

Mapping the Glocal and Deciphering the Asymmetry of Economies of Code in Giacomo Marramao's *The Passage West*.

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Volume 8, 2015

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0008.007> [<http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0008.007>]

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The Passage West (2012) by the Italian philosopher Giacomo Marramao, translated from the original *Passaggio a Occidente* (2003), is a remarkable contribution to understanding the new global paradigm we, as both westerners and non-westerners, inhabit, elaborating on the meaning of globalization and political modernity in our times with an eye to both reinterpreting the heritage of the west and proposing possible political horizons for the future. As the title of the work already suggests, central to Marramao's proposals is the figure of the West itself, though perhaps it is more accurate to say a certain history of the West, or even of the West as history. If this is the case, this place is not (or not only) geographical. It, rather, marks a certain *before* and *after* where the "after" will eventually become the emergence of the global age itself as the passage west. This 'west' should be understood, then, on both a conceptual and historical level. With reference to the former, we are to understand that the West is a very particular form of universality, exceptional, following Max Weber, in the course of human history, and universal in so far as it dominates by unifying, thereby realizing, the universal in its very etymology. Only one modality of the universal is known to it: that of domination. Specifically, this domination has its root in "a particular declension of rationality, which is even more central than the logic of power" (151). Its biggest armament is its particular form of rationality, and this rationality is in turn dependent upon "specific forms of 'practical-rational behaviors' that have no adequate parallels in other cultures" (Marramao, 151).

On a historical level, the west is synonymous with the emergence of a political conglomerate based on the supposition of separate and sovereign nation states, conceptualized in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and historically consolidated in the Westphalia model, or "the system of international relations that, since the end of the religious civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hinged on the sovereign, territorially enclosed nation state" (35). It is not mere coincidence that the Westphalia model followed the religious civil wars of that era, for a reevaluation of the nation-state model also implies reevaluating the process we have come to call secularization. *The Passage West* illustrates that Westphalia is, in the last instance, a moment in which the passage from the political system of the *respublica Christiana* to something wholly new is consolidated, in which new relationships between politics and religion were being defined, and a new kind of political individual emerges, in his own words, "in which the individual acquired full responsibility in the 'inner cavity' of his own conscience" (37). Westphalia thus implies at least two major changes for Marramao: 1) the complementarity of the state and civic life, 2) a clear reciprocity between internal and external order. In the isometric logic that the Westphalian or Leviathan model introduced, then, conflicts of identities became unacceptable to it. What the doctrine of sovereignty of the state thus enacted for western European modernity, then, was the introduction of "a *dissymmetry* that suspends the horizontality of conflict through a form of neutralization that is itself new" (95).

What is the relationship, then, of the west to globalization? Globalization, according to Marramao, is a complex process which can indicate, in an apparently contradictory fashion, both a homogenization of the various *Lebenswelten* through technical-scientific uniformity in globalized modes of communication, on the one hand, and, on the other, a radical differentiation of its members based on symbolic identifications made according to ethical-cultural values. It is the new temporal and spatial stage, or *topos*, that the West now occupies as a passage West, a passage to the West, but also in a certain sense the West as passage. Yet it is not

itself the west, nor does it necessarily adopt the particular and exceptional universality with which it is identified. Marramao asserts that: “today there is a—tendentially antagonistic—conflict between *globalization* and *universalization*” (215). The latter, according to Marramao, “displays an interactive and communicational dynamic of the forms of life” (215). If we can infer, then, one possible form – if not the *only* possible form – of this universalization is that of the west, as that exceptionality that is the West *as* universal, then we can also infer that this universality is not a necessary element in the passage West that globalization entails.

