Plastic Power

Plastic Power:

The Symbolic-Materialist Human and International Politics

By

Juan Recce

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For Elisa and Amelia

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PRESENTATION
BY PROFESSOR FRED HALLIDAY, PHD

London, 27 October 2009

The dizzying speed of contemporary change demands a dual response: both theoretical and philosophical. On the one hand, it calls for an understanding of the depth and scope of transformations in constant gestation; on the other, for a renewed engagement with classical intellectual themes and the historical perspectives that frame them.

This is the merit of *Plastic Power*: a creative vision grounded in philosophical and anthropological reflection which, in addressing both dimensions, offers a lateral perspective on the contemporary world.

By bringing together the symbolic and material dimensions of international politics, and by revealing the mutable essence of power—constantly reconfigured on a global scale in its geographical, material, and symbolic aspects—Juan Recce offers one of the most original academic visions of the 21st century on humanity, power, and international politics.

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PROLOGUE TO THE 2025 EDITION – FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Fifteen intense years have passed. If we closed our eyes in 2010 and reopened them in 2025, we would see that extraordinary transformations have taken place: quantum entanglement. Supercomputers that no longer calculate, but predict. Time and causality, overwhelmed by the mechanics of indeterminacy. The brain, mapped as dynamic networks of emotion, language, and memory. Perception, redefined as active simulation. Consciousness, now conceived as predictive architecture.

Generative models that create language, images, decisions. Algorithms that do not merely automate, but symbolise. Artificial intelligences that not only learn, but infer, represent, and translate. Humanoid robots that sense their surroundings, interpret gestures, deliberate. Interfaces capable of producing legal responses, emotional care, or social judgement. Agency is no longer the sole domain of the symbolic-materialist human: it is shared, distributed, reconfigurable.

The boundary between the physical and the symbolic has collapsed in just fifteen years. This is not a disciplinary shift, but a civilisational mutation that lifts the veil—not only expanding the field of the possible, but rewriting the very foundations from which we understood action, perception, and human subjectivity in the world as a unified whole. In this new terrain, plastic thought is not a niche in the library to be selected at will—it is the network of conceptual relations that connects apparent contradictions, revealing unity. Plasticity does not claim to be a theoretical framework: it is an epistemological compass in the face of disintegrating certainties.

Fifteen years on, *Plastic Power* continues to outline the contours of debate. Plasticity has ceased to be merely a concept and become a horizon of intelligibility, since the world can no longer be read through stable categories. What began as a theoretical exploration written in friction with its own time has, over the years, acquired a second life—for the simple reason that its questions—those probing the symbolic root of power—have withstood the passage of time better than many of the answers currently on offer.

The idea that power is plastic emerged at a moment when the traditional ways of understanding world order were beginning to show signs of exhaustion. The available conceptual structures were increasingly ineffective, increasingly misaligned with the real transformation of the global scene. Plasticity emerged, then, not as an aesthetic gesture, but as an interpretive hypothesis: a way of reading becoming not as a succession of rigid states, but as a field in tension, where forms always signify more than themselves—a provisional translation of what remains contested.

Between 2010 and 2025, much has changed. Some developments confirmed the book's intuitions; others displaced or complicated them. Technological acceleration, the digitalisation of everyday life, the reconfiguration of Leviathan, the mutation of sovereignty, and the proliferation of forms of symbolic violence have shown that to think plastically was not a conceptual indulgence, but an analytical imperative. But there have also been discoveries, readings, lines of flight that expanded the field. The anthropology of Descola, the techno-aesthetics of Stiegler, the critical geopolitics of Mbembe, the cognitive sciences of Dehaene, and the process philosophy of Whitehead did not replace this work: they endowed it with retroactive depth. So too did, from more narrative and expansive registers, books such as *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, which appeared later and helped reposition the history of the human on a scale of cultural and technological plasticity.

It is no coincidence that *Plastic Power* has found a second life in this context. What was written as an exercise in critical intuition now returns as an expanded interpretive framework—not because it anticipated these phenomena, but because it offered a theoretical sensitivity capable of naming them when they did occur. Its central hypothesis—that power resides neither in the material nor the symbolic, but in the dynamic tension between the two—now resounds with unexpected clarity. It is not a matter of having been right, but of having found a form of thought capable of surviving the world's transformation of form.

