

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Of continents and *Großräume*: the production and persistence of continentality

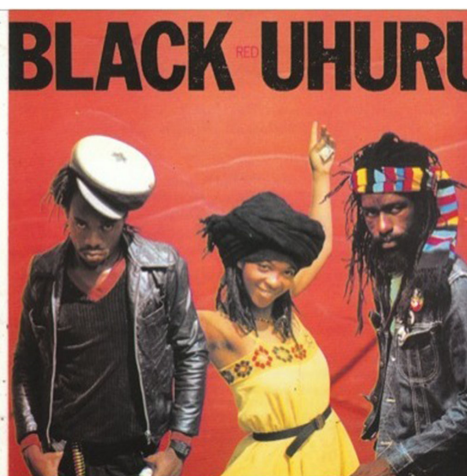
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Abstract

This paper renews the contemporary and enduring salience of archaic and discredited concepts of spatiality and physical geographic determinism, but historicises, repurposes and reworks them: it is an essay in critical and decolonial palaeo-territorialisation. Concreteness may well have been misplaced, but place – and space – might not have been altogether mis-concretised. Rethinking the global is an opportunity to step back and think about macro-scales and macro-scalarities more broadly. This paper exhumes and decolonially/critically reappropriates Carl Schmitt's *Großraum* concept (re-examining, along the way, if not quite rehabilitating the Meer und Land thesis and Mackinder's 'geographical pivot' (Mackinder 1904)) as a heuristic device to explore the overlooked scales of continents and continentality in the genealogy of a global geographic imaginary that is as much geotectonic as geo-historical. 'The Global' would then come to signify pre-eminently – or perhaps has always signified – as the intercontinental rather than the international: a space or set of spaces in some ultimate sense conditioned by the configuration of the planetary crust yet nonetheless produced through historical processes. We may never have been global, but we have been (inter)continental for the last half-millennium. State sovereignty, (racial) capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, public international law, fascism, communism and neoliberal globalisation have all been projects or formations – directly or indirectly, by design or accident – producing, pursuing, exploiting, organising and ordering continental *Großräume*. Contemporary regional trade blocs, regional international governmental organisations, regional human rights systems, military alliances and even putative civilisational divides all reflect the perdurable continental horizons of our ostensibly global imaginary.

Keywords: Continentality; Carl Schmitt; Grossraum; globality



‘The whole world is Africa
But it’s divided in continents . . .’
Black Uhuru



Anyone looking at a globe and pondering ‘the Global’ in 2025 – as indeed anyone looking at a three-dimensional model of the planetary sphere since they were first contrived in the late fifteenth century – remains confronted by great continental landmasses irregularly distributed across an aqueous expanse.¹ Even on the threshold of European cartographers’ first awareness of the ‘New World’ and its twin continents, Behaim’s 1490–92 *Erdapfel* represented the three other continents then known to Europeans in eminently recognisable contours (surrounded by an empty ‘world ocean’). Continents and continentality have defined the European (and then global) geophysical and geopolitical imaginary for the half-millennium since. A world ‘divided in (first three, then five, then six, habitable) continents’, unequal in their material and political development and status as in their spatial magnitude and geomorphology, is our collective global and geographic fate.

Continentality and continents were much on the minds (and pages) of early twentieth century geographic thinkers – and international legal theorists. Schmitt’s international legal concept of *Großraum* and Mackinder’s ‘geographical pivot’ to which it owed much, are both predicated on the configuration of the planetary surface and the disposition of its major landforms.² Their theories of everything might strike a contemporary sensibility as preposterously Eurocentric, grandiose and over-the-top – not to mention crudely physically-deterministic (and orientalist, culturalist and racist) – but their continental predicates deserve a fresh look and critical reconsideration, if not a rehabilitation. Indeed, continents and continentality have never really relinquished – or even relaxed – their hold on discourse or the geopolitical imagination, as evidenced by the array of sophisticated contemporary versions of grand-scale physical geographic/material determinism on offer – whether pre-historical, like Jared Diamond’s, historical, like Niall Ferguson’s at one end of the political spectrum, and Jason Moore’s at the other (Diamond 1998; Ferguson 2012; Moore 2015).

¹This is abundantly evident in the famous 1968 Apollo VIII ‘Earthrise’ and the 1972 Apollo XVII ‘Blue Marble’ space photographs, to which Heidegger objected on the grounds that they removed all trace of human presence from the planet and exhibited a kind of purged and pure physical geography (Lazier 2011).

²Not long after the geographer Mackinder propounded the pivot theory, his younger contemporary, the geologist Alfred Wegener, first elaborated the theory of continental drift – though it was not vindicated or accepted until the advent of plate tectonics half a century later (Greene 2015).

1. Spatiality and *Großraum*: Schmitt's conceptual framework

'Schmitt envisaged the emerging reorganization of political space along the lines of a vast geographical zone integrated by a shared political history, embracing a large number of satellite states, which would constitute the *Großraum* for a guardian power, a *Reich*. A *Reich* ... possessed a dynamic political and historical "idea" which determined what constituted a threat to the collective security of the wider *Großraum* ...

the authentic features of a *Großraum* principle: a planetary conception of political spaces delineated by a strategic vision, as interpreted by a guardian power' (Balakrishnan 2002)

Schmitt's idea was both an inspiration and aspiration, a characterisation of past and a project for contemporary and future, macro-scale political order: his historical referent was the Monroe Doctrine and the US assertion of a hemispherically American zone; his contemporary (interwar) referent, a Teutonic-dominated Europe in line with National Socialist foreign policy; his future (postwar) referent, never fully articulated and only elaborated by successor theorists, interpreters and critics (who have invoked *inter alia* the non-hegemonic, '*Reichlos*' EU). *Großraum* has been the subject of a major early twenty-first century IR (and international law [IL]) revival, as a number of thinkers have sought to test or contest its adaptability to global post-bipolarity (and post-abortive unipolarity). Some, including left Schmittians, find in it an eminently salvageable core idea of a counter-hegemonic, anti-US-universalist pluriverse of regional macro-spaces (Uwazuruike and Salter 2016; Salter 2012); others deem it irredeemable from its imperialist, Eurocentric, racist time-bound substance and methodology (Orsi 2021; Hooker 2009; Hohenwald 2018).

