a pactual basis, the basic order of which is under the exclusive disposition of the Member States,

so

European unification on the basis of a pactual union between sovereign States cannot be achieved in such a way as to leave the Member States insufficient room for the political determination of economic, cultural and social living conditions.

According to that approach, Germany —too big to be an European State among the others, but too small to be a superpower— has certainly a great influence, but it cannot be a real stabilizer, even though, as a strong but not really hegemonic partner, it is involved in many mediations within the EU, without giving up its own national interest (above all, the safeguard of its banking system and its export capacity).

Lacking political unity, even only federal, and therefore lacking a unitary foreign policy and defence, crossed by many dividing lines, among which geopolitical ones (relations with Russia and the US, which, through NATO, organizes almost the same States as EU), Europe fails to define its own strategic interest: foreign policies of member states are national and certainly not identical (see the Libyan affair from 2011 onwards). Faced with the geopolitical challenge, Europe seems to have exhausted the driving force of its current conformation, and must face a dilemma: to join the US, if it resumes its role as leader of the West (whether in a new cold war with China, or in a less conflictual scenario), or to turn itself into a hegemonic Great State in its own area of influence (but which? a needed presence in the Middle East geopolitically,

should also be envisaged). There are two opposing hypotheses, both of which require great political energy: the first, from the United States, which should regain its economic and military hegemonic power (and today, it is not sure that on the European side there is the past pro-American enthusiasm); the second, from the EU itself, that should make a qualitative step toward unification, essential to “great policy”. The outcome, of course, is uncertain. What is certain is that in the present multipolar world, heavily unbalanced and unstable, the EU, as it is, is contestable, and in fact, contended by America, Russia and China: indeed, today China’s hold on some economies (Germany and Italy, above all) is very strong. European decisions (French-German, and mainly German) will have to be taken, and they will come in part also from American decisions. And it is not sure that geopolitical choices (pro US, China or European autonomy) will overlap with the old ideological divisions: the right might well be pro-America, while the center and the left (where there is one) pro-China (but surely not for Maoist nostalgia).

So many contemporary political dynamics can be explained by geopolitical reasons: the main power players are de facto “forced” to these reasons, even though they give “free”, just “political” and not mechanical interpretations. Despite some analogies, today there is neither a coming back to 1914—to the wild plurality of power centers in Europe (in their different ways and aims, EU and NATO moderate internal conflicts) nor to 1945—to a new imperial world dualism, with China replacing the USSR. But we are not even in a new, unified, globalised, homogeneous and pacified world; the fracture lines are there, and so the pluralities of powers, the power projects are there: space is a root of political order as much as a root of disorder. Today’s complexity of politics includes the spatial dimension and its subjects of action: the Great States. So, we are challenged to face the immediacy-mediation nexus at the very theoretical and practical core of geopolitics. Geopolitics does not provide mechanical, automatic, axiomatic interpretations of that nexus: hence, it is not a positivistic “social science”, nor can provide any definitive answer to contemporary political issues, by highlighting them. Nonetheless, as a part of “critical realism”, it can help to pose questions better. Its critical power is here.

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