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Introduction. In the Shadow of the World State

Opening a vein that science fiction would cultivate for a long time, in 1895 Herbert G. Wells began to sketch the unnerving scenario of an alien invasion. In *The War of the Worlds*, the British writer imagined that

> across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us (Wells, 1898: 2).

In the tale, the invasion occurs at the beginning of the twentieth century and reveals the overwhelming superiority of the extraterrestrials, before whom human military technology proves wholly inadequate. With a final twist – when humankind seems destined either to be pulverized or completely subjugated – the invasion stops, neutralized by terrestrial bacteria to which the aliens lack immunity. Despite that outcome, Wells stressed that the sense of security in which humanity had lived up to that moment was forever undermined:

> At any rate, whether we expect another invasion or not, our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind (Wells, 1898: 300-301).

In 2020, the irruption of the Covid-19 pandemic represented for the world something akin to the alien invasion imagined by Wells. Suddenly, our sense of security was struck, and we began to feel

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threatened by an invisible enemy able to cross borders, elude controls, and bypass defensive measures. The discovery of that enemy – so different from the *hostis* Carl Schmitt had in mind – brought back to the fore the old question of the possibility (and desirability) of a world state, also because the global health crisis exposed the ineffectiveness of those very supranational institutions that should have helped to control the spread of the virus and coordinate strategies to mitigate its impact.

Hopes that the post-virus world might turn out to be politically more united – at least in order to confront intrinsically global challenges such as climate change – soon crashed against the reality of a world even more divided, torn by the weakening of the institutions of the liberal international order. The prospect of global government – precisely at the moment when we have become aware that vulnerability is truly a condition common to all humankind – thus seems destined to recede further, beset by the return of suspicion, rivalries, power politics, and nationalisms.

It is therefore no accident that the first issue of *Global Age* devotes a short forum precisely to the idea of a world state, with a focus on three major thinkers – Arnold J. Toynbee, Alexandre Kojève, and Carl Schmitt – who, in different ways, engaged that scenario, defending either its necessity or its impracticability. Though their arguments vary widely, Toynbee, Kojève, and Schmitt all perceived the trends which, from the early twentieth century onward, began to challenge the Western modern political order centered on the modern state and on an international (but in fact European) system of states. The roots of the image of a world government reach further back than the twentieth century, for important foreshadowings can be found both in the dreams of conquest cultivated by ancient empires and, later, in projects for a universal federation capable of banning war from the face of the earth. Yet it was precisely in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century that the silhouette of a planetary government began to stand out in the imagination of novelists, utopians, and political thinkers, taking on the profile of a true world state – modeled on that state form forged by European modernity and then progressively extended to the five continents.

In the intellectual history of the twentieth century, the world state thus came to represent a kind of chimera to which not a few

writers, politicians, and theorists tried to give more or less precise contours. For some it is a utopia to be pursued resolutely, even an unstoppable tendency. Before entering full-fledged theoretical and political debate, however, the outline of a unitary planetary government had already begun to cast a sinister shadow over the future as imagined by some of the pioneers of dystopia. Giving literary form to the nightmare of new despotisms (heterogeneous among themselves), Evgeny Zamyatin and Aldous Huxley, in particular, prefigured a tomorrow in which the humanity of the future would be subjected to the more or less authoritarian control of a state capable of extending its reach over the entire globe. In *We* – written in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution but censored in Russia and published only in 1924 in England – Zamyatin placed his protagonist within a system of capillary surveillance, in which a "One State," having established its control over the planet, prepared to begin the conquest of outer space (Zamyatin, 1924). In an even more elaborate key – and in a variant in which Schmitt would surely have found more than a few confirmations of his convictions – Huxley's *Brave New World* gave literary form to the alluring and at once unsettling specter of a world state capable of "educating" its subjects to happiness (Huxley, 1932). From this standpoint, Huxley's novel diverged from the dominant line of dystopian classics. Whereas in other great dystopias of the period – beyond Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), for example in the novels of Katharine Burdekin (1937), Karin Boye (1940), and Ayn Rand (1937) – regimes often exploited fear of internal and external enemies to secure citizens' support, in *Brave New World* order seemed (at least apparently) to reign uncontested.

> The society described in Orwell's fable is a society permanently at war, and the aim of its rulers is first, of course, to exercise power for its own delightful sake and, second, to keep their subjects in that state of constant tension which a state of constant war demands of those who wage it (Huxley, 1958: 26).

By contrast, the society of *Brave New World* "is a world-state, in which war has been eliminated and where the first aim of the rulers is at all costs to keep their subjects from making trouble" (Huxley, 1958:

26–27); and they reach that goal by "legalizing a degree of sexual freedom (made possible by the abolition of the family) that practically guarantees the *Brave New Worlders* against any form of destructive (or creative) emotional tension" (Huxley, 1958: 267). In Huxley's novel, the world state not only embraces the entire planet and puts an end to war; it also manages, in effect, to carry through a complete depoliticization of social life – that is, to neutralize (almost) entirely conflict among human beings – albeit at the price of a totalizing hold over citizens' lives, subjected to an anesthetizing regimen.

Some of the major political thinkers of the twentieth century also registered the attraction exerted by the figure of a new global Leviathan, though they offered very different – indeed radically opposed – interpretations. A planetary form of government was viewed positively by H. G. Wells himself, but also by intellectuals as diverse as Jacques Maritain, Ernst Jünger, Hans Kelsen, Alexandre Kojève, and Hans J. Morgenthau; one of its staunchest opponents was probably Carl Schmitt, who for more than half a century continued to regard that scenario as unrealistic or as the ideological cover for imperial projects (Castellin, 2025; Castellin and Palano, 2025; Cazzola, 2023; Consolati, 2023; Lanzillo, 2018, 2025; Rosenboim, 2023). After 1989, the face of the world state often took the far less benevolent form of unipolarism, revealing precisely the limits against which Schmitt had warned when he urged caution toward those who brandished the banner of "humanity." It is not surprising that, in a period of crisis for international institutions and the return of violence, the question of the possible future of something resembling a world state should resurface.

The aim of this forum is not, of course, to propose new solutions to the question of whether a world government would be desirable. Our conviction, rather, is that revisiting the intense debates about the world state – and even the critiques that insist on its very impossibility – provides valuable elements for reconstructing the transformation in the conception of sovereignty in the "global age." In its various guises, the silhouette of the world state has, in fact, oriented – perhaps even shaped – the ways of conceiving order, legitimacy, and power in a world unified by technology.

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