Großraum, as Schmitt formulated and elaborated it, is thus polysemic and problematic: descriptive and normative, essential and accidental or contingent. Its ultimate principle of coherence is not sharply delineated and bleeds across the political, the historical, the geographic and the cultural or civilisational. The geographic scale of political order appears now as a matter of fate (geographic or demographic), now as matter of contingency or luck, now as a matter of political vision and boldness – across a spectrum from determinism to decisionism. Its very malleability, however, renders it serviceable for recuperation, reappropriation and redeployment, shorn of its hierarchical and retrograde tenets. In working changes and riffing on the relationship between *Großraum* and continentality, this paper makes no pretence to fidelity to Schmitt's conceptualisation and extends it well beyond his historical examples, as well as his contemporary applications and future predictions. It exploits the play in that conceptualisation to pose a series of questions about the global geopolitical imaginary in the twenty-first century and the residual constraints on the imaginable and practicable spatial scaling of order it imposes.

Although Schmitt dropped tell-tale hints of the preferential continental scale for *Großraum*, he wrote primarily with an international lawyer's concern for the demarcation and regulation of space – with boundaries and rules – not the geographer's or International Relations (IR) theorist's concern for its contours and morphology. Schmitt invokes (in the mid-1940s) the USA and the USSR as the two 'modern spatial [that is, continental] powers' (Schmitt 2006 p 145).³ The relation in which continental states stand in relation to *Großräume* is not clarified: a *Großraum*, although anchored by a hegemonic power, would appear not to require that power itself be continental in scope, a 'continental power', extending sea to sea. A *Großraum* is larger than a single state by definition, insofar as it incorporates subordinate or satellite states, but amounts more to a political-geographic than a physical-geographic 'great space'. Yet clearly, there remains some

³They represented for Schmitt the two unilateral, universalising powers of the global age, at the same time, after the onset of the Cold War, espousing and enforcing competing and mutually exclusive visions of world organisation – evident even in their rhyming names, each potentially scalable to world government: United States of the World and World Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

fundamental connection between the spatiality of a *Großraum*, the spatiality of a continent, and the spatiality of a continental power, even if those spaces or spatialities do not precisely overlap or dovetail. Continental powers are (arguably) the ideal anchoring hegemon or ‘realms’ (*Reiche*) of a *Großraum*, and continents are its ideal spatial extent or expanse.

If the USSR and the USA are, for Schmitt, supreme spatial or continental powers because of their continent-spanning national territories, then they are proto-*Großräume* by virtue of their continent-dominating ambitions, even before they establish a network of adjacent subordinate powers on which to impose an order or exert a sphere of influence. ‘Manifest destiny’ is not merely sea-to-shining-sea (whether Atlantic west to Pacific or Black Sea east to Pacific), or continental margin to continental margin, but whole-continental in scope: the construction and assertion of continental spatiality, of continentality. Albeit less *extensive* – national, not international, ordering – this mode of spatialisation entails a great deal beyond a ‘political idea’ and corresponding regime, since it accomplishes a far more *intensive* multidimensional (material, cultural, social, economic, psychological as well as political) ‘production of space’ in the sense of Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991).

Schmitt failed to consider how continental states, once confronting a world of ordinary or non-continental states – however capacious their territories – could become an object of envy or emulation. Continental-state envy is not simply a matter of territorial extent but of depth: resources and diversity, the availability to a coastal metropole of a vast hinterland or interior, serviceable for rapid industrialisation, resource extraction, energy generation and agricultural production. Post-bellum America supplied the extraordinary spectacle of the conversion of frontierlands into hinterlands with the aim of organising a national economy at unprecedented scale (Maier 2016; Beckert 2017). It was the wonder of the industrialising world, and a goad: once the USA had territorialised and organised a continent-spanning space for purposes of production (most emblematically, perhaps, with the completion in 1867 of a transcontinental rail network), the unique advantages of continental scale for capitalist development were indisputable. The westward expansion of the USA as the manifestation of destiny thus took continentalisation as an intensive ordering project (technological, political and juridical) to a radically new level. It was epochal for the production of production space. At the same time, it was a gauntlet thrown down before European states by the formidable power and promise of European settler-colonial spatialisation on the American continent. A continental power emerged as an integral state-empire, overland not overseas, capable of colonising and capitalising its own internal contiguous (‘national-imperial’) space – a self-continentaliser.⁴

Yet it is not American self-continentalisation over the course of the nineteenth century as a kind of national-imperial (integral-state) *Großraum* that fascinates Schmitt and gives rise to the concept, but rather the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which preceded it. Schmitt repeatedly invokes the Monroe Doctrine as the origin and type-case *Großraum* – ‘i.e., a spatial order determined by the global line of the Western Hemisphere’ – which forbade intercontinental interference by European powers in the formerly colonial and now independent states of the Americas. That initial *Großraum* was thus bi-continental or hemispheric: a hegemonic assertion, by an expansionist but still far-from-continental state, of the power to control and regulate the foreign affairs (partially but significantly) of a multitude of neighbouring states.

Much as Monroe foreclosed resurgent colonial European land-grabbing in the post-colonial Americas, and effectively made them off-limits, European continent-grabbing became a live ambition – or a driving fantasy – in Africa. A recent literature argues that European colonisation of the African interior was driven by ‘continental envy’ of the emerging US, and the realisation

⁴Imperial Romanov expansion from the sixteenth century east across the Urals and Siberia and south across Tatar territory, and eventually the Caucasus and Central Asia, furnishes the other great example of continental power assembly and European overland colonisation/dominance of non-European territory and population, but its intensive production of continental space awaited twentieth-century Bolshevik-accelerated industrialisation (see generally Lincoln 2007).

that Africa was available and exploitable for Europe as vast continental hinterland, for analogous purposes. Sub-Saharan Africa was Europe's American Midwest, Prairie and Far West (Beckert 2017). The resultant patchwork of European African colonies disguises the continental ambitions of colonisation projects – Rhodes's dream of a Cape-to-Cairo railway, the great contiguous expanses of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, the enormity of the Congo Basin, etc. The aim of the scramble for Africa was just that, a scramble for a continent, not pieces of one, at a point when the civilisational, technological and economic bases for continentality as a preferential ordering scale were well appreciated, thanks to the American example, but frustrated on 'The Continent' itself by the jurisdictional mosaic of a Westphalian dispensation and the *jus publicum Europaeum* which undergirded it.