This takes us to the heart of what is at stake, from my perspective, in the coming and going that this passage west represents and which goes to explain why we must understand the rise of phenomenon such as religious fundamentalisms as being a uniquely contemporary symptom of the global age in Marramao’s analysis. For in this reading the passage west takes the form of a passage that opens onto a new and constantly shifting global stage that is impossible to understand unless as a political *topos* that succeeds the abdication of the mighty Leviathan. This new global stage is concretized in instances of the glocal, that short-circuit between the local and the global experienced at any single point of the *topos*, short-circuited precisely because the former mediator of this network—the nation state and the structure that had sustained it—has broken down (35). The glocal necessarily takes on a certain form; it becomes a new structure of the communication networks constantly running between the global and the local. It maintains, however, certain conditions of entry, certain rites of *passage*, the conditions of which are clearly laid out by Marramao, as I read it, in the second chapter, in a discussion on borders, values, language and technology (69 – 84). Yet while these rites of passage certainly seem to confirm that the glocal should be understood as adopting a particular *form*, it nevertheless designates very little about said forms’ *content*. It is precisely *as* passage, then, that it becomes able to occupy any given instance of the glocal without having to simultaneously swallow the West as an exceptional and particular form of the universal.

But this necessarily also changes what we understand by the west today, for this globalized *topos* which has been opened by a certain history of the West is no longer monopolized by the universal values that the latter is seen as in some way representing. Once we have entered into this perpetual passage that is globalization, we must in turn admit that there is room for something that is other than west, even radically other in relation *to* the west. We can only be forced to conclude that the toing and froing of this passage has been, is currently, and will continue to be radically transformative of that which we have chosen to call the west, which is, in this case, only a particular history of the west or, as we have previously mentioned, of the west *as* history (even as the announcement of the end of history, and perhaps, indeed, in light of this fact). What Marramao reveals here is that if there exists something that we can label west or ‘the west’, then, it has no essence but is a process, a process of becoming, a *devenir* west, with its own exceptional and particular projection of universalism. The borders that have marked a kind of interiority and exteriority of this west thus fall apart in the last instance of Marramao’s analysis, dramatized by its current place in the glocal order. It falls into a radical asymmetry with relation to itself, and thus becomes wholly other as something wholly other.

Ultimately, Marramao’s political project is the construction of what he calls a “universal politics of difference” (the reference first appears on page 68), which would develop as a response to, as being responsible within, the new symbolic space of glocalization as a place of encounter between the west (or various wests) and its outside. This place of encounter must, however, be understood in terms of its operating “in spite of dialogue”, which I understand to mean—the obvious reference to Habermas’s philosophy aside—that although they are encounters that are permitted by nature of cultural antagonisms, its political significance should not be closed within the cultural sphere only. There is a political dimension to the antagonism which exceeds the kind of recognition that represents the limit of symbolic identification in the cultural sphere. Yet there is a shadow cast over the text which is never resolved and thus must be brought to the fore; for if the west is not, and never was, a space which is total and absolute, then is there any particular reason that we should consider the passage west to be so either? When we speak about globalization, it is clear that we are talking about a process which is unequal and incomplete. Indeed, if the global really were to en-globe everything, it would cease to make sense as a conceptual tool at all, and become nothing other than a placeholder for the infinite. The life worlds of many different cultures around the world do not have regular contact with that instance which Marramao here calls the glocal. Likewise, in those cultures in which our contact with the glocal is constant, we should not assume that such contact is total either. But what should we care for that which is external to

globalization, in the consideration of a new horizon of politics within the global? The question is important precisely to the extent to which, just as we must consider the west as being marked by interior alterity, such is also true of the glocal space. That which is external to the process of globalization finds itself rotting away at the glocals' very core. Any question of a responsible democratic politics in the global age must thus address this vacant core in all its implications.

I should like to reflect upon this consideration, which I consider to be one of the most important logical conclusions of this work, by discussing that which marks the entry to the space of the glocal, marked by what I have above called "rites of passage", to that kind of passage which permits the local and the global to communicate without the mediation of the nation-state as the absolute political authority and sovereign power. In the second chapter to *The Passage West*, Marramao attempts to expand upon the meaning of the 'present' through what is more precisely an articulation of the conditions of the glocal space. It finds itself between atopicality (following Marc Augé) and belonging, or the need for stable places in an unstable world. It is here that we see the passage west being precisely described as a non-place, which is nevertheless a place of transit, of passage, and which, furthermore, never has meaning "outside of a *system of differences*" (71). This perspective is then further explored on the basis of an examination of four notions: borders [*confini*], values, language and technology. Though this is never explicitly stated, my understanding of these four notions is that they all, to some extent, describe that which makes it possible to participate in the glocal space to begin with, the *glocal's own conditions of possibility*. This glocalization as passage west should not then be a given. Rather, certain *rites of passage* are established, which themselves form part of the necessary elements of the expansion of capitalism across the world that has been a defining feature of modernity. These rites of passage must be understood as that which makes communication between the local and the global possible in the first instance. Any interaction within the glocal space must then meet with these requirements if a kind of communication is to become possible, which is not to say that this occurs in any total way, or, inversely that any given individual may simply choose to remove themselves entirely from this space at any given moment.

