Freedom and land: common destinies

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1. State Crisis or Political Crisis?

Generally, the analyses of the consequences of globalization focus their attention mostly on the processes of deterritorialization, aiming at highlighting the decline of territorial state as a fundamental condition for the loss of political control over economic processes. Despite the overall validity of such representations, regarding the dominant forms of politics that are most strongly represented in the territorial state, there is still the possibility of asking a question such as: when we say that the ability of politics to control the economy is in crisis, can we also say that this crisis is entirely due to the weakening of territorial state?

To attempt to answer such a question, it is important to first consider some of the implications of the current hegemony of neoliberal politics and its interaction with the technological deterritorialization of economic relationships. A real ‘double bind’ in politics seems to derive from these implications: on the one hand, the neo-liberal hegemony quite clearly demonstrates that the dominant forms of politics are now almost totally identified with economic policy; on the other hand, the link between neoliberalism and deterritorializing technologies deprives this policy of the possibility to fully express itself by effectively governing the economy. Here, indeed, it is not simply technological deterritorialization that produces this effect, but the fact that it is combined with the neoliberal de-nationalization of economic governance. These two factors, which radically question the ‘right’ of politics to be thoroughly economic, indirectly reveal its level of poverty and powerlessness, namely its inability to imagine itself in any other way than as a policy serving the interests of the economic forces. It seems unthinkable, in fact, that politics today would be able to reclaim its independence by radically opposing the supremacy of the economy. Now, if this is the situation, it can be assumed that the decline of territorial state contributes only in an ‘additional’ measure to the loss of political autonomy, which instead dates back to causes much more deeply rooted in our history.

In this sense, I would like to propose here the idea that of decisive importance, among these causes, was the progressive dissolution of the special relationship that political action originally had, rather than with the possession of a geo-political territory, with the availability of land as a resource intended for the ‘sustenance of life’.

2. The Parable of the ‘Rural Citizen’

The first point to make at this regard is rather elementary, but of utmost importance. We must remember, in fact, that the relationship between the freedom of political
action and the availability of agricultural land neatly characterized the entire Greco-Roman civilization. It is equally important to stress that, in this culture, the more political freedom could express itself as such, the more citizenship was practiced. In short, it was primarily citizen’s access to land that allowed politics to be carried out, through the citizens’ participation in public life, as an activity free from material worries and from the need of promoting the economic development of society. In this sense, it is essential to consider either that the typical forms of politics matured in the context of the city, and that in this context the civic community was formed primarily by farmers who were owners of much of the rural areas of the city, which also hosted - in Rome at least - an ager publicus available for collective purposes. Certainly, the precondition for the policy of the ancient city was a clear distinction between the public sphere of citizenship and the private sphere of the activities that had agriculture at their core. This distinction was based on the idea that political activity was ‘superior’ to other activities (including agriculture); therefore, men who entered the political sphere were mostly really free, remaining such by guaranteeing their independence from need thanks to, above all, the products of land. Additionally, this explains - although, of course, to our eyes there can be no justification - the fact that the greatest weight of farming and subsistence activities was borne by slaves. Free men could actively practice citizenship only if they were not affected by hard physical work. Aristotle goes so far as to argue that formally free manual laborers and merchants could not be fully recognized as citizens because they were too busy with their activities. Furthermore, merchants leaned also toward the unlimited acquisition of wealth, “an ignoble way of life and contrary to virtue”, which the citizen had to stay away from, focusing instead on the correct management of his assets with the aim of overcoming a needing condition and being able to participate in public life (ARISTOTLE 1991, 1253b-1258b, 1328b-1329a; ARENDT 1994, 18-27; STOLFI 2009; MARUZZI 1988).

Among the many authors who have clearly grasped the connection that was created between political citizenship and availability of agricultural land, Marx himself highlighted the clear difference that exists in this respect between the ancient world and later times, writing that “the history of classical antiquity is the history of the city, but a city based on land ownership and agriculture”; vice versa, “the starting point of the history of the Middle Ages (Germanic period) is the countryside; its further development then proceeds in the contrast between city and countryside”; finally, “modern history” is the “urbanization of the countryside, and not, as in ancient times, the ruralization of the city” (MARX 1970, 105).

Marx highlights another key aspect of the ancient city, saying that in it “it is not through the cooperation in wealth productive work that the member of the community regenerates himself, but with the cooperation in the work dedicated to the collective interests” (ibid., 102). Here, evidently, he is not capable of giving up his analytical framework based on the “centrality of work”, but in fact, speaking of “cooperation in the work dedicated to collective interests”, he is speaking of what the ancients meant by political participation: this included the willingness to defend the city by force of arms, but, in general, differed from the work itself. However, this participation did point at the production of wealth as much as the essential purpose of the use of agricultural land property was not enrichment. In fact, as Marx himself said, “among the ancients we never find a survey on what form of land ownership created more productive wealth, the greatest wealth. […] Surveys were always carried out to establish what form of property created the best citizens” (ibid., 111-112).
Even Max Weber (1979), reconstructing the historical cities types, indicates as essential the fact that “the true citizen of Antiquity was a ‘rural citizen’.”

