



# **Metamorphosis of the State: Sovereignty, Administration and Social Alternatives. A Review of Studies**

VINCENZO MARIA DI MINO

Menfi, Italy

---

The fact that the State and its history belong, without any doubt, to the regularities of the political cycle is a given. The chaotic and whirling events that have taken place in the last two years, as a consequence of the global pandemic of Covid-19, have placed the action and the different functions of the State-form at the centre of the scene, in a sort of apparent 'discontinuity' with its merely executive and peripheral role within the polycentrism of global governance. In this context, questioning the articulations of State power means focusing on the entire field of *Politique*, including the social and institutional actors that interact within it. The linear link, historically and theoretically founded, between State and politics, today renewed by the health emergency, allows, from a critical position, to rethink some key concepts linked to that form of politics as a device of thought (as well as of action). Concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, mobilization, participation, and corruption are the expression of analytical concerns and everyday problems that cut across the entire political field. The books that will be discussed in the following text are part of the debates on these themes, providing a theoretical framework and restoring the tensions that run through the State-Machine and the social worlds. Moreover, these studies attempt to produce a discourse on possible alternatives to the current forms of politics, on the reform of its modes of operation, and on democratic ethics. The books are: *Dominer: Enquête sur la souveraineté de l'État en Occident* by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval; *Political Corruption: The Internal Enemy of Public Institutions* by Emanuela Ceva and Maria Paola Ferretti; *Policing Protest: The Post-Democratic State and the Figure of Black Insurrection* by Paul A. Passavant; *Feeling Like a State: Desire, Denial and the Recasting of Authority* by Davina Cooper; *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed the People: Food Not Bombs and the World-Class Waste of Global Cities* by David Boarder Giles; *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic* by Paolo Gerbaudo; and *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador* by Thea Riofrancos. These books tread the fine line between philosophical history and critical vocabulary, direct experience of participation in conflictual events and reformist planning, and offer readers and scholars



a series of transversal looks at the different facets of the State. The paper will be divided into three paragraphs, dedicated to the macro-themes that emerge from the books: the first will deal with the structural transformations of the State-Machine, the second with the practical modulations of political decisions, the third with alternatives, conflicts and mobilizations.

### **The Material Dimension of the State**

The first block of problems that emerge relate to the morphing of the State. The first issue is related to the concept of sovereignty, which in recent years and with great media hype, has returned as a divisive theme, a threshold along which to position oneself and create political surplus-value. This polarized debate between supporters of sovereignty, conceived as nationalist property, and supporters of the supranational order, and often degenerated into an arena of dialectical clashes between the various 'supporters', has completely obscured the real issues of the debate. To speak of sovereignty is to speak of the State, of a set of experiences and meta-historical elaborations, produced by political forces of opposite camps, which have modified and enlarged the operative force of this conceptual structure. And, at the same time, the binomial of State and sovereignty has been studied, from the point of view of the critique of social movements, as the connection of two mythologies, whose effects (among many, of course) include social and economic divisions. Dardot and Laval's masterly and theoretically exhaustive work places the genesis of the concept of sovereignty in the medieval period, lateral to the institutional development of the Roman Church as a spiritual authority that an author like Carl Schmitt would define as the State's reference model tout-court. Although the State-Machine is a typical product of Western modernity, it is nevertheless a fully-fledged part, together with the other actors belonging to the political field, of the theological-political dispositif. Sovereignty, in the sense outlined by both authors, is a fold of this device, because it materializes its force in the body of the King first, and then of the State. In Foucauldian terms, the modern State is only one of the configurations that the agonistic relationship between rulers and ruled can assume (Dardot/Laval 2020: 699-704). The link between *Vernunft* and *Gewalt*, between reason and force, the beating heart of State sovereignty, is the core that defines the field of options that arise in modernity, starting from two polarities: people and authority. Around them, in fact, the accents of the prevailing political interest are defined, at the individual-collective or State origin of the demands: on the one hand *Leviathan*, on the other the *volonté general*, under the sign of natural rights and the proprietary individual. In the midst of these dialectical poles, there emerges the art of government, the laboratory of weaving the different interests within the framework of State authority, and thus of writing and fixing the *Verfassung*, or material constitution, and the *Konstitution*, or the formal



