

# MODERNITY, GEOPOLITICS, MORALITY. GEOGRAPHICAL IMPLICATIONS IN ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

**ALESSANDRO RICCI**

*University of Bergamo*

*alessandro.ricci@unibg.it*

## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, with particular attention to the geographical and geopolitical dimensions that underpin his thought. It outlines the central arguments concerning the relationship between morality, tradition, and rationality, situating them within broader debates in geographical thought and geopolitical implications. Special emphasis is given to MacIntyre's critique of modern individualism and his call for a return to Aristotelian virtue ethics as a framework capable of providing coherence to moral life. The analysis also highlights how his reflections on community and practices clashes with modern international politics. Through this overview, the article provides readers with essential insights into the geographical implicit reminds of MacIntyre's thought, while also offering points of reflection for future discussion across disciplinary boundaries.

## **KEYWORDS**

Alasdair MacIntyre, Geography, Geopolitics, Space and Politics, Modernity, Territorialization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's book *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* and the considerations he develops around the morality of politics is enormously stimulating, even for those who practice geography. It indeed offers thoughts for consideration that, although apparently distant from the most immediate interests in political spatiality, allows for an in-depth exploration of decisive issues in doing politics, understood as acting in decision-making terms on public spaces, even through specifically spatial and geopolitical lenses.

Some reasoning, especially regarding a sort of Thomistic idealism that MacIntyre embodies and which, in my view, clashes with modern statehood and current dynamics of international politics, seems to emerge rather glaringly.

The attempt of this article is to highlight, albeit from a geographical perspective, apparently distant from that expressed by the philosopher, the elements of greatest interaction between his field of inquiry and political geography, also offering a view

on the current international reality and evidencing the critical aspects of his thought, due to the lack of spatial lenses in considering the “conflicts of modernity”. For this reason, my main purpose as a political geographer is to highlight the convergences between MacIntyre and the main elements of geographical thought and, at the same time, to put in light how his arguments seem to not consider the present geopolitical reality and the power spatialized relations.

## ENVIRONMENT AND TERRITORIALIZATION

First of all, what is the scale of analysis of the Scottish author? What is his reference geography, the geography within which his reflection moves, ranging from the mere individual, subjective sphere, to the state and collective one, relating above all to the concept of the «common good»?

In MacIntyre there is a linear conjugation of the different spheres just mentioned (from the personal to the state one). His is a spatial stratification – or, better said, a multiscalarity, or spatial multidimensionality – that emerges quite clearly from his words, although it sets aside a global logic, to focus more on the sphere of personal action.

Starting indeed from the dual meaning of «personal end» that we find in Aristotle according to the idea of *εὐδαιμονία*, and then in Thomas Aquinas according to the principle of *beatitudo*, MacIntyre often refers to the relationship that each of us establishes with our surrounding environment: it is here that his philosophical, anthropological, and also theological or moral reflections implicitly become geographical. His consideration of humanity – understood as the deepest nature of human beings, that distinctive trait that distinguishes them from animals – is precisely the capacity to overcome the natural and immediate bond with their reference environment. If animals indeed generally cannot separate their development from the environment in which they were born and raised, human beings, on the contrary: «have developed unique abilities to change their environments, so that natural selection no longer operates as it did and does with other species» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 225).

Here the author identifies the peculiar trait of human beings: their capacity, thanks to intellect and their reference culture, to shape the surrounding environments and not be subservient or passive to them, as is the case for other animal species. He takes a further step in overcoming environmental determinism and also a certain basic evolutionism: he speaks of language and the pursuit of the common good that derive from a “high” cultural setup, thus capable of pursuing a good that transcends one’s own person and is aimed at the collectivity.

Beyond this specific moral objective, proper to his belonging to the Thomistic strand, MacIntyre here reasons almost like a geographer: the capacity of men is to

shape the earth and make it their own, and from this derives the good functioning of a social and political system. He specifies in this regard, involving the theme of virtue, that it is exercised when one acts in the functioning of one's social roles «as citizen, as member of a household and family, and so on» (MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 220-221). The fulfillment of one's human virtue reconnects to one's reference spheres and the different geographical scales that these trigger.

