

# The Crisis of Political Space

---

Toni Negri

*translated by Ed Emery*

When people use the notion of a "New World Order", they are bringing into a single frame three powerful concepts: order, world-scale globalisation and the newness of the relations established between them.

This new connectedness of "world" and "order" seems to constitute a *new paradigm*, in other words a new way of arranging political power and the physical space of the world. In order to understand this new coming-together, we therefore need first to think about these concepts – to establish what they used to mean, and what is the crisis of the former ways in which they were connected; and then we will need to penetrate to the originality of the new connection, and its dynamics. At that moment we will perhaps be in a position to understand the depth of the change that has taken place.

Let us begin with the concept of *order*. In the modern era, the concept of social and political order is very close to the concept of *sovereignty* – a territorial sovereignty which only with the passage of time becomes "national sovereignty". Thus we need to examine the concept of sovereignty and that of national sovereignty separately.

The concept of sovereignty is a concept of a power that has nothing above it. It is a secular conception of power, opposed to any notion of a power based outside its own dynamic. It is thus an absolute *quoad titulum* in reference to its source. However, when one considers it in its exercise *quoad exercitium* the concept of sovereignty is rather a singular concept. This in no sense diminishes its character of absoluteness, but it is precisely in singularity that sovereignty is exercised. Modern sovereignty is singularised by virtue of the fact that it is exercised over a territory, and in relation to a people or peoples. International law is founded on this singularity *jus gentium*, or, better, the right of sovereigns, which originally consisted in resolving conflicts between sovereign singularities by means of pacts. "By means of pacts", and thus a right that is absolutely weakened, an exchange rather than a juridical contract or administration. But the concept of sovereignty is not singularised only in relation to the exterior: it is also singularised domestically, where it presents itself as a concept of *legitimation*, or as a relation between power and its subjects. Or, better, as an interrelation with subjects. Modern sovereignty may be a power which has nothing above it, but it has a lot of things below it. In particular it has below it a

space (a territory) and a multitude (the citizenry). The legitimation, to put it in Weberian terms, may take various forms (traditional, charismatic, legal/rational); in all cases it is a relationship between sovereign and subjects – a relationship within which there exists jointly both the expression of authority and the obedience (and/or disobedience) of the subjects.

Thus a living and inhabited space is found at the basis of modern citizenship. Order is the result of an activity of government which meets acceptance and/or passivity among a given group of citizens over the extent of a territory. In this perspective, sovereignty as order becomes *administration*; in other words, sovereignty organises itself as a machinery of authority which extends through and structures territory. Through the activity of administration, territory is organised, and structures of authority are extended through it. Increasingly within the dynamics of modern sovereignty, the connection between administration and territory becomes intimate and full. The nature of the economic regime (mercantilist or liberalist) matters little; the nature of the political regime (absolutist, aristocratic or popular) also matters little. Space finds itself absorbed into the scenarios of sovereignty in ways that are increasingly coherent, and each particularity is structured by the whole in a progressively irresistible manner.

It takes the concept of nation a while before it combines with that of sovereignty. National sovereignty, at the start of the nineteenth century, was not in opposition to sovereignty; rather it perfected the modern concept of sovereignty. It is a powerful specification of sovereignty, which exalts the connection between sovereign and subjects, and at the same time the potency of the whole. This double operation is possible because the nation state presents itself as a self-sufficient cultural, ethnic and economic entity within which the spiritual element overdetermines the sum of its determinations. The process of legitimation is hypostasized in nature and/or in the spirit. Between Sieyes and Novalis, between Fichte and Mazzini, between Hegel and Hertzler, the concept of nation spiritualises that of sovereignty, and makes the space of sovereignty an absolute entity. In the concept of national sovereignty, territory and people are like two attributes of one same substance, and government is the relation which consecrates this unity. The modern concept of sovereignty, in its close relationship to territory, is carried to extreme consequences.

Modern politics – or again the sovereign – is thus a figure which assembles into an absolute different aspects of social life: a people, a territory, an authority. The concept of sovereign power becomes all the stronger as its aspects are unified and overdetermined within the continuous historical development of modern sovereignty. This process of absolutisation and intensification of relations is also at the root of the concept of *democratic sovereignty*. Democratic sovereignty integrates territory *qua* space of the life of a people. Legitimation, in this case, seeks to be dialectical. Administration becomes bio-politics. The Welfare State, the *État-providence* and the *Sozialstaat*, are figures of perfected sovereignty, in a progressive and uninterrupted continuity which seems to complete the anthropological process of the sedentarisation of hordes,

to the point where it configures within a given space the global time of social life.