document that sanctions the legitimacy of the State and guarantees its reproducibility. The names of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke emerge in the studies of Dardot-Laval and Gerbaudo as tutelary deities of sovereignty, declined in a positive and negative sense. For the French authors, sovereignty is only reproduced as vertical domination over the people and lower classes, and is inscribed in the plots of governmentality, the emergence of the individual owner and the bourgeoisie as a productive class and as political subjectivity tout court. In line with Brunner's studies on the historical dichotomy between classes and central authority, and with Schiera's studies on cameralism and *Polizeiwissenschaft*, developed in Germany between the 17th and 18th centuries, and in the wake of the pioneering Foucauldian studies on the founding link between *political economy* and *raison d'état*, the authors underline the role of this practice of government as the center of gravity of State sovereignty, in continuity with the affirmation of mercantile capitalism and the new administrative technologies. The sovereign machine, in this sense, enables economic accumulation and production, and creates infrastructures for the distribution of the wealth produced, as well as channelling different interests and social ties through the introduction of political representation. In this respect, the struggle for sovereignty becomes the struggle for control of the State: in the midst of the Enlightenment, the revolutionary doctrine of sovereignty emerges as an element of transformation and acceleration of material processes, the core of reforming actions and republican and democratic projects. And it is in this sense that sovereignty emerges again today as a stake in some forms of global social mobilizations. Gerbaudo recovers the entire democratic tradition of sovereignty, and inscribes it in a discursive order to criticise both the nationalist and ideological torsions of sovereignty, and the proclamations of the overcoming of the same concept in neo-liberal theorising (in authors such as Hayek and Nozick, for example) and in those discourses pertaining to the strand of 'globalism', that is, the acceptance *sic et simpliciter* of the Market order. In the words of the Italian sociologist the demand for sovereignty once again becomes a stake in political conflicts:

The present demand for the restoration of sovereignty- of the 'public soul of the commonwealth' to quote Hobbes-betokens a reaction to a world in which the lifting of the state intervention on the market has sown the seeds of social instability and economic insecurity. (Gerbaudo 2021: 92-93)

Similarly, Thea Riofrancos in her important study on the intersection between class conflict, ideological conflicts and indigenous claims, points out that the demand for sovereignty by social subjectivities aims at a different use of the State, which often exceeds it. This political surplus, although positioned within the semantic framework mentioned above, becomes synonymous with self-determination and self-organization, with collective processes of decision-making that are positioned beyond Statehood (we will return to these themes in more detail in the third section of this essay). What needs to be further stressed, returning to the theme of State structure, is the set of pressures to



which it is subjected in the context of the constant internationalization of its different functions. Gerbaudo uses the conceptual pair 'endopolitics'/'exopolitics' to capture these phenomena, and their impact on the definition of political strategies of government. The Hegelian quotation in the title of the book, in fact, refers to the 'absolute backlash' that the expansion of the State-Market gap has on the daily life of citizens, and to the double movement between Market and Democracy that Polanyi described in his works. For Gerbaudo, the 'global agoraphobia' is the consequence of a social and political malaise, which translates into a closure with xenophobic and protectionist overtones, whereby demands for social protection become, culturally and politically, processes of exclusion and control (2021: 65-67). The centripetal force of the Hayekian catallaxis, which constantly pushes authority towards the magnetic device of the global market, does not imply the complete abandonment of State functions, but their redefinition in accordance with the needs of international government networks. The State has been transformed into a fully-fledged modular machine, whose operational and constitutional strength is determined by global contingencies and their national articulations. Davina Cooper highlights the general effects of this metamorphosis:

Contemporary state fantasies evoke a global mosaic of large and small states, bounded, contiguous, and mostly touching. In this way, states are mapped along a horizontal plane. [...] States are also imagined vertically as a set of nested relationships, in which local state governments reside within provinces or states, which in turn combine to constitute federal states or supranational regional federations [...]. (2019: 83)

The assemblages of power, to use Saskia Sassen's words, territorialize and deterritorialize power relations, following the movements of economic and human flows. The capitalist *Gesamtprozess*, in fact, is the structural framework that guarantees the interoperability of power agencies, locally and globally. The spread of these fragments of the political assemblage re-articulates, at a multiscalar and highly distributed level, the administrative and order-guaranteeing functions. Consequently, the metropolis becomes, with a more accentuated role than in the past, the central node of the current configurations of political relations. Giles appropriately speaks of 'global cities', restating both the complexity and political stratification that materializes in urban space, and the social differentiation that these assemblages produce. The global city guarantees spatial continuity with the new international division of labour, and reproduces within itself the processes of deregulation, dispossession and marginalization of the weaker social strata (Giles 2021: 7ff). If the author photographs and describes the situation in Seattle, the object of his research, it is nevertheless a mirror of the current condition of global cities in general, vectors of *excess* and *waste* and, at the same time, territorial articulations of global governance. These different facets of the process of the transformation of the State, which respond to the dialectic between endopolitics and exopolitics, make up a broader picture, which is that of post-



democracy, or the gradual shift from democracy as a form of government linked to consensus and electoral legitimacy, to more abstract forms of streamlining administrative procedures linked to the supranational context and to diverse factors. Examples of the latter are financial ratings of national debt, changes in the value of the reference currency, agreements on climate and ecological disaster management, and the management of migration flows. The constant skirmishes between the two forms of the current (false) political dialectic, together with the depletion of the institutions directly linked to the will of the people, highlight the new attributes of the State-Machine. Sovereignty, emptied of popular legitimacy, is the expression of a political void that is sometimes filled by the intensive and continuous dissemination of media opinion, sometimes by the closure of spaces and the exaltation of national specificity, the cult of racial identity and cultural homogeneity. In the following section, the material effects and social costs of post-democratic policies will be discussed, as well as the impact on the administrative forms of the State.

