

A Globe of One's Own: In Praise of the Flat Earth

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Today's questions of climate and climate ethics, with attendant concerns for the sustainability and viability of this life of ours on earth, present a new imaginary for political questions. It was only in the late twentieth century, with the advent of picturing the earth from space, with the possibility of nuclear annihilation of earthly life, and the speed of new media allowing for global audiences (such as the entire world viewing 9/11), that the problem of a global ethos would emerge. If there had always been a silent presupposed "we"¹ in any ethical theory, then this virtual universalism would always struggle alongside moral valorizations of specified communities.² How do we, from the particular world we inhabit, begin to think of life as such? It is the present sense of the planet as a whole—as a fragile bounded globe—that might present us, finally, with the opportunity and imperative to think a genuine ethos. Now that we have a notion of climate that seems to break with the etymology of this specific inclination or latitude of the earth, and does so by gesturing to something like a sense of the earth as a region or inclination in itself, this may open a new imaginary of the globe. We might think of ethos as no longer bound to a territory within the planet; instead there might be the ethos of this globe itself, which has no other region against which we might define ourselves or towards which we might direct our fantasies of another future. If there is something like climate change, perhaps it takes this form: not only a mutation of this climate (warming, depleting, becoming more volatile) but an alteration of what we take climate to be. One might want to suggest that as long as we think of climate in its traditional sense—as our specific milieu—we will perhaps lose sight of climate change, or the degree to which human life is now implicated in timelines and rhythms beyond that of its own borders.

The figure of the globe appears to offer two ethical trajectories: on the one hand, an attention to global interconnections and networks would expand responsibility and awareness beyond the figure of the isolated moral subject. Ethics may have to be considered beyond discursive, human and political modes (especially if one defines politics as the practice of a polity). On the other hand, the figure of the globe—considered as a figure—is intertwined with a tropology of interconnectedness, renewal,

cyclic causality and organicism. This traditionally theological series of motifs, with the globe's circularity reflecting a divine intentionality, is maintained today in many of the most profound and seemingly secular ecological theses, including the Gaia hypothesis and the global brain.

It is the possibility of extinction or the end of human time that forces us to confront a new sense of the globe: far from being an unfortunate event that accidentally befalls the earth and humanity, the thought of the end of the anthropocene era is both at the heart of all the motifs of ecological ethics and the one idea that cannot be thought as long as the globe is considered in terms of its traditional and anthropocentric metaphors.

The word "globalism" along with the word "biopolitics" suffers from a curious double valence. As a descriptive term, globalism can refer to the lost autonomy and difference of worlds. Once upon a time the globe enjoyed divergent timelines and worldviews. Even if it was central to the colonialist imagination to romanticize the extent to which "other" worlds were exotically untranslatable, mystical and embedded in a non-linear time, there is nevertheless a very real sense in which globalism has created an earth of a single time, single market and single polity. Globalism would be a mode of homogenization, disenchantment or rendering quantifiable that one could lament as having displaced an earlier world of different places. This has significant material consequences, since any particular country's environmental or wage policies will directly alter the day-to-day lives of bodies elsewhere on the globe; but it also triggers a series of imaginary ramifications. In positive terms this has been described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in terms of a new multitude. Liberated from nation states and physical locales, there can now be a humanity as such, a self-creating, living labor that has no body other than that which it gives itself through its own immaterial productive powers (Hardt and Negri 2004).

Thought less optimistically, one might say that the physical inability to occupy divergent worlds and times is coupled with a cognitive paralysis to think of any future that would not be one more chapter in a familiar collective narrative. This is evident in the terms that are used to describe the predicament of the globe. Economic events are considered in relation to a past that we have been unable to think as anything other than differing by degree. Despite the new global conditions and linkages, the 2008 cascade of economic crises were gauged to be either as bad as or worse than the Great Depression, while terms such as "recovery," "recession," "depression," and "crisis" place the current state of play as a continuation of a past—a past that varies and recovers always in terms of one easily comprehended cycle. The lexicon deployed to assess and gauge the environment is similarly comforting in terms of its linear temporality and

