Ottavio Marzocca. Professor of Ethical-Political Philosophy and Social Ethics at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro" (Italy). He has for many years been concerned with the contemporary French thought, Italian neo-Marxism and issues of geo-philosophy. He also has been working on the issues of governmentality and biopolitics. Furthermore, currently, he devotes his attention to the relationship between ethical and political issues and problems of space, the environment and territory. His most recent books are: *Foucault ingovernabile. Dal bios all'ethos* (Meltemi, Milano, 2016); *Il mondo comune. Dalla virtualità alla cura* (Manifestolibri, Roma, 2015); *Il governo dell'ethos. La produzione politica dell'agire economico* (Mimesis, Milano, 2011); *Perché il governo Il laboratorio etico-politico di Foucault* (Manifestolibri, Roma, 2007).
Contact: ottavio.marzocca@uniba.it

THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF SPACE AND MATTER

Ottavio Marzocca
Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"

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Many of the contributions to this issue of *Soft Power* address – directly or indirectly – tendencies that for some time have been defined with expressions such as *material turn* or *spatial turn* to proclaim the superseding of formalist and constructivist visions of the world and society, or to indicate the restructuring of the idea that ours is, above all, an era of dematerialization, despatialization, and deterritorialization.

In point of fact, in the 1980s Michel Serres – with the persuasive power of his prose – in *Passage du Nord-Ouest* had already announced the decline of the hegemony that formalism, logicism, and nominalism had conquered in the 20th century over science culture, then also extending their influence to philosophy and the humanities. Finally – according to him – knowledge was once again devoting its attention to the material world, the multiplicity of its forms, the variety of its spatial dimensions, the unstoppable flow of its transformations; in his opinion, a real *dimanche du monde* was welling up and he celebrated it with his research, recognizing its most important expressions in the geometry of the fractal objects of Benoît Mandelbrot, in René Thom's catastrophe theory and in that of Ilya Prigogine's dissipative structures.

It can be argued with many motivations that the change announced by Serres then ripened into the essential conditions of that *New Materialism* that today is strongly affirmed in philosophical studies and the social sciences (Pellizzoni): its influence now extends into various fields of research and reflection – including feminist thought – delineating in a decidedly ontological and post-humanistic manner the need to recognize the primary role of physicality (Lemke). It is quite plausible, however, that the emer-

gence in theory of a similar scenario since the 1980s could be connected to the affirmation on the political and economic level of neoliberal governmentality and post-Fordist capitalism. In fact, the moment when Serres made his announcement corresponded to the period in which neo-liberalism and post-Fordism began their triumphal march. Furthermore, the specific matrix of neo-materialism that has since been defined corresponds to a vision in which the changeability, fluidity, indeterminacy, and complexity of the physical expressions of the world prevail; characteristics that somehow also define the conditions in which contemporary society, over recent decades, has insistently been urged to adapt to forms of government and economy that increasingly tend to be without certainties, guarantees and stable rules (Pellizzoni). Even the despotisms which survived the collapse of real socialism, adapting to global capitalism, today celebrate themselves by erecting regime buildings that no longer correspond to the tetragonal monumentality of the past, but rather have sinuous and elusive architectural forms, perfectly in tune with the fluid commercialization of volatile and liquid extractive resources and the effortlessness of the corresponding financial flows (Toscano).

Yet what can be said of the fact that the period in which the new vision and the political-economic deregulation began to establish themselves, was also the era in which our society took a decisive step towards the technological dematerialization and despatialization of many of its main activities?

If Lyotard had any reason to insist on the "post-modern" development of the condition in which we have found ourselves since then, it is first and foremost because he foresaw the mandatory imperative that marked it, i.e. the constant injunction to transfer what we do, we say or we know about "matter" and "reality" into the a-cosmic and virtual dimension of computer memories and telecommunication networks. Today it is not difficult to recognize that the result has been the possibility to weaken the autonomy of the concrete world at the very moment in which its undeniable complexity is represented in the media. Not surprisingly, when the idea of complexity asserted itself even in the canonical expressions of social theory, this happened mainly through the systemic paradigm that – especially with Luhmann – circumscribed the possibility to take it into account within the limits of "social communication", excluding the possibility for material events and environmental contexts to influence this communication directly. Ironically, a kind of paradoxical and catastrophic confirmation of this vision arrived with the Chernobyl disaster, just as the systemic self-referentiality of our society was being theorized with the utmost conviction: even today, in fact, it does not seem that this and other similar events have managed to "communicate" to our social systems the

need to radically question their "lack of attention" to the material environment around them; ecological disasters generally remain occasions when society acknowledges for a fleeting moment the groundlessness of its claims to dominate the world from a distance, without ever really being able to renounce them.

