

Introduzione al tema

Introduction. Beyond Globalization, and the Drift of the Political

Introduzione. Oltre la Globalizzazione e la deriva del politico

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Abstract. This thematic issue interrogates the crisis of globalization as both a material and conceptual framework, arguing that the present conjuncture can be grasped neither through the narrative of a borderless integrated world nor through that of deglobalization. The article proposes the *drift* as a critical practice of orientation in a world marked by multipolar tensions, ecological breakdown, and the collapse of inherited political categories. Thinking beyond globalization emerges not as a settled condition but as an open-ended critical and political task.

Keywords: globalization, drift, global, planetary, political categories.

Riassunto. Questo numero monografico interroga la crisi della globalizzazione come spazio materiale e concettuale, mostrando come la congiuntura attuale non possa essere colta né attraverso la narrativa di un mondo integrato e senza confini né attraverso quella della deglobalizzazione. L'articolo propone la *deriva* come pratica critica di orientamento in un mondo segnato da tensioni multipolari, dalla crisi ecologica e dal collasso delle categorie politiche correnti. Pensare oltre la globalizzazione ne emerge non come una condizione acquisita, ma come un'azione critica e politica sempre aperta.

Parole chiave: globalizzazione, deriva, globale, planetario, categorie politiche.

1. Drifting maps

Globalization, long regarded as the defining horizon of late twentieth-century modernity, no longer provides an adequate framework for interpreting the present. While the material infrastructures of global interconnection – financial circuits, logistical networks, extractive regimes, and digital platforms – remain deeply entrenched, the conceptual vocabulary that once rendered them intelligible has entered into a crisis. The image of a progressively integrated, borderless, and homogenizing world – often associated with the expansion of neoliberal capitalism under U.S. hegemony – has lost much of its explanatory force. Yet the current conjuncture cannot be adequately captured by the equally reductive narrative of *deglobalization*. What we are witnessing is not a retreat from global interdependence, but its reconfiguration along fractured, conflictual, and uneven lines.

This monographic issue might be described – borrowing Mitchell’s formulation in the essay we present here¹ – as an attempt to “see through madness,” to grasp the planetary condition of disorientation that seems to pervade the present: the resurgence of “reactionary nationalism, authoritarianism, and racism” (infra, p. 16), alongside the proliferation of reckless and often irrational forms of political leadership, beginning with the president of the hegemonic power that once claimed to govern the fate of the globalized world.

From the classical metaphor of the *navem rei publicae gubernare*, evoked by Aristotle (*Politics*, III) – according to which, although navigation is perilous, it remains possible to govern the ship “within the concrete situation that the noetic act and virtue indicate as the direction to be followed”² – we seem to have moved toward that of the “Ship of Fools,” described by Plato in his critique of democracy (*Republic*, VI). The latter now appears as a more fitting image of our condition: a planetary vessel repeatedly driven against the rocks by wars and by the effects of extractive capitalism, running the real risk of finding no safe harbor, except for a select few.

If the myth of globalization has rendered us blind to the dangers inherent in a project of endless exploitation, today – again in Mitchell’s words – its political, economic, and ecological program has become obsolete: “The Ship of fools is no longer a metaphor for the rogue state. It now applies to

¹ This essay first appeared as W.J.T. Mitchell, “Planetary Madness: Globalizing the Ship of Fools,” in *“Disassembled” Images: Allan Sekula and Contemporary Art*, edited by Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2019, 21–37. I sincerely thank Prof. Mitchell, and the Leuven University Press, for allowing us to publish his article in this thematic section of the Journal, confident that his contribution will broaden our gaze on these issues.

² Duso, *La logica del potere*, 89.

the planet, inhabited by a species that fits the legal criterion for insanity, namely, that it is a danger to itself and others” (infra, p. 17).

