

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/11/04/order-and-change-in-global-politics-assessing-the-return-of-geopolitics/>

ROBERTO ORSI, NOV 4 2014

The unfolding global international predicament, with a *crescendo* of tensions in recent months, has prompted a more upfront reflection on the kind of international order currently prevalent and what future order appears as desirable.

Contours of the Debate

In a piece published by *Foreign Affairs* entitled “The Return of Geopolitics: the Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” Walter R. Mead (Mead, 2014) has articulated the view that, after a long interval following the end of the Cold War, the post-historical condition described by Francis Fukuyama in his famous book *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama, 1992) may be over for good. That post-historical condition entailed the dissolution of all major ideological conflicts, and consequently of major geopolitical struggles for the control of the planet, as mankind stepped firmly and irreversibly on the path of liberal representative democracy and free market capitalism. Professor Mead argues that both Russia and China, the two large illiberal powers, are now “pushing back against the political settlement of the Cold War.” Consequently, a new confrontation between great powers is looming, in the pretty familiar fashion of conflict over land, sea lanes, the control of continental masses and possibly the oceans. Russia and China are depicted as revisionist powers, whose march towards the final stage of liberal democracy and capitalistic economy can be long and tortuous, while in the meantime “such figures as Putin still stride the world stage.”

John Ikenberry (Ikenberry, 2014) has formulated a vehement reply to Mead’s piece, describing the latter’s view as one grounded “on a colossal misreading of modern power realities.” According to Professor Ikenberry, “the logic and character of the existing world order” is not at all what described by Mead, and it entails a much more deep-rooted dimension which geopolitical rivalries, and even the occasional success of an illiberal power, cannot shake. Thus, “China and Russia, which are not full-scale revisionist powers but part-time spoilers at best,” do not constitute a credible threat to the liberal order nearly encircling them both, but they represent exceptions which will probably, in due course, be absorbed by the global, all-encompassing, US-led order – albeit perhaps with unpredictable twists and turns – made of liberal democracies (which have spread nearly everywhere) and globalised capitalism. Furthermore, Mead seems to attribute to the US leadership a lack of attention to geopolitical questions during the 1991-2014 period, as Washington was caught in an ideological dream of global order. Ikenberry rejects this by arguing instead how the dichotomy between geopolitics and global liberal (and hence, “value-based”) order is an incorrect formulation of the question. Instead, geopolitics has never abandoned the scene, as the construction of a liberal order was enhanced precisely against the background of the concern for restraining great power geopolitical competition. Reconstructing the history of US foreign policy in the last hundred years, Ikenberry stresses the remarkable achievement of an international order relying on a US-centred system of alliance, a US-centred system of global liberal, rule-based, democratic governance system, and a US-centred capitalistic economic system, in a line of essential continuity between Woodrow Wilson, FD Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama.

To a European reader, it appears, however, that the scope of such an intensely American debate could somehow be broadened. The starting point can be precisely the reference to Hegel who, from Fukuyama’s unfortunate “end of history” argument, has travelled to the pages of today’s reviews of US foreign policy. The purpose of this article is therefore to explore the issues of global order and geopolitics by explicitly embracing the idea that such topic

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

certainly requires a background philosophical reflection, and by highlighting the problems entailed by the still tenaciously resistant, implicit or explicit, Fukuyama-induced reading of history. In the conviction that it would be extremely difficult to grasp an alternative reading of geopolitics to those advanced mostly by US scholars without a previous discussion of its philosophical underpinnings, this article offers a different reading of Hegel's work, suggesting that, while the German philosopher may continue to be one of the leading sources of inspiration to understand the current epoch, contemporary readers should perhaps concentrate more on his dialectical logic rather than on a problematic interpretation of his philosophy of history. The second half of this piece sketches a picture of the global political situation, its probable trajectories and outstanding questions, precisely by recurring to dialectical logic, and offers consequently an alternative assessment of the geopolitical question.

There Is No Hegelian Futurology

It is remarkable that the Hegelian revival in international studies of the past two decades has picked on arguably one of the weakest elements in the interpretation of his philosophy of history – namely the teleology aimed at the enhancement of world's spirit (*Weltgeist*). Particularly problematic is the idea that the human enterprise is ultimately bound to reach a final stage of immobilism, a *nirvana* of perfect happiness, under the sign of liberal-democracy and global capitalism. As it shall be sketched below, Hegel re-elaborated the concept of progress and worked intensely on history and its meaning, but never ventured in any form of futurology, however sophisticated. On the contrary, he famously stated that philosophy is like the owl, which flies at the end of the day, indicating that reflection on history is meaningful only *ex post*. (Hegel, 1911 [1811]: 17).

