

The icon and the imperium

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The *katèchon* (treated not only by Schmitt, but thoroughly analysed in at least two works by Massimo Cacciari, *Dell'inizio* and *Geo-filosofia dell'Europa*) presents itself in neutral terms (τό κατέχον, Latin translation: *quid detineat*) or subjectivised terms (ὁ κατέχον, Latin translation: *qui tenet*). Cacciari says that "the only, true political *form* conceivable in this Christian scope seems to be the *kat'èchon*. The term, which dates to the *second epistle to the Thessalonians* (2, 6 and following), identifies the Power that hinders the full epiphany of the *anomos*, the Adversary. Hippolytus too gave a political interpretation of the *kat'èchon* as image of the Empire, and so did Schmitt: to him, *kat'èchon* is also the medieval Empire, whose function would consist in keeping the Century in-shape, while waiting for its End, against the Devil's "seductions". Until the XIV Century, the king's figure would represent the custodian of the man's "rights" *in statu viatoris*, and only within these boundaries his sovereignty would appear legitimate. However, what Schmitt doesn't see is that the *kat'èchon*, just to perform such function, must assimilate, interiorise the same anomie. To 'restrain it', it can only 'hold it' within itself. Its law is nothing else but the prison where the *filius perditionis* lives – a prison that his power will inexorably end up by demolishing it. So, not only the precariousness and artificiality of this 'containment' work is clear, but much more it is the impossibility for the Christian to truly acknowledge it, as it reaffirms *in toto* the original bond between law and sin. Not only the *kat'èchon*'s order eventually turns out to be impotent (hence, also for this reason it is impossible to rely on it), but it is also intrinsically connected to the principle that it should fight, because it hosts it within itself (the *filius perditionis* is *hostis* and *hospes* of the *kat'èchon*). Sure, the Middle Ages knew also 'heroic' attempts to found the autonomy of the *imperium* and conceive its godly origin (just think of Dante's *duo ultima*). But, to define its own order, the law of the earthly city will come only by giving up any transcendent justification, thus truly representing that space that the man can fully inhabit." (Cacciari, 1994, p. 116-118).



Il *kat'èchon*

Albrecht Durer, Apocalypse (1496-98) Tav. 15. Angelo con la chiave del pozzo senza fondo – Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

In both cases “what/who restrains” is a force that fights the world’s nihilistic annihilation by the Antichrist, that is, by a pure destructive force whose aim is the destruction of everything that Christianity represents. Again, Cacciari says, “does the *kat'èchon* [...] holds in itself the Anomos? It surely does *too*; it is totally wrong to translate *katéchein* as if it were a simple external opposition; we have seen that not even the *adversari*, the *antikèisthai* of the “homo iniquitatis” is so. The *kat'èchon* holds the Anomos from manifesting itself in full, from fulfilling its apocalypse – but only by holding it tight in itself, by *detaining it*. Therefore, we cannot consider, in any way, the *kat'èchon* as mere *enemy* of the anomie; to prevent it from manifesting itself, it must *safeguard it* within itself; to prevent its full realisation, it must become its prison. The *kat'èchon* is inhabited by the anomie; but, in letting being inhabited, in making room within itself for the anomie, it also prevents it from appearing apocalyptically, hence it fights it – but to fight it, it can only take it in. It cannot deny its principle, but it can restrain its full expression.” (Cacciari, 1990, p. 623-624). The paradoxical characteristic of this force is properly highlighted by Cacciari, since the fact that it can only contain within itself and delay the epiphany of Evil but not dissolve it, induces a process that can only take on a ‘passive’ role in the relentless flow of man’s destiny. “But what indeed is the sense of this *katéchein*? Of the ‘process’ that it indicates, ‘before’ the ultimate battle? Its sense is equally clear and decisive. The *kat'èchon* is nothing else but the time of hesitation, of a suspended progress that must be read *in* the same Future [...] When the *kat'èchon* will be removed, this Age will end. It is ‘kept’ in its shape ‘thanks to what’ holds, delays – and by holding, *preserves* the very iniquity. Who will eliminate it? [...] It cannot be intended differently: its ‘custody’ falls to pieces under the anomie’s impetus; the blows of the *apostátes* must eventually make it crumble [...] The *kat'èchon*’s prudent cunning is powerless before the Adversary’s marvels, signs, prodigies, *en-érghēia* – rather: against the power of its own

shrewdness: to 'disguise' as God, to take His form." (Id., p. 624-625). Note that this process of dissolution in fact is nothing more than the intimate constitution of sovereignty: its crisis has already begun with its appearance, since its own statute is that of crisis.

But what is this power that holds the Antichrist in chains?