That form is plasticity. And its relevance depends not on the facts it confirms, but on the questions it still allows us to ask.

In the realm of global power, the consequences are profound. The international system no longer operates as a chessboard of balances between sovereign states, but as a plastic network of asymmetric nodes—hybrid assemblages of technology, capital, representation, and infrastructure. Actors no longer compete solely for territory or resources, but for meaning, for narrative, for algorithmic presence. Diplomacy has become interface engineering; war, a

battle of platforms; and hegemony, a function of control over circulating symbols.

In this new landscape, China's development, the expansion of the BRICS, and the emergence of a more articulated Global South are reconfiguring the imaginary of multipolarity. It is no longer merely a matter of new powers vying for the throne of the international system, but of alternative ways of ordering the real, of hierarchising the visible, of constructing legitimacy. Hegemony is no longer debated solely in the economic or military arena: it is contested in the very syntax of the world. Contemporary multipolarity is not balance—it is geopolitical plasticity, the conflictual coexistence of grammars of power.

The tension between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate change denial, the rise of new diversities and their confrontation with anti-woke discourses, the hyper-concentration of capital in the hands of billionaires, the surge of new post-liberal right-wing movements, and the open wars in Ukraine and Palestine constitute a new regime of overlapping contradictions. These tensions, far from being anomalies, are symptoms of an era that reconstructs itself through its fractures. In them, plasticity is not just adaptation—it is a conflict of forms, a struggle for meaning, a contest over the shaping of the real.

Contemporary empires are not built with weapons, but with protocols. Agreements are no longer signed on paper, but in code. Power no longer resides in accumulation, but in the ability to modulate the real. Understood thus, world power has become plastic: it is no longer exercised, but designed; no longer imposed, but installed. The symbolic and the material no longer alternate—they implicate one another. What was once an epistemological tension is now a structural condition. And understanding that condition is perhaps the only foothold we have for not losing all orientation amid the chaos of the present.

In this framework, human agency is undergoing profound reconfiguration. It is no longer exercised solely through individual will or traditional institutions, but through constant articulation with systems that extend or mediate decision-making capacity. To think of agency as symbolic-material co-construction is not a philosophical concession, but an empirical observation: in the age of algorithms, irreversible climate change, and narrative wars, human beings are no longer autonomous actors, but nodes in a field of forces that exceeds them—and also traverses them. In this context, perception becomes a strategic resource. What is seen? What is

ignored? What is represented as crisis, and what as continuity? The struggle for power is, increasingly, a struggle over the form of shared perception.

Climate change, for its part, erupts as both symptom and system. It is not merely an ecological threat: it is a disruption of modernity's symbolic-material regime. It affects how legitimacy is negotiated, risks are distributed, territories are hierarchised. Geopolitics, in this sense, is no longer defined by strategic location on the map, but by the capacity to anticipate, absorb, or displace the effects of a crisis that spills beyond politics as we knew it. Plasticity, here too, emerges as a critical variable: not who dominates, but who adapts meaningfully. Not who imposes, but who reformulates the grammar of conflict.

Everything we once analysed under the grammar of the post–Cold War and post–9/11 world—the war on terror, American unipolarity, hybrid warfare, the rise of cyberspace, the return of civilisational narratives—can now be read as part of an archaeology of the recent past. These fragments provided prospective clues, structures of understanding we can now reassess as unfinished syntheses. They were sediments, not structures. Fragments, not paradigms. But in their uneven accumulation, they revealed something essential: the need for a plastic thought capable of operating where disciplines fail, where traditional categories turn opaque.

The forces of plasticity and of systems with memory do not merely survive change—they structure it. They are the very conditions through which permanent transition is organised. In this context, plasticity is not just a concept, nor even a property—it is an epistemological continent, an operational space where phenomena lacking disciplinary translation—hybrids, assemblages, paradoxes, instabilities—take form without the need for fixation. This is the vital core that keeps this book alive: not its certainties, but its willingness to host what has yet to be named.