delimitation: Australia still refers to its condition as one of “drought,” even when the period of insufficient water exceeds a decade; climate change policy refers to “mitigation,” “adaptation,” “sustainability” and “viability”—all of which enable one to think of management (however difficult) rather than cessation, rupture or incomprehension. One might say that the imaginary is, indeed, *global*. A literal globalism—the stark reality of there being no escape, no outside, nowhere else to flee now that the earth has been forced to yield ever more to the human desire for life—is coupled with an incompatible global figuration. Things will cycle back to recovery. The globe can be taken and assessed as an object and managed, saved, revived or given the respect and care that it deserves. If where we are is a *globe*, then it can be imagined as delimited, bounded, organically self-referring and unified. Perhaps, given the advent of globalism as a concrete event where there can now be no time, place or body that can live outside a certain destructive force-field of events (such as the possibility of viral, political, economic and climactic terrors), now is the time to think non-globally. The usual figures of the bounded earth, the ideally-self-balancing cosmos, the interconnectedness of this great organic home of “ours” are modes of narrative self-enclosure that have shielded us from confronting the forces of the present. It is not surprising that “globalism” is at once a term of mourning, signaling a world economy and politics that has taken every space and timeline into its calculative, cynical and rigid systematic maw, at the same time as it signals a redemptive potential. We are, so various environmental and ecological imperatives remind us, always interconnected across and through this one living globe, this living world that environs us.

It was the great contribution of Lacanian psychoanalysis to point out that the visual figural unity of the human body—the bounded organism we see in the mirror—serves as a captivating lure that precludes us from confronting that ex-centric predicament of the speaking subject whose desire is never given in a living present, but is articulated and dispersed in a time that is never that of a self-comprehending and self-affecting whole. Perhaps today we might note that it is the physical image of the globe that serves as a reaction formation, precluding a thought of the consequences of globalism (if globalism remains the correct term for the imaginary opportunities presented in the advent of a sense of the limits of the human). If capitalism could once have been thought of as “a” power imposed upon the globe, then this is no longer the case. As the recent economic crises have demonstrated: capitalism is not a system, cannot be attributed to a body of interests, and is less a transcendent structure imposed upon organic life than just one of the many ways in which local, ill-considered, barely intentional forces of consumption and acquisition

exceed the comprehension of any body (be that a physical, political, national or economic body).

Marxist theory's attempt to locate capitalism within history and within a theory of interests can be compared to a whole series of localizations and narrative therapies. Popular culture has for decades been giving a face and body to a series of diffuse and essentially "unglobable" threats. Despite a series of calls for thinking in terms of distributed, decentered and dispersed cognition, where we acknowledge that institutions, cultures and even organisms are not governed by a central organizing brain, the political imaginary remains wedded to organic figures. Popular culture has presented viral invasion more often than not in terms of an isolable and intruding body: conquering such threats can then be placed in a standard narrative of good and evil, self and other. Terrorism, too, is given a specific face in media culture (either the named Osama Bin Laden or an ethnically specified other). But it is not only popular culture that has been unable to confront a temporality and politics that is no longer that of contesting agents waging a war for the sake of a determined end.

Lamenting the fall of modernity into a biopolitics that manages populations according to a general and quantifiable "life," Giorgio Agamben argues that it will be possible to arrive again at a genuine politics only by considering what Foucault failed to confront: the problem of sovereignty in modernity (Agamben 1998). That is, whereas Foucault was critical of the sovereign model of power, or power as an external and imposed body, Agamben's *critical* concept of biopolitics wants to resist a modernity of diffused or capillary power, focusing again on how power establishes itself *as a body*. Agamben refuses the notion of the political and the polity as a universal or a given; the polity is constituted in and through human potentiality's realization that it lacks any determined end. What bio-politics and its terrors force us to acknowledge is that our defining potentiality—for speaking together and opening up a political space—discloses itself most fully when it is not actualized. It is Auschwitz, modern hedonism, and the biopolitical absence of a genuine political space of speech and decision that evidences the true nature of politics. Politics occurs not when bodies located in a world then decide to speak together, for politics is, through the event of speaking, the opening out of a world. Here, then, in this confrontation with a modern biopolitics that is criticized and lamented for being insufficiently political—insufficiently oriented to the opening and manifestation of a political space—Agamben gives the contemporary term "biopolitics" a force that relates directly to the imaginary hyper-investment in the globe. Agamben, unlike the Foucault whom he criticizes for not confronting the relation between bare life and sovereignty, regards biopolitics in its various forms—both totalitarian

managements of populations and democratic aims to increase a society's happiness—as a *loss of the political*. As long as politics is focused on bare life, or the calculation of a living substance, we will have retreated from the question of the potentiality of the political: man is not born as a political animal but becomes one, and he does so by creating a political space through speaking, opening up a world that is always *his* world.