I shall proceed in the order in which Marramao himself deals with these four terms. What may perhaps at first surprise the reader of the first of these four sub-sections entitled "borders" is the absolute lack of any discussion of the term border itself. Beginning with the question of how one is to consider the border today since the collapse of the bipolar world system (exemplified by the collapse of that most famous visual border that was the Berlin Wall), the sub-section then drops the topic entirely to go on to interrogate what one can understand of the history of the modern individual emerging from the Westphalia political system of jurisprudence, and of the deterritorialization and corresponding reterritorialization that are part and parcel of the glocalization process. The author concludes this section with the notion that the nostalgic return to a community which he calls "nostalgia of the present" should be regarded as a uniquely post-Leviathan reaction, forming a world of political associations within a large body of isolated monads. It is thus defined by antagonistic identities finding themselves in a conflict of values which had been neutralized by the state apparatus under the Westphalia model as a conflict of interests, as we have discussed above. It is worth pausing for a moment to think of why this particular discussion should appear under the section in which we had promised a discussion on borders. Could the figure of the border be lying latent at the heart of this history of the individual, itself a product of a certain history of the west which is the formation of the Leviathan model? What else is a border, if not that which confines, but also contaminates? Marramao himself discusses this in these terms, playing with the Italian word for a border, *confine*. This confining could be that of the separation between friends and enemies, as in Schmitt's elaboration of political sovereignty. It could also be the confining of conflicts of values to those of interests, as was the role, in Marramao's evaluation of the current state of affairs, of the now dying Leviathan in political modernity. So what, then, takes place when the great mediator between the local and the global—the nation-state—is no longer able to define the *confini* that are proper to politics? This, I believe, is the question that is opened up here in the discussion of borders, and the following three terms then become one possible way in which to understand the limits of the glocal space in political terms.

The question of values is then opened with the notion that we now live in a time of "ethics in conflict" (73), which can be understood both on a philosophical and a political level. In the former, we are observing the rise of a number of incompatible ethics that share a common space and which nonetheless can be considered as

rationally consistent principles. In the latter, we see that these values themselves cannot be reduced to a nation state model. This leads to a discussion which once again appears to have little to do with values in any direct manner: Marramao proposes the need to broaden the notion of citizenship in a moral direction, by pointing out the irreducible gap that today exists between citizenship and belonging. The phenomena which this author calls nostalgia of the present is, in this understanding, a necessary consequence of the fact that citizenship no longer provides the same kind of symbolic appeasement that it once did; that is to say, that belonging takes priority over citizenship because it lies closer to the reality of the life worlds of different groups. This discussion of citizenship and belonging, however, must be emphasized in its very particular relationship to the question of values; what better denotes the old *confini* of the nation-state model, if not the citizen? The citizen represents that which nowadays radically brings into question the relationship between values and borders understood in terms of traditional political modernity, and shows the need for a new way of understanding these antagonistic identitarian communities that are on the rise in the glocal world. The suggestion seems to be that it is precisely through language and technology, the last of the four terms discussed here, that one can begin to understand how such a reconsideration of the 'present' may take place.