So, from an external point of view, sovereignty is characterised by a monopoly of legitimate physical force; by the exclusive ability to mint the social norms of exchange for reproduction (money); by the singular structuring of the forms of communication (national language, education system, etc); by the democratic (biopolitical) definition of legitimation. **It is an absolute process of territorialisation.**

Modern sovereign states have, in the course of the centuries of their hegemony, exported their absolute power outside of the territories they had originally integrated and moulded within the rules of domination. *Imperialism* (as also colonialism) consisted of occupying zones of the world, and exploiting peoples to whom was denied, by this means, the possibility of acceding to territorial or national sovereignty. In the territories of imperialism, order, legitimation and administration are not auto-centred, but are functional to and dependent on the imperialist state.

Thus far we have posed a number of premises enabling us to get the measure of the *earthquake* which is today shaking the old paradigm of sovereign order. An earthquake which touches all the elements of the old order, and which has created *open conjunctures* wherein many hypotheses exist side by side, and in which one can identify a number of tendencies at work. The changes under way are so profound and extensive that we are not yet in a position to identify directions of development with certainty; they do, however, permit – in fact they demand – new parameters of analysis.

Today the first element that is obvious is that this earthquake is *detritorialising*. It shakes the old paradigm of order in its most intimate aspect: the relation to space, the progression towards a space that is increasingly organised. The paradigm of order is forced to come to terms with a space which lacks traditional determinations – or worse, a space that is limitless. There are three elements which should permit us to define this breakdown and provide an approach to a new power scenario. These are: *the bomb, money, and the ether*.

## The Bomb

The development of nuclear technologies is one of the elements that has laid the basis for the present earthquake. It is to this development that we owe the reign of terror which has maintained stability over the "thirty glorious years" of Keynesian development; but more particularly we owe to the bomb the extension of the notion of *limited sovereignty* to the great majority of countries of the world. A monopoly of legitimate physical force – this was one of the original qualifications of sovereignty. Today this qualification, which once included the ability to declare war, no longer belongs to the great majority of states. Major wars begin to become unthinkable; not, however, small wars, limited conflicts, international policing operations, civil wars, dirty wars, guerrilla wars, etc, etc. It was within this perspective that the bomb first appeared, as Günther Anders was already pointing out in the 1950s: it was the

operation of a violence that was absolute, a new metaphysical horizon which deprived sovereignty of its own territory and denied resistance the possibility of action.

And yet this dialectic of deterritorialisation finds – or rather could find – a limit in *imperial hegemony*, or in the necessity of imposing a new order, of imposing a new territorialisation on growing processes of deterritorialisation.

*Is this new hegemonic pole really in the process of formation?* The conditions for it are there: however this does not mean that this new hegemonic pole necessarily has to emerge as a sovereign continuity of the old order (the USA, for example); it might instead be made up of an ensemble of international powers and organisations. The game is on, and bets – and hypotheses – are being placed on which tendency will eventually win.

In any event – and this is the element that I want to stress – the sovereign monopoly of legitimate physical force (which is one of the key characteristics of the modern concept of sovereignty), is here completely sidelined. Even in a scenario where world hegemony was conquered by an old power (the USA, for example), the content of *its* sovereignty would have to be completely and radically requalified: the worldwide extension of domination modifies the form of that domination. Imperial sovereignty presents itself as a *nuclear territorialisation of a universal deterritorialisation*: here we have a useful initial definition of imperial hegemony.

## Money

The construction of the *world market* is a second element of the earthquake which we are experiencing. This has involved, in the first place, a monetary deconstruction of national markets, and of national and/or regional contexts of monetary regulation. All this began between 1971 and 1973, when the USA detached gold from the dollar and ended convertibility, thus putting an end to a long period of fixed exchange rates. The end of Bretton Woods. The consequence of this was very soon revealed in the highly aleatory nature of the markets, in which monetary relations found themselves subordinated to movements of *financial powers*. In this situation national *money* tends to lose all characteristics of sovereignty. Even the dollar, which seemed to have taken on a role as a measure or "standard" of the other moneys, becomes increasingly subordinated to the financial markets. And this, paradoxically, becomes obvious with the fall of the Berlin Wall, in other words from the moment in which – the Cold War having been won – the USA finds itself deprived of *command rent* by its allies. A national money, with the characteristics which it had during the period of modernity, is inconceivable today. At this level too, the process of globalisation becomes a very powerful agent of radical transformation. With a series of dramatic consequences:

1. The impossibility of monetary regulation at the national level – whether in Keynesian, or simply monetarist, terms;

2. The definitive undermining of all processes of welfarist intervention at the national level, and the crisis of democratic sovereignty which derives from that fact;

3. The push towards the construction of regional and multinational organisations/groupings, with the aim of building a relative resistance to the powers of finance and speculation, and thus to create new possibilities (illusions) for planning their own future;

4. The erratic emergence, in the chiaroscuro of the crisis, of certain currencies (dollar, Deutschmark, yen...) as *imperial moneys*. Here too, while modern sovereignty is becoming increasingly *residual*, and the process of global deterritorialisation progresses with the construction of the world market, there is a hint of a new possibility of *territorialisation*, which is *unilateral* – not constructed on monetary values, obviously, but solely on political values. Is this possible? What are the real alternatives (and in what forms, and within what time-scale) to the affirmation of the dollar (or of other currencies) as imperial money?