The Greek distinction between *bios* (a life that is formed, bounded and oriented to what man might make of himself) and *zoe* (mere, bare life that in modernity becomes so much disposable waste, and increasingly the subject of politics) is, for Agamben a difference that needs to be re-thought and re-inscribed. It is *bios*—*created, formed, bounded, delimited life*—that has been lost and that entails a loss of the political. How does this relate to globalism? Both Agamben's critique of biopolitics and the reaction against globalism express a traditional and theological mourning for a loss of form. Globalism's evils follow from its ravaging disrespect for limits and difference, its tendency to consume all previously distinct and specified nations and cultures into one vast calculative system without definition or limit. Not surprisingly, the response to both globalism (seen as an inhuman, mindless and unbounded system) and to biopolitics (seen as a loss of the self-defining polity) has been the reaffirmation of the figure of the globe or bounded form. Agamben, for example, posits a series of positive maneuvers that would ameliorate the biopolitical ravaging of the man of poiesis; these include a return to the active creation of man as a political living form as *bios* rather than *zoe*, as a being whose political nature has little or nothing to do with his mere life, but requires creation. Not surprisingly, then, Agamben also wishes to retrieve a more authentic aesthetic encounter, where art is not passive spectatorship of an artist's private invention, but an opening out or disclosure of a created world. Here, art as *poiesis* or putting into distinct form would not be disengaged from collective *praxis*.

Hardt and Negri, reacting more explicitly to a globalism that has precluded any active and intentional formation of a polity, call for the creation of a single, self-producing, self-aware and self-referring open whole of humanity: a single, continually re-productive body of man. We can pause here to note that what underpins Agamben's call for a new politics and Hardt and Negri's manifesto for a self-productive multitude is a figural globalism that is a variant of a traditional and theological organicism. That is, the figure of the globe—the ideally bounded sphere in which each point is in accord with the whole, and in which the whole is a dynamic and self-maintaining unity—harbors an axiology that privileges *bios* over *zoe*. What must be asserted as dominant and proper is a whole or bounded form that has no external or transcendent principle,

no ordering that is given from without or that would elevate one point or term above another.

Literal globalism, perceived as humanity's alienation from itself and its earth through dead technical systems (such as the market, mechanization, computerization and speculation), is to be cured by figural globalism. Life as *zoe*, the mere life that lives on without a sense of itself, without a world and without form, is to be combated by life as *bios*: a properly political life of self-formation and speaking in common. Politics ought to be of, by and for the polity: thus, the call to immanence, whereby a body is not deflected by any power other than that of its own making, is yet one more refusal to consider the predicament of a palpably non-sovereign power. Recall that for Agamben, Foucault failed to consider the relationship between biopolitics and sovereign power, between power as instituted law that creates the border between law and non-law, or between governable life and the merely living. For Agamben the problem with biopolitics is that it is insufficiently directed towards *bios*: both totalitarian governments and democracies focus on well-being and happiness rather than confronting the problem that mere life does not proceed without some sort of gap or decision toward its proper world and end. If one were to recall the Greek attention to *bios*, or formed life, one might be able to retrieve something of the proper political potentiality that is covered over in modernity.

Foucault, however, suggests an opposite path. The problem with biopolitics is not its inattention to *bios* or self-making but, rather, its maintenance of organic—or what I will refer to here as “global”—thinking. One could be misled by reading Foucault's corpus backwards, concluding that his final thoughts on Greek and Hellenistic arts of the self would be the natural consequence of a theorization of biopolitics, leading to a retrieval of a poetics of the subject. But there are other possibilities indicated in his earliest criticisms of the concept of life. The problem with this concept, or more accurately this *problem*, is that its manner of folding an inside from an outside, or of producing a relation through which something like knowledge is possible, is—to use a Deleuzian term—its reactive reterritorializing quality. It is the concept of life as such, the life from which bounded beings emerge and against which they maintain themselves, that leads to a certain structure of ethics. Man becomes that being who is nothing more than a reflective structure, a being whose only law is that of giving a law to himself. The three concepts analyzed by Foucault that constitute the modern empirical-transcendental episteme are life, labor and language. It is because there is something in general called “life”—a process of striving, self-production and self-maintenance—that language and labor become the means through which man creates himself as an historical being.

