

CRITICAL DEBATE

Times of interregnum

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Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s of the last century, Antonio Gramsci recorded in one of the many notebooks he filled during his long incarceration in the Turi prison¹: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’. The term ‘interregnum’ was originally used to denote a time-lag separating the death of one royal sovereign from the enthronement of the successor. These used to be the main occasions on which the past generations experienced (and customarily expected) a rupture in the otherwise monotonous continuity of government, law, and social order. Roman law put an official stamp on such understanding of the term (and its referent) when accompanying interregnum with a proclamation of *justitium*: that is, as Giorgio Agamben reminded us in his 2003 study of the *Lo stato di eccezione*, an admittedly temporary suspension of laws heretofore binding, presumably in anticipation of new and different laws being possibly proclaimed.² Gramsci, however, infused the concept of ‘interregnum’ with a new meaning, embracing wider spectrum of the socio-political-legal order, while simultaneously reaching deeper into the socio-cultural condition. Or rather, in taking a leaf from Lenin’s memorable definition of the ‘revolutionary situation’ as a condition in which the rulers no longer *can* rule while the ruled no longer *wish* to be ruled, Gramsci detached the idea of ‘interregnum’ from its habitual association with the interlude of (routine) transmission of hereditary or electable power. He attached it to the extraordinary situations in which the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame, made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage, has not yet been fully assembled, or is not strong enough to be put in its place. I propose, following Keith Tester’s recent suggestion, to recognize the present-day planetary condition as a case of interregnum.³ Indeed, just as Gramsci postulated, ‘the old is dying’. The old order founded until recently on a similarly ‘triune’

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principle of territory, state, and nation as the key to the planetary distribution of sovereignty, and on power wedded seemingly forever to the politics of the territorial nation-state as its sole operating agency, is by now dying. Sovereignty is no longer glued to either of the elements of the triune principle and entities; at the utmost, it is tied to them but loosely and in portions much reduced in size and contents. The allegedly unbreakable marriage of power and politics is, however, ending in separation with a prospect of divorce.

Sovereignty is nowadays, so to speak, unanchored and free-floating. Criteria of its allocation tend to be hotly contested, while the customary sequence of the principle of allocation and its application is in a great number of cases reversed. The principle tends to be retrospectively articulated in the aftermath of the allocating decision or deduced from the already accomplished state of affairs. Nation-states find themselves sharing the conflict-ridden and quarrelsome company of actual, aspiring or pretending, but always pugnaciously competitive sovereign subjects, with entities successfully evading the application of the heretofore binding triune principle of allocation, and all too often explicitly ignoring or stealthily sapping and impairing its designated objects. Ever rising numbers of competitors for sovereignty outgrow already, even if not singly then surely severally, the power of an average nation-state. Multinational financial, industrial, and trade companies account now, according to John Gray, 'for about a third of world output and two-thirds of world trade'.⁴ Sovereignty, which right to decide the laws as well as the exceptions to their application, along with the power to render both decisions binding and effective, is for any given territory and any given aspect of life-setting scattered between multiplicity of centers and, for that reason, eminently questionable and open to contest; while no decision-making agency is able to plea full (that is, unconstrained, indivisible, and unshared) sovereignty, let alone to claim it credibly and effectively.

Risk, says Ulrich Beck, the pioneer of its contemporary exploration and still its leading and most proficient theorist, has from the beginning of modernity 'amalgamate[d] knowledge with non-knowing within the semantic horizon of probability'.⁵ The history of science, Beck claims, 'dates the birth of the probability calculus, the first attempt to bring the unpredictable under control – developed in the correspondence between Pierre Fermat and Blaise Pascal – to the year 1651'; and since then, through the category of risk, 'the arrogant assumption of controllability' has tended to increase in influence. With the benefit of hindsight, we may say that the category of risk was an attempt to reconcile the two pillars of modern consciousness—the awareness of contingency and randomness of the world on the one hand, and 'we can'-type confidence on the other. More exactly, the category of 'risk' was an attempt to salvage the second, despite the obtrusive, resented and feared company with the first. The category of 'risk' promised that even if the natural setting as well as the human-made additions to that setting were bound to stop short from unconditional regularity and so away from the ideal of full predictability, humans might still come quite close to the condition of certainty through gathering and storing knowledge and flexing its practical, technological arm. The category of 'risk'

did not promise foolproof security from dangers, but it promised the ability to calculate their probability and likely volume and so, obliquely, the possibility of calculating and applying the optimal distribution of resources meant to render the intended undertakings effective and successful.