In the moral aspects of spatial action, an interesting convergence is found, especially if we take up the reflections of another highly significant French geographer, Augustine Berque, who, like MacIntyre, argues that our condition as human beings derives from the relationship with the other and thus with places and the earth: «this relationship - argues Berque - is the basis of our very humanity; it is its condition» (Berque, 2019, p. 52) and it is what distinguishes us precisely from other animate beings. And indeed, continues the French geographer, we «are human because what happens at our antipodes concerns us not only in a moral sense. [...]. Unlike anthropoids, what happens over there, in a place we may never go, the issue has to do with our very existence» (Berque, 2019, p. 52). In Berque, this relationship between human beings, even distant from each other, and similarly between men and the natural environment, is constitutive of humanity itself and at the same time distinctive compared to other living beings: «the geographicality of being, in fact, is nothing but the relationship in which physical reality is hardly foreign to the thinking thing, which participates in its own being» (Berque, 2019, p. 53).

When in geography the process of «territorialization» is defined, we speak precisely of the capacity to modify the natural environment that is expressed through a cultural apparatus and a reference language or a semiotic system that is reported on the geographical map. Angelo Turco founded his theory of complexity precisely on the three crucial phases of territorialization, consisting of *denomination*, *reification* and *structuration* and the symbolic control of space that derives from it (Turco, 2010; Maggioli, 2015). Every process of shaping natural space inevitably starts from cultural presuppositions, which MacIntyre himself clearly identifies in his philosophical analysis. Territorialization also presupposes at the same time a capacity for planning, which the Scottish author himself associates with the enormous theme of the pursuit of the common good deriving from the exercise of virtue and the application of man's highest rationality: here perhaps lies the distinctive aspect of one approach (the geographical one) and the other (that of our author), although with many elements in common.

In the first case, in fact, planning in geography is understood in a political sense: we speak, in this regard, of a process of territorialization aimed at the creation of social structures, which in turn determine the landscape stratification so full of political and cultural meanings. The same territorial structures depend on human

action organized in social bodies according to a specific objective, relating to the ordering of the elements of nature and the realization of favorable conditions for life on earth: the territory thus becomes, according to this perspective, the mirror of the functioning of a society and its organizational capacity, while at the same time providing the resources for the realization of collective projects (Casti, 1998, p. 18). The nature of this dual interaction defines precisely human action, which should distinguish itself from the animal one precisely because it tends – or should tend – to overcome the *natural* conflictual logic triggered by territorial dynamics. Indeed, as Giuseppe Dematteis argues, it is essential in this regard «the transformation of what by nature tends towards exclusion and conflict, into a socio-spatial system founded on opposite behaviors, such as communication, cooperation, exchange, that is, on forms of socialization within increasingly vast territorial formations» (Dematteis, 1985, p. 74). It is this concept of “territory” that is not found in animal territoriality, according to the Turin-based geographer. In effect, it is the predominant characteristic of human beings to go beyond nature, as also Berque argues: «to go beyond nature is what we call culture or civilization [...]». One of the proper characteristics of the human (there are others, of course) is to be ethical; to possess the sense of good and evil, and to be able to determine one’s conduct based on this distinction, having thus the consciousness of a duty» (Berque, 2021, p. 42).

In MacIntyre’s case, instead, the question that emerges most strongly at this stage is, or should be, quoting him directly, «What is the good of doing this or that, of making this or that happen or allowing this or that to happen?» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 225). Clearly, the nature of individual life and thus also of collective life, depends on personal choices, which «differ from culture to culture and social order to social order and differs too depending on an agent’s place in her or his social order» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 223). The author states that «Everything turns on how and to what extent agents in their everyday practice conceive of themselves and others as having the powers and potentialities of rational agents» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 215), because – he argues – «to be a good practical reasoner is closely related to being a good human being» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 190).