### **The Everyday Horizon of Postdemocracy**

In the previous section, the concept of post-democracy was mentioned, which can be defined, starting from Colin Crouch's important study, as the process of separation of the *demos* from the collective space of the *polis*. This separation, while maintaining intact the procedural prerogatives of parliamentary and constitutional democracy, has accelerated the splitting between the sphere of decision-making and the sphere of participation. The other fundamental effect of this transformation has been the autonomization of government executives from the remaining parliamentary bodies and the organs of social mediation (parties and trade unions, for example). Corollary to this notion is the parallel concept of 'de-constitutionalization', namely the further disengagement of legislative and normative production, and of the more general organizational direction, from its material foundations. If, historically, the constitution was an organic and dynamic synthesis of the different classes and social interests, today it has lost this function of balance and stability, maintaining itself as a formal (and empty) device for legitimizing existing political dynamics. Clearly, the compression of the material political dialectic within society resulted in the neutralization of conflictual drives, which were absorbed into the pacifying bed of civil society, and produced a greater social divide between classes. The dominance of global economic, political and cultural elites is a solid reality, and has become common sense in some sectors of public opinion. This vertical dimension of global governance, which tends to be oligarchic, as Gerbaudo so aptly argues, has taken two prevalent forms: authoritarian populism and progressive neoliberalism. It is precisely the latter, by combining emancipatory impulses of a progressive and 'leftist' nature with an accentuated economic liberalism, that has



succeeded in absorbing criticism of the iniquity of neo-liberalism and has thus weakened the corrosive force of the critical proposals themselves (Gerbaudo 2021: 86). In the discursive and political constructions of center and right-wing populism, specularly akin to leftist discourse, the critique of the global devices of accumulation and production of inequalities is linked to the artificial production of enemy subjects and dangerous classes. The specter agitated by centrist conservatives and extremists (and, in some way, by certain sectors of the left), is that of globalism, understood as a process of global standardization of differences of national identity. The economic and political elites are seen as part of an overall project of eradicating identity and tradition driven by the volatility of financial exchanges, and thus leading racism back to one of its most classic frames, anti-semitism (Gerbaudo 2021: 169-82). A common sense that is genuinely critical of globalist elitism and its national articulations, having cleared away the dangerous reactionary rantings and *völkisch* criticisms of capitalism, must focus on the systemic effects of liberal technocracy, which the pandemic has accentuated and accelerated. The verticalization of political and administrative action has, in fact, sanctified the role of the bureaucratic corpus, the officium and the technician as the elements that resolve crises and failures produced by politics and politicians. In fact, the German political scientist Claus Offe, in the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s, rightly identified the bureaucratic colonization of the social sphere by the administration as a salient element of the State within the emerging neo-liberal financial globalization, as a suturing element of the crisis of legitimacy of constituted institutions. These processes of an intensive rationalization of bureaucratic practices have brought about a series of automatisms in the administrative and social machinery, such as to transform any element of collective mobilization and transformation into elements of compatibility for intra-systemic stability. Within the immobility of the administrative structure, corruption reproduces itself as an element of stabilization and, paradoxically, of turnover of bureaucratic personnel. Corruption is not simply a local *vulnus* in the network of bureaucratic power, it is an endemic Trojan Horse, which involves the whole structure, conditions its efficiency and, above all, makes it alien to the needs of the citizens. Weber's bleak prophecy of the 'steel cage' thus captures the oligarchic nature of current political arrangements. Further, from a Marxian perspective, corruption reproduces the mechanisms of value production through monetary exchanges, contributing to the volatility of rights and administrative benefits, and to the production of surplus value on a social scale. The neo-liberal restructuring of the State apparatus, by extra-legally connecting different elitist oligarchies (political, economic and criminal), has certainly accelerated the infiltration and private use of the administrative machine, thus highlighting the 'constituent' nature of corruption within political relations. Emanuela Ceva and Maria Paola Ferretti's book analyses the common roots of different forms of corruption by comparing some recurrent types of corruption. The taxonomy that the two authors construct is composed of three elements: summative corruption,



morphological corruption and systemic corruption. The first type refers to the summation of multiple individual misconducts, the second to the chain of command involving all components of an administrative structure, and the third combines the first two within an overall heuristic and hermeneutic framework (Ceva/Ferretti 2021: 62-70). Consequently, corruption has effects not only in the correct functioning of the bureaucratic machine, but mainly as an element capable of invalidating the distribution of socially constituted justice. Ceva and Ferretti elaborate this definition of their object of study:

Political corruption has in some cases the heuristic function of revealing underlying injustices at the institutional level [...] To bring political corruption into focus as an object of public ethics on its own terms means to look at this phenomenon as a specific instance of institutional wrongdoing [...] The interactive justice that would be secured by resisting corruption is in tension with the end-state justice that giving in to corruption would (most likely) realize. (2021: 112-13)

The administrative and institutional effect of corruption goes hand in hand with its material effects on the social milieu. The concept of biopolitics, at this level, is the operator that allows for the connection of the financialization of bureaucratic action with the overall dimension of economic processes that materialize daily: extractivism, privatization, social control. The strong link that unites, without interruption, economic production, political engineering and social mapping is manifested in multiple devices and technologies of government. In the first case, extractivism can be configured as a set of practices of predation and dispossession of the commons, both through the production of enclosures, as well as through an *ad hoc* regulatory production, aimed at facilitating the granting of public resources to private economic agencies. The spaces involved in these dynamics are natural and urban ones, 'captured' as productive bodies in their specificity, therefore able to organize specific value chains and spatial logistics. Thea Riofrancos analyzes the variations in intensity of extractivist devices in the case of oil resource management in the context of Ecuador, put in place by the government to overcome the dichotomy between development and underdevelopment, and make the country independent, both energetically and economically. More precisely, with the concept of 'post-desarrollism', economists and politicians try to leverage development cycles between ecologism, democratization, diffusion of decision-making dynamics and protection of the weaker classes and minorities. In this sense, for Riofrancos, 'petro-nationalism' is the attempt to link these factors, declined through a mix of left populism and socialism, through the process of partial socialization of resources resulting from the hydrocarbon trade. Extractivism, at this point, constitutes the point of balance between the definition of popular policies, oriented to the ecological transition and greater autonomy of indigenous peoples, present in the territories affected by economic



processes, and the technical governance of the processes, located in the post-democratic sphere. The author defines this dialectic as follows:

This multifaceted confrontation, between past and future, between extraction and post-extraction, is particularly intense for the bureaucrats stationed in the provinces directly affected by mining projects [...] Environmental and indigenous activists note that these socio-economic gains posed a symbolic and practical challenge to broad-based mobilization against resource extraction – especially to including the urban mestizo populations in cities. (Riofrancos 2020: 68-71)

The intersection of these dynamics, and their problematic State management, has produced a stalemate, in which the gap between social demands, bureaucratic corruption and State legislation has widened. The ecological impact of extractivism, connected with the exhaustion of the petro-nationalist political cycle, moreover, has amplified the biopolitical scope of these phenomena, and has increased the harmful impacts on life, health and economic well-being of indigenous populations and metropolitan marginalized groups. Similarly, extractive processes work at a molecular level on the metropolitan fabric, through the aesthetic requalification of urban spaces and the policies of confinement and exclusion of large segments of the resident population. Both Passavant and Giles describe these situations in the context of post-democracy, of which phenomena such as gentrification are a part. Passavant frames the racial declination of social control, constitutive element of metropolitan governance; Giles focuses on exclusion and waste understood as material and social surplus, to be neutralized and placed at the limits of the new neo-liberal urban space. Passavant, in particular, concentrates on the 'aesthetic' dimension of government, using the dichotomy analyzed by Jacques Rancière between *politique* and *police*, where the former is the expression of politics as dissent (*mésentente*), and the latter embodies the State assumptions of discipline and control. The shift to the police incentivizes the authoritarianism and personalism of governance, based on subjects and programs devoted to zero tolerance and the securitarian management of social issues. Passavant asserts that problems located along the line of race are managed through the massive use of law enforcement, the dissemination of emergency measures, and the use of physical violence and incarceration as deterrents to racial uprisings. As the author writes:

The process of hosting NSSEs and their repetition, then, has facilitated a vertical dissemination of security arrangements for policing protest, and has stimulated a post-democratic, post legitimation model of policing protest that remains institutionalized within a city after the event, and becomes further developed by hosting subsequent events thereafter. (2021: 94)

Grafting the social crisis onto the economic one, the policing of urban space represents an attempt at social sanitation through the legal use of force by security



agencies. The emergency, clearly, occurs as a technique of government that tends to compress the expression of dissent in public space, divides and administers it through criminal sanctions and spatial discipline in the suburbs, and deletes it through the circuit of the criminal *golden gulags*, to use the categories of Ruth Wilson-Gilmore. It can be pointed out how biopolitics reproduces itself on singular bodies, as a power able to sanction counter-productive conducts for the sake of social order and stability. Davina Cooper studied the impact of the communicative and political agencies of conservative Christians on the production of legislation concerning abortion and the recognition of gender rights, highlighting how they pushed to increase the 'pastoral' power of governance, to maintain a stable and productive hold on bodies and social behaviours. The State, in this sense, operates through the function of *fictio iuris* capable of equalizing the different potentials of bodies, including them differentially in networks and public spaces, and modulating their capacity for expression in accordance with the prevailing social order. As can be seen from the case studies analyzed by Cooper, the political vacuum produced by the asymmetry between rulers and ruled can only be saturated by the action of the latter, in this sense aimed at limiting power over bodies. In order to frame these characteristics of the post-democratic State, it can first be pointed out that one of the plots of this warp is the neutralization and depoliticization of public space, and its subsequent administration in terms of an emergency perspective. The emergency produces a social mixture of frustration and anger, which is channeled through police instruments and the production of deviance and marginality, 'waste', to use Giles' category. Abjection, according to this author (and in the wake of Julia Kristeva's fundamental study), is the object of government and of a pietistic and humanitarian gaze, which requires a specific social orthopedics that often results in the construction of a police and disciplinary order, and an ad hoc social mobility that feeds the networks of value. At the same time, and on all fronts discussed so far, there are possibilities for reformism and radical transformations of the State and the common political space that these studies analyze, in different forms, and which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Which Politics within the Post-Democratic State?**