Schmitt never seemed to have contemplated the spatial order implications of Eurafrica as a candidate *Großraum* project, and indeed viewed the incorporation of extra-territorial colonial space into national territorial space as a symptom of the loss of the spatial ordering premise of *jus publicum Europaeum* in the course of its evolution into international (interstate) law (Schmitt 2006, pp. 233–34). His interwar attention was elsewhere – on the National Socialist project for a Germanic European continental *Großraum*, extending east to the Urals and west at least to France and the Low Countries. That such a *Großraum* could only be coercively secured after a military victory was no barrier to its cogency or coherence, but presented the unlikely (and, in the event, unrealisable) scenario of a middling, non-continental state bidding for pan-continental hegemony. Interwar Schmittian thought was premised on a decisionistic sovereign swiftly and arbitrarily imposing a *Großraum* (though one could frame an analogous argument for Monroe), not a secure continental power playing a long game by incrementally and organically developing and projecting one.⁵

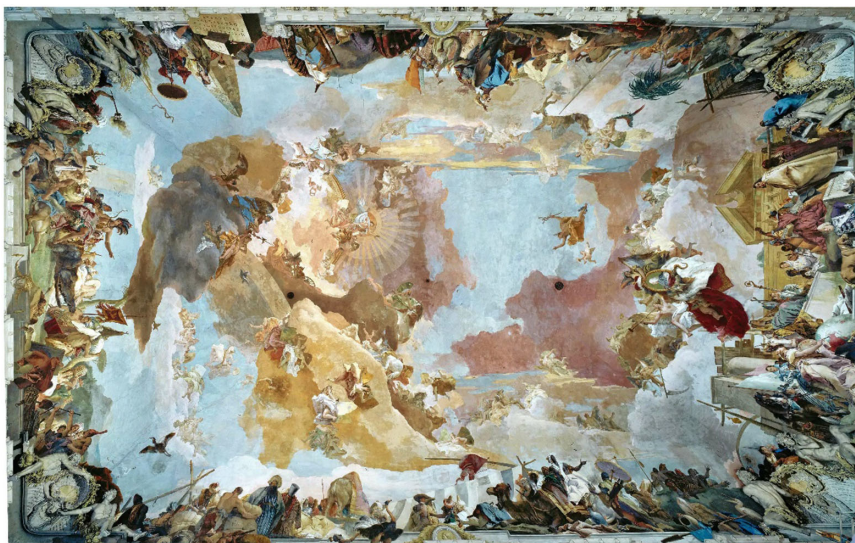
2. Continental geobiographies

But the story of continents and continentality precedes the advent of modern spatial powers and industrialisation by several centuries, and warrants exploring the early modern history of European overseas mercantile and colonial expansion as establishing or producing the spatial predicates for any and all future *Großräume*. To expand *Großraum* itself in this direction means unshackling it from Schmitt's narrow concepts of international legal ordering and 'the political', and approaching it as a matter of scale for the production of (modern, capitalist, sovereign) space in the sense of Lefebvre – even at a proto-industrial moment.⁶

The term 'continent' is ventured with some trepidation. The original term as applied to the three continents of antiquity – Europa, Asia and Africa – signified geoculturally rather than geophysically, and then only as Mediterranean littoral landmasses of unknown extent, with North and Southeast Asian and especially sub-Saharan African space barely guessed by classical (Mediterranean) geographers. Only the voyages of Columbus, Cão, Cabral, da Gama, Magellan, Drake, Hudson and their compeers enabled anyone to conceive or construct the idea of 'continents' in their proper planetary crustal contours and configuration – as members of a set of inhabited terrestrial mega-islands – completed with the addition of the twin Americas, and eventually augmented by Australia (and later, uninhabitable Antarctica), much as the complement of solar system planets was incrementally filled out with Uranus and Neptune, and then finally Pluto. Antique and medieval 'continents' were not the continents of a developed cartographic

⁵In his postwar writings, Schmitt trimmed back the importance of an expansionist, colonising *Reich* for the formation of a *Großraum*, while retaining an anchoring hegemon (Hohenwald 2018, p. 140).

⁶Lefebvre explores the passage from medieval 'absolute space' to modern, capitalist, ideological 'abstract space', particularly as it is reflected in the emergence of urban spatial design and the organisation of rural–urban spatial relations. He acknowledges, at multiple points, the global scaling of the production of space although he does not address directly the production of extra-European colonial space in the course of European expansion (Lefebvre 1991).



consciousness, nor the expansionist drive and organisational capacities/technics it reflected of the advent of Capital; they greatly preceded – although they conditioned and helped shape – the European spatialising concepts and projects of early modernity.

Certainly, the geophysical and geosimaginary contours of the ‘Four Continents’ (excluding Australia and Antarctica – the Uranus and Neptune of the system) had been stabilised by the seventeenth century, as evident in the continental personifications of Bernini’s *Fontana del Quattro Fiumi* of 1651 in Rome’s Piazza Navona and Tiepolo’s great *Allegory of the Continents and the Planets* frescoed on the Würzburg Residenz ceiling a century later. The figures of the continents (or continental rivers) reflect an already settled iconography of differential continental-cum-civilisational attributes/functions and a corresponding *scala culturae* (wisdom, bounty, indolence, martial/navigational prowess, etc.). The terraqueous globe only becomes imaginable and representable on the basis of the configuration of continents in twin hemispheres, Old and New – a world paradoxically now whole but ‘divided [by ocean] in continents’. The (ideologically freighted, orientalist, racialised and normativised) concept of globality itself (Ferreira da Silva 2007; Sylvia Wynter 2003; Quijano 2007) is thus premised on continentality: no continents, no

globe. Moreover, the system of planetary landmasses is aligned with (and fractally replicates) the system of planets as Whole-of-Parts.⁷ This integrated, hierarchical and teleological continentality is rapturously celebrated by Whitman in ‘A Passage to India’ after the interval of a further century – now with Hegelian overtones:

‘Year at whose wide-flung door I sing!
 Year of the purpose accomplish’d!
 Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!
 (No mere doge of Venice now wedding the Adriatic,)
 I see, O year in you the vast terraqueous globe given and giving all,
 Europe to Asia, Africa join’d, and they to the New World,
 The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival garland,
 As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.’