This is clearly a different reference platform for the philosopher compared to geographers, but not necessarily, in any case, does it clash with the definition of territorialization formulated by the geographical literature. On the contrary, there seems to be an unexpected convergence of visions, which makes the sense of the human its crucial pivot and the connection of man with his function, exercised through places, its spatial reference point. What for Berque is the «duty» of man, expressed in his daily actions with a clear distinction between good and evil, coincides with the concept of virtue formulated by MacIntyre, who argues that «the most important judgments that can be passed upon a man concern the way in which he discharges his allotted social function» (MacIntyre, 2017, p. 5). If this

was valid for archaic orders, with the advent of modernity we will witness a decay of this kind of hierarchical and social order, dictated by a moral crisis that precedes the process of secularization, which in turn coincides with the compartmentalization of society (cf. Maletta, 2020, pp. 59-65)

### ***POLIS AND STATE***

If, therefore, a first geographical configuration can be found precisely in the relationship between man and environment, a relationship which according to the Scottish author properly defines humanity in its highest sense and which is also the basis, as we have seen, of geographical reflection, there are two other reference scales of the Aristotelian-Thomistic logic that are addressed by the Scottish philosopher.

The political-geographical dimension of MacIntyre is first of all that of the Aristotelian *polis* or the Thomistic *civitas*, also in this case indissolubly linked to the development of human nature in its deepest sense: it is in the *polis*, but not only within it, «that human beings can flourish as rational animals. And – the author further argues – it is not too difficult to rewrite Aristotle’s arguments about the need for the *polis* (*Politics* I, 1253a1–39) in contemporary terms» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 224).

But what is the *polis* or the *civitas* that MacIntyre refers to and, we might add, aspires to? Is there a geographical reflection in these concepts (Elden, 2013)?

It is one that possesses some fundamental characteristics: it must be justly ordered and well-functioning, such that there exists a double virtuous mechanism concerning the governed and the governors, who both aim to achieve the common good. This happens through participation in the political society, thus acquiring dispositions and virtues that orient citizens towards their ideal ultimate end. It is here that the clash with modern statehood seems to emerge most blatantly, and the author himself does not hide the irrelevance of such theoretical considerations, in a context such as the modern one, «whose bureaucratic institutions and liberal pluralism seem to make Aristotelianism irrelevant» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 176).

The author’s attempt to overcome the difficulties that modern society and politics have offered compared to the moral-Thomistic framework appears, however, fruitless: for MacIntyre the concern for the common good requires a strong political commitment that can be found in local bodies, trade union sections, community organizations, citizen assemblies, associations, and so on, which in his vision would give «contemporary form to a distinctively Aristotelian politics» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 177). In modern practice, which has undergone the fragmentation of society due to moral decay and subsequent secularization, the examples cited appear equally fragmented. The author is well aware that the world

he refers to – the medieval and classical European one – has run aground in modernity, thus the virtuous examples appear equally fragmented and minute. The properly Aristotelian character would therefore be identifiable in another element: the conjugation between ethics and politics, to the point of outlining some examples of such a virtuous relationship, like the case of the community of Danish fishermen in Northern Jutland.

Here the author's framework seems to not consider the reality – the typically modern one, of political globalization, *governance* and mechanisms of close connection between economic and political interests detached from territories, as well as a dirigiste political setup, as in the European case – that profoundly contradicts his theses. The examples reported by the author – and there are several –, as well as the small congregations aimed at the search for a common good, represent in his eyes certainly virtuous examples. At the same time, contemporary geopolitical analysis reveals that these positive examples, while significant, operate from a position of structural marginality relative to dominant power blocs, which calls into question the scalability of its proposal. In the search for small practices of ethical virtue, MacIntyre seems deliberately to neglect the enormous burden of modernity or, more simply, he intends to target those virtuous practices that represent the grain of sand in the vast secularized and amoral bloc of modern society.

His reflection, once again, aligns itself unconsciously with that of geographers, who, by placing the relationship between human beings and the environment at the center, question the inextricable link between human societies, territory, and the definition of civilization. Berque, reflecting at a general and deeper level, emphasizes in this regard that it is modernity itself that undermines values, to the point of being considered an evil, in the paradox that it is precisely the West from which modernity sprang that denies itself: «to the extent that it attacks the identity of a people, modernity is felt as an evil, and the values that oppose it, in an amalgam of premodern and non-Western, are on the contrary perceived as a good» (Berque, 2021, p. 70).

