

# The rise and fall of modern political space\*

— Carlo Galli

*\*Testo della conferenza tenuta da Carlo Galli il 23 giugno 2014 nell'aula "Prodi" del Dipartimento di Storia, cultura e civiltà dell'Università di Bologna, nell'ambito della Bologna – Duke Summer School on Global Studies and Critical Theory.*

In order to *analyze the rise and fall of modern political space*, it is necessary to understand *how space matters in political thought and in politics*, starting from an exposition of what is meant with the concept of "implicit space". This is the aim of my paper, which is based on the ideas I developed in *Political Spaces and Global War* (2010).

implicit space

qualitative space

political space

space globalization

politics

What does it mean that space matters  
in political thought and in politics

1. The relevance of space in politics does not only concern the fact that political power has to calculate the spaces of its own application according to dimensions and distances, thus giving birth to the distinctions between empires and small States, or among climates and characters. It also means that there is a concrete relationship in history between politics and geography, power and territories or rather – which is our main concern – a relationship between thought and institutions, on the one hand, and the nature/culture link on the other. Above all, space is a hidden pattern in political thought and institutions: it is often presumed and used implicitly rather than in an open and self-reflective way.

2. This “implicit space” is not a lifeless geographic factor or a passive nature. Rather, it is the system of differences, distances and proximities, superordination and subordination that formal and informal powers establish. It is the topological structure of the Being to which, either consciously or unconsciously, political thought refers. This space does not have two dimensions only, but three or even four, when we take into account its chronological articulation. It is a political space, it is made by politics, it is thought and presupposed by

politics. This space operates both when political thought and institutions openly theorize it and when they exclude it from their self-understanding or treat it parenthetically. This space is made up of lines of differentiation, inclusion and exclusion that are more or less mobile: according to these lines, one is situated within or outside the political borders of legal citizenship, at the margins or at the core of productive fields, routes and traffics. There are lines (and spaces) of amity, color, religion, gender, economy, language, culture, good or bad manners; there are escape and centripetal lines, constructive or fracturing lines. These lines are not metaphorical but real, though they are not natural but rather historical and political.

Political space does not coincide with the physical one. Space, power and differences are strongly interlaced. Political space is a relationship among differences. Therefore, it does not have an ontological substance; it is not the substitute of the Being and the foundation of the world, as it emerges from some preparatory fragments of the *Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche says: «With its sturdy shoulders, the space opposes the nothing; where there is space, there is being». The space does not have an ordering power in itself, as the old geopol-

itical thought believed as much as Schmitt, with his ambivalent *Der Nomos der Erde*. Rather, the political space is power, interpretation and mobilization. This space becomes valuable today in order to understand the world once time – or, history conceived as progress – is not a trustable compass anymore. The conceptual couples inside/outside, high/low, static/nomadic explain more than the opposition between “old” and “new”, according to which politics defines itself. Rather, this opposition should be rearticulated and deconstructed according to the one between right and left (which, however, is not of our concern today), so to understand the political character implicit in the opposition between “old” and “new”. Briefly, to recall the contributions of Sassen (2006) and Elden (2013), politics is always spatial and space is always political: it is impossible to determine which one comes first. Even though these two domains can be distinguished on the basis of the disciplines to which they refer (namely history of political thought and geography), they actually converge and should be analyzed by philosophy, a meta-disciplinary thought that is able to understand their interactions.

3. During the modern age, within the modern State political thought and institutions tried to produce, from a formal point of view, equal-

ity, proximity, homogeneity (i.e. the State itself) and to hide the space in order to emphasize the dimension of time (i.e. of progress). A close reading of modern thought, however, allows stressing that the difference is not erased, but rather driven off. The existence of a specific spatial distance, that is the “outside” of the colonies, is admitted or at least acknowledged. In the colonies one can find magnificence and horror, difference and anomaly; there, one can see power overtly acting according to dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. From colonial power we can understand that the great modern idea of equality incorporates inequality.

4. Our aim is precisely that of reading the implicit spatiality of modernity starting from the assumption that, while they establish an “outside”, the lines of power also bring it “inside”, because power cannot work without the “outside”. Furthermore, we will analyze the contemporary global world – where everything is “inside” – by stressing that it is crisscrossed by several lines of power which produce a hierarchical inclusion in order to provide a functional and dynamical order for each part of the globe, by establishing homogeneous regions (of exchange, of monetary units, of legal uniformity). These lines of power are in turn overcome and transgressed by counter-powers and, in general terms, they are not

easily established and maintained. They claim to be barriers, but they are first of all places of encounter and transit: they are frontiers and battle-fields. In general terms, in order to understand the power that provides a form and an imagine of the world, though a changing one, we should interpret it as a power that produces and removes spaces, that produces equality but also

inequality through its lines. These lines, these implicit spaces, can be acknowledged both in political practices – that is in law, economics, social differentiation – and in ideology, in political discourses, in the conceptual frames supporting material Constitutions. In order to point out implicit spaces, it is necessary to deconstruct and to criticize them.

