

A World Out of Key

An Interview with Michel Foucher

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Although today's world is more interdependent than ever, it is still a jigsaw puzzle of sovereign states. One consequence of globalization is that we have to update our own mental maps, and to understand other people's. In this interview, the diplomat and geographer Michel Foucher explains the world's new geography.

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A World More Interdependent than Ever

Books & Ideas: In today's world, in which most states are relatively open, can geopolitics still account for the interactions between power and geographical space? In fact, there seem to be two opposite processes at work: on the one hand, there is the territorialisation of states – territorial consolidation; on the other, we see the opening up of markets, the transnationalization of migrations, with a multiplication of flows, and international political integration. How can we properly account for these contradictory dynamics, and the simultaneous decline in the strength of borders?

Michel Foucher: First of all, we have to agree on the meaning of the word “geopolitics”. Geopolitics studies the relationships between political issues and territorial issues, not simply between power and geographical space. This definition is broader than just analysing territorial rivalries. It is essential that we appreciate the importance of representations and perceptions, i.e. that of mental maps. I prefer the kind of geography in which descriptions of local realities and interactions are accompanied by critiques of the the producers of mental maps bound up with political projects that are not only time-bound but are also (they too) territorialised.

The general opening up of spaces frees up the flows of images and expressions – the flows of representations. However, these flows are difficult to manage, because they are so completely trans-border phenomena: there are no customs officials, there's no quality control. Their effects cannot be controlled; this differs from situations in which there are permanent diplomatic conversations, with the usual negotiations, compromises and coalitions. Other than in the European Union, the international system is still very classical; it's terribly Westphalian. The so-called “emerging” states noisily join in on the global game, bringing with them their interests, their objectives, their values, and sometimes their ideas for

improving things. For globalization first consists of actions taken by states and nations. The contemporary world is more interdependent than ever – because of the flows of communication and the resonance of distant events – and yet not very cooperative – precisely because of the prevalence of that nation-centred reasoning. Stable alliances are rare (the transatlantic relationship is an exception); instead, there are ad hoc coalitions depending on the issue being considered. So, for example, while in a G-20 meeting, Europeans and Brazilians and Indians can agree that the Chinese yuan is undervalued, they can disagree in the UN Security Council about Libya or Syria.

I would say that we live in a dissonant world, in the musical sense of the word. The orchestra has no conductor. The United States might claim to play that role, but it is not always heeded. Everyone wants to play their own musical score, even in the shared settings of the UN, the World Trade Organization, peace research, and so on. It's an a-polar situation. No one is really in charge of handling global affairs; each nation manages its own priorities. So the openness does not weaken states; quite the contrary, states everywhere are asserting themselves, in accordance with the logic of states. The international system thus remains characterized by the importance of nation-states. The international system that appears in the UN is a jigsaw puzzle of states. In the IMF, quotas are allocated not to regional organizations but to states. In comparison with regional organizations, nation-states are still overrepresented.

At the same time, transnational markets, investment banks and ratings agencies have acquired the ability to determine states' reputations and external images, and therefore also the degree of confidence that they inspire in investors and lenders. This detracts from states' sovereignty. Here too we can apply geopolitical analysis, but the frame of reference has now changed; it is less ideological-strategic and more financial-economic – except of course in the zones affected by the efforts made by political Islam to restore itself, which relate to a good fifth of the human race.

Here we need to reflect on the concept of strategic autonomy. What does it mean to be sovereign today, in an interdependent and dissonant world? As a geographer, I would observe that even immaterial flows – financial or virtual (e.g. electronic messages) – are carried by material, physical infrastructures. This is even truer for the storage of “big data”. The central servers of IT businesses are as well guarded as nuclear power plants, and their locations are much more secret. The territorial dimension of this storage and of virtual flows is very real. Financial markets related to them are also spatially structured. This spatial structure consists of centres and peripheries, of those who give orders and those who execute them. A few financial centres organize all twenty-four time zones of the planet: Chicago for grain, New York for finance, competing with London, Frankfurt, Dubai, Mumbai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo and San Francisco. It's a full circle: there is really no room for novelty in it, although the balance of power changes and other centres join the fray.

