

MARCELLO TANCA

CONTROVERSY OF MODERN AND POST-MODERN GEOGRAPHERS

By quoting my article *Geografia e filosofia* alongside with Alessandra Bonazzi's *Manuale di geografia culturale*, Matteo Marconi honours me twice. I want to thank him for putting me side by side with Alessandra, and of course I share his reminder about the opportunity of using critical instruments of philosophical origin in geography to solve some complex theoretical issues. I'm deeply convinced that not only geography has nothing to envy to other social sciences, and could aspire on being on the same level with them and with philosophy; but also I think that today, far from its old passive role towards the production of knowledge, which was due to the reflexive unproductivity that forced it to import ideas and concepts from other areas of knowledge (Warf, Arias 2008), it can finally claim a strategic role as an exporter of useful models and metaphors to work out the infinite variety of the world. After this much due premise, I still have to admit that I'm not completely convinced that the inclusion of philosophical notions and quotations in our "toolbox" is enough to guarantee the feasibility of "good geographies". On this point, I agree with Giuseppe Dematteis, who, commenting on some excerpts from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, wrote that «the belief of a solely physical and human geography, separated from "mental geography", is not only scarcely useful, but detrimental» and so, conversely, a mental-only geography is also impracticable, because it lacks all those qualities that make geography interesting to humans, «who need a piece of Land to know the invisible» (Dematteis 2003, p. 66 and 70).

For this reason, since some misunderstanding about my work's goals may rise, I want to be clear about some dangerous equivocations that are potentially lurking in Marconi's paper. The first one is: when in *Geografia e filosofia* I talk about the "eccentric thesis", I'm indeed talking about the desire to build a first, imperfect bridge between philosophy and geography, which are, still today, seen as reciprocally extraneous semantic fields. The eccentricity of this project derives from its being an intent to put a remedy to the delay with which the «profound conceptual and methodological renaissance that has transformed it [i.e. human geography] into one of the most dynamic, innovative and influential of the social sciences» (Warf, Arias, 2008, p. 1) was received by the Italian academic world. I do not intend, then, to profess my faith as a post-modern. The same controversy between moderns and post-moderns has grown old precociously (in philosophy we are already talking about *nouveau réalisme*, cfr. Ferraris, 2012) and as such it should be dismissed. But since I've been called in the controversy, and I feel a bit

like that character cited in Saramago's *Baltasar and Blimunda's* exergue, who, to those asking him, «Where are you going, my friend? », answered «I'm not going anywhere. They're taking me by force», I will try to express my point.

Marconi's main thesis seems to be the following: the geography that intercepts post-modernity presents itself as “eccentric” and “heretic”, but this eccentricity and heresy are just apparent, and at the most a revamping operation. Deep inside, the postmodern geographer who quotes Foucault, Harvey, and the *New Cultural Geography*, maybe even professing his faith in deconstructionism, is not alien from compromises with the regime of truth of modernity, and this makes that subversive and/or critical charge he says he wants to practice towards the existent (towards power relationship, domination discourses, etc.) a flash in the pan. In fact, he injects in his work a virus whose dangerousness is so elevated that it comes out as lethal: after reducing reality to a mere subjective “point of view” (so that “every entity is measured on the basis of the position of the observer”), without a paradigm of truth, the post-modern geographer is but replicating, unwarily of course, but not for this reason less culpably, all those defects he wanted to distance: the thirst for domination, the will of power, the «hegemonic and homogenizing» way of thinking and so on; all these typical traits of modernity. There is then full continuity between modern and post-modern, also in geography; the latter being nothing more than the prosecution, with other instruments, of that perverted logic that tends to subdue all the other entities to man. The conclusion is only one: he who aims at eccentricity really is the most conformist of all; his critique tends to maintain unaltered the status-quo, to “normalise” reality through that order and that power that (apparently) he wanted to fight.

