



Fear and Global Risk: Failed or Rehabilitated States?

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1. ...in the beginning was the State

There is a very close link between fear and the birth of the modern State: “sovereignty is [...] constituted on the basis of a radical form of will, but counts for little. That will is bound up with fear, and sovereignty is never shaped from above [...]. Sovereignty is always shaped from below, and by those who are afraid” (Foucault 2003 : 96).

The pact which establishes the sovereign is thus the outcome of a will, driven by fear and by the concern to protect one’s life. What we have here is the Hobbesian theme of the “state of nature”, conceived not so much as an element preceding the establishment of the city or of political order, as their internal principle; in Hobbes, writes Giovanni Fiaschi, “the state of nature is therefore a hypothesis of reason and an explanatory fiction” (Fiaschi 2017 : 209). The *homo homini lupus* formula, therefore, describes a sort of “area of indistinctness between the human and the beastly” (Agamben 2005 : 118). But the rational element remains the centrepiece of Hobbes’ theory. It is rational choice that leads men to establish a sovereign order capable of protecting them against violent death; and it is the desire for self-conservation on the part of individuals that transforms irrational fear into a means to rationalise political life. John Locke adopts this structure, adding the element of property to it: “thus the desire for self-conservation turns into the desire for property, for acquisition”. As Leo Strauss writes, “this small change entails huge consequences” (Strauss 2011 : 58)¹.

Starting with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a new concept of security emerged, leading to a new idea of Europe: “this may be the first time that Europe appears as an economic unit, as an economic subject in the world” (Foucault 2008 : 55). This transition was favoured by the establishment of the modern State and by the gradual transformation of the very concept of sovereignty: this no longer served to merely preserve political life, but came to revolve around economic interests. In analysing the economic roots of our age, Karl Polanyi emphasises the central role played by the State in the development of a European market for goods. This centrality is precisely what favoured the growth of States power through economic wealth, which became a driving factor in the European context.

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¹ On this point, Michael Oakeshott proposes an innovative thesis that indicates the State as the historical product of an unresolved tension between two opposite modes of “association”, *societas* and *universitates*. See Oakeshott 1975.

Liberalism took root as a new method of government precisely within this changed context. Its main aim was to preserve security, in the light of the potential problems engendered by an increasing level of freedom. Market freedom developed starting from the capacity of the State to create *dispositifs* to control, manage and promote security, so as to ensure constant economic development. This paradigm shift in sovereignty may be summed up as the transition from the entirely external protection of subjects on the sovereign's part to a mechanism whereby liberalism is continually required "to arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals by reference to this notion of danger" (Foucault 2008 : 66). A surplus of freedom, therefore, requires increased levels of control on the government's part.

Gradually systems of law enforcement were developed, designed to ensure public security and further market and trade development. The Peace of Westphalia marked the beginning of a historical phase based on international diplomatic relations between States, a phase in which some unprecedented mechanisms emerged: a permanent military system, intended to maintain an internal order and ensure the quality of the State and of its various elements². The police thus acquired a significance related to the prerogatives of the sovereign and of the State. The State no longer constituted a static community governed by a public authority, but acquired a dynamic capacity to act in order to maintain both its own power and order.

The new liberal order sprung from these processes is founded on the logic of security: all aspects of social life are now structured within a web of pervasive, widespread power relations. Within this framework, we witness a transition from the "macrophysics of power" to the "microphysics of disciplinary power" (Foucault 2006 : 27): the power of discipline replaces the power of sovereignty. And discipline serves the purpose of making subjects conform to those forms of order which gradually become established in society. Discipline is a stabilising factor, geared towards the normalization of individuals and designed to make them functionally compatible with the new economic and productive regime.

At this first stage, sovereignty takes two different forms, losing its original character: from being an agent of political order, the State becomes an agency entrusted with ensuring the smooth running of the economy. The security measures adopted contribute to turning fear into a merely irrational and politically harmless element, which at most may manifest itself as a horizon of expectation, as a mixture of dread and hope in the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary events of the 19th century³. The new century will come to experience new fears and to evoke old ones: subjective and collective experiences of fear will find fertile ground in the vast range of events characterising the period between the late 19th century and the first half

² See Foucault 2007 : 266-269. For an analysis of modern systems of law enforcement, see Campesi 2009; on the role played by national armies in the preservation of public order in 19th-century Europe, see Gooch 1980.

³ On this point see Bodei 2010 : 129.

of the 20th. For Johanna Bourke - the author of *Fear. A Cultural History* - the “bruising encounter between individual subjectivity and social norms” defined what it meant for modern man to be fearful (Bourke 2007 : 9).