(Whitman 2004)

Those spatial ordering processes noted above were composite and piecemeal, mediated by sundry discrete colonial/commercial projects and enterprises, including the political actions and juridical acts of actors at all scales and with diverse capacities and roles. However local and place-specific, the effects and consequences of these ongoing poly-scalar processes could be regarded as cumulatively continentalising. Schmitt’s *Großraumordnung*, by contrast, appears as a more limited and less nuanced, traditional concept of top-down juridical spatial ordering, whereas those processes emphatically entailed piecemeal, bottom-up juridical spatial ordering.

‘[I]nternational law does not derive purely from the genteel world of diplomats in European capitals, but also from the slightly dustier one of Poor Law reformers, colonial administrators, company civil servants, Treasury officials, political economists, and even theologians’ (Orford 2016; see also Benton and Ford 2016; Benton 2002; Once 2018).

The continentalisation story is as a result composite, contingent and complex. ‘The whole world is ... divided in continents’ – and potential *Großräume* (using the term grossly) – but they are manifestly unequal, geophysically and geopolitically. Each continent has a distinct geobiography, a history of production as potential or imaginable macro-space, *Großraum sensu latu* – a differentially penetrable and occupiable, or assemblable and governable, territorial expanse – thus confounding the inherited view of a set or system (Lewis and Wigen 1997). All continental landmasses are contingent accidents of plate tectonic, climatic, volcanic, erosive and biotic dynamics over aeons, but they acquired (or didn’t) *geopolitical continental status* (‘continentality’) as contingent accidents of spatial production – through processes like ‘discovery’, conquest, settlement, commodity frontier advancement and resource extraction, colonialism, war, state formation and interstate relations/regulation – and concomitant spatial imagination, over centuries. Those material and symbolic contingencies produced distinct and hierarchical ‘continentalities’ – heterogeneous continental identities and corresponding orders. The ‘continental physiognomies’ of Latin America, Anglo-America, Africa, Europe and Asia (West, South, North, East, South East) are as far from uniform as their respective macro-territorial geographies.

The sections below take up and outline divergent geobiographies of continentality, in three broad families or genealogies. Eurasia – a singular and improbable continental amalgam in the first place – is treated first, Eurocentrically but unavoidably, since the ‘pivotal’ (to play on

⁷The symmetry here reflects early modern European ideas of the systematicity and orderliness of material and social reality, as well as of the scalar relationship of heavenly and terrestrial spheres (macrocosm/microcosm correspondence) (Wynter 2003; Tillyard 2011).

Mackinder) concept of continent/continentality as a scale for ordering space is European to begin with, and Europeans ‘continentalised’ the world. The European World System could just as readily be called the European (Six) Continents System. Next are the transformatively Europeanised (European-settler-colonised) continents – the Americas and Australia – which were the sites of unprecedented projects of spatial macro-scaling (*Großräume* plotting) from the moment Europeans were made aware of them. Their continentality (and indeed the concept of continentality as ordering space) was produced through the efforts to seize, control and exploit their territories, and to subjugate, reduce and marginalise their inhabitants. Finally, Africa exhibits perhaps the most fraught and charged theatre of European continentalisation, since that process was inextricably bound up with the slave trade in the first three centuries, followed by precipitous colonial land-grabbing and marked throughout by race. The contemporary ‘continental physiognomy’ of Africa thus reveals as a result a signature dehegemonic, decolonial *Großraum* logic – almost a *Großraumselbstordnung* (self-order) or *Großraumgegenordnung* (counter-order).

3. The World Island and Island-Hopping

3.1. Mackinder’s Geographic Pivot, with the World Island at its centre



Eurasian continental space is singular in its sheer geographic enormity, heterogeneity, and complexities of scale⁹: not for nothing does Mackinder aggrandise it as the ‘World Island’ (Mackinder 1904). Geophysically, the Eurasian Landmass – thirty-six per cent of the terrestrial crust – is the consequence of the tectonic aggregation of the Eurasian (itself an aggregate), Arabian, and Indian plates, and dwarfs the other continents. At the moment of the end of the fifteenth-century *Erdapfel*, the World Island floated in splendid isolation (much as in traditional ‘island’ cosmogonies, see the reference to Turtle Island below), save only for the vast and newly navigated African coastline (not yet continent) below it. But the integrity and salience of its continentality appear dubious in light of its component peninsular subcontinentalities – Europe, Arabia and India – as well as its vast archipelagic southeastern fringe – notwithstanding that, as noted just above, its westernmost subcontinental peninsula contingently became the organising pole of global continentality itself: the geometropole.

⁹Diamond (1998) has invoked its unique geographic endowments as an east–west axial landmass facilitating species-spreading, etc.

The Orientalising geography of distinct European and Asia continents – anomalously among the other great landmasses made divisible at a set of entirely arbitrary or conventional lines (Urals, Caucasus and Bosphorus) – is a classical contrivance that has been improbably maintained (as witness ‘transcontinental’ states like Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan – pure artefacts of convention). In any case, the 54.76 million square kilometres of Eurasian space are inhospitable and inapposite either to Schmitt’s *Großraumordnung* or to the broader concept of continentalisation developed here. Although Eurasia might be a geophysical landmass, it is not a geopolitical space for continental ordering: the World Island is not a potential *Übergroßraum*. Expansionist, *Großraum*-making, continentalising projects have certainly been essayed across northeastern Eurasian space (Chinggisid and Romanov, to name two¹⁰), and expansive macro-scale projects of rule over lesser or subcontinental spaces (Roman, Iranian, Indian, Near Eastern/Islamic, Anatolian, Central Asian, Chinese, Japanese, Khmer, etc.) – just not over its entirety.¹¹

Mackinder’s designation of a ‘World Island’ and then ‘Periphery Islands’ (‘the outer or insular crescent’) is particularly suggestive for a consideration of continentality. Mackinder’s ‘Periphery Islands’ were rendered both ‘peripheral’ and ‘islands’ by the expansion of commodity frontiers, which proceeded by ‘island-hopping’, first across the Atlantic and Caribbean islands (Moore 2015) – themselves produced as plantation space, and plantations are islands on islands, micro-archipelagos: demarcated, surveyed, regimented, ‘abstract’ spaces for commodity production located on islands – and then on to the mega-islands of the American continents. The sixteenth-century ‘Spanish Main’, the mainland space for colonial commodity production in Mesoamerica and Northern South America, was the beachhead for continentalisation – for the organisation of a Chinese-box continental macro-space that was continentalised to the same extent it was ‘islanded’: demarcated as a space to be developed or produced for purposes of commodity production, itself eventually organised into a mini-archipelago of colonies – viceroyalties – each containing micro-archipelagos of plantations.