Concerning the use of Hegel and its related questions, one of the main points of the whole of Hegel's philosophy is his *ante litteram* antifoundationalism. Hegel's great philosophical accomplishment lies in the development of the epistemological image of a world caught in a continuous and tumultuous change. It would be too long to explain here the epistemological debate which formed the context in which Hegel formulated his philosophical system. Recalling the precedent of Heraclitus's principle of perennial change through strife, Hegel points at the *becoming* as the key feature characterising not only human existence, but also the ways in which the human knows, and the way in which knowledge itself is historically constructed. Far from endorsing the hypostatisation of any ontic teleology (i.e. the idea that the final causes of the world are endowed with real existence), from constructing any metaphysical eschatology (namely, a theory of the ultimate destiny and the end of the world based on metaphysical causes), or indeed from attempting any prediction for the future of the world and world politics, Hegel's reflection on history is to be understood as an exercise aimed at the orientation for the purpose of social action of an historically defined actor (and therefore always, in a specific, present-related, context).

The starting point of Hegel lies in his understanding of the human condition as inextricable from the largely pre-existing setting of social institutions in which every human is socialised. The human condition cannot consequently be fully understood if not in its expression of group, collectivity, as a “we,” and of what is constitutive of such human grouping. The concept of spirit (*Geist*) is Hegel's main conceptual device for the development of his philosophical argument. Sometimes erroneously reified as an immanent force independent from human will directing events, the *Geist* is the set of ideas, explicit and implicit, which makes a plurality of individuals a subject capable of action, but eventually also identifies itself with the people, institutions and objects which are the bearers of such ideas.

The spirit, containing the ideas that inform correct judgment and action, is caught in a constant process of change. Therefore, the nature of collective social actors can only be grasped in its historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*). From the viewpoint of the theorist and the philosopher, a reflection on history is produced for the sake of understanding the present human condition. Hegel's philosophical analysis of history is conceived as an enterprise which intends to reflect upon the *Geist* with the aim of uncovering the limits of the contemporary self-understanding.

Given the role of a reflection on history for the sake of expanding the limits of the current *Geist*, any such reflection inevitably considers the present as the highest stage in the development of a given culture, the arrival point of all previous past. This implies also however, that every present, far from being the end of history in the sense of the *terminus ad quem* of historical events, remains open to further change.

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

Recovering Hegel’s Dialectical Logic

The apparent endorsement of a reading of the history of mankind inexorably heading to the affirmation of a certain model of political and economic organisation stems from a rather decontextualised reading of his exercise in assessing history from his specific standpoint (Hegel being a German philosophy professor in the early nineteenth century).

On the point of the “end of history” episode, Hegel is often quoted as pronouncing this phrase while witnessing Napoleon’s victorious entry in Jena following the Prussian army’s defeat in 1806. The young Hegel supported Napoleonic France’s revolutionary ideas, and the struggle between revolution and reaction appeared to him and his contemporaries as the cypher of their generation’s historical vicissitudes. Of course, Hegel never really meant that history ended with Napoleon. After all, the Corsican was eventually defeated in 1812. But it is easily understandable that Napoleon was for the Europeans of his generation the central historical figure of their contemporary era, and that the revolutionary ideas necessarily occupied the centre of intellectual reflection. In general, it is arguably the task of each successive generation to re-assess history for the purpose of social action, picking those threads which appear to be more relevant and substantive for the *Geist* of today.

It should be at this point sufficiently clear why Hegel’s revival on the specific point of the “end of history” has not been particularly fortunate and, unsurprisingly, not terribly productive. Instead of focusing on a use of Hegel centred on a precarious teleological foundationalism, it would be arguably more fruitful to focus on other aspects of the philosopher’s work, primarily his dialectical logic, which contains again the implicit call to overcome the limits of one’s own worldview.

Dialectical logic is the gateway for critical thinking. In the light of dialectical logic, historical change is explained as the clash between conflicting principles (ideas, systems of thoughts), a thesis and an antithesis, whose very interaction as strife and opposition will eventually lead to the *Aufhebung* (variously translated as “overcoming” or “sublation”) of both into a new system. The new system constitutes in turn the thesis of the successive dialectical process (see especially Hegel, 1833: 77-208).