Plastic Power does not seek to close down thought, but to make it more permeable. And in that insistence, it finds its most vital form: as a critical gesture, as a cartography in motion, as an invitation to think in other words, from other surfaces, towards new possible forms of the real.

Author's Note

Fifteen years on, this new edition preserves the structure, data, and references of the original publication. However, over time—and following new professional and personal experiences, as well as numerous readings

and conversations—I have chosen to soften the original language, which at times was excessively dense and severe. The content remains unchanged; only the tone has been adjusted, now seeking greater clarity and lightness. A new prologue to this edition and a brief epilogue have been added.

PROLOGUE TO THE FIRST EDITION (2010)

We believe we understand the world because we have learned to name it. We call "time" history, "space" territory, "power" force. And we believe that is enough. But what if those words no longer name what is truly happening? What if we are still interpreting international phenomena through broken lenses, inherited from epochs that no longer exist?

This book begins with a suspicion: that even our most modern theories carry ancient myths, fossilised images, categories that were once truths and are today merely habit. This is not merely about thinking differently, but about admitting that the different is already happening. And that, if we do not see it, it is because we are still searching with the wrong questions.

This book arises from a deeper concern: what happens when anthropo-biological sciences begin to challenge certainties long taken for granted by philosophy, sociology, epistemology, and international relations theory? Here we propose an alternative perspective—one that recognises the plastic nature—mutable, historical, conditioned—of the human being, of his symbolic-material consciousness, of the State, and of the international system that contains them.

It is not merely about thinking differently. It is about recognising that this "other way" of understanding the world is already emerging, and that we must learn to hear it.

The theory of international politics is, relatively speaking, a young library. Not because there has been no reflective tradition on man and his world, but because it is only in recent decades that academia has begun to treat global power as an object worthy of systematic study.

Most of that library—realists, liberals, neo-Marxists—shares a foundational premise: that power is rooted in the rational management of the material dimension of life. Even in their ideological disagreements, these schools are grounded in inherited conceptions—more shaped by invisible philosophical determinisms than by empirical observation.

The more recent—and still marginal—portion of that repertoire has attempted a different turn. Constructivism, as its most emblematic expression,

incorporates the challenges posed by postmodern philosophy and contemporary sociology. From this perspective, global power is not explained solely by rationality or materiality: it manifests primarily in the symbolic realm—in the meanings that organise human life, often by non-rational means.

Both currents have developed powerful theoretical architectures, but ones that are disconnected. Each tends to exclude—or subordinate—the validity of the other. This cognitive fragmentation limits our capacity to understand international phenomena as integrated configurations, in which the symbolic and the material not only coexist but shape one another, operating with simultaneous causal weight. In a world marked by plasticity, these two dimensions cannot be understood in isolation: they are interwoven forms in tension, reciprocally affecting and transforming one another.

Accepting this vision requires a rupture—not only with our ideas but with our most intimate certainties. Every historical form of social life—institutions, practices, orders—has been shaped, consolidated, and later reified. What was contingent, shaped by historical relations, becomes naturalised and unquestionable. Thus, a nation's military power, its industry, or its cultural projection are not merely objective facts: they are repeated historical forms, sedimented to the point of appearing inevitable. But they are not. What "is" came to be—and could have been otherwise.

The separation between the material and the symbolic persists as a silent inheritance: a rationalised mutation of the Platonic–Cartesian dualism. Positivist *res extensa* continues to be consecrated as the foundation of knowledge, while *res cogitans* is relegated—awkward, marginalised—like the leprous figure of post-positivist critique.

To understand Plato and Descartes is not difficult. To escape them is. The difficulty lies not in their ideas, but in recognising that we are still thinking from within their structures. We are, simultaneously, object and subject of their persistence.

Nonetheless, there is no reason for discouragement. It is possible to think from a different epistemological framework, if we combine theoretical abstraction with historical density. The figure of the symbolic-materialist human—constructor of meanings and organiser of tangible reality—opens the possibility for a truly post-Cartesian stage. One in which the symbolic and the material share the same analytical status—without hierarchy.