Continentality itself was produced only in and over the course of European colonisation and appropriation: ‘continents’ became the largest ‘explorable’, appropriable and colonisable contiguous terrestrial spaces – mega-islands. Continentality then becomes a concept and product for non-European spaces of an expansionist Age of Capital, Commodities and Production and was only subsequently back-applied to European/Eurasian space. Although the westernmost Eurasian peninsula might have colonised and continentalised the world, it only continentalised itself as a spatial order candidate belatedly and haltingly. Ironically, ‘The Continent’ had never been continental: European continentality, in the sense of political and material ordering-space, congealed only after the continentality of the Americas had been produced – conceived and imagined, explored and exploited, conquered and colonised.¹²

Schmitt’s idea of *Großraum*, it might be ventured, was offered to Europeans as a correction to, modification in, and self-application of, continentalising theory and practice in other (properly continental) spaces. Public international law, the *jus publicum Europaeum* developed on, by, and for ‘The Continent’ was a juridical compensation for a spatial deficiency: Europe was undercontinentalised, and a new political project of ‘*Großraumierung*’ was formulated as a belated

¹⁰The contemporary revival of Russian imperialism in the form of Putin’s Eurasianism is similarly confined (Lewis 2020). The Belt part of China’s Belt and Road project (confusingly, ‘Road’ is maritime and ‘Belt’ terrestrial) might be a contender for the most continentally ambitious *Großraum* gambit since the Mongols, although the classical geopolitical predicates for its framing have been challenged and critiqued (Cheng and Apostolopoulou 2023).

¹¹They have, however, supplied the Orientalist trope of the relentless and recurrent pressure of nomadic Asian steppe marauders on settled, farmed and civilised European space – a staple of early twentieth-century meta-historiography (as is the centrality of Central, formerly Middle or Inner, Asia) (Grousset 1970; Frankopan 2015).

¹²World Systems Theory (really European World Systems), the most vivid and ambitious treatment of the European organisation of the globe and globality – incorporating the Mackinder World Island and Periphery, but reversing the valences – does not quite reckon with this irony (Wallerstein, 2004).

but now necessary ‘spatial self-fix’, once the old juridical project based on customs, usages and norms, and buttressed by treaty, had (for Schmitt) begun to come apart under the pressures of formalism, positivism and unilateral universalism.

Of course, from the eastern pole of the mega-continent, Eurasia is a less compelling continentalised conceit or case, since the historical, cultural and political significance of Europe was remote and secondary or tertiary – a far barbaric periphery. However expansionist Asian powers have historically imagined or acted (Chingissid, Mughal, Han, Timurid, Khmer, etc.) they do not appear to have embraced any concept of Asian continentality¹³ – which arguably only arises in contemporary discourse off the back of the construction of ‘The Continent’ and remains equally dubious and as culturally and historically fraught or over-determined. Portuguese, Dutch, British Euroforming of Asian territories bounding the Indian Ocean and South China Sea was spatially distinct and disjunct – a function of largely archipelagic and non-contiguous geographies – and never offered vast, contiguous and ‘virgin’ American spatial expanses nor solicited large-scale settler colonialism (save in the overland rather than overseas Russian expansion to Siberia and beyond). Ironically, of course, the originary American continentalisation was accidental and incidental to an Asian trade project: a western sea route to the Indies.

4. Stolen continents: settler colonialism and dispossession in the Americas and Australia

4.1. *The Americas*



¹³The Chingissid conquests furnish perhaps the most compelling example of the limitations of a terrestrial expansionist vision – Chingiss was the ‘Conqueror of the [known] World’, but not Conqueror of the World Island, a landmass bounded by ocean. The geographic self-imagination of historic Asian powers, even when it provincialised or ‘occidentalised’ Europe in a discursive foil to orientalism (e.g. in the famous Mughal miniature by Bichitr, ‘Jahangir preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings’) was not continental in scale.

The New World was just that, never imagined by its European discoverer-marauders, and of planetary scope, integrity and remoteness – an extra-terrestrial terrestrial space, the surface of a transoceanic planet. It furnished the first example of functionally empty, ‘virgin’ continental space: resource-abundant, undeveloped, unclaimed, its population unpropertied. ‘In the beginning all the World was America’ (Locke 1980, chap. V, sec. 49). Never before or since have such vast territorial expanses been vulnerable to wholesale, macro-scale dispossession and depopulation – accidental and intentional, microbial and biopolitical, by decimation and by extermination, concentration, or displacement (Galeano 1997; Wright 2005; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). The Columbian Exchange was a demographic and spatial catastrophe of unprecedented and *continental* (or hemispheric, bi-continental) magnitude. It overcame the ice-age sundering of the biogeography of *H. sapiens*, and profoundly restructured the fundamental ‘divid[ing] in continents’ of a cosmopolitan, African-derived hominin species: the displacement-cum-replacement of an indigenous (bi-)continental array of peoples and cultural/political orders by those of another and remote continent.¹⁴ The European-mediated ‘peopling’ of the American continents (Bailyn 1988) over the period was a cataclysmic depeopling, repopling and transpeopling.

The impetus was nascent capitalist commerce: large-scale transatlantic population flows enabled by novel nautical technology. No previous human migrations approached these appropriately continental scales. The Americas furnish the type-instance and originary continental arena for settler colonisation (Wolfe 2006) and its multidimensional transformation, or production, of large-scale space. This took the form of the elective or induced transoceanic transfer of successive waves of European settlers and dependents, concurrently with the forced transoceanic deportation of successive waves of enslaved Africans, and their permanent, adverse occupation and exploitation of American territories already comprehensively and autochthonously inhabited and culturally, politically, juridically and economically organised at a multitude of scales. These waves occurred under diversely framed legal schemes and ventures, along a spectrum of election/coercion, all imagined, organised, chartered, sponsored, financed, executed, regulated and administered by an array of European private and public authorities and actors – schemes and ventures from *encomiendas* in New Spain for conquistadores to Royal Charters in New England for non-conformists. The social, communal and national origins, as well as the contours of the colonising imagination and desire of the settlers, were commensurately various. So too was the course of the characteristically but differentially violent dispossession, displacement, subjugation, marginalisation, incorporation and/or elimination of the vast heterogeneity of native peoples, from Arctic Inuit to Fuegian Yaghan.