Geography allows us to identify the substantial distinctions between hemispheres and the geographical trajectories of modernity and its opponents, as in the case of Berque, who is an expert of Japan, and of Yi-Fu Tuan, who, as a native Chinese, carried out his teaching function in the USA, and identified the distinction between his two reference worlds in the «cosmos» and the «hearth» (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1996). In the Scottish author the aspect relating to regional differences that exist, for example, between Northern and Southern Europe, between contexts where local realities can still “have their say” and contexts where they are truly irrelevant, seems to be neglected, that is, where the blend between the utilitarian principle and the liberal idea of happiness has taken root more

strongly<sup>1</sup>. In other words, if he reasons at a moral and individual level, analyzing society and human behaviors according to an idea of fragmentation into spheres of existence and distinct stages, he does not seem to take into account the broadening of horizons and the distinction between regions of the world from a political and social point of view.

In the first case, therefore, the MacIntyrean discourse coincides with that of many geographers where the stages of individual life in fact coincide with the places of the everyday, the object of study of geography. In the second case, that is, when the gaze extends beyond the individual contingent, the distinction between different social conceptions and trajectories of modernity is lost. It is on the individual reference scale that his reflection moves most, although he tries to extend it to the modern state sphere as well: it is in this case that the categories he refers to suddenly lose their cogency with reality and clash with modernity.

MacIntyre seems indeed not to consider another, decisive aspect, that is, the foundation of modern politics. Or, better said, he would like to overcome it, in an impulse that in light of current reality appears almost wishful or excessively idealistic. For the Scottish author, in fact, Morality still acts in modern politics. If for him the beacon of action must normatively be Morality, in the pursuit of a supposed «common good», in the application to modern reality this principle seems to lose meaning: «In a society such as our own in which so much economic and political activity is expressive of the attitudes and standpoints of rational maximizers, Morality therefore continues to have a distinctive function, function, since its constraints extend beyond any that rational maximizers would impose and its projects are other than those that rational maximizers would undertake» (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 188).

From this he derives two other considerations: 1) Morality would go hand in hand with rationality and 2) loyalty to Morality allows Western governments to make aid promises.

The question we must ask ourselves at this point is: is this really the case?

## MODERNITY AND A-MORALITY

The limits of the MacIntyrian model in grasping the nature of modern politics becomes evident when contrasted with an alternative paradigm, such as the ‘stasis’ or global civil war framework proposed by Giorgio Agamben. While MacIntyre seeks to reconstruct a moral *polis*, Agamben diagnoses its definitive dissolution, wherein the boundary between the political and the domestic, friend and enemy,

<sup>1</sup> «The encounter between the utilitarian principle and the liberal idea of happiness however does not seem to have rivals today: that the “concept of happiness it embodies is so amorphous and adaptable does not make it less but rather more pleasing to those who seek a court of appeal on evaluative questions which they are sure will decide in their favor”» (Maletta, 2020, p. 76).

becomes blurred<sup>2</sup>. Although the premises and conclusions of the two philosophers are radically divergent, their thought offers two contrasting lenses through which to read the same phenomenon: the eclipse of a shared political space.

There is indeed certainly a certain degree of incoherence in Western political logic, which the author himself highlights well: geopolitically we can see this incoherence in the wars of the West and NATO, always cloaked in good intentions, affirmation of good and export of democratic values, which no longer have quarter and spatial definition, to the point that Giorgio Agamben defines the civil war as a political paradigm of global spaces: and indeed *stasis* confuses, in a dual shift, what belongs to the *oikos* and what is proper to the *polis*, the intimate and the foreign (Agamben, 2015, p. 15).