If generally - he writes - it’s with reason that we consider the typical nowadays ‘citizen’ as an individual who does not meet his own food needs with his own farm, for most of the cities characteristic of Antiquity (poleis) the exact opposite was true. […] The citizen of antiquity originally had full rights, as opposed to the citizen of the Middle Ages, because of the fact that he was the owner of a fund (kleros), of a ‘fundus’, […] of an entire lot of land that fed him (ibid., 10).

It is clear, then, how politics has tended to lose its specificity and autonomy from economy since the relationship between the state of free citizens and the availability of agricultural land began to dissolve. The political crisis of the ancient city, a result of the royal and imperial dimension prevailing over the civic and republican ones, was probably one cause. But also decisive in this respect seems to have been what Marx called “the contrast between city and country”, which was created in the Middle Ages, when the ‘feudal’ dimension of the rural world and the ‘bourgeois’ dimension of the urban areas began to separate.

According to Otto Brunner (2000), rather than of a contrast, in the Middle Ages we should speak of a long coexistence of the rural “land lordship” and the “city community”, which - under the influence of Christianity - would for centuries still rest on the recognition of a right superior to both factors. Therefore, the author invites us not to interpret retrospectively the Medieval ‘dualism’ between city and country as the basis of the conflict between bourgeoisie and nobility, which led to the overthrow of feudalism. In his opinion, the coexistence between the rural world and the urban context was changed into a “legal separation between city and country” only after long transformations in which “the modern state in its making” played a decisive role, as it was interested in contrasting the local power of the nobles with the network of cities, including it in its absolutist system of power. Once a “national economy” in the modern sense” was created, the state would have then deposed both the rural land lordship and the urban community of any autonomy (ibid., 127-130).

Certainly, however, Brunner does not deny that the medieval city was progressively characterized by the prevalence of the “European trader” and the “free artisan guilds”, chief architects of the “European system of long-distance trade” as early as the Middle Ages (ibid., 126-127). This can also be explained by the fact that the inhabitants of the cities found in the difficult accessibility to land ownership - rigidly controlled by the bellicose rural lords - a great motivation for dedicating themselves to trading and manufacturing, which gave rise to the trading system. In the long run, this eventually influenced and weakened the rural lords’ relationship with the land, involving agriculture in the process of overcoming all limits of productivity, in order to send goods to ‘long-distance’ markets.

3. Lords and Merchants

As for that, it should be considered - at least in part - what Adam Smith (1950) wrote. In fact it helps us to focus first of all on the medieval lords’ relationship with the land and to avoid believing that it somehow perpetuated the relationship of the ancient free citizen with the urban countryside. At this regard, in fact, he says that in the Middle Ages, “the land was considered not just as a means of subsistence, but of power and protection”.
In those times of disorder, every large landholder was a sort of little prince. [...] He made war at his discretion, frequently against his neighbours, and sometimes against his sovereign. Therefore, the security of a land estate, and the protection which its owner could give to those who lived there, depended on its extension. To divide it meant to compromise it, exposing each of its parts to incursions of its neighbours, their oppression and usurpation. Therefore, the law of primogeniture [...] in the succession of lands was established for the same reason that it had been established in the succession of monarchies (ibid., 348).

As one can imagine, Smith's general purpose was not to understand why in the Middle Ages the direct relationship between the availability of agricultural land and free citizenship failed or weakened. His purpose, rather, was to highlight the way in which the development of capitalist economy took place in Europe; first of all, it moved the opposite direction with respect to the "natural course of things", or the pattern where "the majority of the capital of every society in development is directed primarily to agriculture, then to manufacturing, and, finally, to foreign trade" (ibid., 347). This order was "inverted" precisely due to the lord's ownership of land and, in particular, to the "law of primogeniture" and the resulting "inalienability" of the large estates. By impeding the commercialization of these lands, these factors prevented most of the inhabitants of the cities from engaging primarily in agriculture, pushing them to develop primarily factories and trade instead. The effects that followed, however, later reverberated in land tenure and agriculture itself. Trade and manufacturing - Smith says - "gradually provided the large landowners with something for which they could exchange all of the surplus produced by their land" (ibid., 373). Thus, they were driven to continually improve their income by reorganizing crops, and to gradually reduce the resources dedicated to the maintenance of "tenants and customers", in order to buy the most varied and sophisticated goods that "merchants and manufacturers offered them". Overwhelmed by these expenses, sooner or later, many of them ended up ruining themselves and having to "sell" their birthright (ibid., 374-375).

