

POWER AS THE PIVOT OF HISTORY¹

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Abstract

The conception of society as a pyramid is strongly rooted and spread over the different world cultures that it could be considered as "universal" in the sense given by E.Reclus. The current world geopolitical structure (the world order) is transforming according to hierarchical-elitarian principles in economy, hierarchical flexibility or authority in conformity with the various social cultures, and (but only as a "noble" fiction) in accordance with the Western idealistic equalitarian-participating principles. It is taking on a shape of a world order at the same time Ultracentred, Pluricentered and Intercentered, depending from the level (or part) of the hierarchy/pyramid of power you are considering.

Keywords: World Order. Hierarchy (of power). Governance (kinds of) Centrality. Change (in the World Order). (different) Selecting criteria.

Resumen

El concepto de la sociedad como pirámide se arraiga y extendió fuertemente por las diversas culturas del mundo de tal modo que podría ser considerado como "universal" en el sentido dado por E.Reclus. La estructura geopolítica del mundo actual (la orden del mundo) está transformándose según principios jerárquicos-elitistas en economía, flexibilidad jerárquica o autoridad conforme a las varias culturas sociales, y (pero solamente como ficción "noble") de acuerdo con los principios participativos-igualitarios de los idealistas occidentales. Está adquiriendo la forma de una orden al mismo tiempo Ultracentrada, Pluricentrada e Intercentrada del mundo, dependiendo del nivel (o de la parte) de la jerarquía/de la pirámide de poder que está sendo considerada.

Palabras-clave: Orden del mundo. Jerarquía del poder. Clases de gobierno.

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Centralización. Cambio en la orden del mundo. Diferentes criterios selectivos.

Título: O poder é o pivô da história

Introduction

Current world dynamics display several empirical indicators that demonstrate that there has been a world order for some time and that it is still working.

The main feature of the world order—and an accepted ideological concept—is the *inequality of power*, and therefore of action and rights, between states. The asserted equality of states under the Westphalian system is a “functional fiction” (Eva 1999); the reality is a hierarchical–pyramidal structure (Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Strange 1997) that operates under the global governance of a few empowered nations and international organisms influenced by the “Holy Alliance” of these same nations (Zolo 1995; Falk 1999).

There are four key principles to the operation of the world order: stability, territorial containment of conflicts, economic globalization, and Western-style democracy (Eva 1999).

The deterritorialization of the state, the changing roles and functions of international borders, and challenges to the absolute sovereignty of states and their territories are emblematic of the current process of change (Newman 1999). But the concept of nation remains very strong and is still the standard unit of measurement in our conception of national interests, geostrategy, and international relations. The term *inter[-]national* itself stresses the centrality of the nation.

The power pyramid is not regarded as fixed since “geopolitics is about change” (Dalby 1999). Rather, I assume that while the pyramidal structure is

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the norm in a hierarchical world order, the relative position and role of the individual nations within the pyramid changes through time. Even if we agree with Dalby that "sovereign states are cartographic devices", the world order is still based on nations in the sense that the global decision-makers belong to the ruling classes of specific states with specific characteristics. They are empowered by territorial justifications, although they act in an increasingly deterritorialized way. The elite "aim to maintain their state and its apparatus in order to retain or increase their own power" (Paasi 1999).

Finally, international relations are usually described through "state narratives."

A World Order still working

USA are "at the top of the hill" and the states at the apex of the pyramidal world order belong to or have a leading role in organisms like UN Security Council, G7, IMF, World Bank, NATO, EU. They can be described in terms of their:

- 1) geographic conditions
- 2) control of financial flows and the nodes of the world economy
- 3) political role on the world stage
- 4) national self-esteem and desire for power

- 1) Although territory is less important today than in the past, the world order is still based on it, since it determines the borders of states and the geographic differentiation between them. In a world order based on territory, the area, population, availability of resources, and geographic location of a state are still significant. It is not possible for a state to be a (super)power unless it has territory or the capacity to control territory (power and/or military efficiency are significant in this sense). The progressive decline in importance of territory in a globalized world can be

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countered by the capacity to control economic dynamics.