### How space matters in political thought: a short survey

Which implicit spaces can be revealed in political thought and institutions? Since the beginning of political modernity – marked by the discovery of America and the enlargement of the European space on the one hand, and by the rift in the supposedly universal space of Christianity determined by the Protestant Reform on the other – different implicit conceptions of space followed one another. Though this movement seems to be characterized by their mutual opposition, each of them actually develops some implicit features of the previous one. These implicit conceptions of space can be classified as follows.

#### *1. A qualitative space characterized by natural differences*

This is the ancient political space both of the Greek *polis* and of Rome. There is, however, a difference between these cases, since in the first

instance the distinction between civilization and barbarism is conceived as natural, while in the second one it is based upon legal foundations.

#### *2. Machiavelli's agonistic space*

According to Machiavelli, space is the field of civil and military struggles. The city and the territory interpreted by the Prince must be marked by virtue, that is by conflict. Accordingly, «unpleasant places» – as Machiavelli calls them in his *Discorsi* (book I, 11) – should be preferred since they allow strengthening virtue. Furthermore, the space should be seen from the point of view of the possibility of engaging a war (*Discorsi*, book III, 39; *Principe*, 14).

#### *3. The Catholic space of Thomism and of the Second Scholasticism*

This conception of space develops some features of the universal Christian space of Middle-age

(even though the latter was actually dualistic, insofar as it was built upon the struggle against the Islamic world). Francisco de Vitoria's *De Indis* is an early example of this conception. For Vitoria, space is not differentiated according to ontological criteria, since every man is an *Imago Dei* and everybody is able to govern himself. Only differences in terms of development and of knowledge of the Gospel may legitimize the Christian powers to provide their benevolent help to the «savages». Furthermore, Christian powers should not be prevented from their commercial exchanges and the work of evangelization. Thus, the universal and homogeneous space full of qualities is differentiated along lines that, at least in theory, are provisional. Beside Vitoria, a different conception of space is articulated by Sepulveda in his 1547 *Democrates Alter*, according to which Native Americans are nothing more than *homunculi*. However, as Gerbi explains in *The Dispute of the New World* (2000), the latter conception was accepted until the 18th century.

#### 4. *The utopian space*

Placed outside the *is*, this space concerns the *ought to be*: it is an island in the middle of the sea, it is at the antipodes, and it is far away. It is an extreme universalism that stands before the real world and its manifestations with an indifferent abstractness. Furthermore,

there also exists an internal utopia dressed as an external one, that is a critique developed from a point of view as innocent as the one of a stranger (this is the case of Montesquieu's perspective in his *Persian Letters*).

#### 5. *The smooth universal empty space of modern rationalism*

This space exists before things, it is a space where things are placed according to the order and segmentation provided by politics.

1) First of all, it is an operative universalism, insofar as space – as Heidegger suggests – is where the human artifice, the image of the world defined by technique, is placed (Heidegger 1950). The true dimension of this space is a progressive time: time is progressive when an artifice is built within the homogeneous space, when a movement from the state of nature to the Political State, from barbarism to civilization, takes place. This universal space is made up of natural subjective rights. Paradoxically, the modern and secular universalism is realized by a plurality of particular States, each establishing itself as an empty, homogeneous, neutral and legalized space in order to overcome the rift produced by religious civil wars. In such a space, as Isin pointed out, the natural rights of each subject become civil and political rights, thanks to the systems of citizenship and to the struggles for being

included in it (Isin 2002).

The movement from war to peace, from anarchy to order, from nature to property is possible everywhere, at least theoretically, even though it happened only in Europe. America is the metaphor of a natural, undifferentiated universality, which opposes to a civil, progressive and differentiated universality. In his *Second Treatise on Government* (Ch. V, *Of property*), Locke states that: «In the beginning, all the world was America», just like Hobbes in *Leviathan* (Ch. 13), even though for Hobbes progress is always threatened and reversible. The difference between America and Europe, therefore, is enormous, but it is a transient state that can be overcome. The only intrinsic spatiality of modern rationalism is the one which is imposed, it is a political spatiality. It is the relationship established and created by the sovereign State between internal and external, between criminal and enemy, between peace and a war fought by subjects who are different but equal in quality: *hostes aequaliter iusti*. These are the categories upon which political modernity is based, the only (binary) space that is openly admitted. The homogeneous internal space and the external made of stranger, alien spaces.