“Territorialisation” should be understood almost literally, primarily as the enhancement of land, and the extension of cultivation and of mining, at sea as on land. I'm struck by the general movement towards the territorialisation of maritime spaces, now referred to as “maritimisation”. Terrestrial reasoning is applied to maritime spaces. China's attitude is extreme: it looks on special economic zones as zones of full sovereignty. We are seeing a race to demarcate maritime spaces – the ultimate degree of territorialisation. We have clearly entered a period in which borders are being reaffirmed.

This process is in keeping with the perspective created by the dialectic between openness – the engine of globalization – and partitioning – the search for security. This dialectic – which was set out by Jean Gottmann, a Franco-American geographer undervalued in France – is illuminating. Conservative developments in some Arab societies are undoubtedly a response to globalization; they fall back on traditional values that shape collective preferences against the openness of an imported modernity. It seems to me that this dialectic is an interpretative framework that we must constantly revise and apply to new circumstances. Mireille Delmas-Marty says much the same thing with regard to the field of law, when she points out contradictions between globalization and the tightening of restrictions on international migration, the increase of social exclusion, and harm to the environment.¹

A Clash of Representations

Books & Ideas: You coined the expression “battle of the maps” (*la bataille des cartes*), by which you suggest that depiction of the other, as of oneself, can be a source of conflict as well as cooperation. How much have representations of the world changed since the end of the Cold War? Today, who wields enough authority, legitimacy and power to impose such a representation or discourse? In other words, who today possesses the key to the new collective geography?

Michel Foucher: Etymologically, geography is the description of the world. No one can reasonably claim to have a precise vision of the world as it is. The world is always something to be discovered. Descriptions are time- and place-bound, and also, as I have written, as subjective as they are objective. Geography must simultaneously take into account both the realities of a place and the discourse about them, the representation of them – the sum total of all of the images, discourses, and correlates connected with this or that portion of territories. So the “excerpt” is the dominant form, because of selective visions of international affairs, the selectivity being in accordance with the knowledge, interests and familiarity of the describers.

The “battle of the maps” refers to the redistribution of the balance of power between states, in the context of the new stage of globalization. The strength of my disbelief in a clash of civilizations is matched by the strength of my belief in a clash of representations. During the Cold War there was a dominant ideological and strategic representation based on the rivalry between two systems, with the third world as the battlefield. During the last twenty years, representations have changed and westerners have embarked on a kind of democratic crusade to spread values, regimes and economic ideas, in this unipolar western (and primarily American) moment. Current crises and tensions arise from this, for we have not yet finished paying the bill for western interventions (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.). Today, the international marketplace of ideas has diversified, and a diversity of representations is beginning to establish itself. Western values, procedures and institutions are being questioned, and other models of development are being adopted, especially in Africa, inspired by the economic success of the major centres of population, China and India.

The current “battle of the maps” has emerged with new configurations, new balances of power and influence, and “geopolitical projects” that are disturbing the old order. It is useful to try to penetrate the various different intentions and visions here, in order to identify possible points of convergence – for example, African problems that are simultaneously of

¹ Mireille Delmas-Marty, *Résister, responsabiliser, anticiper*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2013.

interest to France, Brazil and Turkey. These transitional states are in a phase of emancipation, seeking their “place in the sun” as in the period of Wilhelm II; they are seeking visibility, not just market share – visibility and recognition – with a will to upset the established western order, and probably also with some difficulty in accepting and measuring the degree of interdependence among states. (Talking about “de-globalization” is basically a denial of interdependence. In the United States itself, civil society completely fails to appreciate the fact that a significant part – 32% – of GNP relates to external trade – a useful measurement of economic interdependence.) This all assumes reconsideration of the degree of globalization that a society can accept, and leads us back to the earlier question: what is the right political recipe for combining partitioning, openness, and protection? In short, for combining liberty and security.