Classically, the opposition between thesis and antithesis takes the form of a paradoxical interdependence, which leads to the overcoming of differences through a fusion of their constitutive elements. So one may read the Cold War as the dialectical opposition between free market capitalism and liberal democracy on one side, and command economy under the rule of communist regimes on the other. Although the communist forces were defeated, the resulting order in terms of the globally prevalent political ideology which emerged from the conflict incorporated numerous instances which were typically endorsed by the Soviet leadership, such as the creation of a system of state-provided minimal social protection and entitlements (from basic housing to education to healthcare, as clearly visible in the welfare system of Western European countries), de-colonisation and self-determination, feminism and secularisation, whereas many of these points (although not all) were initially opposed by the Western camp to a varying degree.

The result has been a far more interconnected world than that of the Cold War era, a world where paradoxical relations of systemic interdependence reveal the extent to which thinking in dialectical terms may be revealing about the nature of the current global order, and the role of geopolitics within it. Such level of constitutive interrelation is perhaps insufficiently underscored by a narrative insisting on a contraposition between liberal-democratic regimes on the one hand, and authoritarian-illiberal dictatorships on the other, focusing primarily on formal-constitutional, legal, diplomatic, and military relations. Below these levels, all of which are certainly to be regarded with the highest consideration, however, lie other relevant elements for the understanding of global order.

In the next sections, some of these elements will be briefly sketched by looking at the complexity of discourses on order and democracy and at the implications for international politics arising from the web of interdependence among international actors. Successively, the options for designing or just simply envisaging some sort of future world order will be explored, emphasizing three main sets of questions. Finally, the problem of geopolitics and its alleged return will be reassessed in the context of the scenario thus sketched.

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

Order and Democracy

The mentioned opposition between liberal democracies on the one hand (i.e. the US and its allies) and illiberal dictatorships (Russia, China, and their allies) on the other does not seem to make full justice of the complexity of the matter. Russia and China have indeed very different political systems: Peking's regime is characterised by a one-party-rule, with heavy censorship, explicit limitation of political freedom enshrined in the law, largely on the model of the old Soviet system. Russia is a different case, as Moscow is ruled by a more heterogeneous group of military and intelligence officials, economic tycoons, regional strongmen, religious leaders, who are tied together by all sorts of arrangements, from personal interests to a shared ideological national pragmatism (*Putinism*) in the framework of a multi-party system of some kind. Indeed, arguments supporting the thesis of why Russia cannot be regarded as a democracy do not have their focus on constitutional forms, but they delve into significantly more complex analyses of the imbalances in the Russian media system, and in the ways in which consensus is created by political leadership. Interestingly, one may notice that major opposition parties in Russia are often more illiberal and authoritarian than Putin's positions, and usually advocate a more adventurous foreign policy.

The solidity of the global liberal order based on the nearly ubiquitous spread of democratic rule is also, upon closer scrutiny, less impressive than it may otherwise seem. One issue concerns the very problem of political order, another the authenticity of democratic rule.

It appears that the current era is witnessing a degradation of the idea of democracy in many ways similar to what was lamented by international jurists a few generations ago regarding the idea of the state. At that time, particularly before WWI, the world was organised in a hierarchy, at whose top were the sovereign states, ruling over a number of other political entities: dominions, protectorates, colonies. What for the jurists characterised the rightful claim to statehood from the part of a certain organised political community was its effective control over a given territory according to the practices of European-style government (stable legal and fiscal systems, control of the borders, courts, bureaucracy, adequate defence capabilities, economic sustainability) and the recognition of such status by other established states. This was in essence the order of Westphalian international law. However, with the admission to the states' club of entities possessing only a number of the above mentioned requirements, the very category of “the state” as international entity has suffered a (rather Hegelian) process of deterioration. This became visible after the admission of the Ottoman Empire to the European system of inter-state relations, but much more in the case of the newly formed Latin American states, or of rather fictitious entities such as the Congo Free State (1885-1908). The era successive to WWI and WWII has seen a huge proliferation of recognised states (currently almost two hundred, not considering a disturbing proliferation of *de facto* states), with a large number of those having little effective control of their allotted territory and people, and a rising proportion of failing or openly failed states. Indeed, the current world contains vast areas which cannot be considered to be in good order, starting from the rather chaotic situation in Mexico and other Central American states (tens of thousands annual casualties related to the drug war, endemic insurgency) down to Colombia, Venezuela, and the Andes region, but especially a large area of “limited statehood” (to translate Thomas Risse's *begrenzte Staatlichkeit*) encompassing a territory stretching from Morocco to Myanmar, from Lampedusa to Cape Town. Even in some ASEAN nations, arguably among the most successful states having emerged from decolonisation, there is a severe lack of statehood (insurgencies in Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines) in some circumscribed areas.