The Iberian *Conquista* of South America and Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century and the incremental British/French/Spanish settler-colonisation of North (eventually Anglo) America from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries were events that thus cumulatively produced continentality itself – events that forced the concept of continental space on the European imagination and respatialised the global surface.¹⁵ Although the era is conventionally defined by maritime navigation, exploration and commerce, when the seas became a universal road from any coastal port on the globe to any other coastal port, its macro-terrestrial spatialisation was

¹⁴This gross characterisation (at least outside Anglo-America) must be qualified by the pervasive hybridisation and Mestizo culture in Mesoamerican and Andean regions and elsewhere, the significant indigenous populations in those same regions and the Amazon basin and the slave-descended populations – most prominently, but not exclusively in Brazil and the Caribbean islands and Caribbean main (Belize, Suriname, Guiana, Guyana).

¹⁵For Maier (2016, p. 187) argues that the geographic imagination has entertained territorialising projects at vast spatial scales since antiquity and beyond Europe, albeit reserving ‘continentalism’ for concerted, industrial nineteenth-century projects. The concept of ‘continentality’ broached here is intended to encompass both the geotectonic and the broader geo-historical dimensions in the context of European capitalist expansionism from the fifteenth century onwards.

concomitantly revolutionary. A new type and scale of spatiality¹⁶ was thus encountered, imagined, charted, penetrated and occupied in virtual simultaneity – indeed, the temporal condensation is paradoxically matched by the spatial scope, and environmental, cultural, epidemiologic and demographic consequences. Moreover, as American continentality cohered, so did global intercontinentality (or intercontinental globality) across, for the first time, circumglobal trade flows: transpacific Spanish gold and silver from Acapulco to Manila from the mid-sixteenth century and the transatlantic triangle of African enslaved, European manufactures and American raw commodities from the early seventeenth century. West and East, it was emergent American continentality that effectively summoned or provoked Old World continentality into modern conceptualisation and operationalisation, serving as the (bi)continental node connecting Atlantic with Indo-Pacific spaces: Whitman's geographic Hymen ('Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World'), the real World Island, the Inter-Continent(s).

The concomitant European-on-non-European cataclysms – the forced importation and enslavement of fifteen million Africans and the dispossession/displacement/destruction of sixty million indigenous Americans – created continentality-defining, complementary and interdynamic histories of macro-scale (spatial and temporal) victimisation and subordination, which have played out over the ensuing centuries of plantation slavery, other forms of coercive labour, deprivation, exploitation and genocide for their survivors and descendants: the parallel and interrelated Red–Black racialisation (natives and slaves) in the construction of unmarked European Whiteness. The multiply scaled 'geo-chromatics' of the Americas is thus also a singular aspect of its continentality, emblazoned across its many divergent but replicative histories of Black, Red and mixed struggle against domination and destruction, and for rights and recognition – from sixteenth-century Peru (Túpac Amaru) to late eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue to the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (The Landless Workers' Movement) and Black Lives Matter movements of the moment in Brazil and the USA. That geo-chromatics has accorded the Americas a global discursive and political centrality in formulating, understanding and redressing the critique and claims of/from Indigeneity and Blackness particularly, and people of colour more generally. Blackness (along with other diasporic forms of continental identification¹⁷) and Indigeneity, born with American continentality, both buttress and complicate the coherence of that continentality, and have propagated globally and informed extra-American continentality, reflecting globally comparable and convergent experiences of displacement, marginalisation and racialisation (Gilroy 2022; Coulthard 2014; King et al. 2002; Hokowhitu et al. 2021).

American continentality is geographically, geoculturally and geopolitically twinned or doubled in a unique sense, setting it apart from all other continents. One continent or two, or a continental set or pair? The Americas or America? The differential elaboration and evolution of distinct Northern (Anglo) and Southern (Latin) senses of continentality (complicated by the linking arc of the Antillean archipelago) transpose and scale up the European North–South cultural, linguistic and historical axis of the colonising powers. These twin Americas have evolved into a gross albeit complex political, cultural and economic intercontinental inequality.¹⁸ The exercise by the first independent American republic¹⁹ of hegemonic cultural, political and economic force over all

¹⁶One, of course, can legitimately query whether this Eurocentric concept of continentality – subtending Schmitt's *Großraum* and literalised in Mackinder's 'World Island' – is altogether so novel in human geographic imaginaries. The Ojibwe told of mikinaak-minis, or Turtle Island, and clearly experienced their surrounding (and grounding) terrestrial spatial setting as bounded by water – a mega-island.

¹⁷One might even venture that the Americas are the canonical diasporic – as well as the canonical hybrid – continents, or that they exhibit a signature diasporic continentality, which holds with very divergent valences for both European- and African-descended populations.

¹⁸Quijano and Wallerstein 1992.

¹⁹Yet another distinctive aspect of American continentality (or Quijano's and Wallerstein's 'Americanity') is its geopolitical trailblazing character as the matrix of (creole) decolonisation and modern (democratic) republicanism. The priority/hegemony of

succeeding American and Caribbean states for the last two centuries, prompting the promulgation of Schmitt's favourite *Großraum* manifesto, the Monroe Doctrine, has left hemispheric American space and continentality ('the global line of the Western Hemisphere'), standing in tension with national American (US) space and continentality. No other continental space is geopolitically dominated in the same manner by a single continental hegemon – concentrating Schmitt's attention to the same degree as nineteenth-century European would-be continentalisers who coveted an analogous hinterland in Africa. That hegemony has reinforced the geocultural continental bisection, misaligned with the strict geographic, and with it starkly divergent geochromatic patterns of racialisation and racial dynamics, yielding over the long *durée* significant *mestizaje*, hybridity and cultural/racial mixing in Latin America, and commensurately prominent bounding and policing of racial/cultural identities in Anglo-America.²⁰