Schmitt's reading of this passage, all played on the political terrain, suggests that this contrasting force is the Empire, namely a political force that keeps in itself the duplicity of power, both spiritual (it calls itself *defensor fidei*) and earthly. To hold evil in restraint with earthly chains, there must be a body of power (whether objectified as legal person or subjectified as physical person) able to delay chaos from getting unleashed. This is the reason for which, after the fall of the Roman Empire many centuries before, there still is the great collective illusion (from Dante's *De Monarchia* to Machiavelli and the entire political literature of the XVI Century) of the *renovatio Imperii*, which enlivened the fate of that medieval adventure called the Sacred Roman Empire. In this light, we could even say that, notwithstanding the struggle, at times implicit and at times explicit, which saw Papacy and Empire on positions that were often opposite one another, it was a struggle that did not want the adversary's destruction, but presented itself as dialectics between the religious element and the imperial element, between the crosier and the sword, aimed at society's balance and harmonisation (*complexio oppositorum*). This happens because it is necessary to keep society in order, in shape. The Christian eon is an epoch that promises to be very long, but that unfortunately (or fortunately in an eschatological dimension) will surely end as predicted. Hence, to Schmitt the Empire is the force that holds, the κατέχων, which, however, it always appears dual in its iconographic representation and, notwithstanding the constant elements of friction that characterise the relation, both elements take part in keeping in shape the medieval society. Furthermore, there are reasons related to the very survival of the western world: without a strong monocratic identity character based on spiritual identity and military and political unity, the Muslim world would have undoubtedly wiped out the Christian world from History.

This duplicity is well represented by the two pillars of Hercules that represent the iconographic element of Charles V's uniform: the two pillars, the first surmounted by the Bishop's tiara, and the second by the imperial crown, are held together by a band that has the motto *plus ultra*. The imperial element is in that band that joins the two powers.

Schmitt's thesis is that the κατέχων stays in the ability to represent at the same time a duplicity that never blends and preserves equal dignity, although ending in a unity for the entire western world. His reconstruction starts from the datum by which "since the Germanic kings created for themselves a dynastic power, the empire became a constitutive element of such power. With this event, it stopped being the *elevation of a crown* based on the work of a *kat'èchon*, namely of a reign founded on a land and on its people. From the time of the Luxembourg and Hapsburg sovereigns, the imperial crown belongs to a "house", a dynastic family; the dynastic power of such house consists of a pile of crowns, ownership rights, estate claims and candidacies, a mound that includes also the Roman imperial crown, although that is a "crown" in a totally different sense from that of Saint Louis's, Saint Stephen's or Saint Wenchenslaus's crowns." (Schmitt, 1991, p. 49). The critical element introduced by modernity is in the fact that the earthly power seizes, engulfs the spiritual power, with the presumption of autocratically synthesizing the two aspects and operating a *reductio ad unum* of duplicity (see Henry VIII's abjuration of Rome).

The narrow passage of this metamorphosis is in the transformation underlined by Schmitt in *Nomos of the earth*, especially when he maintains that "the medieval unit of *imperium* and *sacerdotium*, typical of Western and Central Europe, has never been a centralization of power in the hands of one man only. It was instead founded from the start on the distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas*, as different principles of order, but subordinated to the same comprehensive unit. Hence, Pope and emperor were not opposed to each other in an absolute way, but only in their quality of *diversi ordines* in which the organization of the *respublica christiana* lived." (Schmitt, 1991, p. 45). Therefore, the Empire turns from feudal sovereignty based on elective mechanisms that involve feudal world (see the selection procedures among the Great Electors of Germany, who were seven: the three bishops of Mainz, Cologne and Treviri, and the four secular lords of Bohemia, Palatinate, Brandenburg and Saxony) and spiritual

power (from Charlemagne on, there was the necessity that the Emperor's coronation by the Pope would be held in Rome, but from Fredrick III of Austria – an Habsburg – on, this ceremony was abandoned – 1440), to a self-founded sovereignty where the continuity element is not exogenous, that is, it doesn't come from an external power, but it becomes endogenous, that is, it comes from itself. The identified mechanism is that of the constitution of ruling dynasties. Moreover, this mechanism was developed in 1500 on a European scale through a policy, mainly from the Habsburg, of assembly of reigns through marriages between ruling dynasties: sovereignty is built and demolished based on a semi-divine code that attributes a Herculean statute to its temporary representatives, a statute clearly expressed by the necessity to create an Olympus of dynasties with prohibition of union with 'plebeian bodies' (Henry VIII's and Anne Boleyn's story does not leave this scheme, as it is an 'expected exception' to this rule: comparing the sovereign to Zeus, who copulates also with mortal women, is totally natural).