So, in a truly dialectical fashion, as more or less everything can be deemed to be a state, the very concept of state, by ceasing to be discriminatory, becomes meaningless. Now a similar danger is currently affecting the idea of democracy. There is a worrying drift concerning this political-theoretical concept, which has increasingly been enshrined as an object of *unconditional belief*, forgetting about its nature of *form of government*, among a plurality of possible forms of government, for a specific purpose.

Even without the need to recall the Greek theory of democracy, and the complex definition of *demos* as an *organised plurality* of citizens as opposed to the more general *ochlos* (“mob”), even contemporary thinkers have often highlighted how the democratic ordering of a political community cannot transcend any historical, social, economic, even cultural category. Jürgen Habermas, hardly a political extremist, has, for instance, concentrated a relevant part of his work in trying to demonstrate how grounding a theory of democratic rule solely, or in any case overwhelmingly,

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

on abstract reasoning (as typically in legal studies and in the currently prevalent quantitative political science) of rule design under ideal conditions, entails the risk of missing out on vital elements for the effective construction of real-world democratic regimes. In many ways, the quality of established democracies becomes questionable at least when, firstly, the state is not firmly on its feet, as the construction of a working state arguably takes precedence over the establishment of a democracy, as there cannot be a democracy without a state, namely a democracy in chaos. As highlighted above, the quality of many democratic regimes, or regimes which are defined in those terms by the prevalent opinion, often endorsed by the press, in areas of widespread security instability, is questionable.

Furthermore, at least since Aristotle, any meaningful conceptualisation of democratic rule (indeed, of any political system) has reflected on the material conditions forming the core of the citizenry's livelihood and of the hierarchy among citizens derived from economic relations. From Aristotle to Habermas and beyond, there seems to be a general agreement that a true democracy has to entail the assurance of the citizen's freedom also by means of an equitable distribution of economic resources in terms of property of the factors of production, without excessive concentration in the hands of few and the reduction of the rest to subsistence of little more. As an indebted citizen, or one struggling to make ends meet, cannot be deemed to be truly free, so consequently the quality of democracies in areas where not only economic inequality, but dire poverty to the point of limited access to food, water, and basic necessities for human life are widespread, is questionable.

Besides the problem of material conditions, democracy as a form of government may not be able to function, as rather clearly shown in the bitter disappointment of state- and democracy-building in Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, in areas where particular societal and cultural forms (such as tribalism) are prevalent.

However, it also emerges that the quality of established democracies is in decline in the Western world as well. One issue is clearly the shrinking of the middle class coupled with the limited levels of social mobility, reflected in the broader discussion of growing inequality, phenomena which appear to be in a paradoxical relation with Western success in the Cold War, and the consequent globalisation process.

Other problems are more substantially related to questions of political culture. Returning to Hegel's point, a reflection on the history of the most recent time, a reflection on the constitutive terms of today's *Geist* as the spirit of the current forms of socialisation and *Sittlichkeit*, may point to the degradation of the possibility of authentic forms of *communal life* in the face of individualistic atomisation, political apathy, and anomie.

Philosophers and political theorists have wrestled with the problem of finding the correct balance between direct participation and representation (but in what modes?), struggling to transpose the ancient concept of democracy as it appeared in the Greek *polis* with its few thousands citizens living in a *thick* civic and religious *ethos*, in political realities with millions or hundreds of million people. From a European perspective, the growing debate about the limits of representation in the face of an increasingly self-asserting, self-referencing bureaucratic rule from institutional figures and political party *apparatchiki* is an ominous signal that the Western world may be rapidly shifting towards what Habermas calls *post-democracy* (Habermas, 2011). In certain European nations, such as Italy or Greece, the term *kleptocracy* does not appear to be an entirely inadequate description of the political situation. Habermas has been very attentive to the crisis in the quality of communal life since the very start of his theoretical work about the “public sphere” on the vital link between open forms of communication enabling the sound functioning of civil society, and democratic institutions, denouncing the dangers to democracy coming from the sheer logic of power and money which animates, as already pointed out by Weber, the work of the bureaucrat and of the market operator.

A further element underscoring the above illustrated crisis of democracy belongs to a more fundamental question of politics. Philosophical reflections on how to organise political life under a defined form of government do not stem from the sheer need of ways to organise human communities, but all political systems have been theoretically devised with the aim of making a given community *thrive*.