This distinction between these scales of action does not appear in MacIntyre's logic, who indeed does not consider the distinct geographical spheres that this entails. If he still sees an active presence of Morality, especially in state action, today the only true morality admitted is not the one with a capital M described by the author but one based too often on untruthful presuppositions, of those who, beyond any morality, divide the world into «good» and «bad» (think of the applied idea of «Rogue States») and on this basis declare new «*just wars*» which, unlike those of the past, are not such because they are based on a common *ius*, but on a fragile and fake morality that often hides base interests (Colombo, 2021). Not coincidentally, MacIntyre's attitude in the face of such a world stage seems to correspond to Agamben's description. His focus on the private sphere is the result of a general condition dictated by *stasis* as the prevailing modern political paradigm, which excludes from political belonging those who do not participate in it: «Not taking part in the civil war amounts to being expelled from the *polis* and confined to the *oikos*, to losing citizenship by being reduced to the unpolitical condition of a private person» (Agamben, 2015, p. 17).

At this point a question arises spontaneously, also relating to the individual level: to what extent does the Morality spoken of by MacIntyre act in the lives of people and the collectivity, that is, in the personal sphere of the *oikos* that transfers into the political one of the *polis*?

He himself responds that sometimes people act and think according to the perspective of the common good and thus of a high rationality, other times on the basis of interests and external conditioning. But it is a decidedly uneven relationship, entirely to the disadvantage of those who act according to Morality.

<sup>2</sup>It is not the intention of the present article to engage with the substance of the criticisms directed at Giorgio Agamben's theses, as this would lead the reader too far astray. However, for a critique of the Italian philosopher's "normativist" attitude, as well as his use of "paradigms" considered ahistorical, the reader is referred to the works of Crosato (2019); de la Durantaye (2009); McLoughlin (2017); Raciti (2019) and Revel (2016).

In this, perhaps the simple observation of our daily reality, not even the political one, would suffice for immediate confirmation.

When the author reports the example of the child in danger of life (cf. MacIntyre, 2016, p. 189), he imagines a man who, acting according to maximum rationality and Morality, is ready to save him with an immediate gesture, and the same should happen at the local community level: but in both spheres – the personal and the state one – how many times do we witness total indifference towards violence committed against other fellow citizens? News reports often speak, tragically, of such widespread indifference much more than of expressed solidarity towards those in difficulty<sup>3</sup>.

Also at the political level, how many times do the same rulers act blatantly against the good of their own citizens, knowingly doing harm? Suffice it to think, in this latter regard, of the continuous calls to the necessity of entering war made in recent years, without considering the nefarious effects of such declarations on the civilian portions of Western and European society.

Moreover – and here we come to the crucial point of the question – MacIntyre seems almost unwilling to consider that at the foundation of modern politics, of the management of the *polis* and the State, there exists only and solely interest, be it particular or – in the most virtuous cases – be it collective. According to the realist school, clearly prevalent in the strand of international relations and also of geopolitics<sup>4</sup>, it is only interest that guides the action of rulers, from the most corrupt, who maximize their own personal gain, to the most virtuous, who nonetheless represent the attempt to pursue the collective and national interest. The modern geopolitical panorama is not dotted with practical-rational actors in a high and Aristotelian sense, of men ready to save children in difficulty, but with “practical-interested” actors who act for their own immediate interest or that of those who support them, completely overriding any idea of common good or sense of state collectivity.

At the foundation of modern politics, particularly in the state logic of international relations, there is the notional and conceptual framework formulated in the 16th century by Niccolò Machiavelli and Giovanni Botero, the true first reference of the crucial theme of *Reason of State* (Botero, 2009; Baldini, 1992)<sup>5</sup>.

It is the modern political framework that contradicts the almost idealistic setup, based on Morality, proper to MacIntyre: the foundations of modern statehood

<sup>3</sup> The media system certainly influences this widespread perception, being far more inclined to report tragic events and crime news than positive episodes. In any case, among these, the notorious case is the brutal killing of the Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutka, killed for no apparent reason while she was inside a carriage on the blue line of the Lynx Rapid Transit, in Charlotte (USA). Images from closed-circuit cameras captured the dramatic indifference of the other 5 passengers around the victim, without providing any assistance.