### The Ether

The fixing of language and defence of that language, the construction of an educational system, and the protection of culture now more than ever are the substance of sovereign prerogatives. However from now on all this is dissolved in the airwaves. Modern systems of communication are not subordinated to sovereignty: quite the contrary, sovereignty is subordinated to communication.

In the field of communication, the paradoxes implied in the dissolution of territorial and/or national sovereignty, and by the breakdown in the singularised relationship between order and space, are taken to extremes. In fact communication's capacity for deterritorialisation is wholly original; it no longer merely limits or weakens modern sovereignty; it removes even the possibility of a link between a given order and a given space. Except... within the complete *circularity* of signs and the indefatigable continuity of that circularity. From this there derives a conception of territory as "*circulatory territory*" and therefore the impossibility of singularising the relationship of order to territory. Deterritorialisation is the *primum*; circulation is the form in which it unstoppably manifests itself; and thus in the ether languages become functional to circulation and dissolve all relations of sovereignty. As for education and culture, they have no choice but to subject themselves to the "society of the spectacle".

In this experience we reach an outer limit in the dissolution of the relationship between order and space: henceforth we can only view this relationship within *an other place* – an "elsewhere" which is original in being uncontainable within the articulation of the sovereign act.

The space of communication is completely deterritorialised. It is absolutely other, in relation to the residual spaces that we have identified in analysing the crisis of the the monopoly of legitimate physical force, and that of the definition of monetary measure. What we have here is not

a residue, but a *metamorphosis*: a metamorphosis of all the elements of political economy and theory of the State, which derives from the fact that we have entered a phase of *real subsumption* of society within capital. In other words, communication is the form of the capitalist process of production at the point where capital has conquered and subjected to itself the whole of society, in real terms, globally, by suppressing any margins of alternative: if ever an alternative is to be proposed, this will have to be done through the intermediary of the society of real subsumption, and it will have to be constructed within it, playing up new contradictions. The alternative will be posed within the "new", in fact within the "very new".

The imperial tendency is also operational within the ether. Once again this tendency is seen at first sight in the continued existence of *American power* and in its expansion. The space which is being created with this breakdown of relations of sovereignty is very often American. However in none of the situations which we have examined is the reference to the function of imperial reterritorialisation more unstable than here. Unlike what is happening on the terrains of force and money, communication is actually a relation of production, involving the development of capital and, at the same time, a transformation of the forces of production. This dynamic produces a powerfully open situation in which American power comes into confrontation with the power of social subjects – of all those who are increasingly actively involved in the interactive production of communication. In this place more than any other, which is a place of circulation, imperial domination over the new forms of production/communication has proved to be uncertain.

The earthquake which has destroyed territorial and/or national sovereignty is thus deep and thorough-going. The space of politics becomes undefinable, and within it we can no longer count on the functioning of dialectical connections, or even simply of functional connections. In the formal subsumption of world space to capital there still existed intermediations which offered points of reference to given biopolitical processes. Today we can consider the Fordist period as having been a phase of transition (from formal subsumption to real subsumption) within which, little by little, all determinations tend to be erased. We find ourselves looking at a space which is smooth, with occasionally a few variously striated zones, a space that is unified, and periodically identifiable by the hierarchies which run through it; a space that is invested by a continuous circulatory movement, within which one can occasionally perceive resistances. Or, again, to put it in another way, we are living in a universal suburb, characterised by variations of speed – sometimes one can identify centres, on this desolate horizon, maybe one, maybe many, but at any event what we have here is a power which invests a new space, a *new power*.

Obviously, our problem is to decide whether this new space is in the process of being organised, and if it is, then we must describe how. How is this new deterritorialisation expressing itself in terms of administration. I do not necessarily think that it is possible to advance more broadly in this direction. But it would nevertheless be useful to pose a number of premises, or, rather, to anticipate an ideal type which might

enable clarification of the road to be followed. The *ideal type of empire* could be useful to us. It is radically different from the concept of imperialism (which consisted, as we have seen, in a specification of sovereignty) because the space of empire is without preconstituted determinations; it is a centre which is dislocated over numbers of terrains, and which circulates without finding obstacles. Within a unified world-space, individual states combine within fluxes and networks that are always in movement; countries exist in a context in which *peace* is guaranteed by a permanent and effective policy of international policing. When this breaks down, conflicts are isolated. In all cases, the sovereign characteristics of single states are weakened and recomposed within collective functions of the market and the organisation of communication and policing.