At this point in the discussion, we can turn to the political proposals made by the studies under consideration. These proposals range from the reactivation of an ethics of public administration to concrete proposals for the democratization of social space, to innovation through alternative legal practices, to mutualism and widespread antagonistic conflicts. They highlight both the conditions of a possible reformist action, internal to the State or inserted in a radical institutional horizon, and the processes of



subjectivation of antagonism, which are placed in open opposition to the structures of governance as an effective and material counterpower.

Ceva and Ferretti, in their analysis of the figures and mechanisms of corruption as a material internal enemy of democracy and equity, highlight the need for legal mechanisms to combat corruption, both in terms of redistributive or corrective justice and in terms of new ethical obligations for the administration. At the same time, the two authors also highlight the risks latent in purely legalistic approaches, namely the discretionality in the attribution of (eventual) criminal responsibility and the construction of the scapegoat on which to lay all the blame. In these types of approach to the phenomenon, in fact, there is a lack of a systemic vision on the mechanisms of corruption, which is countered only through the hypertrophic production of *ad hoc* regulations (Ceva/Ferretti 2021: 172-75). On the contrary, the new ethical obligation must be based on concrete forms of justice, with which to proceed to the distribution of responsibilities among officeholders: the interactive and widespread dimension of corruption, based on the pursuit of personal goals, must be replaced by an ethics of institutional responsibility that operates through the principles of restorative justice. What emerges from Ceva and Ferretti's discussion, again in Weberian tones, is the need for an ethical reformism, nourished by the principle of equality and a sense of duty on the part of the agencies that make up the public administration, to restore an institutional environment impervious to corruption (2021: 194-96). In this sense, the normative point of view used by the two authors to analyze corruption as an internal enemy clearly highlights one of the main vulnerabilities of the democratic structure, which is the thin line that unites and divides public and private interests, and at the same time tries to reconnect the ethics of public service with the democratic one. The connection between these two ethics, in fact, is a reformist corrective to the crisis of legitimacy of the institutions, which corruption has accelerated and continues to fuel. The proposals put forward by Gerbaudo move in the direction of such democratic renewal, within the post-neoliberal stasis: this author, in fact, talks about sovereignty as an alternative, through the political prism of democratic socialism. Drawing heavily on Gramsci's conceptual grammar, Gerbaudo primarily highlights the need for a new social block, for new alliances between the different fragments of the labour force, the urban middle class and the diffuse social movements (feminist and ecological movements, for example). In this sense, it is a question of mobilizing this social composition on the Left, both in 'horizontal' terms, by enlarging the area of consensus of this bloc, and in 'vertical' terms, by opposing it to the dominant classes, so as to be able to combat both the distortions of common sense and social inequalities (Gerbaudo 2021: 166-67). The polarization that the author presents, the 'classic' (and pedagogically expendable) one of the fight against the elites, both globalist and nationalist, allows him to articulate a draft program centered on social protection, on the centrality of the nation-State as a barrier to financial flows and neo-liberal policies, intensified by the pandemic and the crisis as a



continuous art of government. The points listed by Gerbaudo to accelerate the crisis of the old and affirm the realization of the new, to return to Gramsci and the metaphor of the 'interregnum', are derived from the socialist and republican tradition of the twentieth century, but acquire a renewed validity in the present context: redistribution, equity, protection of the weakest, political protagonism of the subalterns. Finally, seeing the State as the central actor of political life, Gerbaudo superimposes political reforms and social transformation, illuminating precisely the contradictions of State policies as opportunities for change in the wake of the democratization of collective life. It is at the same time important to emphasize, as a pivotal element in the Italian sociologist's work, the attempt to restore the primacy of politics, the *politique d'abord* of the social-democratic tradition, whose efforts are aimed at the realization of an integral democracy that is open, supportive and inclusive.