This book proposes a method: a constant dialogue between abstract conceptualisation and empirical observation. We will explore the recent

past—the post–Cold War—and the present in gestation—the post-post–Cold War—as historical laboratories in which the plasticity of global power is expressed.

Following the collapse of the bipolar order and the attacks of 11 September, processes emerged that radically transformed our understanding of the international order: the displacement of power towards the Global South, the resurgence of the State vis-à-vis the market, the return of ideology as a driver of conflict.

What explains these mutations? What determines that state power strengthens in certain contexts and dissolves in others? Why this oscillation between the public and the private? What conditions the ideological or identity orientation of conflicts?

These questions do not demand univocal answers, but relational understandings, in which the human being is constituted through interaction with others, amid scarce resources, within frameworks of shared symbolic structures. From this logic, States emerge—and with them, the international system.

If consciousness and its material ties are plastic, then international politics too is plastic—as a superior form of social organisation.

Barely two decades ago, the global horizon was different: neoliberalism, ethnic identities, privatisations. Today, those axes have been displaced. Geopolitics returns—and with it, the State.

This return reactivates a neo-Westphalian logic that reconfigures state legitimacy within a symbolically ductile system capable of redefining its own foundational categories.

At the same time, we witness an economic shift: mixed enterprises reappear, the State reclaims strategic sectors, and military instruments regain prominence. Are all these elements causally linked? The temptation to say yes is strong. But the real challenge is to explain how—and why.

Take one case: in the 1990s, the attraction of foreign direct investment did not depend solely on economic variables. It also required symbolic conditions: rules, institutions, shared expectations. These symbolic frameworks facilitated deep material transformations—and those transformations, in turn, restructured the symbolic.

Did something similar not happen with Japanese modernisation? Or with the integration of the United States and Germany into the second industrial revolution? Can we separate the symbolic from the material without arbitrariness?

Applying Kenneth Waltz's framework—individual, state, system—we may ask: at which level does the origin of these transformations lie? Can a systemic structure alone generate such profound effects? Are we dealing with abstractions "completely irreducible to subsystems"[1]?

Or are we, rather, facing a network of complex interactions, in which the three images co-determine one another in a fourth[2], even denser? A socially constituted reality, driven by an anthropo-managerial impulse towards total equilibrium. A form of homeostasis that exceeds classical analytical frameworks.

The history of humanity—that which was, but might not have been—has accustomed us to return. Going back to the past is, often, a way of asking: *Quo vadis?*

In these pages, we will understand plasticity as the capacity for contingent adaptation to change—not determined, but conditioned by the historical forms that precede it. Emergent from objectified realities. And woven from three threads: violence (Hobbes), scarcity (Malthus), utility (Ricardo).

Greek mythology offers a striking image: Sisyphus. Astute founder of Corinth, condemned by Zeus to eternally push a rock uphill. Each time he reaches the summit, the stone falls. Everything begins anew.

The history of man in society is the history of Sisyphus. Time and again, with titanic effort, he lifts his Hegelian Leviathan—the State—towards the heights of ideology, only to see it tumble again into the plains of identity. On those ideological heights, the international stage adorns itself with geopolitical regalia. Myths of manifest destiny arise, new representations of space emerge. In the plains of identity, a deterritorialised geoeconomy reigns.

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[1] Onuf, Nicholas, *Levels*, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, Número 1, 1995, p. 40.

[2] Cfr. North, Robert, *War, Peace, Survival: Global Politics and Conceptual Synthesis*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990, p.10. Citado en: Onuf, Nicholas, *Op. Cit.,* p. 37.

Throughout time, we have witnessed the unceasing cycle of the rise and fall of Leviathans[3]. From ancient empires to the superpowers of the twentieth century, through city-states and contemporary middle powers—all have reached their symbolic and material zenith, only to return—again and again—to fragmentation.

Imperial Rome is perhaps the most illustrative example of that moment of plenitude. But even there, symbolic and material cohesion dissolved. *Ius publicum* yielded to the *ius privatum* of the barbarian companies, with whom spoils were shared: *con-panis*.