4.2. Australia

Australian settler-colonialism invites suggestive comparison with the American case but temporally and spatially dislocated – a strangely rhyming but anomalous latter-day replication. The continentalisation of Australia was, in a sense, a three-centuries-shifted, condensed and abbreviated, remake of the American original, this time in the novel form of penal colonialism and buttressed by the doctrine of *terra nullius* (Hughes 1986). Indeed, it is the belated and replicative character of Australian continentalisation, coupled with its singular geographic remoteness from its European metropolitan authority, that distinguishes it. The production of continentality and the Euroforming of a continental expanse were, on the cusp of the nineteenth century, an established practice, with an imperial playbook and a highly developed technological apparatus (or apparatus of technics, in Mumford's sense). The maturing spatial-ordering capacities and practices of the British Empire – chastened but reinforced upon the virtually contemporaneous forfeiture of its most valuable American colonies – coinciding with the massive acceleration in pace and scope of domestic industrialising processes, greatly simplified and facilitated the task and enabled it to be accomplished in a far more centralised, directed and controlled fashion than the comparatively piecemeal, scattershot, improvisational colonisation and continentalisation of the Americas.

Notably and uniquely across the settled continents, Australia (along with the adjacent Australasian territories of Tasmania and New Zealand) underwent appropriation and settlement, and attendant continentalisation, at the hands of a single power. Africa and the Americas were contested spatial expanses and confronted competitive continentalisation on the part of seven or more imperial centres, whereas Australia was continentalised exclusively by the British Empire, in an imperial isolation comparable only to the geographic isolation. It is the sole instance of unilateral imperial seizure of a contiguous great landmass surrounded by ocean. Of course, with decolonisation and the establishment of an independent state (dominion), this has produced the world's sole continental power in the strict sense: a country co-extensive with a continent. Australian continentality is geobiologically, geophysically, geopolitically, geoculturally – and thus geobiographically – *sui generis*: its modest extent (the smallest of the inhabited continents, less than half the size of South America, the next smallest, and smaller than Canada), its mononational character, monoimperial history and very belated 'discovery'/seizure; its tectonic sundering and solitude and the resultant fifty million year-long separate evolution of its fauna and flora, together

the thirteen North American colonies of Britain in modelling and trialling, for the benefit and emulation of all other American settler-colonies, Revolution (decolonisation) is as striking as fateful – and paradoxical (given enslavement). The immediately succeeding revolutionary American republic was, of course, the first and only Black one, Saint-Domingue-Haiti, destined for continental (and European) opprobrium, oblivion and ostracism. Trouillot, 2015 [1995]; James 1989 [1938].

²⁰A broad distinction, subject to multiple qualification and complexification against the globalisation of race (Ferreira da Silva 2007; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992).

with the fifty thousand year-long linguistic, cultural and genetic isolated history of its peoples, make it an incomparable continental anomaly.

The impediment posed by the indigenous peoples was arguably a lesser challenge than in any previous settler-colonial essay, thanks to a perfect storm of factors: the greatly enhanced military and technical capacities (guns and steel) of late eighteenth-century colonisers, the small-scale and modest numbers of the indigenous countries and their immunological vulnerabilities (germs). Even as the campaign for termination of the slave trade was gathering force in Britain, the social, cultural and legal technics of racialisation were approaching their mature elaboration and formulation and served both to justify and operationalise the unprecedentedly compressed and thoroughgoing marginalisation and subjugation of the several-hundred-thousand-strong indigenous population (Pascoe 2018). The devastating immunogenetic impact of settler-colonialism – effectively, a ‘Tasmanian Exchange’ – was augmented by concentrated and sustained settler lethal and sublethal violence resulting in displacement, dispossession and extermination, particularly of coastal peoples. Australian (together with Torres Strait and New Zealand) Indigeneity has perhaps acquired a unique contemporary salience and resonance among continents since Indigenous-settler dynamics and claims dominate discourse, politics, social and cultural policy, and occupy public space in a manner which defeats ready comparison across other settler-colonial states (the USA, Canada, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, etc.): Australia is the ‘indigenous continent’ par excellence.²¹

5. The counter-continent: Africa as decolonial *Großraum*

If the Americas furnished the originary spatial models of ordering at continental scale because they were perceived as ‘empty’ and ‘penetrable’, Africa provides a counter-case of continentality, for centuries unsuitable because ‘impenetrable’ (overpopulous and overgrown, uniquely hostile and forbidding in the European imaginary thanks to the savagery of its people, density of its vegetation and virulence of its diseases). The long history of a thin European coastal presence only, for purposes of the trade in enslaved persons and ancillary commodities (albeit accompanied by a complex insertion of affected African authorities and polities into the nascent global economy [Greene 2019]), deferred proper continental spatialisation until the nineteenth-century moment of the European ‘effective occupation’ of the interior. It was moreover the only example of a blanket, juridically mediated continentalisation, a bespoke international legal order for its seizure and control (Craven 2015).

Africa, for Europeans before the nineteenth century was a coast, not a continent: its singular geographic obscurity (physical and human to the same degree) and cartographic blankness made for a kind of spatial negation or absence: a continent-sized hole or vacuum that provisionally forestalled the processes of European-directed spatial production that stretched from the Arctic to Australasia. Indeed, this inverse spatiality at scale (negative or silhouette continentality) was necessarily co-produced with the positive spatiality at scale of the other continents (Australia, from the time of its charting as ‘New Holland’, might be a second and roughly contemporaneous example, but it never attained the deep psycho-geographic status of ‘Dark Continent’).

Africa is the supremely essentialised continent in European discourse, most emblematically fixed by Hegel (Gathii 2000), imbued with a character coterminously racial, cultural and continental (Mudimbe 2004). Over the four centuries of the violent transatlantic deportation of as many as fifteen million Africans and their sentencing to a trans-generational carceral labour regime, their continent of origin was comprehensively and uniquely racialised. If for the European continentalisers, ‘in the beginning the whole world was America’, for the extra-

²¹There is a rapidly expanding literature – library – treating aboriginal claims, rights and legal relations/status in the face of the Australian State (represented perhaps emblematically in the Uluru Statement) (Behrendt et al. 2019).