Davina Cooper's analysis also moves within the perimeter of State coordinates, but with a focus on the concept of 'play' as a political experience operating at the intersection of bodies and State. In this sense, play is a performative political practice, borrowed from Judith Butler's important reflections on the transgressions of 'bodies that matter': an infra-political practice that traverses all levels of State structure and society, which transforms its own milieu of belonging, starting from the transformations of bodies. Cooper focuses on legal practices as experiences of friction and conflict, focusing on the strength that legal institutionalism can assume as a democratic practice, able to stand alongside the State regulatory monopoly. Along the lines opened up by Bourdieu's legal studies, for Cooper law, as a social practice, acquires force when it is used collectively, because the effects of the *force du droit* can thus also be extended to a 'tactile' and physical level. Cooper speaks, in this sense, of an 'erotic life of States', starting from the configuration that legal and normative practices assume in the assemblages she analyses, especially with regard to the legal devices that apply to marginal subjectivities. Power over bodies and spaces of desire can be transformed through legal experience, that is, through a normative force that moves on an alternative plane (Cooper 2019: 139-41). The strength of bodies, as can be seen in Cooper's discussion of legal cases, lies in the radical imagination they express in the politics of transformation in the everyday, which they try to translate into a counter-hegemonic force that moves in parallel with the State through experimental and horizontal practices. These bodies disciplined by the State, for Cooper, at the same time produce new forms of responsibility, *ethopoietique* in Foucault's words, created by the events they experience, and transform this same potential into institutional forms that are mutable, mobile and reversible, but endowed with strength and capable of generating processes of subjectivation (2019: 164-69). The coalition of 'desiring' bodies, in fact, escapes the capture mechanisms of sovereign authority, and constitutes other forms of *commune*, and this, in fact, is also the heart of the theoretical project pursued by Dardot and Laval,. Both authors stress the need for a new political grammar that recovers



revolutionary theoretical and political experiences, and opposes all facets of State sovereignty. The theoretical background of the book could be summarized as follows: *pour en finir avec la souveraineté étatique*, and with the representations of this power. But at the same time, they also pose the fundamental question: what is there beyond the State? The theoretical genealogy of the two French scholars leaves no room for doubt: the founding expression of the sovereignty of the people is situated in the gap between the different forms of sovereignty, including experiments in revolutionary sovereignty, and is irreducible to all representations. The shift from the public interest (postulated by the French institutional school of Hauriou and Duguit) to the common interest in fact marks the limit of reformist and republican experiences, and paves the way for experiments in collective self-government, the cornerstone of which is the Paris Commune, at the crossroads of the debates between Marx, Bakunin and Kropotkin. The authors define 'realized' popular sovereignty in these terms:

Quand nous parlons de la souveraineté populaire, ce n'est ni la souveraineté de l'Etat, ni la souveraineté du peuple [...] [L]a souveraineté populaire renvoie à ce peuple qui est acteur de la souveraineté, non au peuple comme mystérieux sujet de la souveraineté. (Dardot/Laval 2020: 693-94)

The bond that is formed between social actors, outside of State covenants and constraints, constitutes a new form of obligation called co-obligation, namely a bond that binds subjectivities within the *commun*, understood as the origin and product of the founding activity:

L'obligation du commun est également une obligation politique mais en un sens nouveau: elle procède d'une responsabilité à l'égard des conditions d'habitabilité de la Terre pour tous les vivants. Elle ne dissocie pas l'obligation des hommes les uns à l'égard des autres de l'obligation des hommes à l'égard de ces conditions. (Dardot/Laval 2020 : 694-95)

The principle of responsibility enunciated by Cooper assumes, in this form, the force of a constituent principle, with which to plan the transformation of society, moving beyond the lines of State sovereignty or those of the market. The path outlined by Dardot and Laval, which cannot be reproduced in all its richness, allows us to move with a compass within the minefields of power, and to bring out the conflicts, the splits, the experiences of self-government that break with reformist (and radical) experiments, to affirm instead the constituent force of social countervailing powers, of class, gender and race struggles, of ecological struggles, which delineate the field of political and social autonomy of subalterns and marginal subjectivities. What have previously been called processes of subjectivation of antagonism find their place in the books of Riofrancos, Giles and Passavant in a true geographical and social cartography of struggles. Observing the concrete making of antagonist subjectivity in different contexts (Ecuador, Seattle and the anti-racist mobilizations), the three scholars outline the framework and



field of struggles today, showing the strength and weakness of subjectivities, practices and organizational forms, desires and claims obtained through mobilizations, and highlighting, above all, their social legitimacy. As a matter of fact, the field outlined by these studies is that of anti-capitalism as the ideological background of the mobilizations, just as the points of view of all three scholars are explicitly located within the very processes they study. Straddling the line between co-research and ethnography, the militant ethics of these analyses restore to readers and scholars the climate of the mobilizations, the joy in organizing the battles, the strength of the movements in continuing to pursue their goals. And three specific subjective (and objective) figures of antagonism emerge from these books: the indigenous struggles (in Riofrancos' work), the experiments in mutualism and autonomous solidarity in the cities (in Giles' work), and the perennial specter of 'black insurrection' (in Passavant's work).