We do not propose here a new determinism. On the contrary, we affirm that Sisyphus is master of his rock and loves it, "it is his destiny, created by him (…) his destiny belongs to him. His rock is his thing"[4].

And that the rise and fall of Leviathan are visible expressions of a pendular alternativism between ideology and identity, between geopolitics and geoeconomy. In that cycle—made of symbols and matter, of history and contingency, of power and possibility—we seek to understand international politics not as a closed field, but as a plastic form: open, and in permanent transformation.

This work is structured in three parts, each inspired by what we figuratively call "spirits": formative and transformative forces of the symbolic-material dimension of human life. The spirit of the people, as identity; the spirit of the age, as ideology; and the spirit of the epochs, as pendularity. These three forces condense the historical, cultural, and political coordinates from which we intend to examine the plasticity of global power.

The first part, titled *The Spirit of the Age: Identity*, is conceived as a kind of archaeology of the recent past. Its aim is to retrieve the constitutive features of the international environment that followed the presumed "end of ideologies"—that liquid interregnum where informational vertigo seemed to erode all durable forms of political meaning.

The post–Cold War, as a category, has not finished narrating itself: this chapter seeks to define its contours and unveil its logics.

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[3] Kennedy, Paul, *Auge y caída de las grandes potencias*, Plaza & Janes, Barcelona, 1977.
[4] Camus, Albert, *El mito de Sísifo*, Editorial Losada / Pagina 12, Buenos Aires, 2004, pp. 126.

Chapter One begins with a personal experience linked to the material architecture of poverty. That sensory and symbolic starting point allows us to introduce graphically three vectors that have structured the epochal transition: the eclipse of the State as the point of convergence for social relations, the econometric codification of those relations, and the disappearance of ideological *meta-narratives*[5].

These factors enabled a profound reordering of the binomials constitutive of the political: friend/enemy, command/obedience, and public/private—all rearticulated around a new/old gravitational axis: identity of belonging. Thus, we move from the geopolitics of ideological frontiers to a geoeconomy marked by ethno-linguistic boundaries.

In line with our aim to forge concepts that articulate the material with the symbolic, Chapter Two introduces two fundamental contemporary dynamics for understanding the plasticity of the social world—and with it, of global power: the dumping of economic capital and the dumping of symbolic capital. The former is well known: economic, commercial, ecological, financial, and social. The latter, taken from debates in contemporary sociology, refers to how the underdeveloped world, through mass migration, refugee flows, and forms of symbolic violence such as terrorism, seeks to restore local ways of life disfigured by the economic dumping of the developed world.

Chapter Three takes a further step in the search for the deep architecture of global power. To understand how these dumpings from different realms intersect and are expressed politically and economically, we introduce two key concepts: intersubjective understanding and material interdependence. Both allow us to demonstrate the interpenetration of the symbolic and the material in contemporary configurations of power.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the foundational dialectic of our time: globalisation versus localisation. We reformulate these concepts based on four vectors that operationalise their impact: ethnicity, socialisation of the factors of development, transnationalisation of capital, and resources. In this way, we show how globalisation and localisation give rise to a third space of hybrid nature, where emerging powers deploy plastic forms of geoeconomic and symbolic management, capitalising on the best of both worlds.

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[5] Cfr. Lyotard, Francois, *La condición posmoderna,* Traducción de Mariano Antolín Rato, Cátedra, Madrid, 1987.

Finally, Chapter Six closes this archaeology of the present with a look at the mutation of the balance of power: from the military mode to the economic–cultural mode. In this way, a new power matrix is configured: the balance of power in times of identity.

The second part, *The Spirit of the Age: Ideology*, projects itself toward the present in gestation. Across Chapters Seven and Eight, we propose an articulation between ideology and geopolitics. We show how, in recent decades, powerful Leviathans have re-emerged—this time shaped by ethno-racist ideologies, religious fundamentalisms, national–imperialist projects, and material–economicist doctrines. These are ideological forms that not only reinterpret history, but also attempt to reorganise global order through new symbolic and material territorialities.