Mitchell’s reflection on the space we inhabit today has deeper roots, tracing back to a lecture he delivered in 2018 entitled *Iconology 3.0*. As he noted on that occasion, we attempt “to inhabit our historical moment with a sense of critical clarity,”³ only to find ourselves “caught up in a maelstrom of contradictions.” The emerging image of the world no longer presents a totalizing unity, but rather exposes the limits of what remains a liveable world. Mitchell already linked this image to the ancient metaphor of the Ship of Fools, “reminding us that our planet is a wandering island in an inhospitable void [...] On our small and fragile island, our ship of fools, the seas are rising, and the deserts are expanding. If we do not find our way beyond our folly as a species, we will wind up like dinosaurs, just another fossilized relic of a life-form that could not adapt.”⁴

This metaphor returns as a way of asking what space might be adequate to our present condition of drift – if not the sea itself? The maritime dimension can be approached not only metaphorically, but also through an attention to material realities, which increasingly reveal the oceans as a crucial site of struggle over the control of global flows. As such, the sea becomes a figure through which to reimagine the space we inhabit and traverse, and within which it is possible to rethink the “psychological and political framework within which a critical account of our planetary insanity has to be re-framed” (infra, p. 19).

Yet if, as Mitchell suggests, the sea is also the metaphor of madness *par excellence* – “to be all at sea is to be confused, disoriented, overwhelmed” (infra, p. 21) – it is equally true that the attempt to trace *drifting maps* may constitute a form of political and epistemological practice adequate to our present historical moment of chaotic transition. This metaphor, too, has a longer genealogy⁵.

In the eighteenth century, English sailors used precise *drift charts* of winds and currents, improving navigational safety by consolidating previously fragmented maritime knowledge into a coherent system of orientation. Reconsidered from our contemporary perspective, however, these charts can also be understood as *drifting maps*: not merely technical devices of representation, but dynamic frameworks through which space

³ Mitchell, *Iconology 3.0*, 26 (lecture delivered at the conference “Cultura visuale in Italia: Prospettive della ricerca,” University of Palermo, March 19, 2018).

⁴ Mitchell, *Iconology 3.0*, 27.

⁵ It has recently been reactivated, for instance, in the editorial project Portolan Journal, where “the reference to nautical maps [...] is a gesture towards the need to forge new conceptual tools for navigating the turbulence of the global present.” (Hardt, Mezzadra, *Capital and the Global War Regime*).

is interpreted, experienced, and continuously reconfigured. *To drift* thus emerges as a critical practice – in the sense developed by Guy Debord's *dérive*⁶ – functioning as a device of intelligibility through which it becomes possible to follow the traces of transformations in forms of experience, political action, and aesthetic perception.

Drifting is not a simple loss of direction; rather, it emerges as a form of inquiry, a way of traversing environments, and constitutes a situated mode of engaging with complexity, in which objective cartographic knowledge intersects with subjective perception and affect, and foregrounds the political and experiential dimensions of practices.

This monographic issue proceeds from the hypothesis that to think *beyond globalization* requires neither abandoning the global as an analytical category nor replacing it with a new totalizing paradigm. Rather, it calls for a critical de-placement: a reworking of inherited concepts and the elaboration of new interpretive tools capable of grasping a world marked by multipolar tensions, ecological breakdown, technological acceleration, and shifting regimes of mobility and control. In this sense, the project resonates with the broader critical-theoretical efforts to interrogate the historical conditions of the present.

The contributions gathered here take up this task by interrogating the spatial, temporal, and epistemic coordinates of the present, foregrounding the instability of the categories through which it has been understood.

2. Global Processes Beyond Deglobalization

A crucial starting point for this inquiry is the critique of the globalization paradigm itself. As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argue, the contemporary invocation of “deglobalization” risks obscuring the persistence and transformation of global processes. The dominant understanding of globalization that emerged in the 1990s – centered on market integration, deterritorialization, and geopolitical unipolarity, and echoed in many respects in Francis Fukuyama's “end of history” – was always partial. Today, its limitations have become increasingly evident.

Rather than a smooth and homogenizing space, the global appears as a terrain of frictions, asymmetries, and infrastructural struggles. Finance, logistics, extraction, and digital platforms continue to organize economic and social life, but they do so through heterogeneous and often conflicting spatial arrangements.

⁶ Debord, “Théorie de la dérive.”