Satisfying the most childish vanity - says Smith - was the sole motive of the large estate-owners. The merchants and artisans, who were much less ridiculous, acted only in view of their personal interests, and congruently with their characterizing ideal, the one of getting a penny wherever a penny could be earned. None of the two groups understood nor intuited the great revolution which the folly of the one and the industry of the other were gradually causing. That is how it happened that in most of Europe the commerce and manufacturing of the cities, rather than being the effect, were the cause and the occasion for the improvement and cultivation of the countryside (ibid., 376).

Setting aside Smith's triumphalism, in his speech it is possible to distinguish the role that both the 'country gentlemen' and the 'city bourgeois' played in compromising the relationship between the agricultural use of land for the conservation of a decorous life and the opportunity to participate in political life. But this issue, in fact, has no place in Smith's fresco. Therefore, the expropriation of small farmers that took place since the 15th century appears here only in a veiled way and, moreover, as an "inevitable" result of the "enlargement of the farms" and the "improvement of crops", which the landlords were driven to by the "progressive" influence of merchants and manufacturers (ibid.). On the other hand, in his discussion there is no place for the destruction caused by the enclosures of the common land system that - from the Middle Ages up until his time - had guaranteed freedom from basic needs to an indefinite number of poor people, laborers, small landowners, tenants and even merchants and
craftsmen (see: MARX 2009, 900-919; NEESON 1996). Likewise, he does not take in any consideration the diversity (and problematic nature) of the experiences of citizenship and democracy in medieval cities; nor he pays any attention to the fact that these experiences and, above all, those of the ancient cities, inspired the English republicans of the 17th century, who - not by chance - identified the distribution of land and its non-commercial use as the bases for the political change they supported (HARRINGTON 1985; POCOCK 1980, 661-672; HYDE 2012, 100-105).

4. Property and Use

Although it may seem superfluous, in conclusion, it should be clarified that, far from wanting to re-enact *sic et simpliciter* the ‘rural city’ of antiquity, here instead it seems possible to recognize that it embodied the link between agricultural self-sufficiency and free citizenship, as an ‘anticipation’ of the ‘food sovereignty’ that nowadays, in respect of the upheavals caused by globalization, appears far more important than the ‘territorial sovereignty’ of a state unable to free itself from the imperatives of global economy. On the other hand, no apologia on land ownership can be traced in the argument I proposed here. Property - whether ‘private,’ ‘public’ or ‘common’ - in itself certainly constitutes neither a guarantee for, nor a bias against the proper use of land for the purposes of individual and collective political freedom. If it has historically been able to play a role at this regard, this happened to the extent that it eluded, on the one hand, its ‘feudal’ variations as an instrument of power and, on the other hand, its ‘commercial’ significance as a means of pure enrichment, exchange and speculation. These are issues that - of course - are not amongst the concerns of a writer like Smith nor - ultimately - amongst those of Marx, Weber or Brunner. Smith, however, as a forerunner of the political hegemony of economic liberalism, makes it possible for us to understand the ethical-political change that has been made in our history since the time when it started being possible to believe, without hesitation, that acting “only in view of the personal interest” is the trigger for a “development of prosperity” led by an
“invisible hand” that no political will should impede, if it does not want to jeopardize that development (Smith 1950, 409-410). It is significant, however, that Smith himself is not able to hide his concern for the inauspicious consequences deriving from the economic “great revolution” he mentions, if individual countries are unable to maintain their economy’s necessary link to agriculture:

The capital acquired by a country through trade and manufacturing is always a very precarious and uncertain possession until some of it has not been secured and realized in the cultivation and improvement of its land. A merchant […] is not necessarily the citizen of a particular country. He is largely indifferent to the place in which he runs his business, and a slight disgust will make him move his capital from one country to another and, together with the capital, the entire industry it supports (ibid., 379).

A rather euphemistic foreshadowing, but certainly an effective one, of our times of global ‘trade’ and land grabbing.

References

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Abstract

The emphasis we use today, speaking of the decline of territorial state as the main cause of the crisis of political autonomy with respect to economic forces, hides the fact that other very important factors contributed to the weakening of political autonomy since ancient times. In this article it is suggested that one of these decisively important historical causes was the dissolution of the relationship between the po-
itical action of the free citizen and his access to land as an agricultural resource, a
typical feature of the Greco-Roman civilization. Tracing the parable of this relationship
through the writings of authors such as Marx, Weber, Brunner and Smith, the main
factors of its dissolution can be identified in the separation between ‘rural lordship’
and ‘urban community’ that occurred in the Middle Ages, and in the rise of the liberal
market in which land was transformed into a commercial property and a means of
unlimited production, whereas the state became a political authority which had to
constantly satisfy the action of the ‘invisible hand’.

**Keywords**
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