The current period requires a revision of our mental maps: what do we want to be in the world as it unfortunately is? It also requires an effort to understand the maps of others, as a prerequisite for organizing the ongoing redistribution of forces. This new political geography is an extremely interesting issue. For example, some German analysts now attach the adjective “absteigend” (descendant) to France. This reduces French powers of persuasion over Berlin in decisions about European affairs; at the same time, it shows that, in its own interests, Berlin needs a French partner that is stronger.

For technical reasons, ideas, images and emotions move around with ease. This explains the popularity of new kinds of power. To be acceptable, power must present itself as being “soft”, or “smart” (synthesizing “soft” and “hard” power). Heightened interdependence promotes the adoption of so-called strategies of influence (through language, culture, and diplomacy) and attraction (with regard to foreign students). American and even Chinese strategies are imitated, without realizing that American “soft power” is based on actions bound up with the freedoms of American society.

Thus, globalization plunges us into representation games that we have no control over. The collective geography operates with no control tower. The time is ripe for questioning the universality of the western vision, especially by Indian thinkers, Singapore intellectuals, and Chinese experts close to political authorities. In this questioning, merit is opposed to democracy, emphasizing the meagre results of our democratic regimes in terms of growth, and our frequent recourse to external military interventions. I concluded my book with this idea: is the universal really a common good?

Today’s Borders: Neither Open nor Closed

Books & Ideas: So in your view, borders are no longer lines, but a multiplicity of crossing points?

Michel Foucher: In fact, many borders are closed; far more are crossed illegally; and others are subjects of disputes and litigation, including those around new states. Borders are still a sensitive issue for states, diplomats, the UN, the International Court of Justice, and arbitration tribunals. So I don’t see that there has been an erosion or disappearance of borders in the sense of political boundaries. On the other hand, yes, of course, there has been erosion or intentional removal of some controls. The Schengen area is a unique case. Elsewhere, in South and East Asia, entrance is not so easy. Europe is an exception, with its free interior movement and Europeans’ ability to travel outside Europe with a small number of visas. This

exceptional asymmetry works in favour of Europe. In new states there is a mentality of resistance and closure. Any summary of the last two decades must lead to the conclusion that, more than any erosion or removal of borders, there is now an obsession with them.

A border is a line that is crossed in moving between two states, whether or not it is closed or controlled, and whether or not an entry permit (visa) is required. The most extreme example here is Switzerland, which as a Schengen state has free circulation of persons, but as a non-member of the EU continues to inspect merchandise. Therefore, a border should increasingly be seen as a multiplicity of crossing points. Crossings are increasingly numerous, because of the intensification of movement. But border regulations are still very diverse (as to visas, customs duties, and manner and price of crossing). In short, I think it is essential to avoid the dichotomy open versus closed. The abolition of internal borders in Europe has influenced attitudes about this too much, as has the fall of the Berlin wall, as if the openness or removal of borders were in itself an ideal.

Books & Ideas: What is a typical early-twenty-first-century border? Does it take after the model of the barrier fence (e.g. Israel, Mexico, etc.), or a less material model? More generally, how has the functioning of borders changed in recent years?

Michel Foucher: The typical border is both open and closed: open to flows of legal border crossers, merchandise, and ideas, and closed to illegal crossers and undesirables – those seeking asylum and refuge, and so on. Again, this world is very dissonant, with a tendency to more fences and technological controls, from the fence and surveillance markets. The goal is to streamline and at the same time to control. The typical border is more and more the European model: free movement after controls, in a context of intense mobility. Obviously, there is a broad range of borders, from fully open to fully closed. Even between the United States and Canada, there are several possible pathways, depending on the status of the border crossed. So the typical border is one that is open but filtered.

Books & Ideas: Is Europe witnessing the traditional function of borders as delimitations being overtaken by that of frontiers? Should Europe's borders be seen as instruments for transforming boundaries – as leverages of political transformations?