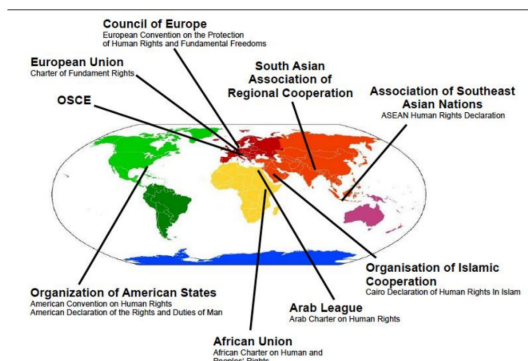


European continentalised, at the end, ‘the whole world is Africa’, both in the sense that the African condition of subordinate (extra-European) continentality has become generalised (Africans, along with other peoples of colour, are conscripts of continentality insofar as it constitutes a necessary dimension of the globalised condition of modernity [Scott 2004]), and in the special sense that slave-descended and colonial African diasporas represent a significant demographic and cultural-political factor and force spread across the other continents (in particular, the rise of the Black Atlantic).

African singular continentality endures. In European policy, academic and popular discourse, ‘Africa’ long remained a kind of (racialised) continental shorthand for developmental failure, political pathology and dysfunctionality (‘bad governance’), social disorder and endemic conflict, systemic human rights crises, and poverty, disease and malnutrition (Thomas 2000; Gathii 2000) – as well as a preferred site for emergency extra-continental, bilateral or multilateral, strategic and/or humanitarian intervention, from peacekeeping deployments to international criminal investigations and prosecutions to counter-terrorism operations (du Plessis 2012; Williams 2021; Gathii 2000). But African continentality also signifies in other, positive registers – material, discursive, symbolic and institutional – such as the increasing sophistication of the African Union as an interstate organ of governance, security and development, to the globally unmatched proliferation of infracontinental or subregional trade and governance organisations or economic integration projects (effectively, *Mittelräume*, like ECOWAS, ECCAS, SADC, EAC, G-5 Sahel, etc.) (Bashi 2018). Tellingly, Africa and Europe are the two contemporary instances where ‘The Continent’ has become a standard geographic term and trope in academic and policy discourse as well as in popular culture and journalism. Finally, the ‘continental iconography’ of Africa is as unique as the continental cultural identity (manifest in the global brand-recognisability of African literature, music, sports and arts). No other continental contour is as ubiquitous: the shape of Africa can be found in jewelry, on jumpers, in hair designs, in the pan-African trademark colours of the Ethiopian flag, etc. This symbolic, insistently decolonial continentality reverses the subaltern valence of its received continental status and constitutes a vital dimension of the contemporary geopolitical imaginary.

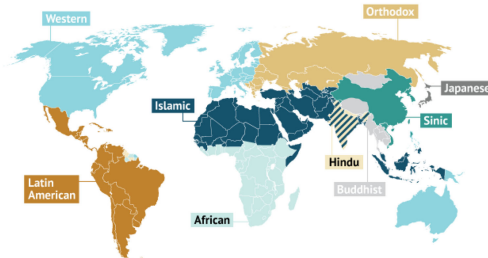
6. Continentality and Globality in the moment

Continentality, continental order and continental identity not only persist amid, but define, globality in the twenty-first century. The map of regional human rights organisations and the map of trade areas both strikingly (though not precisely) reflect the geophysical configuration of continents – as does the map of Huntington’s clashing civilisational blocs (Huntington, 2011), a



HUNTINGTON'S CIVILIZATIONAL DIVIDES

Samuel Huntington categorized the world into nine civilizations, arguing that the fault lines between them would shape international relations and serve as the driving force of conflict in the post-Cold War world.



Source: *The Clash of Civilizations*

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baffling but revealing fin-de-siècle throwback to early twentieth-century essentialist geographic and historical thought in the mould of Mackinder and Spengler – and Schmitt. Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin American remain primary identity markers for individuals and core categories for census data.

The 'Periphery Islands' were continentalised (and islanded) through histories of enslavement and then racialised over the course of colonial subjugation, followed by post-colonial admission to the world economy and the international political order on grossly unequal terms (Africa); through dispossession, settler colonialism and – in one case – imported enslaved labour and a post-slavery racial order (Australia and North America); and through conquest, settlement and cultural hybridisation in the context of enslavement (Latin America). These processes produced *Großräume* and corresponding continental identities or political macro-spatial self-conceptions, and gave rise to both Blackness and Indigeneity, as argued above. The experience of violent continentalisation gave rise, for its myriad numbers and categories of victims, to intercontinental political communities, movements predicated on an intercontinental solidarity and collective mutual recognition, and a distinctive posture with regard to continental as well as national modes of ordering: Native Americans, First Nations, Indigenous Australians, African Americans, Afro-Brazilians, *inter alia*, are, in diverse but provocatively complementary ways, extra-territorial to *Großräume*, residual micro-islands on the continental macro-island. Analogous processes of duress shaped infracontinental and extra-territorial identities and *Großräume* in West, South, Southeast and East Asia.

Whether Left Schmittians or IR enthusiasts looking for a pluralistic alternative to the never-really-and-now-no-longer New World Order are plausible in their strategic redeployment of *Großraum* theory or not is not really the point. *Großräume* might matter less as macro-political

projects or as pluralistic forms of transnational order preferable to the current positivist, state-centric, monistic international legal standard on offer. They might matter more as continental communities of fate, history and experience in the wake of colonialism and conscription into modernity, capital and sovereignty – a system that produced continents and established continental horizons of repression and resistance both, of power and counter-power.

Continentality is our condition; it is one among many ‘imperial durabilities’, phenomena reflecting the sustained shaping pressure or ‘duress’ (Stoler 2016) of centuries of European formation, deformation and transformation of space, lifeworlds and lives, of macro-scale biopolitical, ‘chromopolitical’ and geopolitical engineering. That duress is also evident in the historical constraints on our geopolitical imaginary, operative at the level of effective macro-identities and the abiding preference for macro-scale over global ordering beyond the state, the comfort zone of the continental *Großraum*. We have never been (fully) global – that is, post-continental: our transnational horizons remain continental or intercontinental, and our political imaginary remains commensurately segmented.²²

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²²Even speculative fiction typically invests continents on other worlds with political valence and natural macro-spaces for ordering. See, for example, Silverberg (1980), Jemisin (2015).

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