In the first case, Riofrancos highlights the conflictual dialectic between the Ecuadorian State and the set of organizations and social actors, initially aligned within the same 'leftist' camp, but later increasingly at odds over the strategic significance of the role and functions of economic development, mainly linked to resource extraction. The author studies the limits of 'petro-nationalism', of the specific function of redistribution of profits derived from the sale and nationalization of natural resources implemented during the left turn of the governments of South American countries during the first decade of the 21st century, and of the set of bottom-up democratization experiments that took place within the governmental decision-making arenas. Consequently, Riofrancos highlights the shift from popular participation in the resource management process to criticism and anti-extractive resistance carried out against governments themselves, thus materializing the new division of the political field between 'left-in-power' and 'left-in-resistance' (Riofrancos 2020: 168). The characteristic of this 'left-in-resistance', in fact, is the critique of extractivism as an expression of the cycle of 'dependency' and 'underdevelopment' generated by the market, which takes on ecological and classist dimensions through the claiming of the decision-making autonomy over indigenous territories traversed by infrastructures and the very processes of private accumulation of resources. Antagonistic political assemblages take the form of a countervailing power based mainly on the principle of *buen vivir*, borrowed from indigenous peoples, which lends itself to the construction of experiments of redistribution and collective participation that prefigure what Riofrancos calls a 'post-extractive utopian vision' (2020: 178). In this context, it is of interest to list the organizational characteristics of these conflictual assemblages: they are 'collective subjects of resistance', whose political protagonism emerges within the struggles, which affectively involve the communities affected by the economic processes, and whose main characteristic is their territorial rooting. And, in the author's words, the political horizon of these struggles must be the direct struggle for power, that is, the shift from positions of resistance to the quest for political hegemony. This, in fact, is a goal to



be achieved by broadening the spectrum of the anti-extractivist coalition to urban popular sectors. This form of subjective organization is necessary to claim a specific decision-making capacity based on alliances between metropolitan realities and peasant and indigenous realities, on the construction of new identities and new collective interests, centered on solidarity as a practice of conflict (2020: 181). In this scenario, the countervailing power manifests itself as a popular constituent force, which directly and forcefully opposes the projects of the Pink-Left and takes the power to decide for itself (2020: 105), through the recognition of differences, the dissemination of information, and, where necessary, the collective use of the force of the demos against State or private actors.

The metropolitan dimension of countervailing power is at the heart of Giles' reflections, whose preferred subject of analysis is Food Not Bombs, an organization dedicated to guaranteeing meals and assistance through the recovery of waste and resources. This grassroots organization exists in the major global cities and connects activists, residents, the poor and marginal subjectivities within urban spaces, and gives life to self-organization experiments rooted in the folds of capitalist consumption, which at the same time go beyond it, through the 'reactivation' of waste and the construction of paths of mutualism and solidarity. The practice of FNB is immediately conflictual, because it is centered on the radically alternative use of bodies in public space, on forms of communication that connect performance, conflict and the re-appropriation of urban spaces as common spaces, and on eco-sustainable practices, based on the recovery of the rubbish produced by consumerism. The shift of the 'margins' to the center of public space is productive of political tensions, both in terms of political repression by the authorities and in terms of the spread of cooperative practices. The autonomy of these practices of solidarity is expressed through horizontal organizational forms, which the author describes through the conceptual prism of 'slow insurrection', which has its roots in the 'war machines' postulated by Deleuze and Guattari and in the concept of 'autonomy' postulated by Zibechi:

Cultivated over decades, this nonviolent, decentralized escalation is what I call slow insurrection [...] What I argue is that elements of Food Not Bombs are often organized, provoked and amplified by the efforts of city governments to suppress them. Their slow insurrection is an affective dynamo, which in turns reconfigures the possibilities for an urban politics across two distinct arenas, both directly confronting state power in the public realm and remaking everyday life in other, counter public spaces. (Giles 2021: 169)

FNB's strength lies in the mimetic practices it uses to hide between the folds of governance, and in the micropolitical coordinates of slow insurrection. This concept theoretically conceptualizes the multiplicity and richness of 'transversal' countervailing power practices, highlighting their affective dimension and emergent properties through



a multi-scalar perspective capable of bringing out the irreducibility to a single node of subjective multiplicity. The organization analyzed by Giles is *sauvage* (to use the words of Clastres quoted by Giles himself) because it is ontologically multiple, flexible and deterritorialized, because it goes beyond the simple summation of individual parts, and connects and aggregates marginal singularities through carnivalesque and spectacular 'events' with which they subvert the order of neoliberal poverty by constructing moments of 'rhizomatic' mutualism (2021: 176-78). These libertarian 'new politics of surplus' bring out unprecedented forms of resistance and conflict, which transform waste and abjection into moments of organization and peaceful insurrection, with which to give 'voice' and space to those marginalized groups that populate the metropolises (2021: 246-48), and to give shape to effectively anti-capitalist politics in the everyday space of the 'here and now', escaping the rhetoric of humanitarian reason and the spectacle of assistance.