This dynastic passage is important also for the fact that it ratifies the transmutation of the king's body into a legal person, who physically dies but survives through his children, as centre of that complex phenomenon of unity of the multiple, which is the political representation of sovereignty. The representation of Charles V's dynastic succession in favour of his son Philip II in Leone Leoni's medals is very effective from an iconographic point of view. Bear also in mind the fact that this succession, like other important successions, took place with the sovereign still alive who abdicated in favour of his son; in Charles V's specific case, after relinquishing the title of king and steering for the first time in an unquestionable way his son's election to the imperial throne – thus depriving the German great electors of their authority – he retired in a monastery where he died two years later. Here, the Catholic king keeps only the sacred element, privatising it and simplifying in a wonderful way the private subordination of the spiritual element to the earthly public element. Kantorowicz wrote some splendid passages on the motto "The King never dies", because he keeps in himself that *universitas quae numquam moritur* that was thought as referred to the Pontiff, based on a mainly British jurisprudence that decreed the transfer of attributes. In one of these passages, he writes of the immortality "of the Holy Seat as *dignitas quae non moritur* that was founded on a rational juridical fiction. [...] The Holy Seat's perpetuity seems here an offshoot of the divine power and of the perpetuity of the Church, whose supremacy knows no interruptions *quia Christus non moritur*, "because Christ does not die". Vice versa, we remind that also the Empire was considered perpetual for similar metaphysical reasons: it was the fourth world monarchy destined to last until the end of time; it had been established from Heaven by God himself; while Justinian's law considered it eternal (*imperium semper est*). However, it is worth mentioning that those issues were now integrated, or even replaced by the new juridical theory regarding the immortality of dignity. Thus, Goffredo da Trani, commenting (ca. 1241-43) the decretal *Quoniam abbas*, would overturn the reasoning and say: "Since dignity does not die with the holder's death, the *imperium* is perpetual». And later authors would have directly maintained that the motto *imperium semper est* referred to *dignitas*. It was the secularized version of ancient concepts: the Empire's perpetual nature was no longer deriving from God or the divine providence, but from a fictitious, albeit immortal character called *dignitas*, from a dignity created by a human decision and attributed to the prince or holder of the office by a political entity also immortal, the *universitas quae numquam moritur*. It is clear that the value of perpetuity was no longer essentially focused on the divine nature, nor on the immortal idea of justice or on that of law, but rather on *universitas* and *dignitas*, both immortal». (Kantorowicz, 1957, p. 340-341) Indeed, the prevalence of the *dignitas* as foundation of the *auctoritas* arises in an ecclesiastical context and only later it is applied to the political one. Kantorowicz cites the legal case on the assets of an abbey, held during the reign of Edward IV, in 1482, where "the abbot is not mentioned as member of the general *corpus mysticum* of the Church or of the reign, but as a mystical body *per se*, because it "never dies" and has "continuity". It is clear that the idea of *corporation* expressed by the *dignitas* was mistaken for the similar notion expressed by the *corpus mysticum*, or that the "mystical body" was mistaken for what it was otherwise called "dignity" (Id., p. 349) In particular, Kantorowicz thinks about a certain British jurisprudence regarding Henry VIII, which perhaps we'd better mention in full for its illustrative and clarifying function of certain mechanisms. "And the reason for this is that the King is a *political body*, and when a law says "the King" or says "us", it always refers to his person as the King, and *in his regal dignity*, therefore *it includes all those who make use of his function*. [Judge Brook, Henry VIII, 1557] [...] And King *is a name of continuity that will last forever* as leader and sovereign of the people, as set by the law [...], and for this motive, the King never dies.

The judges thought that for this motive the law doesn't call the king's death as such, but it calls it *demise*, since then

he remits his reign to another and let others make use of his functions, so that *dignity continues forever*... hence, when... we refer to him as King, he, *as King, never dies, even though his natural body dies*: but *the King*, in whose name we refer to him as *semper continua* [...] and thus the word King will extend [from Henry VIII] to King Edward VI [his successor] [...]. from this, we understand that when something refers to a particular king, *in the name of the King*, in such case, it extends to his heirs and successors [...]