In *The Republic* (*De re publica*, II.372), the Platonic Socrates is attacked by Glaucon with the sharp remark that he, by initially prospecting a rather rustic state in which people should content themselves with very little and live in

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

simplicity, has imagined a “state of pigs” (καὶ ὅς, εἰ δὲ ὑὼν πόλιν, ὃ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, κατεσκεύαζες, τί ἂν αὐτὰς ἄλλο ἢ ταῦτα ἐχόρταζες;). Since then, philosophical political reflection has focused on the incorporation and direction of human *ambitions*, also in the conviction that decline and decadence cannot yield a significantly better life for the overwhelming majority of the members of a community. Even more, the revival of popular sovereignty theories in the direction of the democratic constitution from the early modern period has arguably been animated by the idea that self-rule and freedom enhance the general condition of the state in all its aspects, making it more influential on the international stage as well. In other words, democracy is supposed to make a nation *rise*. This has been historically true in a number of cases. However, in more recent decades, established democratic regimes appear to be overseeing the long term decline, if not of the liquidation, of their own countries. This is clearly visible in Italy and other Southern European states, although even in Germany the projections for the future international relevance of the country indicate a rather steep deterioration, primarily as consequence of demographic issues, which are in turn also symptoms of suboptimal forms of socialisation and fear of the future. While this does not affect the theoretical worth of the democratic ideal, it should raise doubts about its actual implementations. Democracy is not supposed to produce the long term decline of a country, but its rise. As a rule of thumb, if a country is not obviously rising, it is in decline. If this happens, something must be reconsidered in investigating the functioning of such polity.

Interdependence

Coming back to the advantages of thinking in terms of dialectical logic about international politics, the search for patterns of interdependence can shed light on unsuspected relations between opposed poles, as in Hegel’s famous master and slave interaction (Hegel, 1907 [1807]: 127-131).

The above summarised discussion on the return of geopolitics appears in this respect mostly focused on the institutional-legal-diplomatic side of international politics, but today’s international politics also contains unprecedented levels of interdependence and interconnectedness. As any Western consumer entering a shopping mall can see, the sheer amount of goods manufactured in the authoritarian nations of the East is proof enough that most of the planet lives in the same economic system, although declined in different ways in different parts of the world. Even without embracing the Marxist claim about the relations of production being the key to understand all politics, the economy cannot entirely be left outside the scope of a discussion on world order, particularly when, after the end of Cold War, the currently “globalised” order is based precisely on the idea of tying all the countries and peoples in the same economic system.

In the last two decades, the world has rapidly moved from the expansion of the Western capitalistic system into the virgin lands of post-communist nations, to the current arrangement, which relies *systematically* on China and Russia as integral constitutive components of the global economy, without which, purely and simply, the system would not be able to function.

China’s initial supply of cheap labour has allowed the reconstruction of global production chains away from unionised Western workers, who had managed to extract “exorbitant privileges” during the Cold War period. In a second phase, with a dramatic acceleration from the early 2000s, China has become the main centre of industrial growth for the global economy, emerging as the largest market in terms of material goods being produced and consumed, and the largest importer/consumer of commodities and raw materials worldwide. China has also emerged as the number one trading partner not only of practically all East Asian nations, but also of many South American, Middle Eastern, and African countries. As a consequence, what happens to the demand from China, and to the dynamics of Chinese economy, is now more important than what happens in most of the Western world for a vast number of economic operators worldwide.

Russia, on the other hand, has managed to avert the complete annihilation prospected by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his *The Great Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Brzezinski, 1998), and has at least partially re-emerged as a great power from the mid 2000s onwards, assuming the role of key energy producer and exporter, but also becoming a vast market for (especially) European industries and investments.

Within this picture, the view that Russia and China are in essence outsiders to the global system of international

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

relations, whose contribution to international order can be ranked as minimal, and their conduct equated to the status of “free riders” in the face of the provision of “public goods” coming from liberal states (primarily from the US), appears to be problematic. In a truly dialectical fashion, it is not impossible to see to what extent the economic growth of authoritarian states depends on the consumption propensity of liberal nations, but conversely, without the constant flow of what dozens of millions workers produce in China for the Western consumer, the latter would have his standard of living severely curtailed as wages in the Western world, especially in the US, have been constantly falling over the last few decades in real terms. More generally, because economic growth in the last decade or so has mostly come from China, it also emerges that the stability of liberal political regimes, old and recent, which involves necessarily at least a modicum of economic prosperity, rests partially on the authoritarianism of the East (not to mention the strategic importance of Russia as global energy supplier). This is further reinforced by the direct flow of investments which China and to a certain extent Russia pour into the global economy either directly or through the financial system. China is notoriously the largest or second largest foreign creditor of the US. While this kind of contribution may not be regarded as “public good” according to the institutional view of international political science, it would be difficult to deny that economic activity in authoritarian countries constitutes a key pillar for the stabilisation of the current global order. This has important implications from a foreign policy perspective.