Now, it's Umberto Eco who wrote in the *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* that: «Thus, with the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it, but with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously» and I think Marconi fell into this trap, and took things too seriously, exercising in an essay of that “mental-only” geography we were talking about at the beginning. My impression is that controversies like these, if they have a sense as long as they are developed on the plan of principles, of theoretical conflicts, of conceptual metaphors and rhetorical and persuasive strategies, lose it –or assume another– precisely when we put them in the context of a concrete geography, which is also, apart from mental, physical, and human. As the saying goes, the fault lies at the top, and this seems evident to me if we look at the solution proposed by Marconi (in the fact that this solution comes before, and not after, this reasoning): implanting heavy doses of Heidegger in geographical speculation. But Heidegger here is the classical sickness that wants to be the cure, since he is one of the sources post-moderns took abundantly from to build part of their fortune. Typically Heideggerian, rather than strictly post-modern, is for example the interpretation of modernity as a compact, linear and homogenous path, without cracks, where it is possible to find a

common direction. But, it hurts me to say so, fascinating as this might be, this reading is completely unfounded on a historiographical plan: if there is a common trait that characterizes modernity is precisely the sense of uncertainty provoked by scientific and geographic discoveries that smashed down, one after the other, all the paradigms on which the image of the known world and the universe was established: the discovery of unknown lands, the negation of the immobility of the Earth and its centrality in the solar system, as well as the finite character of the universe. The consequences were devastating: all that men had kept for most secure, and that alimeted anthropocentrism, disappeared: «the new philosophy calls all in doubt [...] tis all in pieces, all coherence gone»; the author of these expressions of dismay is not a post-modern, but John Donne, contemporary of Shakespeare. He is echoed by Pierre Borel, author of the *Discours nouveau prouvant la pluralité des mondes* (1657): «we are forced to admit that what we know is much less than what we ignore». This is so different from the triumph of the “will of power” of the man-entity that Heidegger wished for! In short, far from being the age of certainty and of subject metaphysic, modernity is, on the contrary, the age of precariousness, insecurity and mismatch.

But, leaving this apart for a moment, the fact is –and here we come at the decisive point– the maximum a Heideggerian geography can aspire to is to configure itself as a geophilosophy, that is to say, a “mental-only” geography. This happens because, as I have written in *Geografia e filosofia*, at the very moment in which we embrace a setting of this kind –undoubtedly and undeniably fascinating– to shape our descriptions of the world, we find ourselves empty-handed. An example? Let’s take the theme of dwelling, a strong point of this kind of analysis, that finds in essays like *Building dwelling thinking* a powerful source of inspiration. Well, that *dwelling* Heidegger refers to is an existential and ontological category, and for this reason (as Michel Lussault also points out) it has nothing in common with the «actual conditions of today’s dwelling», what in French would be expressed by *situations d’habiter*, but if dwelling doesn’t mean possessing a house (Heidegger, 1976a, p. 126) that same *dwelling crisis* has nothing to do with the ways we concretely do so: «However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses.[...] The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.» (Heidegger, 1976b, p. 108). The problem is that, while the philosopher has the right of working on mental-only geographies, neglecting their territorial and environmental implications, we as geographers –if we really believe that what we do has some kind of social utility– must perfect geographies which are attentive, first of all, to the consequences that “the effective forms of today’s dwelling” have on people’s life. As Gilles Deleuze used to say: «Give me the possible, or else I’ll suffocate! ».

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CONTROVERSY OF MODERN AND POST-MODERN GEOGRAPHERS. – Giuseppe Dematteis, commenting on some excerpts from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, wrote that «the belief of a solely physical and human geography, separated from “mental geography”, is not only scarcely useful, but detrimental» and so, conversely, a mental-only geography is also impracticable, because it lacks all those qualities that make geography interesting to humans, «who need a piece of Land to know the invisible». In response to article by Marconi, my impression is that controversies like these, if they have a sense as long as they are developed on the plan of principles, of theoretical conflicts, of conceptual metaphors and rhetorical and persuasive strategies, lose it –or assume another– precisely when we put them in the context of a concrete geography, which is also, apart from mental, physical, and human. I do not intend, therefore, to profess my faith as a post-modern. The same controversy between moderns and post-moderns has grown old precociously (in philosophy we are already talking about *nouveau réalisme*, cfr. Ferraris, 2012) and as such it should be dismissed. Also in geography.