The current conjuncture is marked by the emergence of a multipolar order, the intensification of geopolitical conflict, and a rearticulation of the relationship between capitalism and territorial power.

Wars – understood in a broadened sense to include both “military activities other than war, including security operations like border control” and “wars conducted by non-military means, such as tech wars, trade wars, sanctions” (infra, p. 45) – along with competing infrastructural dynamics, are not external to globalization but constitutive features of its ongoing transition. From a global process perspective, war emerges from the tension between capitalism and territorialism, while also revealing the instability of global power formations and their connection to capital operations, which operate through infrastructures and are tied to labor and life.

From this perspective, transition must be understood as an “open and contested spatio-temporal process” (infra, p. 39) rather than a linear shift from one regime to another. The global is neither dissolving nor stabilizing; it is being reconfigured through struggle. This diagnosis calls for a “renewed internationalism capable of confronting the global operations of capital” (infra, p. 39) while acknowledging the fractured and uneven terrain on which such struggles unfold.

3. From Resilience to Chaos: Epistemologies of Crisis

As Laura Bazzicalupo writes (infra, p. 58), it is difficult to think that we are going through a phase of infra-systemic transition. Although certain constants are confirmed, this approach – one that epistemologically presupposes a succession of systemic states of equilibrium – fails to grasp the discontinuity that disrupts coordinates, the emergence of something truly unforeseen, and today’s variables make it impossible to discern the passage that the idea of transition evokes.

If globalization as a paradigm is in crisis, so too are the epistemological frameworks that sustained it. During the neoliberal decades, systemic and complexity-based approaches provided a language for managing uncertainty. Concepts such as resilience, adaptation, and nonlinearity were mobilized to render crises governable, transforming instability into a calculable and administrable phenomenon.

As Bazzicalupo highlights, this epistemic regime is now undergoing a significant mutation. The metaphor of resilience, once central to neoliberal governance, is increasingly displaced by a more radical invocation of chaos. This shift signals a loss of confidence in the capacity of systems to absorb shocks and maintain equilibrium. Chaos, in its absolutized form, names a condition of pervasive instability that exceeds the horizon of control.

Politically, this transformation has ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it legitimizes new forms of centralized and often opaque decision-making, frequently mediated by algorithmic systems and justified in the name of necessity. On the other hand, the recognition of chaos opens up the possibility of bifurcations of critical thresholds, at which established trajectories can be disrupted, and alternative futures can emerge. Catastrophe, in this sense, is not only an endpoint but also a site of potential “bifurcation that is as catastrophic/destructive as it is potentially morphogenetic.” (Infra, p. 65)

To think beyond globalization thus requires engaging with these altered epistemologies of crisis. It entails examining how narratives of chaos and catastrophe are mobilized, while also exploring their capacity to generate openings for political rearticulation.

4. Environmental Governance and the Depoliticization of Crisis

The environmental question constitutes one of the most salient sites in which the limits of globalization become visible. While ecological degradation is deeply entangled with global capitalist dynamics, the frameworks through which it is addressed often reproduce the very logics that have contributed to the crisis. As Giulia Sajeve argues (infra, p. 77), environmental discourse remains deeply embedded in neoliberal order, even as it itself shows signs of decline.

This persistence manifests in processes of depoliticization that reframe environmental issues in ways that obscure their structural and conflictual dimensions. Responsibility is frequently individualized, reducing systemic problems to matters of personal behavior. At the same time, environmental governance is increasingly technicized, presenting decisions as neutral and evidence-based while concealing the ethical and political choices they entail. Finally, the reliance on market mechanisms – privatization, commodification, and financialization – reconfigures nature as an object of economic calculation, often at the expense of ecological effectiveness.

These dynamics unfold within a broader “hyperpolitical” condition, characterized by an intensification of discourses and interventions that paradoxically leads to a dilution of political agency. The result is a form of governance that is both pervasive and depoliticized, active yet unable to address the root causes of ecological crisis. Moving beyond globalization in this domain requires a re-politicization of environmental issues, foregrounding questions of power, responsibility, and collective decision-making.