On the one hand, Foucault suggests that this is in quite a specific sense the consequence of a refigured globe: the pre-modern space of knowledge had distributed beings in relations of analogy, such that the universal order of things was reflected in each living being. In classicism this book of nature, or experience of the earth as possessing its own sense that could be unfolded in various ways in each living form, gives way to an order that appears in representation and tabulation. In classical thought, man is not yet that being produced through the act of speech and labor that forms him in relation to a life in general that is only known after the event of its formation. In modernity, the globe is no longer the book of nature or scene of readable order, becoming a site of "life" that is now known as the enigmatic progression through which organisms and systems emerge: life is a process that can be read after the event of its ongoing acts of formation. Critically, then, this would suggest that with the politics of life itself, something of the globe is lost or occluded. And this, indeed, is how ecological and anti-globalist theory understands both biopolitics and globalism more generally. What is lost is any sense of the earth as a living whole, as bearing a life and temporality of its own, within which human beings are located and towards which they ought to pay due respect and care. Yet despite the sense that globalism as a political event has erased all traditional and enchanted senses of the globe as a living whole that harbors its own order, the appeals to the figure and normativity of englobed life have become more intense than ever. If Agamben seeks to retrieve a sense of the world as that which man gives himself through speaking in common, and if Hardt and Negri aim to catalyze the self-expressing multitude, then they do so in thorough accord with a tradition and spirit of the self-evident beauty and worth of the organic globe.

First, we can note the theological nature of this figure of the self-referring, self-creating living form that has no end or determination outside its own existence.³ Not only is this how the Christian God of monotheism was defined (as a potentiality that has no essence other being in pure act, never deflected from pure self-forming), it is also the case that theological poetics used the figure of the bounded sphere to express a divine intentionality of perfect accord, balance and (most importantly) self-reference. Such a form has its own temporality which is at once linear, organic and circular; it is a time of increasing creation and fruition, in which beings arrive at their proper form and in which the end concludes and discloses the reason of the whole. As an example, we can think of Milton's frequent references to the pendant world or balanced globe, contrasted with the boundless, formless and time-deprived chaos. The divine meets the human in John Donne's frequent references to globes, circles, circumference and recovery, as though the earth's form is that of the soul:

Then, soul, to thy first pitch work up again;
Know that all lines which circles do contain.
For once that they the centre touch, do touch
Twice the circumference, and be thou such
(Donne 2000, 229).

Second, this divine, organic and perfectly bounded form of immanent self reference can take the form of philosophy itself: that activity through which human reason refers back to and redeems itself by circling back and recognizing its own constitutive conditions. One could include here Heidegger's hermeneutic circle, Hegel's philosophy of absolute self-reference, and more recent and supposedly scientific claims for "human" understanding, such as Robert Wright's recent claim that the monotheistic figure of God will, organically, evolve to become nothing more than that of human nature understanding itself as the origin of all the figures to which it was once enslaved (2010).

Third, and finally, when current ecological theorists continue to refer to the environment—as that which environs or encloses—or call for a due reverence to an earth that bears its own balance and self-ordering, it is once again a figure of bounded form or *bios* that is maintained against a life that would be a force without sense of itself, a time without disclosure of fruition.