- 2) The globalization of economies and the media occurs irrespective of territory. Globalization challenges the very idea of the nation-state since it threatens certain typical characteristics (borders, for example) and reduces the potential for exclusive action within a state's own territory. This undermines the concept of sovereignty itself.
- 3) The political role of a state on the world stage depends on its past and present—that is, on overall long-term dynamics and the dynamics (often unforeseeable) of the moment. These determine the likelihood of states becoming leaders.
- 4) It is not possible for a state to become a (super)power if there is no will to do so and if the political leaders and the people themselves do not have strong self-esteem built in as a cultural rather than a national trait. In an international power structure based on inequality, thinking and acting as if one were more or better than others is unavoidable. This self-esteem is the product of a protracted historical-cultural process that often manifests itself in the geostrategic decisions of the world powers. Success or failure in reaching objectives is mainly the result of the condition of/capacity for controlling historical dynamics while they are in progress.

In the past, cohesive societies with strong symbolic points of reference and a determined elite were able to employ a geostrategy based on control. And today these factors are still effective: the blurring of social cohesion and strong symbols can be integrated with, or replaced by, cultural and ideological control deriving from the command of the media and advanced technologies or even by the capacity to invent symbols and identity narratives.

Writers commenting on international relations, strategy, or the foreign policies of the main powers refer to the nation-population using expressions such as "national interests," a "will to pursue national strategy" (Cline 1975), and "national morale" (Spanier 1993). One particular

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supporter of property-based analysis explicitly states that the “cohesiveness of owner identity is the source of community resolve” (Demarest 1998), underlining the geopolitical importance of being “resolute.” I prefer the term *self-esteem* (as a historically and socially constructed, and therefore cultural, characteristic), which suggests more the idea of an attitude shared by the majority of a population. The term therefore represents “national” sentiment as the sum of the attitudes of a country’s population rather than an ideology passed down from on high.

For this reason I would argue that among the factors that influence the world order, the dominating cultural make-up of the nation-states at the top of the pyramid should be taken into account, in particular as regards the nature of their relationships with power and the perception they have of themselves (self-esteem). If geographic differences continue to be relevant, so to do cultural differences, and this must be taken into account. Cultural areas have differing abilities at dealing with political and economic dynamics at the local and global levels. They are not, however, necessarily in conflict with each other. The only states that are in competition (or in conflict) with one another are those that compete for world power and/or an authoritative role on the international stage. Local conflicts or bilateral wars that do not threaten the status quo have no relevance within the general structure, and the so-called international community relies on them remaining territorially confined.

The international “rules of the game” and the hierarchical world order are (still) determined by mechanisms and concepts originating in, and created by, the West, and it is not by chance that at the apex of the pyramid we find (and have for some time) countries with Western cultures.

A significant empirical indicator of power is the capacity to abuse it—that is, a readiness not to respect (international) rules or customs and to bend the rules without consequences. The countries at the apex of the world order have all shown this readiness, although in significantly different ways.

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China and Japan have aspirations to a role of authority, if not one of true leadership, and are the only non-Western countries at the apex of the world order. It must first be stated that China is already in a position where it can bend the rules or fail to respect internationally accepted regulations or customs, while Japan is still forced to endure restrictions to its geopolitical actions and, therefore, is not in a position to play outside the rules.

A “mentally” accepted hierarchy

The inevitability and naturalness of hierarchy is a cultural construct that has been consolidated over such a long period that for most humans it is impossible (initially) to envisage the absence of some center, some form of hierarchical power, as the only valid instrument for guaranteeing the order and security of any human community. This attitude is the product of the fatalistic acceptance of the inequality of humans. It is behind the widespread confusion between inequality and difference.

The exercising of some power in some form is inevitable in relations between individuals and groups. This does not automatically mean, however, that one cannot live without power or that one cannot conceive the absence of power in the life of a society. In the modern era, socio-political Utopias have been envisaged in which power is deliberately fragmented and deconstructed so as to humanize it, that is, to place it within reach of the individual. Anarchic thought has provided the most extreme and highly structured examples of such visions.

Before the modern age, power was structured into various hierarchical forms according to the philosophical and economic views of the day. In the modern age, the push for the “democratic” broadening of the participation of the social classes and citizens in public life—and therefore in power—has produced a view of the state as the modern power structure. The state compensates for inequality/difference between individuals through its

superior structure, which is theorized—or won through social and political conflict—as being increasingly “neutral” as regards the choice of the individual and the particular identities of its citizens. This is the case in Europe and the West in general.

“The other face of hierarchy is inequality” (Held 1999), but since inequality is regarded as natural, it produces a positive value as regards order, all the more so if it is democratic.

The modern state uses various forms of centrality and hierarchy—the product of various cultural traditions—to guarantee an order that today, at least in the West, we desire to be “democratic.” It should be pointed out that at present the objective of clear economic genesis and efficiency seems to be increasingly regarded as an indicator of democracy, rather than a means to particular ends that are privately determined.