Even if not explicitly, the semantics of ‘risk’ needed to assume, axiomatically, a ‘structured’ (‘structuring’: manipulation and the resulting differentiation of probabilities), essentially rule-abiding environment. It had to assume a universe in which the probabilities of events are predetermined, could be scrutinized, made known, and assessed. But however far the ‘calculation of risk’ might stop from a flawless and infallible certainty, and thus from the prospects of pre-determining the future, its distance seemed small and insignificant in comparison with the unbridgeable categorial abyss separating the ‘semantic horizon of probability’ (and so also the hoped-for risk calculation) from the premonition of uncertainty saturating and haunting contemporary liquid-modern consciousness. As John Gray pointed out already more than a 12 years ago ‘the governments of sovereign states do not know in advance how markets will react . . . National governments in the 1990s are flying blind’.⁶ Gray does not expect the future to usher into a markedly different condition; as in the past, we may expect ‘a succession of contingencies, catastrophes and occasional lapses into peace and civilization’⁷: all of them unexpected, imprevisible and more often than not catching their victims as well as their beneficiaries unawares and unprepared.

It seems ever more likely that the discovery and announcement of the centrality of ‘risk horizon’ in modern consciousness followed the eternal habit of the Owl of Minerva, known to spread its wings at the end of the day and just before the nightfall, or followed the yet more common proclivity of having objects, as noted by Heidegger, transported from the state of ‘hiding in the light’ of staying immersed in the obscure condition of *zuhanden* to the dazzling visibility of *vorhanden* no earlier than they go bust, fall out of routine, or otherwise frustrate expectations. In other words, things become known thanks to their disappearance or shocking change. Indeed, we became acutely conscious of the awesome role that the categories of ‘risk’, ‘risk calculation’, and ‘risk taking’ had played in our modern history only at the moment when the term ‘risk’ had lost much of its former utility and called to be used *sous rature*, having turned—to use Beck’s own vocabulary—into a ‘zombie concept’. When, in other words, the time had arrived to replace the concept of *Risikogesellschaft* with that of *Unsicherheitsglobalschaft*. Our dangers today differ from those which the category of ‘risk’ strove to have captured and brought to light by being unnamed before striking, unpredictable, and incalculable. And the setting within which our dangers are born and from which they emerge is no longer framed by the category of *Gesellschaft*—unless ‘*Gesellschaft*’ is coterminous with the population of the planet itself. Times of interregnum are thus times of uncertainty, and while raising many questions, three of them seem particularly pertinent to address at a time when rulers no longer *can* rule and the ruled no longer *wish* to be ruled; institutional disparity, the future of migrants and the endurability of the planet.