Of course, within the dominant frame of neoliberal governmentality, there have been and there are more or less credible attempts to make the economic reproduction of society compatible with the ecological reproduction of the environment. But these attempts mostly conceal the claim for world dominion by attributing an essential economic rationality to "nature" which, if respected, would make it possible for society to continue to increase its profits (Leonardi). One way or another, a disregard for the irreducibility of the world to human aspirations recurs as an indispensable constant in our culture. It is perhaps for this reason that a kind of monotonous euphoria is continuously reproduced in the recurring celebration of the technological speed with which space, physical distances, and the scabrous variety of things and places are incessantly exceeded by communication in "real time".

Therefore, we need to hypothesize that perhaps it is not so much the rise of more meticulous visions of materiality than those we had in the past, that really represents the sign of our times: in fact, they were soon superimposed by the radical computerization of knowledge and the dizzying electronics developments that seem to have just as quickly restored the hegemony of the "formalism", "logicism" and "nominalism" over those same visions; or, at least, it is necessary to focus on and radically problematize the fact that the networking diffusion of information systems implies the detachment of communication from a tangibly located reality or the transfiguration of the latter into images functional to its use by the media and commercially.

An unconfessed need to get away from the world, a desire to be separate from it to better rule it, seem characteristic of our civilization. Hence, also the propensity to a-cosmism or favoring the time of interiority over the harshness of spatiality, which – from Kant to Bergson – can be seen in much of its philosophy. Not surprisingly, this often tends to reduce the ways in which man dwell in the world to the creation of a kind of intimacy distinct from the open and common dimension that makes them possible (Bojanić). Is it not an inclination to distancing, to withdrawing into oneself, that is paradoxically still asserting itself in the rampant mass narcissism that constitutes much of the media communication of our era? Is the main problem that we face, from this point of view, simply to develop a proper view of the matter, or truly to rediscover the relationships that we inevitably have with the harshness of the world?

In this sense, therefore, it is important to give credit to that contemporary thought that has not failed to warn of the magnitude and gravity of the relationships that our society has with the reality of the physical space in which it lives. This happened, in particular, when genealogical philosophy and the political reflection gave consideration to the density and the variety of ways in which the earth, space, and cities become what is at stake in the strategies of power, settlement areas, movement conditions, and theaters of conflict (Marzocca). The earth, then, is presented as the stable foundation of institutions or an undefined dimension of nomadic crossings; space is considered to be the site of dangers to be averted, presences to be monitored, dynamic processes to be governed; urban structures, finally, appear to be places of the movement of people and goods, as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, as behavior control systems, as locations of unexpected subjectifications, as essential places of political action (Tucci).

This relevance of concrete spatiality does not allow us to settle for either the construction of a materialism that claims to be unprecedented, nor the idea that ours is an era of general deterritorialization and irreversible despatialization. In fact, today, also the telematic media cannot help but refer to the multiplicity of the places from which they tend to disengage, articulating themselves through so-called *geo-media*; even the heads of the most historically globalizing States feel the need to raise walls against the new "barbarians" (Labriola); moreover, space as a geopolitical dimension again claims its non-negligible role to the point that some try to reconnect even the transcendent universalism of the monotheistic religions to precise areas of the geographical theater, as do the fierce promoters of the "Islamic state" or the ineffable theorists of the "clash of civilizations" (Chiantera-Stutte). But, in reality, it is not only through these "simplifications" that spatiality claims its indispensability. The territory, in particular, now reappears as a non-negligible dimension not only on the strictly geo-political level; it is also thought of as a multiplicity of ecosystems with natural and historic, environmental and cultural characteristics, which relate to forms of civilization that interact dynamically with specific locations. Understood in these terms, the territory makes it possible to see deterritorialization itself both as a result of the distancing of the technological flow of information from the realities situated there, and as a result of the devastation of places, produced by the indefinite expansion of metropolitan structures suitable for the global systems of economic and political power (Magnaghi).