These two final questions are intimately linked and serve, more than to arrive at any conclusive statements, as reflections upon the current state of affairs. The reflection on language largely takes place as a problematization of the deleuzian notion of minority languages; while we must agree with their subversive power, then, we see that language itself tends towards a radical dispersion that, as reflected in the new fundamentalisms of the occident, actually tend not towards reconciliation but antagonism and fragmentation, precisely as "proliferation of a logic of identity" (80). If language is a conduit of identitarian values, then, what is the conduit of language, if not technology, and precisely technology as a kind of coded language? Technology is that which transports experience from one to an-other. In this sense, the crucial question becomes not one of what the author calls the 'reticular' nature of technology, but a more specific question of power that is latently at work in the very construction of that technology *as coded language*. The question thus becomes: "Where is the power of 'performativity' to be found? Who establishes the codes? How (and to what extent) is it possible to negotiate them?" (81). Once the limit concepts of the new glocal space are discovered (borders, values), the question is that of the way in which the conditions of this space are given, through technology and language, and where the nodes of power and capacity for individual agency lie within that system. The process of glocalization consists in, at its limit, encounters that take place in the space of the glocal, where the experience of the other is transported (through language?) by technologies understood as coded languages. At the heart of this reflection lies a recurrent problem: what are the conditions under which I am able to have a relation with an-other, and how am I able to respond to that other in turn? What kind of relation is established by this coded language that transports the experience from one to an-other?

It must be insisted that, whatever kinds of new political possibilities it may open onto, whatever kinds of old political structures it may challenge, the process of globalization is experienced by most individuals as a primarily economic process; laboring for a multi-national company, economic migration, the availability of products made from around the world, the selling of values as commodity, and so forth. It thus follows that the primary function of this coded language is to allow for a certain kind of symmetrical network of relations which lends itself to the capitalist economy of exchange, which becomes a home not only for the exchange of capital but, also, for the exchange of values, even if these are often reified as commodity. Support should be lent to this fact by the nature of those technologies themselves, produced by global companies for other global companies, and often managed by a collectivity, even cartel, consisting of the latter.

Marramao thus provides an indispensable framework for thinking through the question (and limits) of equivalence in our global age. For this author, the glocal space is composed of radically different, but otherwise 'rationally coherent' ethics, of antagonistic collectives who define themselves on the basis of values in a symbolic identification, often to an irrecoverably past community. It is composed of encounters that go beyond the simple problematic of dialogue. It is nevertheless true, however, that there is a certain commonality in the communication of this difference that is defined not by language, but rather by the mode in which that language is communicated, sometimes even defining the *lingua franca* of that encounter itself. There is a certain symmetry in the language of exchange that is granted by the coded technologies of the glocal space. What we find then within the glocal is not an economy of capital but an economy of code. Everything

that is granted to us is granted as code, as a coded language, and often the responsibility of reading that code falls to the technologies of communication. Or, more accurately, it would be the technologies of communication that appropriate the responsibility of such reading.

It seems to me that this is the way in which we should understand how, for Marramao, difference becomes the “cipher of the unidentifiability of being” (196), as he comments in another section of the same work. For this author, this unidentifiability of being exists to the extent that “differences never identify being but, precisely, they differentiate it” (196). Yet would not the identifiability of being in the analysis we have just made go further than this, would it not point towards the indecipherability of the cipher, of the coded language of technology, precisely as that secret which is unobtainable as absolute other in every instance of exchange? Difference must be more and less than mere systems of differences. There is something which this difference is unable to grasp, and this is a kind of absolute difference or otherness, something that is unknowable, even to the individual to whom this secret is proper. To put this into other words, when one considers the asymmetry between any two individuals on the glocal map as a relation of the first order, Marramao’s analysis can be understood from the perspective by which it explains the conditions of possibility for capitalist exchange on the glocal plane. For any relation of symmetry that permits an exchange to take place in the short-circuited space of the glocal is only granted by the rites of passage that is the passage west. Without the asymmetry that makes equivalence on this plane possible, moreover, the toing and froing of the glocal space, the passage as perpetual passage which modifies endlessly the various assemblages that compose the west and everything other than west, cannot be accounted for. This I believe is one of the many numerous interesting and important possibilities for thinking globalization that the *Passage West* offers, certainly a welcome contribution to an ever on-going debate.

Works Referenced

Marramao, Giacomo. *The Passage West. Philosophy After the Age of the Nation State*. Translated by Mateo Mandarini. Afterword by Antonio Negri. New York, Verso, 2012. Print.

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Online ISSN: 2007-5227