Michel Foucher: There is clearly an element of transformational diplomacy – which Moscow has not failed to notice. Europe's so-called "neighbourhood" policy is an asymmetric tool to implement this transformation of reorienting a periphery towards the centre. The "frontier" is part of the vocabulary of the historical westward expansion of the United States. The "enlargement" of the EU and the Atlantic Alliance replicates that expansion, this time eastwards on the European continent. In Poland this is the dominant depiction of relations with Belarus and Ukraine and even Georgia. The Poles have designed a German-style *Ostpolitik*, with a view to changing some boundaries. Their ultimate purpose is joining to Poland the area between Poland and western Russia, as a security measure. This embodies both the concept of a geopolitical frontier to the east, to contain Russia,² and the idea of a linear border to the west, between Poland and Germany. The American idea persists in this concept of a frontier with no limits. The contrasting ideas of control and linearity are more Chinese, Russian and Japanese.

² See *Les frontières de l'Europe: Dialogue entre Michel Foucher et Bronislaw Geremek* (a conversation that took place in Warsaw in 1992), Fondation Robert Schuman, Entretiens d'Europe no. 27, 28 July 2008. http://www.robert-schuman.eu/doc/entretiens_europe/ee-27-fr.pdf

Books & Ideas: Diasporas' political activism, undertaken at their own initiative but also at the initiative of the homeland or host state, have led to a growing disconnect between territory, sovereignty and citizenship. Do diasporas not call into question the idea of the permanence of borders?

Michel Foucher: I don't see any signs of an end to connections between states of origin and receiving states. In the current period diasporas have worked in favour of the homelands— for example, the Chinese, the Indians in Silicon Valley who invest in India, and so on. We could construct a typology of diasporas, based on the degree of importance of the ties preserved between the communities. For at least the last twenty years, the diasporas of Eastern Europeans in the United States have played a very important role in European political transitions. Some of these people have gone back to their countries to exercise power there. In the early 2000s, three Baltic presidents were North Americans: Vaira Vike-Freiberga (Latvia), a Canadian national; Toomas Hendrik Ilves (Estonia), Swedish then American; and Valdas Adamkus (Lithuania), American. Diasporas are the conservators of old mental maps, and they do not always do their countries of origin any favours (e.g. Armenia, Libya).

The Arab World as an Amplifier

Books & Ideas: Does the contagion of the Arab Spring affect your analysis of the role of borders and the power of collective representations?

Michel Foucher: One of the important effects of the Arab Spring is to compel us to call things what they are, and for us Europeans to stop talking about the Mediterranean region, instead of the Arab world. The mental map of “the Mediterranean” masked the North's neo-colonial and Saint-Simonian intentions to dominate. The Mediterranean of Fernand Braudel is the one that is projected by Western Europe. The term “Arab world” is also a representation. The Arabic language distinguishes between the “Arab world” (*Al-‘Ālam al-‘Arabī*) and the “Arab nation” (*Al umma al arabia*). The Arab nation is no longer the political agenda. The nationalists are dead, they lost, Saddam Hussein was hanged, the Bashar clan is now just a coalition of religious minorities, and the PLO, the supporter of the Palestinian national project, has been hammered by Hamas, the local branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. It's as if western activities in the Arab world for some decades had been designed to weaken the leaders representing Arab and Persian nationalism, to clear the way for the conservative forces (and for the control of Iraq and Iran by the ayatollahs). But since 2011 the Arab world has served as a pool of interpretations, and as an amplifier, with national movements echoing each other everywhere, even in Jordan, in the Gulf, and fairly soon in Saudi Arabia. At this point, the national framework, inherited from Franco-British border accords, has been strengthened by these Arab revolutions. The constitutional debates are salutary (where to position the cursor between public and private spheres and between religion and state, the role of women, equal rights, etc.). Consolidating these states confronted by growing threats of internationalist jihadism is a major strategic challenge. It is up to Europeans to understand and to assist the ongoing transitions – which will continue – and to build a positive interaction with these states, which are at our borders to stay!³

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³ Michel Foucher, “2031 en Méditerranée, nos futurs, l'avenir d'une représentation”, *Cahiers du Centre régional de la Méditerranée (CEREM)*, Marseille, 2013.

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