INSTITUTIONAL DISPARITY

I have already mentioned that the progressive separation leaning uncomfortably close towards a divorce between power and politics—the two seemingly inseparable partners residing for the last two centuries, or believed and postulated to reside, inside the territorial nation-state. That separation has resulted in the mismatch between institutions of power and those of politics. Power has evaporated from the level of nation-state into the politics—free ‘space of flows’—to borrow Manuel Castells’ expression—leaving politics ensconced as before in the previously shared abode, now degraded to the ‘space of places’. The growing volume of power that matters (that is, the kind of power that has, if not the final say, then at least the major and, in the end, decisive influence on the setting of options open to agents’ choice) has already turned global; but politics has remained as local as before. Accordingly, the presently most relevant powers stay beyond the reach of extant political institutions, whereas the frame for manoeuvre in inner-state politics continues to shrink. The planetary state of affairs is now buffeted by ad hoc assemblies of discordant powers unconstrained by political control due to the increasing powerlessness of the extant political institutions. The latter are thereby forced to limit their ambitions severely and to ‘hive off’, ‘outsource’, or ‘contract out’ the growing number of functions traditionally entrusted to the governance of national governments to non-political agencies. The emaciation of the political sphere (in its institutionalized orthodox meaning) is self-propelling, as the loss of relevance of the successive segments of national politics rebounds in the erosion of citizens’ interest in institutionalized politics, and in the widespread tendency to replace it with the drive to experiment with ‘free-floating’, electronically mediated quasi-or-inchoate/incipient politics. This experimentation is eminent for its expeditiousness, but also for its mutually dependent and reinforcing ad hocness, short termism, one issuesness, fragility, and staunch resistance, or perhaps even immunity, to institutionalization.

Finding an exit from the state of interregnum and chronic as well as unredeemable uncertainty would require the restoration of the commensurability of power and politics. Present-day uncertainty being rooted in global space, that task can be performed solely at the global level and solely by (alas not as yet existing) global law-making, executive, and juridical institutions. This challenge translates as the postulate to complement the heretofore almost wholly ‘negative’ globalization (i.e. globalization of forces intrinsically hostile to institutionalized politics—as capitals, finances, commodity trade, information, criminality, drug-and-arms traffic) by its ‘positive’ counterpart (as, for instance, globalization of political representation, law, and jurisdiction), which has not yet started in earnest.

FUTURE OF THE MIGRANTS

‘Europe needs immigrants’—Massimo D’Alema, currently the President of the European Foundation for Progressist Studies, states bluntly in the 10th May *Le Monde* 2011—in direct dispute with ‘the two most active European pyromaniacs’,

Berlusconi and Sarkozy. Calculation to support that postulate could hardly be simpler: there are today 333 millions of Europeans, but with the present (and still falling) average birthrate will shrink to 242 million in the next 40 years. To fill that gap, at least 30 million newcomers will be needed—otherwise our European economy will collapse together with our cherished standard of living. ‘Immigrants are an asset, not a danger’—D’Alema concludes. And so is the process of cultural *mettisage* (‘hybridization’), which the influx of newcomers is bound to trigger. Mixing of cultural inspirations is the source of enrichment and an engine of creativity—for European civilization as much as for any other. All the same, there is but a thin line separating enrichment from the loss of cultural identity; to prevent the cohabitation between autochthons and allochthons from eroding cultural heritages, it needs to be based therefore on respecting the principles underlying European ‘social contract’ . . . The point is, by *both* sides!

How can one secure such respect, though, if recognition of social and civil rights of ‘new Europeans’ is so stingily and haltingly offered, and proceeds on such a sluggish pace? The immigrants, for instance, contribute currently 11% to Italian Gross National Product (GNP), having, however, no right to vote in Italian elections. In addition, no one can be truly certain how large is the number of newcomers with no papers or with counterfeit documents who actively contribute to national product and thus to the nation’s wellbeing. ‘How can the European Union’, asks D’Alema all but rhetorically, ‘permit such a situation, in which political, economic and social rights are denied to a substantive part of the population, without undermining our democratic principles?’ And citizen duties coming, again in principle, in a package deal with citizen rights, can one seriously expect the newcomers to embrace, respect, support, and defend those ‘principles underlying European social contract?’ Our politicians muster electoral support by blaming the immigrants for their genuine or putative reluctance to ‘integrate’ with the autochthon standards—while doing all they can, and promising to do yet more, to put those standards beyond the allochthons’ reach. On the way, they discredit or erode the very standards which they claim to be protecting against foreign invasion . . .