Contrary to the Cold War era, in such an interconnected world, as shown in the case of the economic sanctions imposed by some Western countries to Russia upon its annexation of Crimea, measures of this kind have become of very little use, and entail costs which affect the promoters of sanctions as much as the target nation. On the other hand, global interdependence to the current level has generated extremely complex and equally fragile trans-border production chains, which are dangerously exposed to geopolitical risks. This is not only true for the obvious case of oil shipments from the Persian Gulf, but most notably for the South and East China sea, the most trafficked seas in the world: a however limited naval conflict in the region and the consequent disruption of shipping would have an unfathomable impact on the global economy. From a strategic viewpoint indeed, the sheer concentration of industrial capability in one region of the world has not been a particularly far-sighted idea.

Three Perspectives for the Future of World Order

Visions of world order do not emerge out of nowhere, but they constitute responses to urgent questions pertaining the future of political communities, according to a hierarchy of perceived priorities. The establishment of such hierarchy immediately depends on how the current situation in its historical evolution up to the present point is evaluated. As it has been illustrated, Hegel envisaged the evolution of the idea of the human person and its freedom in his reflection on history as the central thread for the purpose of social action.

Of course, this does not mean that, even at Hegel's time, there were no alternative threads for the reconstruction of past history and for the orientation of action. In the same way, in the current world political landscape there are at least three different sets of questions, descending from an equal number of historical interpretations, which point to different trajectories in the future, leading to different visions of world order, and possibly to three very different conceptions of order itself.

One set of questions is concerned with the creation of a working economic order. At the present moment, even bracketing radical forms of critique of capitalism, there is uncertainty regarding how much the current global economic architecture may be considered stable, and desirable. The unprecedented era of economic expansion which has followed the onset of the present wave of globalisation in the late 1990s, culminated in an arguably unique moment of synchronised global expansion in the period 2004-2007, seems to have come to a close. Precisely with reference to that expansion, many elements point to its speculative and provisional nature based on excessive accumulation of debt, and on the excessive weight of financial activities in the Western economies within the context of rampant deindustrialisation. To that, the above mentioned issue of inequality looms prominent, together with the chronic problem of underdevelopment in most countries in the world. A more politically important question in the immediate future will be the pressing matter of reaching some sort of international agreement on monetary policies, namely in the form of a new monetary system. Colossal extraordinary measures of quantitative easing, debt monetization, and multiple years of zero-interest-rate policies following the meltdown in 2008-2009 have profoundly altered the nature of money for the sake of avoiding the collapse of financial institutions and states. As indicated by

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, the world may be in need of a new Bretton Woods (Volcker, 2014). While this certainly sounds sensitive, in an historical perspective any monetary order has almost invariably depended on the acceptance of a *de facto* hierarchy of power, usually emerging as the outcome of a major war. It is uncertain to what extent states and non-state actors can explicitly agree on a shared reform project of monetary and economic order, and the prospect of a more chaotic evolution of the matter appears probable.

A second set of questions focuses on the future of historically defined human collectivities, such as the nation, in the face of globalisation as a process of rapid collective identity disintegration and/or geographical dislocation. This set of questions arises out of the concern for the preservation, transmission, and enrichment of the complex symbolic environments in which membership of a given political community has been traditionally articulated. While this concern seems to occupy a primary position in more conservative societies and leadership groups (such as in the Muslim world, but also in Russia and other Central European states, in numerous sectors of the Indian society, with China trying to re-construct some sort of national identity of its own), it now looks increasingly prominent also in Western Europe, with the rise of movements critical of identity loss, both at national and regional levels (UKIP – “we want our country back” – in Britain, *Front National* in France, but also Scottish and Catalan independence movements), and in Israel.

A third set of questions concerns the relation between the human species and the environment. For many centuries, reflections on politics and the nature of human economic activities seldom considered environmental concerns, if not at a local level. The scale of the human population and the limited technological ability to harness and exploit the environment made such preoccupations unnecessary. However, the situation has drastically changed over the course of the last two centuries. On the one hand, the human population has exploded from one to today’s seven billion people, with projections of ten billions by the end of this century. On the other, the technological capability for the mobilisation of natural resources has grown exponentially, implying that anthropic activities are now severely affecting every single habitat and all forms of life. Two threats emerge from this situation. One is constituted by the sheer level of damage inflicted on the world’s ecosystems: climate change, loss of biodiversity, toxicisation of the planet, deforestation, and so on. The other is the continuous reliance of the current technological civilisation on relatively scarce raw materials and resources in the face of surging consumption, especially with regard to fossil fuels (still constituting over 80% of total energy generation and consumption), fresh water, and soil. So while at the moment it appears that the task of sustaining the life of today’s global population is successful, scientific communities are articulating the concern that such an achievement may be the result of over-exploitation of limited resources, which are bound to decline rather rapidly within the temporal horizon of the next few decades (Ehrlich, 2012).