There's really no need for comments to demonstrate in which measure the passages reported herein in italic to best highlight them, were deriving from issues that commentators and post-commentators had posed well before: we acknowledge the slogan *dignitas non moritur* indicating the *dignitas's* continuity notwithstanding the holder's death; the unity of predecessor and successor; the binding value of the obligations taken in the name of dignity; the importance of the mention or omission of the "name"; and all the other consequences that had been drawn for over two centuries on the decretal *Quoniam abbas* or in other similar circumstances." (Id., p. 349-350). This passage, in contrast with Schmitt's thought, occurs with all European dynasties (and indeed, with the Tudor, more noticeably in England); in fact, there is a continuous transposition of symbols and rituals between the Island and the European Continent. In fact, Schmitt maintains that "the important and forerunning Hobbesian idea of State was not implemented in England, neither with the British people, but it was implemented by the powers of continental Europe. [...] Thanks to its political instinct of maritime and commercial power, master of a world imperial supremacy exercised through a powerful fleet, the British people escaped this type of State closure and remained 'open'. The British spirit is far from the decisionism of the absolutistic thought. The absolute State's concept of sovereignty, as conceptually 'pure' form of the public power, and as such excluding any blending and balancing with other forms of State, found no consensus in England. [...] But at the same time – instead of the absolute States' concepts of continental land war, defined by the cabinet's and fighters' war – this maritime power developed with great strength, starting from naval and commercial war, the concepts of naval war that was close to its nature, and did it just on the basis of an idea of 'enemy' that – totally out-of-state – makes no distinction between fighters and non-fighters; therefore, it is the only one that is truly 'total'." (Schmitt, 1986, p. 124-126). To the Schmittian approach to the problem, it is structurally unthinkable that two symbolic systems connected to two great collective myths such as sea and land can give a similar political result. In fact, Schmitt maintains that "for centuries, Hobbes has been the infamous representative of the absolutistic 'State of power'; the image of the Leviathan was emphasized like that of a monstrous Golem or Moloch, and it has still today the function of archetype, where we can see everything that the western democracy means by the polemic bugaboo of 'totalitarian' State and 'totalitarianism'. The specific elements typical of a 'State of laws' present in the Hobbesian law and State doctrine were almost always ignored. [...] Hobbes was only interested in overcoming with the State the anarchy of the feudal, class or ecclesiastic right to resist and the civil wars resulting from it, and opposed to the medieval pluralism and to the claim of power of the Churches and of other 'indirect powers', the rational unity of a univocal power able to offer an effective protection, and of a legality system whose operation could be calculated." (Id., 120-121).

But maybe the difference between the Leviathan as symbol of the sea powers and Behemoth as symbol of the continental powers, to which Schmitt attributes great value and justifies his disappointment for the political effects of the Hobbesian symbolic elaboration, actually does not seem that clear, at least during the Renaissance and the Baroque period. On the contrary, it is interesting to follow the game of cross references in the mottos celebrating the accomplishments of the various European sovereigns and observe the recurrences between the mythical symbols they used (the pillars of Hercules, the caduceus, the phoenix, ...). We will partly do this later in this work.

A last remark must be made with regard to this principle that shapes the world against the anti-Christian chaos, and starting right from Schmitt and from that mixture of nostalgia for the European and Christian unity and the fascination for an inevitable catastrophic, albeit salvific outcome. The background is that where apocalyptic prophecies seem in our times – especially following the devastating Second World War and its most evident result, namely the Cold War – to increase their persuasive power out of proportion. On these terms, Schmitt can be included among those who try to catch the signs of the imminent final solution of the chaos in which the human events are. Therefore, he

addresses the winning powers, but realizes that they are sea powers, hence they do not have that restraining power necessary to perform their task. Surely, in a different time in history, another Empire too had managed to perform its mandate in an effective way. In fact, Schmitt says that “the byzantine Eastern Roman Empire, led by Constantinople, was a coastal empire; it still had a powerful fleet and a secret weapon, the so-called Greek fire. Nevertheless, it was by then forced to defend itself. However, it was able to obtain, as sea power, a result that the empire of Charlemagne, a purely land power, was unable to reach: it was a true “restraining force” – a *kat’èchon* in Greek – and, notwithstanding its weakness, managed to “resist” for many centuries against Islam, thus preventing the Arabs from conquering the whole of Italy.” (Schmitt, 2002, p. 21) But, alas, the United States of today do not have the spiritual weapons held by the pantocratic orthodoxy of Byzantium’s sovereign power and are only a very weak shade of restraining force. So, the problem of causing the apocalyptic prophecy to occur stays in the fact that we need to reconsider the role that this modern Empire (the U.S.) can play, albeit in an unorthodox way. Therefore, Schmitt’s idea is that the American empire is ‘unconsciously’ predestined to a task that is certainly superior, but that the U.S. will interpret, for this, in the best way, namely by unleashing the forces of chaos on earth. On this subject, Franco Volpi says that “in this context, Schmitt uses for the first time the eschatological concept of *kat’èchon*, applying it here to the United States, but still in a lesser measure and not in the strong theological-political function. [...] Schmitt – who, in various passages, returns to the political-theological meaning of this figure and suggests for it various identifications – maintains here that the United States, in their role of great power, enter in the historic range in which the restraining force operates. However, in their incapability to cut the umbilical cord with the British motherland and in the contemporary proclamation of the “American Century”, in their wavering between isolationism and interventionism, between neutrality and world war, they are unable to be neither a true restraining force nor an accelerator of the times. They are only an “involuntary accelerator”, a big ship “lacking the determination of her inner sense, which slips into the maelstrom of history”. (Volpi, 2002, p. 134)

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