The big question, one likely do determine the future of Europe more than any other quandary, is what of the two contending ‘facts of the matter’ will eventually (yet without too much of delay) come on top: the life-saving role played by immigrants in the fast aging Europe, few if any politicians dare so far to embroider on their banners, or the power-abetted and power-assisted rise in xenophobic sentiments eagerly recycled into electoral capital?

After their dazzling victory in the provincial election in Baden-Wurtemberg, leaving the social democrats trailing behind and putting for the first time in the history of Bundesrepublik one of their own, Winfried Kretschmann, at the head of a provincial government, German Greens, and notably Daniel Cohn-Bendit, begin to ponder the possibility of the German Chancellery turning green as soon as in 2013. But who will make that history in their name? Cohn-Bendit has little doubt: Cem Ozdemir. Their present-day sharp-minded and clear-headed, dynamic, widely admired, and revered co-leader, re-elected in 2010 by 88% of the voting. Until his

18th birthday, Ozdemir held a Turkish passport; then he, a young man already deeply engaged in German and European politics, selected German citizenship because of the harassments to which Turkish nationals were bound to be exposed whenever trying to enter UK or hop over the border of neighboring France.

One wonders: who are, in Europe's present, the advanced messengers of Europe's future? Europe's most active pair of pyromaniacs, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit?

ENDURABILITY OF THE PLANET

As Martin Heidegger reminded us, we all, humans, live towards death—and can not chase that knowledge away from our minds, however, hard we try. The rising number of our thoughtful contemporaries keep reminding the rest of us that the human species to which we all belong aims towards extinction—drawing the rest or the most of living species, after the pattern of Melville's Captain Ahab, into perdition; but thus far they fail to make us to absorb that knowledge, however, hard they try.

The most recent announcement of the International Energy Agency that the world production of petrol peaked in 2006 and is bound to glide a downward slope at the time when unprecedentedly numerous energy-famished consumers, like China, India, or Brazil enter the petrol market failed to arouse public concern, let alone alert the public—political elites, men of business and opinion-making circles alike—and passed virtually unnoticed.

'Social inequalities would have made the inventors of the modern project blush of shame'—therefore, Michel Rocard, Dominique Bourg, and Floran Augagner conclude in the article 'Human species, endangered' they co-authored and published in *Le Monde* on 3 April 2011. In the era of the Enlightenment, at lifetimes of Francis Bacon, Descartes or even Hegel, at no place of Earth the standard of living was more than twice as high as in its poorest region. Recently, the richest country, Qatar, boasts an income per head 428 times higher than the poorest, Zimbabwe. And these are all, let us never forget, comparisons between averages—that brings to mind the idea the proverbial recipe for the hare-and-horse paté: take one hare and one horse. . .

The stubborn persistence of poverty on a planet in the throes of economic-growth fundamentalism is enough to make thinking people to pause and reflect on the collateral casualties of progress-in-operation. The deepening abyss separating the poor and prospect-less from the well-off, sanguine, and boisterous—an abyss of the depth already exceeding the ability of any but the most muscular and the least scrupulous hikers to climb—is another obvious reason to be gravely concerned. As the authors of the quoted article warn, the prime victim of deepening inequality will be democracy, as increasingly scarce, rare, and inaccessible paraphernalia of survival and acceptable life become the object of a throat-cutting war between the provided-for and the left-unaided needy.

And yet there is another, no less grave reason for alarm. The rising levels of opulence translate as rising levels of consumption; enrichment, after all, is a value worthy to be coveted in as far as it helps to improve on the quality of life—whereas

the meaning of ‘making life better’, or just rendering it somewhat less unsatisfactory, in the vernacular of the Church of Economic Growth planet-wide congregation means to ‘consume more’. For the faithful of that fundamentalist Church, all roads to redemption, salvation, divine and secular grace, and happiness immediate and eternal alike, lead through shops. And the more tightly packed are the shop-shelves waiting for the seekers of happiness to be cleared out, the emptier is the Earth, the sole container/supplier of resources—raw materials and energy—needed to re-fill the shops: a truth reiterated and re-confirmed day in, day out by science, yet according to a recent research bluntly denied by 53% of space that the American press devotes to the issue of ‘sustainability’ and the rest of journalist service neglects or passes by in silence.

