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BOOK REVIEW

Keller Easterling (2014), *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso books, London-New York 2014

Italian Edition: Keller Easterling (2020), *Lo spazio in cui ci muoviamo. L'infrastruttura come sistema operativo*, Milano: Treccani

This work by Keller Easterling also arrives in Italy, with the original title *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, published in the English world by Verso already in 2014 and rendered in Italian with the title *Lo spazio in cui ci muoviamo*. Despite the six-year difference with the original in English, the work does not seem to be marked by the time that has passed, especially because the trends identified in the book – already widely established in 2014 – have only strengthened in recent years. Although the text is presented in a narrative form accessible even to non-experts, this is not an easy book: it is a hybrid object, straddling sociology and managerial economics, often elliptical, and which deals with an abused theme – the transformation of space – from an original, oblique and sometimes disorienting point of view. Alongside and already above the nation states, with their jurisdictions, their logic of government and legislative regulation, a set of infrastructures has developed that the author defines as a true global operating system, which intertwines and finally determines a production model that is imposed and socialized on all economic actors, and therefore in the first place for the States themselves. It is, precisely, what Easterling defines as extrastatecraft, «a fruit salad-word that describes the activities – often not officially declared – that take place outside traditional government practices or that go alongside them, even going so far as to establish relationships of collaboration» (p. XVIII).

One of the main engines of this parallel economy, but which we must indeed imagine as fundamental and not at all ancillary to the “normal” capitalist reproductive logic, is that of the “zone”. By zone, the author means the special economic zones, removed from the legislation of the state that establishes or hosts them, and that take the form of an extra-legal territory which, by unleashing an economic force of persuasion around the world, ends up determining the developments, including legislative ones, of the reference state context. The area is an enclave, cut out on the model of the free port of the eighteenth-nineteenth century, in which state legislation is suspended or modified regarding commercial and labor relations, customs, tariff and legal ones, and any other possible legislative brake. It is therefore an experiment of free market, of economic liberalism in vitro or, more precisely, a “state of exception” that the state itself creates to achieve in a limited territory what it could not achieve in all its territory. The multiplication of these SEZ (Special Economic Zones) in the world is unstoppable, and in 2006 they numbered 3,500 zones in 130 countries,

where 66 million workers worked. The basic reason identified by the author, who also traces the guidelines of Unido – *United Nations Industrial Development Organization* – is that these free zones allow primary accumulation, bringing in masses of private capital for companies in the area, otherwise impossible to reach in a normal context of state-national economic legislation and regulation. Consequently, most of these areas are located in developing countries or countries undergoing economic growth, often being the main reason for this rise.

The question does not stop at a simple (even moral) calculation of how legitimate it is to build portions of territory removed from the general law and governed by private and transnational authorities, that in fact base their competitive strength on the paroxysmal exploitation of poor labor and underpaid, without contracts or trade union rights, which allows for the primary accumulation mentioned above. Over time these areas, from simple fenced production districts consisting of a few industrial sheds and some administrative buildings, have transformed into real cities. Shenzhen and Pudong, Navi Mumbai and Songdo, Astana and King Abdullah Economic City and dozens of other examples, become copies of the inherent model cities (e.g. Shenzhen is, or rather was, the copy of Hong Kong, as well as Navi Mumbai of Mumbai or Songdo of Seoul), and subsequently present themselves as a paradigm, global cities capable of influencing the organization of metropolitan territories even of “normal” cities. The “state of exception” becomes the standard. Shenzhen, for example, only became a “city” in 1979, an enclave built alongside a fishing village and framed as a market town. Today it has 14 million inhabitants, it is the fourth most populous city in China and the third largest economy in the country. The original SEZ ended up incorporating the seven districts of the city, transforming the entire urban territory into a free zone. 14 million people who live and work in a sort of legislative and legal suspension with respect to the rest of China: «the area as a corporate enclave has become the most appreciated among the models of contemporary global city» (p. 3). It is so appreciated that in the end it is the “mother” cities themselves that generate copy-cities, where new management, administrative and economic models can be experimented.

Then we come to the second issue dealt by the author, that is the ability of these areas to generate global commercial networks, consequently producing their own standardized language, and finally their own informal right but capable of interacting and modifying state jurisprudence. «If law is the currency of governments, standards are the currency of international organizations and multinationals» (p. XXII). In other words: within the zone, the law is produced directly by the economic agents, by the multinationals that govern the area by means of dependent authorities. Through the ISO (International Standard Organization), private companies establish their own legislation based on “quality standards” valid globally. The ISO is the parliament of *extrastatecraft*, the place of mediation and legislative production of the global infrastructural space, or rather of the language through which the various special economic zones around the world communicate with each other. Since the seventies, what were only “recommendations” have become increasingly “international standards” that are difficult to bypass, to which it is necessary to adapt in order to trade globally. The ISO has in fact the trade representation of 161 countries, having in the meantime published about 19,500 valuation standards, to which to adapt by paying a certain amount that becomes, in fact, the fee to be able to trade and export. This regulatory power conflicts with state-national legislation, because «instead of respecting the laws of a state, companies such as Apple, Nike or Starbucks can undergo some certification procedure and display a collection of labels and certificates next to their logo which symbolize some “universal principle”. Compliance with these rules is voluntary, and the stamp that certifies it can even be a product of the company itself» (pp. 217-218).

Coming to conclusions: the fundamental infrastructures of our production system are formed in an extra-state space, alien to national or international legislation, and are organized through their own specific language (the “quality standards”), which ultimately interacts and modifies the legal state language. The state of exception therefore becomes law, and this transforms the productive system itself. It is for this reason, the author concludes, that today material sovereignty passes through global infrastructural networks, capable of prefiguring that world of tomorrow whose seeds are continually sown in SEZ-cities around the world.

Alessandro Barile