II) However, in this simple and empty space one can find other concrete and differentiating lines of political power that are always

implicit. According to Schmitt (*Der Nomos der Erde*) sovereignty is exclusively European and its conditions of possibility are given by the exercise of a non-legal power in the maritime and extra-European space. Locke, as well, stated that America could have been conquered because there was no property – therefore no labor – there: conquest cannot provide a justification when a civil State is conquered, as he explained in chapter 16 of the *Second Treatise*. However, when it is established through settlement and labor in an abandoned place, it is legitimate. According to Grotius (*De iure praedae*) where there is no territory – that is, in the sea – a private war can be fought in order to protect and take back property: in both cases, therefore, the line of power is established by labor and property. According to Kant, illegitimate violence is usually practiced outside Europe through occupation, colonization, commercial exploitation, that are not justified in themselves but only insofar as they are a bridge, a passage towards a full integration of “savages” within a legally organized civilization (*Metaphysical principles of the Science of Rights*).

Even within political rationalism there is a civilized echo of the terrible exportation of uncontrolled and savage violence towards non-European spaces such as the Atlantic and Asian ones:

from slave trade to piracy, from the devastation of South America to the hard struggles – described by Milton (1999) – between Portuguese, English and Dutch for the Moluccas, the islands of spices. All these processes are the one true driving force of capitalist accumulation, where war and commerce interlace on a global level (beside and against *doux commerce*). World capitalism is the truth of the European State: the lines of the European space of States dividing the interior and the exterior space are actually interlaced and fueled by the multiple extra-European lines of power such as the oceanic routes of unequal commerce, of war for extermination (even between European powers, though outside Europe) and of slavery. The exterior space is the core of the interior one. Capitalist universalism generates infinite differences that are not ontologically determined by the physical space. Rather, they are determined economically and politically, according to their different places within the regimes of production.

#### 6. *The revolutionary, romantic and dialectical space between nature and history*

The modern space, supposedly empty, is now filled with nature, society and history by the Nation and the bourgeois State. In Sieyès the lines of power are internal (the division of labor, the strug-

gle against privileges) and external (the armed revolutionary nation); in Ritter, space is not only politics or nature, but also history; even Hegel believes – in his *Philosophy of Law* (§§ 244–7) – that space develops progressively from East to West: in fact, the space is simultaneously crisscrossed by inner contradictions (the civil society) that are pushed outside (through colonization). So, the relationship between the internal and the external space is complicated since the “outside” is interpreted as the condition of possibility of the “inside”. The space is articulated in time, in a “before” and an “after”. In Marx this is even clearer: the internal space (the State) is crisscrossed by a class line, which is truer than the empty homogeneity of democracy. This spatiality is made possible by the spatiality – both differentiating and hierarchizing – of the historically determined global capitalism. In other words, space is modified by history and economy.

#### 7. *The natural, quantitative, differentiated space of Positivism.*

Here the space is ruled by physical and anthropological – that is quantitative – laws, that can be scientifically known and that differentiate it: *The burden of the white man* consists in managing these differences rather than overcoming them. The (real) economic and technical unbalance is politicized by referring to natural laws that bound pol-

itics and legitimate it. As Kipling clearly stated with his motto *East is East and West is West, and never the Twain shall meet*, differences cannot be fully overcome since they produce hierarchies and separate spaces: colonialism and racism enter the stage of political discourse as primary actors. Together with them, at the beginning of the 20th century geopolitics emerged together with the idea that space, with its internal differences and its immanent logics, provides laws for politics. In other words, the link between space and power is governed by physical and geographical laws that politics should accomplish, as it is – for instance – in Mackinder's concept of *Heartland* (1904).

#### 8. *The inverted and differentiating space of totalitarianism*

Here the inversion concerns the classical self-definition of the modern State. In totalitarian regimes, the internal space is characterized by homogeneity rather than equality, while the difference between the inside and the outside is brought within. In other words, the enemy is within, it is the object of an internal war. Another inversion concerns extermination, formerly practiced in extra-European spaces and now imported into Europe. The element of differentiation is explained by the German and Japanese theories of the "Great Spaces", openly anti-universalistic. The globe

is divided into heterogeneous and closed blocks.