2. From fear to fears: the age of global risks

The emergence of the masses amplified certain social phenomena, including the perception of fear, with significant consequences. The rapid transformations which occurred following the industrial revolution made societies more dynamic and interpersonal relations even more widespread. The early 20th century was pervaded by countless tensions, which manifested themselves in the form of widespread social hysteria. A striking example of this is provided by two episodes which occurred in England and the United States. The first case concerns the 1926 radio programme, *Broadcasting from the Barricades*, which spread panic throughout England through the announcement of the imminent threat posed by a riotous and enraged crowd of unemployed men in the streets and in other public areas. The second case – a far better known and more striking one – occurred a decade later, when another radio programme, *The War of the Worlds*, suggested that Martians had landed on the east coast of the US.

Both episodes occurred within a predetermined framework of historical and social events, already shaped by the tensions and fears of the period. In turn, the spread of panic was favoured by the role played by new media, such as the radio, which contributed to transmitting the alarming news even more rapidly. This news had a manipulative effect, which is to say that it presented itself as the possibility of influencing mass behaviour and of eliciting a reaction.

Fear was turned into a means of political and social control. It was put to the service of power and defined on the basis of the power relations at play. The security measures deriving from this present themselves as a “*totalitarianism of the defence against dangers*” (Beck 1992 : 214).

This transition is even more evident in the analysis of the concept of *global risk* formulated by Ulrich Beck. For Beck, risk in general is a factor that is always present in human history. The peculiar element is rather the definition of the risks and the fact that this definition results from power relations. Risks are therefore socially and globally defined in view of the forces at work, which determine their characteristics and qualities, as well the potential solutions and courses of action to face them. It is in such terms that risks present themselves in the global age. Moreover, risks have a plural character, which is to say that in each case they present themselves in different, heterogeneous forms, subject to spatio-temporal contingencies, within a context marked by apparently irreconcilable dichotomies. Equally heterogeneous are the range of global risks threatening classical State sovereignty: after bursting upon the stage as a key element in the modern political order, the State “does not cease to be, but operates within socio-spatial and transnational webs of power” (Bazzicalupo 2017 : 48)⁴.

⁴For an overview of issues related to the redefinition of the nation-State, see Sassen 2007, Sassen 2006; Tuccari 2000; see also Portinaro 1999, and see Ohmae 1995.

The placing of the State within these webs has had a number of consequences. First of all, the key concept of sovereignty, which represented the cornerstone of the modern State, has undergone a significant process of erosion. Globalization took root precisely with the emergence of capital “as an emerging global sovereign” (Brown 2010 : 63). This capital is free to act and is not subject to any political sovereignty; rather, it has the power to shape the lives and social conditions in human communities⁵. Many States have witnessed a process of deregulation of their decision-making power, frequently accompanied by the passive acceptance of choices made elsewhere. So, global risks have produced *failed States* even in the West, with the concrete risk of post-democratic authoritarianism (Beck 2009 : 79).

The constant fear of threats from abroad has been amplified precisely by these global webs. Global interconnectedness has considerably increased the perception of risks and multiplied the range of fears. The outbreak of anxieties and tensions, therefore, occurs on a pathological level, by turning a human emotion such as fear into the indistinct whole of global age pathologies⁶. Fear of the *other* emerges precisely within this framework, yet unlike Hobbes’ fear, which is a productive and rational one, it presents itself in the guise of an indistinct, irrational fear towards an other that is unknown – as fear towards those who are different, towards foreigners. The feeling of insecurity engendered by indistinct and global threats often leads people to point to some perceived guilt – and to someone guilty. These pathological expressions are also symptomatic of a crisis: the “crisis of the original fiction of modern sovereignty” (Agamben 2005: 145). Giorgio Agamben highlights this aspect when dealing with the figure of the *refugee*, which becomes a ‘disturbing’ figure for the order of the modern nation-State, insofar as it breaks “the continuity between man and citizen, between *nativeness* and *nationality*” (Agamben 2005 : 145). The close relation between State sovereignty and national belonging is somehow jeopardised by this unexpected guest. Unsurprisingly, European States put up a strenuous resistance when it comes to their exercising of sovereignty with regard to immigration policies.

Fear directly influences State authorities and risks undermining the legitimacy of governments. It poses a new problem of stability and political order. Security acquires new social relevance, in keeping with the role it played in modern times⁷. It becomes the key factor that States draw upon in the attempt to restore their lost legitimacy and their crumbling sovereignty.

3. Europe and democracy

These issues overlap with the debate on democracy – a debate Europe is fully involved in. Contemporary fears pose a concrete risk of dissolving the European common sense, understood as a range of shared practices, cultures and institutions.

⁵ On this topic, see the analysis provided by Ferrara 2014 : 273-289.

⁶ See Pulcini 2013 : 177-194.

⁷ For an analysis of the development of the concept of security from the modern age onwards, and for a bibliography on these topics, see Del Vecchio 2015 : 405-419.

