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Note de lecture du livre de Franco Farinelli

Reading report of Franco Farinelli's book

De la raison cartographique

Franco Farinelli

Paris, CTHS-Éditions, 2009

The author

Franco Farinelli is the President of the Association of Italian Geographers (A.G.E.I.). He teaches human geography at Bologna University. His last work is *La crisi della ragione cartografica*, (Einaudi, 2009).

The book

"Each handbook, in its own way a geographical handbook, establishes a double trust: what is orderly and that same order is reproducible on paper, on a page ... a geographical book is no ordinary book because it covers, more than others... from the very beginning on time, covering the entire world". Using these words the geographer Franco Farinelli starts his book *De la raison cartographique*, (CTHS-Éditions, 2009) immediately revealing a double ambition: the statement of a discourse which could be formally (just on paper) referable to the most recognizable of geographical knowledge texts, the atlas. And it's possible to be aware of this important analogy opening (literally opening) the book's chapters and noticing an extraordinary correspondence between page size and chapter's subjects, generally where only in an atlas it is possible to find. The second is a collection of stories, of steps, regarding the genesis and the development of western culture models until their crisis; models which are of geographical kind. Ambitions, it was said, and they're much bigger as geography has confined itself to the world description, or representation, without questioning itself about what the world has become. It is mentioned from the beginning of the book how geography has been relating to the Earth as a specular vision, as *Gé*, "something clear, surface relating, concerning horizontal position", and definitively forgetting the other name by which ancient Greeks used to call Earth, that is *Ctòn*, "still surviving in the adjective "chthonic" - which instead means subterranean, cavernous" - concerning vertical position, that cannot be reduced to the plane and two-dimensional sphere of the table, of the map.

Nevertheless the systematic reduction of the Earth to the table, to the plane, to the map, does not imply just the loss of one dimension in the representation - as the myth of Dionysus, in which he was killed by Titans and then reassembled by his brother Apollo, remembers - but, as the German critical geography of the first XIX century asserted, it implies the impossibility of returning to Earth, the impossibility of the opposite method, an additive one, by which reassembling the different representations the result is the very beginning of the Earth. This is exactly what happened from the XVIII century when the Paris meridian was built crossing the entire France territory from Dunkerque to Perpignano, materializing what Heidegger called "the age of the World Picture". And it's just through this operation that the world has been reduced to a great picture, to a geographical map turning itself in the copy of its copy.

This journey across the main western knowledge models can be based on some main protagonists, and they are the concepts of space, representation, landscape and city; it is clear looking at the titles of the makeup of the three part the book: *La pyramide et le triangle* ; *Le paysage, le sujet, le lieu* ; *La ville, la carte, l'espace* .

If the first section there is general introduction to the chapters that follow and concerns of the primacy of some knowledge models like the Ptolemaic projection and cartographic triangulation. The second and the third part respectively treat the history and critic of two main topics of geographic inquiry: the landscape and the city. Farinelli explains how the idea of landscape had begun, starting from the end of the XIX century and thanks to the work of one of the "heroes" of the book, Alexander von Humboldt, one of the most controversial (for this reason important) subject of geographic inquiry. If according to Humboldt, landscape is the cause of the knowledge process, the necessary starting point to develop each scientific argument - within the Humboltian political project, landscape is the primary means to spread bourgeois ideas against the German aristocratic feudal despotism - at the beginning of XX century, with Sigmund Passarge's *Landschaftskunde*, landscape becomes a simple collection of things, of objects, and this, in geographical terms means the rejection of any causal explanation: "since the landscape is just the only form of reality the geographer is able to inquire about, it is definitively the geographical reality itself". In the Sixties, thanks to Lucio Gambi (to whose memory Farinelli dedicates his book) this kind of landscape will show its limits and be completely inadequate as reality explanatory model; by that moment the geographical inquiry will refill «the empty evidence of terrestrial features» to which the geographer has to give a meaning.

The third part focuses on models and theories concerning the study of the city and of its representation, starting from Plato's "ideal city" theory to the contemporary informational and electronic cities where what we can see and observe is absolutely unfit to explain its internal functioning. Within this context a new definition of the city seems to be very important. According to this new definition the city is "a place that is able to produce a material, public, and shared image reproducing the form and functioning of the world or part of it". This statement, according to the works of Jane Jacobs and Edward W. Soja, enables to cross that impasse between a formal vs. functional consideration of a city, crippling the geographical analysis for years, bringing back the focus on the significance of images.

Thanks to this statement it's still possible to consider the Anatolian site of Çatal Hüyük and modern cities thousands years later as outcomes of the same aggregative logic. But just at this moment also this possible definition of the city begins to show any limits and new kinds of settlement (the informational and the electronic city) put any attempt of shared self-awareness in a critical position.

It's along these paths that Franco Farinelli's "*raison cartographique*" has been developed, and it finds in myth and in western knowledge archetypical models a possible source to explain the contemporary world, after the modern cartographic logic sunset has been recognized.

The labyrinth represents the end of these paths: it is the most extraordinary among images and the most fascinating among models. Labyrinth which represents the peak and at the same time the collapse of the cartographic logic, that one of the reduction of the sphere to the table, of the world to the Earth, of the *physis* to its deathly representation. As Farinelli notices, labyrinth exists just as mental image and cause its definition it's not possible to draw it and otherwise to represent it. But it's also true that it refers, according to its

Egyptian model described by Herodotus, to another invisible subterranean composition of which what it's possible to see is just a reflection, as the story of the two Earth's names, *Gé* and *Ctòn*, still reminds.

Notes

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Bibliographie