What is passed by in the most deafening, numbing/incapacitating silence, is Tim Jackson’s warning in his already 2-year-old book (*Prosperity without Growth*) that by the end of this century ‘our children and grandchildren will face a hostile climate, depleted resources, the destruction of habitats, the decimation of species, food scarcities, mass migration and almost inevitably war’. Our debt-driven and zealously abetted/assisted/boosted by that powers-that-be consumption ‘is unsustainable ecologically, problematic socially, and unstable economically’. Another of quite a few Jackson’s chilling observation—that in a social setting like ours, where the richest fifth of the world gets 74% of the annual planetary income while the poorest fifth has to settle for 2%, the common ply of justifying the devastation perpetuated by the economic growth policies by the noble need to put paid to poverty cannot but be sheer hypocrisy and offence to reason—has been almost universally ignored by the most popular (and effective) channels of information; or relegated, at best, to the pages/times known to host and accommodate voices reconciled and habituated to their plight of crying in wilderness.

In *The Guardian* of 23 January 2010, Jeremy Leggett follows Jackson’s hints and suggests that a lasting (as different from doomed or downright suicidal) prosperity needs to be sought ‘outside the conventional trappings of affluence’ (and, let me add, outside the vicious circle of stuff-and-energy use/misuse/abuse). It has to be sought inside relationships, families, neighborhoods, communities, meanings of life, and an admittedly misty/recondite area of ‘vocations in a functional society that places value on the future’. Jackson himself opens his case with a sober admission that the questioning of economic growth is deemed to be the act of ‘lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries’, risking/fearing/expecting not without reason to be to one or all three of those categories assigned by the apostles and addicts of grow-or-perish ideology.

Elinor Ostrom’s book (*Governing the Commons*, 1990) is 10 times older than Jackson’s—but already in it we could read that the arduously promoted belief that people are naturally inclined to act for short-term profits and follow the ‘each man for himself and devil takes the hindmost’ principle does not stand to the facts of the matter. From her study of locally active small-scale businesses Ostrom derives a quite different conclusion: ‘people in community’ tend to reach decisions that are ‘not just for profit’. In conversation with Fran Korten in the magazine *Yes*, March 2010, she referred to an honest and sincere intra-community communication, shaming and

honouring, respecting the commons and open pastures, and other virtually no-energy consuming and waste-free stratagems as to quite plausible, almost instinctual human responses to life challenges—none of them being particularly propitious to economic growth, but all being sustainability-of-the-planet-and-its-inhabitants friendly...

It is high time to start wandering: are those forms of life-in-common, known to most of us solely from ethnographic reports sent from the few remaining niches of bygone ‘outdated and backward’ times, irrevocably things of the past? Or, perhaps, the truth of an alternative view of history (and so also of an alternative understanding of ‘progress’) is about to out: that far from being an irreversible, no-retreat-conceivable dash forward, the episode of chasing happiness through shops was/is/will prove for all practical intents and purposes to have been a one-off, intrinsically and inevitably temporary, detour?

The jury, as they say, is still out. But it is high time to come in with a verdict. The longer the jury stays out, the greater the likelihood that it will be forced to run out from their meeting room by running short of refreshments...

NOTES

1. *Quaderni del carcere*; here quoted after Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.
2. Giorbio Agamben, *Stato di Eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri Torino. In English, *State of Exception*.
3. See Keith Tester, ‘Pleasure, Reality, the Novel and Pathology’, *Journal of Anthropological Psychology* 21, no. 21 (2009): 23–6.
4. John Gray, *Gray’s Anatomy: Selected Writings* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 231.
5. Ulrich Beck, *Weltrisikogesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2007). Here quoted after Ciaran Cronin’s, trans. *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 4–6.
6. Gray, *Gray’s Anatomy*, 236.
7. *Ibid.*, 223.