The relations between these three perspectives are complex, and possible solutions may often present dilemmas or trilemmas implying difficult choices, including the acceptance of a significant degree of detriment affecting elements which are conceptualised as expressions of untouchable values in today’s dominant political cultures, such as economic freedom, economic and legal equality, the absolute value of human life, religious beliefs and practices, collective identities, and individual dignity.

The Intensification of Geopolitical Struggles

Coming back to the initial question of the “return of geopolitics,” such a return can only be understood in terms of an *intensification in the struggle for the control of land and sea*. Geopolitics as such cannot return as it cannot go away, but it is a constant feature of politics directly descending from man’s *territoriality*. There is no other place for human communities but to live on land, and a central question of inter-national politics, namely the interaction between political communities, can be articulated as *who lives where?*

Geopolitics contains in this regard a geographic component, and a demographic one. The former concerns the determinations of land (and sea) use, particularly in the guise of establishing, guarding, and managing borders. This is in its essence the *Nomos* of the Earth, as famously described by Carl Schmitt in the homonymous book (Schmitt, 1950). The demographic component is concerned with the population insisting on a given territory, both in terms of its sheer size, distribution, vital statistics, and of its *lato sensu* anthropological and economic dimensions (geo-economics).

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

The intensification of geopolitical confrontation can be explained by looking at the ways in which the sets of problems mentioned in the previous section may find solutions, maybe not for *everybody*, but at least for the specific, limited political community a certain political leadership is ruling.

As another example of dialectical development, the very way in which the last large-scale problem (namely the East-West confrontation of the Cold War) was solved, has laid the foundations for the present and arguably future central questions of international politics of the twenty-first century.

As already envisaged by the Greek-German scholar Panagiotis Kondylis (1943-1998) in his far-sighted work *Planetarische Politik nach dem Kalten Kriege* (Kondylis, 1992), the Western victory in the Cold War has led to the establishment of mass-democracy, human rights, and the mass-consumption-driven capitalistic economic model as the golden standard of political thought. Eventually, the entire politico-theoretical construction rests on the problem of distribution of economic goods to the masses. However, this vision is bound to incur in severe contradictions once it is becoming clear that, given the sheer size of the human population and the environmental impact of consumption at Western levels, the universalisation of such political-ethical imperatives is in its essence self-destructive or impossible.

The challenge ahead, presently in the form of intensification of geopolitical struggles, seems to be linked to a more upfront re-politicisation and consequent problematisation of demography, and of geopolitics in its core dimension of assessing the *who lives where?* question. The three sets of problems mentioned in the previous section, which are likely to inform possible responses to the question of world order in the next future, are centred on geopolitics to the extent to which they all directly or indirectly point to the question of the economic and material arrangement of human collectivities, and of humanity as a whole, in the upcoming period of economic, demographic, and environmental turmoil.

The economic crisis of 2008-2009 has signalled severe imbalances in the global economy between areas of the planet of great capital accumulation (particularly East Asia), rampant deindustrialisation masked by unsustainable levels of debt to finance private consumption in Western countries, and a large grey area substantially marginalised from any meaningful industrial development. The loss of confidence in an excessively financialised economy and in a monetary system exclusively based on fiat currency is also prompting a shift towards the acquisition of material assets and commodities which are of course physically located *somewhere*. This is particularly visible in one of the most important, yet little emphasised geopolitical developments of these years, namely the mass purchases of land (so called “land grab”) for agricultural purpose taking places virtually in every continent. Such development will be likely to test the effectiveness of *informal control* tactics, and possibly prompt the re-introduction of less informal control mechanisms in areas of limited or absent statehood.