The complication of the analytical framework that derives from the assumption of positions like this, sets before us unavoidable tasks and questions. In particular, to understand what possibilities we have to convert our ways of inhabiting the world and,

moreover, to regenerate politics and democracy by finding the reasons to do so in the rediscovery of the worldly and shared nature of our condition.

With regard to both questions, we should first address the extreme dominance that the economy has achieved over most of our activities intensifying, through computer networks, the commercialization of every asset, every place, every patrimony. It is likely that it is no longer sufficient to oppose this dominance simply by trying to redeem the *use value* of what is being commodified from the supremacy of the *exchange value*. For a long time, the use value has been suspected of being only the seemingly innocent face of the same coin as the exchange value. However, what one cannot help but consider is that this suspicion in reality is largely based on an uncritical identification of the concept of *use* with that of *consumption*, an identification that should frankly be questioned. While it is true that the use value of an object immediately exposes it to the possibility of becoming economically exchangeable, it is not a given that this will entail – as it were – the immediate and inevitable loss of innocence. Speaking more precisely and explicitly, it can be said that neither usefulness nor exchangeability as such can be considered conditions of the indefinite commodification of the world's goods. Rather, what creates this conditions in an almost irremediable way is precisely the theoretical and practical identification of use with consumption: the transformation of exchangeability into exponential and unlimited commodification can be seen especially if you exclude any difference between use objects and consumer goods, so the intensive and extensive production of the consumability of both types of assets becomes an economic, political and even ethical imperative, from which society can no longer escape. Hence the importance of a reflection on the conceptual and semantic richness of the idea of *use*, aiming to rediscover and interpret its meaning in ethical terms also, i.e. as a form of social and individual *ethos*, corresponding to ways of inhabiting our common world, "using it" and taking care of it, rather than consuming it (Gorgoglione).

Hence, also the need to plumb the possibilities available to regenerate politics and democracy in relation to our being in the world, first of all questioning the prevailing ways of governing. These – despite the enormity and the novelty of the problems faced today – remain largely linked to the sovereignty model, demonstrating the inability of policy makers to overcome the unilateral concepts of the exercise of power. In this regard, in effect, an analytical use – rather than normative – of systems theory can be useful for giving the problematic importance they deserve, not only to the variety of subsystems (politics, law, economy, culture, science…) which make up our society, but also, and above all, to their tendency to refer only to themselves, to their own languages,

to their own reproduction needs. There must be serious doubt as to whether the unilateral decisions of politics are truly crucial to society's government in such a scenario. What is difficult to sustain, however, is that in this context there is not still at least the need for an overall *orientation*, an "indirect government" – rather than a centralized government – of society itself. In fact, the systemically organized social presences, adjusting for themselves, easily tend to ignore the need to limit themselves in their development and to underestimate the catastrophic consequences that they can cause by indefinitely pursuing their reproduction and remaining indifferent to that of other presences (Innerarity).

At least three major issues, which it is necessary to continue to investigate, emerge from a similar scenario. The first is that in every form of government, self-government or "indirect government", what is always at stake – as Foucault would say – is the need to promote, adopt, reject, problematize or change certain forms of the *ethos*, of "conduct". The second, instead, consists in considering that in a society like ours, neither the multiplicity of subsystems that animate it, nor their tendency to self-referentiality imply that their ability to influence, guide and, therefore, to govern the conduct of men have the same force and the same intensity. It is hard to deny, in fact, that the political subsystem has for a long time adapted to the rationality of the economic subsystem and the latter, in turn, now tends to increase its influence on the whole society, even (or especially) through its proven ability to guide the conduct of men. The last and most important question, finally, is to ask whether the problematic nature of the relationship of our society with the world is not due to our unwillingness to fully recognize that only we can claim to, or try to, govern the earth, the environment or the world, often succeeding only virtually, while they have never ceased and do not cease to truly govern us, directly or indirectly.