Chapter Nine—*"The Neo-Westphalian State and the Balance of Power in Times of New Ideologies"*—translates the classical elements of national power into empirical categories suited to the new global context, in line with our hypothesis of symbolic–material plasticity. New instruments of power thus come into play: e-hinterlands, sovereign wealth funds, and competitive clusters of symbolic analysts. These are, perhaps, the platforms from which the future international system will be articulated: polycentric, increasingly multipolar, and symbolically fragmented.

The third and final part, *The Spirit of the Epochs: Pendularity*, addresses the oscillating movement between identity and ideology, between geopolitics and geoeconomy, as part of a blind and recursive process of global homeostasis. Although this process has endogenous roots in the Western tradition—in its way of understanding material interdependence and intersubjective understanding—with the experience of globality, it becomes planetary. The West has universalised its "living metaphors", which reduce the inaccessibility between civilisational thought systems, enabling a shared discursive capture of the symbolic and the material. In doing so, it consolidates implicit philosophical structures capable of legitimising a materialist ontology of violence.

This final part consists of two chapters. The first, Chapter Ten, explores the tension between *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*. On that oscillating slope, up and down which the rock of Leviathan moves endlessly, identities are ideologically amalgamated or disintegrated into ancestral micro-narratives. This dynamic constitutes the contested terrain between the spirit of the people—singular, particular, embodied—and the spirit of the age—diffuse, abstract, totalising. The chapter proposes, in a more essayistic key, two lines

of analysis: the symbolic pendularity between identity and ideology, and the material pendularity between geopolitics and geoeconomy. By crossing these, we seek to restore the recursive parity between the symbolic and material dimensions of human life.

Chapter Eleven—*"The Symbolic–Materialist Human"*—focuses on the figure of the subject as the axis of the plasticity of power. The old ontology inherited from the pre-Socratic duel between Heraclitus and Parmenides still governs our epistemological frameworks. On one side, perpetual flux—Bauman and his liquid modernity; on the other, the rock of permanence—positivism and its ontological derivatives. In between, the lived experience of plasticity: something flows, something remains. History does not repeat, but it retains memory. "Path dependence" sets historical limits on action, without cancelling human agency. Thus, power, as a symbolic–material form, is always the product of the relationship between historical trajectories and intersubjective meanings.

Neurosciences, at this point, emerge as interlocutors of the social sciences. They force us to reconsider our anthropological categories, introducing new psycho-biological variables that explain the co-conditioning between "the outside" and "the inside", between the symbolic and the material—not only at the social level but also the individual. Subjectivity, in this framework, is not a prior datum, but a symbolic–material construction that feeds back from experience.

Finally, it should be noted that this book draws upon a broad conceptual apparatus taken from diverse philosophical and theoretical traditions. It does not do so innocently. Often, the weaving of ideas demands the introduction of neologisms, the building of bridges, the forging of new categories to name hybrid phenomena.

Thus, this book seeks to trace a dialogical re-reading between the singular and the general, between the symbolic and the material, between the political and the economic—and to propose a way of thinking about historical conditioning—objectified through its persistence—that shapes the possible futures of international politics.

PART I

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE: IDENTITY ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RECENT PAST

CHAPTER 1

FROM IDEOLOGY TO IDENTITY AND FROM GEOPOLITICS TO GEOECONOMICS

"The metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, nor even for plausibility; they seek astonishment. (...) They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one of them."[6]

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

The Overlay of Poverty. "Las Latitas" or Bombay?

It was an ordinary morning, some years ago, when an image on the edge of a page struck me with the force of a memory I had never lived. In an issue of *The Economist*, a small photograph—relegated to the lower corner of an economic column—depicted the intimacy of a makeshift home on the outskirts of Bombay.

The scene was simple: a Hindu woman hosing down her son, both barefoot, standing at the threshold of their house over a murky puddle of mud and foam.

I had never been to India. My sparse links to that culture were limited to a few texts on international politics and philosophical readings on Eastern worldviews. Yet that image felt uncannily familiar. Something in it—in its aesthetic, its atmosphere, its architectural rawness—triggered a latent sensory memory. I covered the human figure in the frame with my hand, and in doing so, something was unlocked. I did not recall the people, but I did remember the space. Not the gesture, but the structure.