The importance of geopolitical control in terms of economic re-organisation of the planet also appears prominent in the face of the risks inherent to an extremely complex, and equally fragile, web of economic interdependence. There are in essence two phenomena which are likely to emerge from this situation. First, the most powerful sovereign actors will intensify efforts to assert their grasp over land, seas and even populations which will enable them to defend their current status, to bargain from a stronger stance in the process of economic planetary re-organisation, and to have access to resources when scarcity will become acute, even if in decades from now. Russia’s effort to re-incorporate several former Soviet areas can be understood as a bid to achieve a critical mass of land and inhabitants, which will secure and possibly strengthen its global power rank. This is visible as well in Moscow’s efforts to fight population decline and place the country on the path of demographic recovery. China’s activities in the seas surrounding Asia and Beijing’s penetration in South East Asia and Africa can be read in the same light. China, however, being a vastly overpopulated country, epitomises the situation of a crowded world in which the promise of affluence for everybody cannot be delivered considering the side-effects and unintended consequences it generates. Speculations about Beijing considering ways to relocate part of its population, seen from this perspective, do not appear completely nonsensical.

The second main phenomenon linked to the economic transformation of the planet lying ahead entails a more substantial political-cultural dimension. As it is becoming clearer that the material content of Western

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

humanitarianism cannot be delivered to immense and still rapidly growing masses of humans, these are testing the tenability of borders from Mexico to the Mediterranean, and whether Westerners will really remain faithful to humanitarianism *at whatever price*. This being unlikely, it is not difficult to envisage how one of the main preoccupations for the geopolitics of the twenty-first century will be the preservation of at least few areas of relative order against the magmatic expansion of a rather chaotic humanity in the rest of the planet, in the face of negative returns to complexity.

Conclusions

Politics is *in nuce* the question of how to organise the life of human collectivities for a certain goal. Geopolitics, as argued, is a fundamental component of politics directly descending from the territoriality of human communities. And as much as the Earth (*gea* in Greek, hence geo-politics) is the home (*oikos*) of the human species, the economic (*oiko-nomia*) and geopolitical dimensions of its geographical, demographic, and material order are in essence different aspects of the same question.

Hegel's lasting heritage is constituted by a number of tools for the enhancement of *critique*, i.e. for the overcoming on the limits on one's own thinking, and of the prevalent cultural categories in a given society with the view to promote change. To Hegel goes the merit of having re-instated the question of historicity of human cultures, thus underscoring their nature of provisional tools for the solution of historically contingent problems.

As problems continuously renew themselves, paradoxically to a large extent in response to the attempts at solving them, so the philosophical categories by which the world is read ought to be re-organised at every step. Dialectical logic shows how precisely what has brought anything into being will be, in due course, the cause of its eventual demise. The next set of problems are usually coming from those areas which have been de-politicised in the past, i.e. left outside of the scope of conscious, upfront political discussion, when not subjected to *tabooisation*. May the reader wonder what the taboos of his time are, he will know where future questions are likely to come from.

References

- Brzezinski, Z. (1998) *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books).
- Ehrlich, P. and Ehrlich A. (2013) “Can a Collapse of Global Civilization Be Avoided?”, in *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, B, 7 March 2013 vol. 280 no. 1754, accessed at <http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/280/1754/20122845.abstract> on 24 October 2014.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster).
- Habermas, J. (2011) *Zur Verfassung Europas* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag).
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1833) *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), accessed at https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_XHGx2e_KLOYC on 24 October 2014.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1907 [1807]) *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Leipzig: Verlag der Dürr'schen Buchhandlung), accessed at <https://archive.org/details/phnomenologied00hege> on 24 October 2014.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1911 [1811]), *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag), accessed at <https://archive.org/details/grundlinienderp00gansgoog> on 24 October 2014.
- Ikenberry, J. (2014) “The Illusion of Geopolitics. The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order” in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014 issue, accessed at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141212/g-john-ikenberry/the-illusion-of-geopolitics> on 24 October 2014.

Order and Change in Global Politics: Assessing the “Return of Geopolitics”

Written by Roberto Orsi

Kondylis, P. (1992) *Planetarische Politik nach dem Kalten Krieg* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag).

Mead, W. (2014) “The Return of Geopolitics. The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers” in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014 issue, accessed at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141211/walter-russell-mead/the-return-of-geopolitics> on 24 October 2014.

Schmitt, C. (1950) *Der Nomos der Erde*, (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot).

Volcker, P. (2014) *A New Bretton Woods??? Remarks by Paul A. Volcker at the annual meeting of the Bretton Woods Committee*, Washington DC, May 21, 2014, accessed at <http://www.brettonwoods.org/sites/default/files/publications/Paul%20Volcker%20final%20Remarks%20June%2017.pdf> on 24 October 2014.

About the author:

Roberto Orsi is researcher at the Security Studies Unit of the Policy Alternatives Research Institute, and lecturer at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Tokyo. He holds a PhD in International Relations obtained from the London School of Economics in 2013. His research interests focus on international political theory, history of political concepts, East Asian and European international politics.