Recent decades have witnessed attempts to limit the openings made in matters of citizenship and freedom of movement in Europe, precisely in relation to the phenomena currently underway. The most concrete and evident risk is that of an inversion leading to a process of re-nationalisation of European political life (Olsen 2014 : 346).

Within such a context, European citizenship can serve as a crucial way of balancing nationalist tendencies and cosmopolitan openings, which question the idea of politics as a territorially-defined practice. These two opposite tendencies risk destabilising the already precarious balance of European society: on the one hand the cosmopolitan opening, which tears down political and State boundaries, is essentially and realistically infeasible; on the other, the confining of citizenship to an ethno-nationalist concept of *demos* might well spell the decline of the project of a united Europe. The dilemma lies in the loss of democratic legitimacy on two levels: the State level and the European one.

Social fears are the most destabilising factor for democracy. The incapacity of governments to face up to these fears further weakens social cohesion, potentially leading to the emergence of phenomena of mass hysteria. Hannah Arendt notes that the loss of this point of balance may be observed in two phenomena that are symptomatic of a social crisis:

the destruction of human plurality and the destruction of the common world can happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as is usually the case in tyrannies. But it may also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria (Arendt 1998 : 58).

Freud's analysis of the *Discontents of Civilisation* in the early 20th century here finds a counterpart in the "discontents of democracy" illustrated by Carlo Galli. Within the context of the democratic interaction between the ruling class and citizens, we are witnessing a contemporary redefinition of Hobbes' pact of protection between the sovereign and his subjects: protection against perils, deriving from widespread social fears, acquires a relevant role in democratic dialectic and in government choices. Politics acquires new forms: "populism, plebiscitarianism, fictitious rallies against fictitious enemies conjured up by political and economic powers" (Galli 2011 : 63). Fear guides citizens' choices.

The rise of a populist democracy may be associated precisely with the fears engendered by globalization. What emerges, then, is an ambiguous relation between citizens' political choices and the principles and values of liberal democracy. Policies come to be centred on security issues. The discontents of democracy come to light with the foregoing of tolerance, of inclusiveness towards others, and of the cosmopolitan openness of society. Fears distort community bonds and redefine them on the basis of the idea of belonging, of conformity to a 'We'.

It is in this sense that public policies have gradually come to adopt a securitarian approach, designed to make up for the lack of democratic legitimacy. Deprived of its normative power and removed from citizens on account of its intrinsic proceduralism, democracy today defines its political agenda on the basis of requests made “from below”, without any intermediary⁸. Moreover, it must be noted that for a decade at least, both in Italy and in Europe as a whole, security policies have gradually come to replace social policies, leading to the emergence of a “post-social State” (Kaya 2012 : 24). This transition becomes even more evident if we take into account the fact that the government enforcing security is structurally associated with the government based on new processes of social exclusion (Curbet 2008 : 10). Security and exclusion thus appear as the new paradigms of contemporary Europe: in opposition to freedom, the emphasis has shifted on the limiting of spaces, the closing of certain frontiers (if only as a temporary measure) and the oppressive bonds of a control-based society. Inclusive social policies, concerning not just immigrants but citizens too, have been followed by exclusive political claims and by social policies that are inadequate to ensure the implementation of the citizenship measures formulated by Thomas Humphrey Marshall (Somers 2008 : 163).

Europe today dangerously coexists with these powerfully disintegrating effects. The demand for security, which is used as a new means to bring together citizens and the authorities, favours the spread of a punitive populism ready to identify *scapegoats* to blame for the social and economic malaise: “fear has come back to acquire value as the foundation of political theories” (Svendsen 2007 : 110).

4. ...rehabilitated States

The emergence of nation-States is a distinguishing feature of political modernity in Europe. From the Peace of Westphalia onwards, Europe established itself as a collective economic power through a range of political actors. Each State pursued enrichment as its main goal, for the purpose of increasing its power. Through economic and technological development European States gradually consolidated their political power and ensured the global supremacy of Europe (Rossi 2017 : 205). The colonial era, which commenced with the conquest of the New World, marked the beginning of the process of construction of European hegemony. International law established itself as Eurocentric law and the European paradigm of sovereignty became an instrument of dominion for European powers. The State acquired a key role in Europe and gradually consolidated itself as a political community on the international level. The model of the nation-State spread throughout the African continent and was adopted by most of the new political actors in the Middle East. The view of international politics that emerged was marked by a statist logic, which contributed to extending Europe’s influence over the whole planet. Colonialism and sovereignty represent the two paradigmatic aspects of the hegemonic development of Europe.

⁸For a reflection on the topics of “remoteness” and “closeness” in politics, see Innerarity 2015 : 289-303. For a recent analysis of populism in Italy, see Revelli 2017; see also Villacañas Berlanga 2018.