What emerged was not India, but a different scene—strangely equivalent. Heavy smells came back to me: stale dampness, wet earth, carbon monoxide. Rough textures: worn nylon, untreated wood, unrendered bricks.

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[6] Borges, Jorge Luis, *Tlön. Uqbar. Orbis Tertium,* Ficciones. El Aleph, Círculo de lectores, Buenos Aires, 1956, p. 16.

The scene no longer belonged to the photograph. It was an evocation, yes—but not an invention. I clearly recognised the material architecture of a shared poverty. I understood then that this aesthetic of deprivation is not unique to one continent or culture. Misery globalises, too.

That other house—the one my memory overlaid onto the image of Bombay—was just forty kilometres south of Buenos Aires. During my years in seminary, it had been a regular destination for weekend social outreach. The neighbourhood, even then, was part of the third ring of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area—a zone that, in a few decades, had shifted from rural dairy enclave to an urban conglomerate of over two hundred thousand people.

That is where "G." lived—one of the children who attended parish activities along with his five siblings, his mother, and, when alcohol permitted, his father as well. On rainy days, the visit required wellingtons and a raincoat: the house—barely twenty square metres without a solid floor—would flood quickly. Kitchen, dining room and bathroom merged into a single space, whose only extension was the slant of its sagging walls.

G.'s father, an immigrant from a neighbouring country, had arrived in Argentina in the 1970s. His job as a labourer for the state energy company, combined with his wife's sewing work, had enabled them to rent a house near the petrochemical complex of Dock Sud. He was one of many indirect beneficiaries of overemployment and the informal safety nets that the welfare state—with all its imperfections—still sustained.

But by the mid-1990s, that institutional architecture began to collapse. Privatisations, new indicators of economic efficiency, and the extractive logic of global capital left thousands like them without support. Like so many others, G.'s parents were forced to occupy public land and build their home with salvaged materials. They were not victims of a natural disaster but of a structural transformation: the retreat of Leviathan, the de-ideologisation of politics, and the hegemony of the private sphere over the public.

Unaware of their place in a broader global process, G.'s family was swept up by the deep currents of an epochal mutation. In Greater Buenos Aires, as in Bombay, the collapse of the welfare state and the withdrawal of unifying ideological narratives gave way to social fragmentation and the return of ethno-ancestral identities as alternative forms of belonging and resistance.

A decade later, the networks of migrant solidarity that had emerged informally in that neighbourhood crystallised into associations with class and origin consciousness. The one G.'s parents were part of—now with its own voice—joined the Bolivarian Congress of the Peoples and demanded representation within that Leviathan that, from the ashes of neoliberalism, had begun to hint at its return.

What that photograph triggered was not merely a memory—it was a comparative epiphany.

The material architecture of poverty, when closely observed, reveals structural patterns that transcend cultural boundaries. The third ring of Bombay and that of Greater Buenos Aires are not identical, but they resemble one another. That resemblance is not an aesthetic coincidence: it reveals a global logic. Where the social contract disintegrates, where ideologies no longer unify, identity takes the place of narrative—and the geography of deprivation allows us to think politics from the margins of its traditional representation.

It is unlikely that the men who stormed the Bastille imagined that with each stone they pulled down, they were chiselling a new grammar of power. Perhaps they acted out of rage, hunger, or the sheer vertigo of the crowd. But unknowingly, they embodied a historical mutation: they were both spark and clay of an order being reconfigured in the very act. Subjects and objects. Cause and effect. Their gesture was not merely political—it was *plastic*, in the deepest sense of the word. They gave form to something that had not yet been named.

Two centuries later, thousands of kilometres away—and without proclamations or cannons—other bodies, less visible, more silenced, are playing a similar role. The residents of Greater Buenos Aires' third ring and the structurally poor of Bombay. They write no manifestos and raise no flags, yet they inhabit the edges where the world is being reshaped.

Their lives, unknowingly, mould the lines of fracture and fusion of contemporary power.

They are not spectators of history—they are its living matter. There, where the State fades and identity becomes a refuge, *plastic power* finds its laboratory.