5. Migration, Punitive Environments, and the Fragmentation of Space

The reconfiguration of global processes is perhaps most starkly visible in the domain of migration. As Martina Tazzioli demonstrates, the last decade has witnessed a profound transformation in the politics of migration containment in Europe. The “hostile environment” approach, initially developed in the United Kingdom, has evolved into a broader regime of “punitive environments,” marking a shift in the governance of mobility that operates through the production of precarious and harmful conditions of life.

These environments operate not only through legal restrictions, but through the systematic dismantling of infrastructures of life-support. Migrants and asylum seekers are governed by being exposed to conditions that undermine their health and well-being – kept in insalubrious spaces, deprived of adequate services, and subjected to forms of violence that render life precarious. Punishment, in this context, extends beyond the sphere of criminal justice, targeting what Tazzioli, referring to Foucault, terms “infra-legal illegalism” and blurring the boundary between legality and illegality.

Importantly, these punitive environments do not affect migrants alone. They reveal broader processes of interlocking precarization and criminalization that also impact citizens, particularly along racialized lines. Migration thus becomes a privileged lens through which to observe the fragmentation of global space: a world in which mobility is both enabled and violently constrained, and in which the promise of global circulation is unevenly distributed.

At the same time, the dynamics identified here cannot be reduced to a purely European phenomenon. They point to a more general trend in the governance of mobility, one that reflects the tensions between global interconnectedness and the reassertion of borders. To think beyond globalization requires attending to these tensions and to the forms of violence and resistance they engender.

6. Toward a Critical Orientation of the Political

Across these domains – global processes, epistemologies of crisis, environmental governance, and migration – a common thread emerges: the inadequacy of existing categories to capture the complexity of the present. In response, alternative vocabularies have begun to take shape, among which the notion of the planetary occupies a central position.

The planetary perspective – as developed by thinkers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty⁷ – shifts attention from the integration of markets to the conditions of life on Earth, foregrounding species interdependence, ecological limits, and vulnerability. It challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have long structured political thought, opening the field to multispecies perspectives – in Donna Haraway’s words⁸ – and to new forms of ethical and political consideration. At the same time, it raises difficult questions about scale, responsibility, and action in a world marked by profound inequalities.

The task, therefore, is not to replace the global with the planetary, but to think their tensions: to develop a conceptual framework that can account for both the systemic interconnections of global capitalism and the material limits and vulnerabilities of planetary existence.

The contributions collected in this issue do not converge on a single theoretical model. Instead, they offer a series of situated interventions that, taken together, map a space of the beyond – in the sense evoked by Homi K. Bhabha: “to dwell ‘in the beyond’” is to inhabit a “space of intervention in here and now”⁹; the *time of the now* in Benjamin’s terms. If I may venture to say, what unites the essays is a shared commitment to moving beyond the limitations of globalization as an interpretive paradigm, while retaining a critical focus on the political dimensions of practices.

This orientation is necessarily experimental and open-ended. It involves not only the critique of existing categories, but their transformation and recombination. It requires attention to multiple scales and temporalities, as well as to the interplay between material processes and epistemic frameworks. Above all, it demands a renewed engagement with the political – not as a stable domain, but as a field of ongoing conflict, contestation, negotiation, and resistance. It also echoes ongoing attempts to rethink internationalism under conditions of fragmentation and crisis.

To think beyond globalization is to confront a world in which the coordinates of political, spatial, and epistemic experience are being fundamentally reconfigured. It is to recognize that the narratives of integration and coherence that once structured our understanding of the global no longer suffice, yet they continue to shape the terrain on which we think and act. It is, finally, to engage in a process of conceptual and political experimentation aimed at making sense of a present marked by instability, displacement, and potential transformation.

⁷ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”; Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.

⁸ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

⁹ Bhabha, *Location of culture*, 7.

In bringing together analyses of global processes, chaos and catastrophe, environmental governance, and migration regimes, this issue seeks to contribute to this endeavor. It does not offer a unified theory of the present, but a set of critical perspectives that illuminate its tensions and open pathways for further inquiry. “Beyond globalization” thus names not a settled condition, but an ongoing task: that of rethinking the world in a moment when its contours are more uncertain – and more contested – than ever.

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