*Post-modern ideologies* have made much of the weakening of the characteristics of sovereignty. They have also, and by the same token, made much of the new dimensions of the fragmentary, the local, and the particular, and the emergences of new identities (which here and there break the flat surface of postmodernity). In my view these descriptions are not sufficient for providing an understanding of the fundamental nature of the empire: this consists of moving beyond mere manifestation of the fragmentary and the complex, into organising in a unitary manner within the fragmentary, within the complex, within the intermingling and control of identities. Postmodern ideologies have made great play with a given situation of which, up until now, they have not perceived the new structuring dynamic.

It was Foucault and Deleuze who best grasped the figure of empire (considered here solely from the point of view of the construction of an ideal type). The threefold model which they propose for the evolution of the political regimes of modernity (from "*ancien regime* society" to "disciplinary society", to "control society") identifies the dynamic of weakening sovereignty within the transition from disciplinary society to the control society – not as something evanescent, but quite the contrary, as modernisation and optimisation. "Control society" is the framework within which imperial power is deployed. In raising the summit of command to an enormously high level, the possibility of mediations in the resolution of conflicts and therefore the dynamic requalification of all particularities within the process of power, becomes very much greater. Force and discipline are thus included within politics of control.

But let us now take a look at the model of empire which Polybius constructed. The Roman empire, we are told by this Greek intellectual who lived in Rome, was a synthesis of the three forms of government defined by classical antiquity: the empire was monarchic with the emperor, aristocratic in the Senate, and democratic-republican in its tribune functions. And what about today? Is what we are seeing in the organisation of a new imperial power once again Polybius's threefold model? Perhaps. A definitive monarchic centre, the exclusive holder of force, has not yet emerged, although one can say that it is increasingly identifiable in tendency. But the two other aspects of the model required by the imperial synthesis are there: on the one hand the financial

aristocracy and the discipline which it imposes on substantial fractions of overall labour power at the worldwde level; and also the republican power of control, or that disciplinary reflex which is embodied in what is left of the single national states, and which is increasingly represented in a contractual role in relation to the imperial authority.

The empire is thus there, just around the corner, waiting for us inexorably, as something which is already in place. As a political philosophy, post-modernity has been a warning sign telling of empire – sad and inadequate, but effective.

Far stronger and more real are the warning signs that are etched in the crises and the temporary pauses of the constitutive process of empire. Where are they to be seen? Essentially in conflicts between orders of values and in contradictions between procedures. *Increasingly strong hybridisations* become apparent when we consider the space of the proper and the improper, of the economic and the political, of the legal and the illegal, and when the traditional considerations of law and the social (not forgetting the moral) comes up against the spatial opening-up of empire. In the lives of states and communities a large part of public activity is henceforth devoted to the resolution of these conflicts, to the recomposition of the procedures which govern them, and thus to the "management" of these hybrid spaces.

We clearly have to ask whether the life of empire – in this, which would be its first real form – rather than being invoked for the solution of major international conflicts, should not here be invoked to deal with the individual conflicts affecting the material aspects of the existence of peoples and nations.

This now brings me to my final formulation. For me it is so fundamental that I would be very happy if it found an equal footing in everything that I have said so far, even in reductive fashion – because it is no less essential. My conclusion is the following: the breakdown of the modern relation between order and space is a radical rupture, the sign of a mutation of paradigm. What this rupture presents to critical thought and action is *a new transcendental of the political*. When politics is looked at within the dimension of empire, one can no longer conceive it in the dimension of single national spaces. From now on, concepts of politics, sovereignty, legitimation, administration etc are completely thrown into question – they certainly go into crisis, they may be subject to re-arrangement, but in the long term they are also open to overthrow and subversion, because they no longer have any relation to the old paradigm of national, international, territorial and cosmopolitical order. Today the multinational level is played out within a space that is quasi-national. There are no alternatives to the verticality of the new imperial power – the only alternatives are in who will actually own imperial power (will it be the USA or a conglomerate of different sovereign states that will take power over the empire?), or in the games that might be played in terms of transversality. In any event we are already right in there. We are citizens of this world which is preparing to make public its new international organisation – in other words *the imperial nature of the relations of domination*. Whether or not one agrees with this development, we must necessarily view it as inevitable, and we will have



to recognise that many of the contradictions which democratic action has experienced hitherto are going to reproduce themselves on terrains that are infinitely more complex. From now on power can only be looked at from within the framework of this new political transcendental.