In Passavant's words, the autonomy of black insurrection is the nightmare of American democracy (and, one might say more generally, of colonial and post-colonial democracies), because it is seen as the only force capable of destroying the devices for controlling and governing differences. By highlighting the link between the crisis of democracy, governmental racism and the militarization of law and order, the author uncovers the potential of conflict on the color line precisely through the centrality it assumes, both in determining repressive responses by law and order agencies and, more importantly, in determining antagonistic coalitions. The metaphor of the 'black insurrection', in fact, indicates the process of subjectivation that starts from racial issues, but which widens and spreads over the entire political terrain, both through widespread riots (as in the demonstrations linked to Black Lives Matter) and through the construction of a counter-power in the cities (following the example of the practices of the Black Panthers). The ontological condition of blackness is, at the same time, its extremely subversive force:

"Blackness", Wilderson argues, "is constituted by violence in the ontological first instance." [...] Blackness is without social relationality, is outside the symbolic authority or recognition, is beyond intra-civil society discursive relations or communication, and is constitutively nonsubjectivized and thus beyond Human empathy. As theorized by Afro-pessimism, Blackness is perpetually exposed to gratuitous violence, and its social death is the condition of possibility for the state and civil society (Passavant 2021: 208-09),

because it is, as Passavant clearly says, the condition of possibility of the State. Reversing the terms of the argument, at this point, the black insurrection is the figure of possible political autonomy because it contains within itself, in Fanonian terms, the seeds of its own liberation. In this sense, the relationship of political antagonism that movements such as BLM entertain with State authorities is clear, because they are expressions of



opposing visions of democracy and the State. The success of present and future mobilizations, for the author, must be the result of a socialization of racial issues within the more general social problems caused by post-democracy (2021: 237). The specter of insurrection, further, is a *hauntologie*, a projection that lives suspended between past and future, with which to revive the power and density of previous cycles of racial and class struggles, and which police departments materialize in the most varied devices for controlling subjectivities. But, as Passavant argues, it is precisely from the material conditions of exclusion of racial communities and subjectivities that we can build pathways of coalition with which to resist police control and State violence, claiming the right to live freely. In the words of bell hooks, only the coalitions of the different excluded marginal segments can open up concrete spaces of freedom, which, by waving the ghost of revolt, can challenge governmental authority. The figure of the black insurrection, in conclusion, is the figure of the latent and potential force of the subaltern and dangerous classes, which can always become a collective subjectivity and, therefore, corrode the power of the State.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we must tragically look at the winds of war that are shaking the eastern borders of the European continent, and at the vicious circle that these wicked actions have triggered: humanitarian crisis, xenophobia, war rhetoric and, above all, the need to side with one of the two contenders on the field. As we have tried to observe above, the *sancta sanctorum* of the State contains many mysteries, and one of these is war, which indeed shows its criminogenic and necro-political nature: war legitimizes, historically, the crises of consent of the governed and accelerates the transformation of States of emergency and exception into the new political normality. But, at the same time, the war shows the 'nakedness of the king', to quote H. Dabashi who, referring to Ernst Cassirer, speaks of the 'mythology of the State' to thematize the failure of the nation-State, due to the impossibility of realizing its 'vital' promises of prosperity and development. Nationalism, the rhetorical weapon most often used in crisis contexts, as pointed out, can become the cause of an enormous social butchery, of a race to the slaughter between populations. Criticizing the current state of democracy, as we have tried to do using the work of the authors discussed here, in times of war means denouncing the historical link between the State and the market and their 'divarication' from the needs of the governed through the unequal distribution of common wealth and the arbitrary use of force in wartime contexts and in the management of internal dissent. For me, criticizing the drifts to war of post-democracy and the effects of nationalism means transforming the potential for indignation of the mobilizations of these days into a concrete force of a political alternative to what exists. Only by developing their own political grammar and



institutional forms can antagonistic movements create spaces for democracy through conflict and widespread mobilization. And, in conclusion, only by rooting their practices in the affects and moods of subjectivities can they socialize their proposals, and transform the perennial crisis into a condition of opportunity for a structural transformation of the State.

### Works Cited

- Ceva, Emanuela, and Maria Paola Ferretti (2021). *Political Corruption: The Internal Enemy of Public Institutions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, Davina (2019). *Feeling Like a State: Desire, Denial and the Recasting of Authority*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval (2020). *Dominer. Enquête sur la souveraineté de l'Etat en Occident*. Paris: La Decouverte.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo (2021). *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*. London and New York: Verso.
- Giles, David Boarder (2021). *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed the People: Food Not Bombs and the World-Class Waste of Global Cities*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Passavant, Paul (2021). *Policing Protest: The Post-Democratic State and the Figure of Black Insurrection*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Riofrancos, Thea (2020). *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham: Duke University Press.