The Post–Cold War and the Atomisation of the Enemy

The scene that opens this chapter—G and his family sharing the same type of structural precarity as a woman and child elsewhere in the world—is not an isolated anecdote. It is a visible thread in a broader weave: that of the global sociological shifts that followed the end of the bipolar order.

For G and his kin, the retreat of the State and the closure of the Cold War cycle left an uncertain future—though less bleak than that of millions trapped in the harsher margins of the world: Africa, the Balkans, Central Asia, Latin America. It was with those regions in mind that many analysts began mapping a new terrain of conflict: no longer bipolar, no longer inter-state, but made up of asymmetric, hybrid tensions, hard to classify.

With the collapse of grand ideological narratives—capitalism vs. communism—the state monopoly on violence weakened. In its place, new markets for legitimate violence emerged. Some were oligopolistic, like the militias in Afghanistan. Others, more chaotic, like armed groups in Haiti, seemed to operate in a perfect competition market: everyone offers violence; everyone competes.

This new landscape did not merely overwhelm the categories of the twentieth century—it blew them apart. The world ceased to be organised around two opposing ideological poles. The great symbolic–material mosaics that once divided the planet were replaced by a fragmented, multicoloured board. What emerged was a map of black holes[7]: regions trapped in ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic conflicts—pre-industrial societies—coexisting with hyper-globalised zones—post-industrial societies[8].

During the Cold War, the friend/enemy logic served as a binding agent. The threat of the "other" enabled the construction of internal cohesion, the offering of certainties, and the upholding of social pacts. Identity was subordinated to ideology. That phase may be termed *pax identitatis*: a peace based on the negation of identity through grand narratives.

When that *pax identitatis* collapsed, what emerged might be called *fractio identitatis*. The old social pact, founded on three pillars—shared borders,

[7] Cfr. Brzezinski, Zbigniew, El gran tablero mundial, Paidos, Barcelona, 1998.
[8] Cfr. Bell, Daniel, El advenimiento de la sociedad posindustrial, Alianza, Madrid, 1976.

institutional obedience, and fair redistribution—began to crack. And with it, the legitimacy of the modern Leviathan—the State—was weakened.

A geopolitical border is not merely a line on the map: it is a symbolic construct that allows the individual to identify with a totality. The political contract, in turn, shapes the rules of the game: who commands, who obeys, how decisions are made. Finally, the economic dimension ensures that the material conditions of existence—education, health, employment, food—are available in a more or less equitable fashion. In all times and places, the proper conjunction of these three elements facilitates the closure of geopolitical spaces that guarantees the effective sovereignty of the State—both as liberation from the power of others and as the internal unification of its own power[9].

The historical fusion of nation and State (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), the result of a fortuitous synthesis of geoeconomic and geopolitical cleavages[10], though carried out in the name of sovereignty, has always constituted a form of unstable equilibrium. To date, there have been few cases in which the national agent's identity integrity has been harmonised perfectly with the totalising character of the State as structure[11].

The nation-State has always been an *imagined community*[12], constructed during modernity in correspondence with its objective material structures[13]. This community, which ensured a "doxic submission to the established order"[14], saw its cognitive structures dissolve with the arrival of postmodernity—enabling the simultaneous and parallel emergence of

[9] Cfr. Bobbio, Norberto, El futuro de la democracia, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Bogotá, 1992, p. 71.
[10] Cfr. Rokkan, Stein, Dimensions of State Formation and Nation-Building: A Possible Paradigm of Research on Varations within Europe, En: Tilly, C., (compilador), The Formation of National States in Western Europe, Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 592-595.
[11] Cfr. Kuah, Adrian, Sovereignty and The Politics of Identity in International Relations, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Working Paper Número 48, Singapur, 2003, p. 19.
[12] Cfr. Anderson, Benedict, Imagined Comunities, Verso, London, 1991.
[13] Cfr. Bourdieu, Pierre, Espíritu de Estado – Génesis y estructura del campo burocrático, Revista Sociedad, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales - U.B.A, Abril de 1996, p. 13.
[14] Ibidem.