<sup>4</sup> Although with some distinctions. See, in this regard, Kelly (2019).

<sup>5</sup> For interpretations from a geopolitical perspective of both these authors, please refer to Ricci (2015; 2016; 2023b). For Botero, see also Descendre, 2022; Raviola, 2020.

that we find in Machiavelli, in fact, outline for us the features of a management of the territory based not on Morality nor on a sense of common good, but on the figure of the prince and the personalization of the power management setup, with the difference that while the Florentine secretary had contemplated the use of reason and force by the prince for the purpose of a collective good, in the modern politics of his ideal setup only the first assumption has remained.

Not that this was absent from the political forms of the past, but the principles of political geography expressed from modernity, in opposition to the imperial idea, denote the features of an a-moral politics because founded on the territorial datum and on specific, particular, national interest. That of Machiavelli is - like it or not - the model that emerged prevailing from political modernity, and it is the model of particular interest over the universal (Chabod, 1964). The particular first of all of a territorial type, but then also cultural and the sense of collective identity, which in the attempt to assert itself over others inevitably leads to a condition of equilibrium or possible clash on the global scenario.

The theme of the balance of power, governed by a *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, will not coincidentally emerge in the reflections of Carl Schmitt (2003) precisely with the political structuring of modernity, when the imperial forms centered on universalistic principles, which also coincided with the search for a common good in an, if you will, Aristotelian sense, began to deteriorate.

## CONCLUSIONS

Another fact must be outlined.

The model proposed by Machiavelli, which is based on the clear and unquestionable overcoming of morality in favor of an extreme realism embodied by the new Prince, will be the winning one compared to its counterpart, more or less contemporary to the Florentine secretary, embodied by Giovanni Botero.

Although starting from the same platform of reflection, based on the consideration of reality as such, the Counter-Reformation thinker from Bene Vagienna, a former Jesuit, attempted to overcome the Machiavellian setup by proposing precisely the return of morality into modern political dynamics, to the point of hypothesizing the constitution of a «Council of Conscience» to guide the management of the State. This corresponded *de facto*, according to Chabod's interpretation, to the «intrusion of the Church into the singular act of government, by means of religious orders, confessors, and canonical advisors of the princes (...). The Prince in this way bound himself to the faith, which was, naturally, only one: the Roman Catholic. This alone could assure him happiness in government and open the safe path for him» (Chabod, 1993, p.130). The Council of Conscience that Botero proposes diverges from the model prevalent today.

MacIntyre's political order is established by more or less precise rules, which are those proper to Morality and rationality. In this the Scottish philosopher comes much closer to Botero, guided by an idealized conscience, than to Machiavelli (2005). The current geopolitical scenario, on the other hand, is not only - as Headley Bull would say in *The Anarchical Society* (1977) - profoundly *disordered* and, we might add, *uncertain*, because based on the very personal interests of States, but in it the minimal rules that governed the international political game have also completely broken down. The threshold of the minimal, basic rules on which relations between States and also conflicts on the international scenario were based has been surpassed, as we are observing in the tragedy of Gaza.

Think of the rules of engagement or of mutual respect for international political spaces. The *ius ad bellum* de facto no longer exists (when is war declared, nowadays?!). The albeit minimal rules of the *ius in bello* have also broken down (just see the number of civilians killed in Gaza, often deliberately and without any consideration for children, contrary to the idea of the man ready to save them, as figured by MacIntyre); and the inviolability of diplomatic spaces and international dialogue has also lapsed, as can easily be observed in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and in the Western responses to it.

At this point one might wonder not so much where the Morality described by MacIntyre has gone, but where the minimal rules of civil coexistence have gone, placing oneself on a much more basic and less elevated level.

In this sense, the modernity experienced today seems to represent the existential counterpart of the Aristotelian-Thomistic political logic repropounded by the Scottish author: it is, in short, the contrast emerging from modernity - and which also manifests itself in today's geopolitical uncertainty (Ricci, 2023a) - and to which MacIntyre himself tries to provide a complex and almost unattainable moral remedy.

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