At the time the nation-state was being established, conceptual definitions of the type developed by Friedrich Ratzel, for example, regarding the indissoluble state–land–population triangle were useful, as opposed to necessary: the “container” must have a form (the state), clear dimensions (territory with clear-cut borders), and a content clearly related to it (the people). This triangle represents a vital organism. It is no surprise that theories about the organic state, such as those of Ratzel (1897) or Halford Mackinder (1904) that spoke of the need for territorial control (Heartland) as the geostrategic aim of power, were so readily accepted in academic circles and by political decision-makers during the age of colonialism and industrial and economic imperialism around the turn of the last century.

Later views of international relations and strategies were founded on nothing more than extending the concept of state-based order, power, and sovereignty to a larger territory (the world) politically based on associations of sovereign states that, in the future, will be governed as a universal state.

The current geopolitical situation (the world order) involves existing states that occupy particular places in a hierarchy with recognized territorial

sovereignty (although under threat from economic globalization), which have changeable, fast-moving, and deterritorialized dynamics.

Despite differences in circumstances and mechanisms, there is no conflict between states and economic dynamics at the level of ideals. Indeed, states have protected and guided economic dynamics and continue to benefit from doing so. "States are in agreement as to how to act to encourage economic globalization" (Sassen 1998).

The overlapping interests of the political and economic elite are obvious given that the management of the economy and economic activities is ideologically hierarchical and centralized at the level of decision-making authority, geared towards efficiency (the pursuit of one's own aims), and "democratic" in the sense that it is flexible and does not present *a priori* ideological obstacles to entering global competition, although the global market is composed of selected players that are not democratic in themselves—in the economic system, the only "voters" are those with capital (Sassen 1998).

Every enterprise is founded on the principle of property. Decision-making power is directly proportional to the amount of this property. The spaces within an enterprise are exclusive, subject to security checks, and organized according to a hierarchical–functional chain. The roles and activities of the humans within the enterprise are unequal in terms of titles, responsibilities, and remuneration. "The moment citizens entered factories, their lives became subject to the dictates of capital" (Held 1999).

The space outside an enterprise—that is, public space—belongs to the state and its citizens. But again this space is conceptually hierarchical because there is a desire for it to be "ordered" rather than "organized," even if the need to negotiate is recognized. However, the universal rights of the citizen to participate in the political process and the existence of multiple decision-making centers draws out the time required to make decisions and even involves the discussion or criticism of the premises legitimizing authority

itself. This is not acceptable for the private citizen who has decision-making authority. It is no surprise that business people are increasingly insisting that the public authorities speed up and streamline the decision-making process. A commonly held belief in the business community is that the state should restrict economic intervention as much as possible (Nozick, 2000), and that any intervention that does occur should be “democratic” in the sense that it must guarantee the right to possess property. From the perspective of capitalist democracy, property and “opportunities” are sufficient guarantee of socio-economic mobility fuelled by competition.

By virtue of these premises, the world order is generally seen according to the traditional hierarchical–pyramidal power structure. In the current geopolitical phase, the hegemonic states are mainly interested in governance (the steering of trends and the mild regulation of the imbalances of economic crisis and conflict) and security (the maintenance of the existing structure and, possibly, hegemony).

Different kinds of “centrality”

Reassessing the world order in light of the above considerations, we can state that the hierarchical power pyramid, which has been a pivot of history from time immemorial, is still operating, although contemporary challenges have fragmented its operation.

Current trends can be summed up as follows:

1. “Universal” values are progressively ***ultra-centralized***—that is, they are increasingly reduced in scope to their Anglo-American interpretation within Western politico-theoretical culture (parliamentary democracy, human rights, unlimited ownership). The emergence of China as an international player may challenge this situation.
2. The problems of international security (the fight against terrorism) and stability (the maintenance of the status quo, territorial containment of

conflicts, “humanitarian” military intervention) are increasingly **centralized**. This trend also holds true for technology and the media.

3. Capital flows and economic hubs, in particular financial, are already **pluri-centric**, although hierarchical. Because of changes in transport, this is also true of manufacturing.
4. International aid, disaster relief, and so on take place in **many centers**, although UN bodies do act to some extent as centralized points of reference.

Hierarchically organized power remains the main reference point in the world order. It is rigid in that it is structured, multifaceted in that it has a range of functions, and flexible in that it allows states internal mobility according to their circumstances.