#### 9. *The dual planetary space*

This space was born after WWII and after the subdivision of the world realized by the USA and the Soviet Union and the end of Euro-centrism. It is the space of a struggle between conflicting universalisms: the basically undifferentiated space of democracies, rights and capitalism *versus* the basically undifferentiated space of socialism. Here a couple of observations can be made: the first concerns the division between East and West, which is complicated by the one between North and South. The South can be the theatre of events and actions that are not tolerated into the North, such as the armed conflict between the two Worlds. The Vietnam War is one example, together with the anti-colonial war fought through *guerrilla* (the case of Che Guevara) or by regular armies (the case of Cuba's intervention in Angola). The second observation concerns the fact that, since the world was the theatre of a clash between universalisms, the implicit spatiality of the Cold War is in fact the Universal, that is the One rather than the Two: as Schmitt suggested in his *World Unity* (2003), the unity of the world was provided by technical and industrial production, the common base both of capitalism and of communism.



#### 10. *The global space*

The global space is the space of the winners of the cold war, namely liberal-democracy and capitalism.

I) According to its self-representation, this space claims to be smooth, free of obstacles, a space for commodities and markets, rights and democracy to be exported. Qualitative differences, or differences in terms of principle, do not have any right of existence here: neither the difference between nations, nor the difference between the internal and the external space of the State. The enemy and the criminal are equivalent, and as a consequence there are not wars anymore, but rather police operations aimed at providing protection. Law rules the world, at least theoretically: the *nomos* of the Earth is composed by the principles of universal democracy and universal human rights, the United Nations with their “responsibility to protect” and a universal exchange, the *lex mercatoria*, which overcomes the spatial streaks produced by post-sovereign States. The symbols of this universalism – which is the extreme heir of modern rationalism – are the “world wide web” and finance: these forces treat the space according to modern logics, as if it was completely at their disposal, and tend to turn it from universal to virtual. This means, as Sloterdijk suggests, to create a type of space that is artificial in itself and that

is meant to take the place of both the space of nature and the one of modern metaphysics centered on the subject (Sloterdijk 1998–2004).

II) Actually, the global space is a chaotic and a paradoxical *space*, but also a paradoxical *time*. There are two reasons for this. First, each point is immediately in contact with the whole (the so called *globalism*): there are no more filters and intermediate spaces, everything can happen everywhere, anytime, and what happens in one spot immediately produces consequences in every other place on earth. This is the case both of terrorism and of financial operations. Second, the global space is a discontinuous and hierarchical space, though hierarchies are not rigid or fixed: there are different positions and configurations within the system of global capitalism. On one side we find the superpowers – the United States, China, the European Union – trying to articulate concurrent Great Spaces, all of them open rather than closed. On the other side, new States are approaching the world scene (the so called BRICS) while failed States become a field of struggle between the US and China. All these spaces are crisscrossed by different forces: on the one hand, masses of migrants that are expelled by the borders of failed States – according to logics clearly explained in Saskia Sassen’s latest book (2014), and then dispersed around

the world as a living sign of contradictions, caught within new border spaces of struggle, as Mezzadra and Neilson suggest (2013); on the other hand these spaces become the scene of new and troubling “remote wars”

- analyzed by Chamayou (2013)
- fought with drones that overturn the relationship between friend and enemy and its implicit spatiality.

Globalization produces a political

### Conclusions

space crisscrossed by lines even more complex than it is presumed. This leads us to suggest that, in the present, alternative interpretations of the Global are needed. First of all, these alternative interpretations of the Global must concern its genealogy, which should take into the account Atlantic and postcolonial studies and the new geopolitics, i.e. those approaches that show how far the centrality of Europe and political modernity has been based upon a never ending confrontation with non-European anthropological and spatial factors; alternative interpretations, however, must also take into account the problems that globalization forces us to face. These problems can be summarized as follows: the redefinition of the role of post-sovereign State in the context of the Great Spaces according to which global capitalism is articulated; the transformation of the meaning of citi-

zenship; the relationship between settlement and nomadism (a relationship which is much more productive than the one between Empire and multitudes); the role – and the reciprocal difference – between *edges* and *boundaries*, between *borders* and *frontiers*. Lastly, it is necessary to deconstruct the abstract universalism of global spatiality so to expose the manifold lines of power, both new and old, which constitute it (the line of gender, linked with that of religion, remains crucial). At the same time, it is necessary to avoid the nostalgia for frontiers, identities and close spaces, like the one of Debray (2010). This research program shows that the dimension of space is decisive both for a genealogical critique of the Modern, and for a political critique of the Global. This critique is nothing more than a “cartography of the present”.

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