What lies at the basis of the development of these two paradigms is the concept of nation and the consequent alternation of the hegemonic roles played by the various European States. Nation-building occurred over a long period of time; each nation followed its own course and, most significantly, was forced to face many historical challenges in order to consolidate and affirm itself as a State. Charles Tilly analyses two fundamental factors that have enabled the nation-State to acquire a stable structure: the role played by capital and the coercive function – already recalled by Max Weber – which combined to produce the different kinds of State (Tilly 1990 : 17). This process engendered a competitive struggle between a multiplicity of actors⁹.

Europe also experienced deep internal rifts. The rivalry and competition between States – which was only attenuated by the outward projection of conflict during the colonial era – led to the First World War, which has been regarded as a genuinely European war. Europe, now the centre of the world, waged an internal war which acquired global relevance, owing to the extended influence of the continent and its conquests: division is arguably the only constant feature in the history of Europe (Rossi 2017 : 235). The hegemonic aspirations of individual European nation-States led to the outbreak of conflicts, while inner divergences caused hostility and mutual distrust. The Second World War marked the rise of new powers, and the beginning of the gradual process of reducing the European role in the international framework.

Following the catastrophe of the Second World War, most of Europe converted to pacifism. The end of the European civil war marked the gradual decline of the nation-State and, with it, of that political and military model that had enabled the European States to establish their hegemony over much of the globe. Europe as a whole lost its capacity for self-defence (Rossi : 193). New Leviathans made their appearance on the world stage.

The project of European unification, launched in the aftermath of the Second World War, had the pacification of the continent as its primary goal. The first cooperation agreement, however, had an exclusively economic character. It was designed to prevent future frictions and lay the foundations for political unification. The authors of the *Ventotene Manifesto*, Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni, identified nation-States as the leading cause of war in Europe and argued for the need to move beyond them in order to bring about a unified and federalist Europe. The new Europe they envisaged was a stateless Europe, with an extended federal dimension that gave the concept of sovereignty a new, shared meaning. The process of European unification was thus launched. Europe found itself increasingly caught in the process of division of the world into two opposite blocks: the United States, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other. For quite some time, Europe was the historical stage on which a Cold War was fought that soon extended to the whole planet. Little by little, Europe lost its relevance as the epicentre of history, becoming absorbed within the broader framework of global processes.

⁹On this process, see Tilly (edited by) 1975.

The post-Cold War world reconfigured itself as a plurality of co-existent and heterogeneous spaces. Europe today is an area that must engage with a plural world (Rossi 2017 : 253), which makes any attempt to revert to a Westphalian world ineffective as well as unrealistic. Globalization is the name given to this new problem (Mordacci 2017 : 124): a spatio-temporal acceleration that threatens to undermine all balances and challenges every international order. Europe, understood as a political organisation and cultural area, is experiencing the repercussions of the globalised world, and suffering its consequences¹⁰.

Global dynamics also pose a real challenge to the role and relevance of States. This concerns not just its capacity to exercise an external influence and to face global risks, but also its capacity to ensure well-being, economic stability and political order within its own borders. In an attempt to solve these dilemmas, in certain parts of the world, States and the political powers associated with them have 'staged' a newly found sovereignty. The raising of 'new walls' and the symbolic fencing off of State borders with barbed wire have been a way to project the image of a re-established sovereign power. Thus various ideological concepts and factors from the past are now back en vogue: protection, closure, security, the symbolic power of the people, and the national space. These themes have contributed to the enactment of a "theatralization of sovereignty" (Brown 2010 : 112), within a context marked by phenomena of political radicalisation and by the resurfacing of 'immunization practices' designed to protect the community from the vast range of dangers amplified by the global sounding board.

The need of the State, then, lies in the weaknesses engendered by global crises¹¹. Foucault's image of the birth of the State in connection to a will driven by fear is newly presenting itself today as an urgent problem that concerns Europe's future. The disintegrating power of fear would appear to be affecting the fragile and uncertain European institutions, while its aggregative capacity seems to provide a means to assuage widespread social anxieties within the context of a 'closed' and nationalist State.

It is likely that the process of supranational opening is an irreversible one today, capable of containing nationalist drives and of limiting the incendiary effects of global fears. But what we need to reflect upon, after having outlined a plausible diagnosis, are those aspects related to the "care of the world" (Pulcini 2009 : 190). In particular, it would be useful to channel existing fears into a rational and fruitful reference framework, capable of ensuring, on the basis of a mutual awareness of our vulnerability, not merely the self-preservation of individuals, but the survival of humanity as a whole. Besides, the project of a united Europe is itself the outcome of the implementation of measures to re-establish peace on the European continent – a project that, despite its moments of crisis, still seems like the only effective foundation for a peaceful coexistence.

¹⁰ For a "map" of globalization, see Zolo 2004.

¹¹ For an analysis of the challenges posed to the State by a series of contemporary transnational phenomena, see Poggi 1992.

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