Conclusion

Anyone who wishes to make real changes to the world geopolitical structure must be capable of envisaging something that is truly different, something that would change the conceptual reference points—that is, something other than power and its hierarchical–pyramical structure. But there must also be a desire to change.

Over the last two decades, and in particular since the end of the bipolar world order, such visions have increasingly taken the form of theoretical propositions (neo-Marxism, post-modernism) lying outside the traditional liberal-capitalism/Marxism dichotomy. Globalization, which has a progressively homogenizing effect since it is promulgated by the media and new technologies, as well as the lack of disagreement among “realists” in the area of international politics and among the Anglo-American libertarians² in

² In Europe, the term *libertario* means anarchist. In Italy, however, certain political movements have begun to use the term incorrectly to mean *libertarian*. This meaning is now passing into general use.

the area of economics have given impulse to the rediscovery of so-called communitarian liberalism, which, although certainly in the democratic mold (Selznick, 1999) and suffering from the limitations of its geographic and conceptual origins (yet again in the Anglo-Saxon world), does find support among those who defend cultural tradition as the best resistance to a supposed single globalized way of thinking. It should be pointed out that telecommunications and information technology are making it increasingly easy for individuals in affluent societies to either lock themselves up in their own immediate space or immerse themselves in cyberspace. What the consequences of this might be at the level of power and the exercising of power is among the most important, topical, and complex areas of geopolitical study.

Some theories have been more directly addressed at the reform (the re-ordering) of the world system, including the WOMP (World Order Models Project) and Daniele Archibugi's and David Beetham's writings regarding a cosmopolitical democracy. Ideas of this type have the merit of tackling the question of the central role of power in history and its hierarchical repercussions in the structuring of an order. Their main objective is to conceptually alter the interpretive framework. On the whole, rather than concepts based on hegemony, they put forward key concepts that aim to resolve conflicts and organize cooperative relations.

These concepts can be summarized as follows:

1. The de-ethnicized, deterritorialized individual belonging to a range of groups (a concept deriving from the cosmopolitical citizen of the world [from Immanuel Kant through Martha Nussbaum 1999])
2. The multi-territoriality of human groups, with mobile (Reclus 1905) and flexible borders, multiple accords of various dimensions (Malatesta 1924), and the multiplication of borders (Eva 1992)
3. The deideologization of spaces and people's ties to it (Falk 1999)

4. The division (fragmentation) of global and regional power, and of the bodies that wield it (Archibugi 1998)

These concepts are decidedly at odds with the hegemonic model that currently operates. However, they (with exclusion of point 2) suffer from two fundamental defects:

- They are to some degree dependent on the idea of the state (they do not succeed in not thinking in terms of it) and the idea that power must in some way be structured.
- While criticizing the economic system (which is also hierarchical), they do not concern themselves with changes to economic and production structures, which remain the prerogatives of power.

Finally, it should be pointed out that such arguments use concepts and reasoning that are typical of anarchic thought, without their authors being aware of the fact (at least it seems so). This is the result of the systematic dismissal and negation through history of anarchism exercised by bourgeois thought, because of fear, and Marxist thought, because of anarchism's practical incompatibility with the Marxist idea of "revolution" and Marxists wishing to avoid any competition in the area of left-wing thought. Nevertheless, this road has been taken and we can now look forward with a certain optimism to future theoretical developments.

Elisée Reclus believed he had identified three factors in human development: "Class struggle, the pursuit of equilibrium, and the sovereignty of the individual's decision-making rights—these are the three factors that the study of social geography reveals and that, in the chaos of things, show themselves to be sufficiently constant to be called laws" (Reclus 1905, p. iv).

These "laws" or constants in human history indicate that:

1. In all societies there has been, and still is, the tendency for organization into groups according to class and caste.
2. There is an unstoppable tendency towards the balancing out of inequalities and an ongoing balancing out between power and freedom.

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3. No evolution can occur within a population without individual effort.

Using these three concepts as interpretive reference points offers significant scope for geopolitical analysis and sufficient room for thought to envisage **a-centric** ways of organizing society.

Reference to the individual and the reduction of the dynamics of power to the astructured level of the individual, as well as positive assertive action through non-hierarchical cooperation, leads to the rediscovery of old ideas for envisaging and organizing spaces that are governed by freedom and liberty.

It is difficult to find power structures when "Human beings, the fundamental building blocks, group together at will with the other building blocks of ever-changing humanity" (Reclus 1905, p. III).

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