The problem with this anti-globalization global tropology is twofold. First, it is inefficacious when one considers the nature of modern power. The twenty-first century is marked by an intensification of diffuse and destructive forces. The Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation had already troubled the motif of life as a war of interests among bodies, for it was clearly possible that the trajectory of man for survival and dominance was the same path that would lead to his disappearance. The subsequent wave of annihilation threats, from the AIDS awareness of the 1980s, followed by increasing anxieties about global warming, food shortages, viral panics (SARS, bird flu, swine flu), terrorist organizations that no longer concerned themselves with a worldly survival, and then economic crises that exposed an absence of any centered or commanding viewpoint: all these serve to show that the image of the globe, of an interconnected whole, is a lure and an alibi. We have perhaps always lived in a time of divergent, disrupted and diffuse systems of forces, in which the role of human decisions and perceptions is a contributing factor at best. Far from being resolved by returning to the figure of the bounded globe or subject of *bios* rather than *zoe*, all those features that one might wish to criticize in the bio-political global era can only be confronted by a non-global temporality and counter-ethics.

Second, it follows then that far from being an ecological figure that will save us from the ravages of globalism, subjectivism and biopolitics, it

is the image of the globe that lies at the center of an anthropocentric imaginary that is intrinsically suicidal. Of course, extinction and annihilation lie at the heart of all life. But accelerated and self-witnessing extinction can only be achieved by a global animal, a “man” whose desire for survival and mastery is so frenzied that he consumes his own milieu. And he does so because his milieu is a globe. If, as recent “returns” to phenomenology insist, the thinking and living being always has a world, and if that world is always a world of meaning—defined in terms of potentialities and the organism’s timeline—then we are truly global. We are bounded by our own living form, with a world of our own folded around our sensory-motor apparatus (Thomson 2007). But does not the phenomenon of a violent, life-annihilating and globe-destroying globalism present us with another possibility? Perhaps what we need is a zoopolitics: not a lament for the ways in which politics has taken hold of human populations as mere life, but a critique of the ways in which political thinking remains all too human. That is, biopolitics ought to be criticized *not* for seizing upon bare or mere life—*not* for forgetting the human forming power that enables politics, not for regarding man as *bios* rather than *zoe*. Rather, the biopolitics that is hysterically and morally regarded as destructive of well-bounded life would still be captured by *bios*, by the good form of self-producing man and would be better directed toward forces beyond the human, beyond the organism and beyond the globe. The globe or earth as the planet that was blessed with the contingency of life, including the human species whose global imagination has done so much to create destructive systems beyond its own power and comprehension, cannot be saved. Insofar as it is imagined as a globe or living whole with its own order and proper potentiality that might be restored, the earth will continue to be sacrificed to the blindness of an organic thinking that can only insist upon its own self-evident value.

One final feature of globalism that needs to be noted, and that might suggest a new counter-global temporality is that of information. There is no public sphere, no bordered polis in which circulating data may be reflected upon, and incorporated, as an aspect of an all-encompassing life-world. Indeed, it is the surfeit of information, especially information regarding the limits of the globe (such as data about global warming, resource depletion, new speeds of viral mutation, terrorist cells without traceable command centers) that requires a micro-politics (if that term could be freed from the notion of a polis) or demands some mode of schizoanalysis. The latter would refer to a tracking of splits in forces, of divergent systems and incongruous fields. One may never free oneself from the figure of the globe, or even the globe as the notion of *figure*—the notion that “we” give a world to ourselves through our own recuperat-

ing imagination. But if the present has the capacity to teach us anything, it may be this: only a shattering of the globe, with an attention to forces that resist recuperation, incorporation and comprehension—forces that operate beyond intentionality and synthesis—only this radical destruction can save us from ourselves.

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Notes

1. In his commentary on Husserl's vision of the task of phenomenology, Derrida notes that any consideration of universal truth, or truth in general, must presuppose a subjectivity that would transcend any specific or determined cultural norm; this would yield humanity as a horizon within which located norms would function, a 'silent presupposed we.' Derrida notes, though, that this freeing of humanity from any determined and concrete image of 'man' occurs with Husserl's modernity and the vision of phenomenology as uncovering the transcendental presuppositions of Western thought (Derrida 1978, 61).
2. Michel Foucault argues that in modernity only *ethics* is possible, only a negotiation of the forms of arguments, and that morality – or the practical judgment of specific forms of life – is no longer possible (Foucault 2002, 357).
3. "...this amounts to thinking time and movement on the basis of the *telos* of the *gramme* that is completed, in act, fully present, that keeps its tracing close to itself, that is, erases its tracing in a *circle*." (Derrida 1982, 60).

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