

# **‘BORDER AS METHOD’: AN ARCHIVE ABOUT TUMULTUOUS BORDERSCAPES**

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The long-standing collaboration between Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson finds in *Border as Method, or, the multiplication of labor* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) a turning point, whereas it constitutes an encyclopedic anthology of their eclectic approach to the substance of borders and borderscapes in our conflicted contemporariness. Their capability of deconstructing the reification of the borders through multiple theoretical standpoints indeed ranges from ‘migrations’ studies to what they call ‘the operations of capital’ (especially extraction, logistics, and finance), from social movements to the study of the Common.

*Border as Method* was published during the fifth year after the ‘origin’ of the so-called global crisis, and it can be read as an attempt to set up, inspire, and provoke, a new critical-theoretical cartography of our present. The book elaborates a sequence of entry points, original perspectives, and continuous displacements, moving on the planetary scale – feeding on multiple ethnographies, political thoughts, post-colonial theories, and an impressive series of literature and experiences made by the authors. The constant attempt to locate the point of view on the planetary level breaks up the usual idea of the global as a homogeneous Moloch, avoiding at the same time the relativist trap enacted by the image of a fragmentation that would make impossible the attempt to produce general interpretative frameworks.

Since the frontispiece, the book immediately tackles the imaginary of a world of flows where borders are disappearing, representing a counterpart of the consolidated narratives fostered by authors like Kenichi Ohmae (1990) or Manuel Castells (2010). In doing so, it adopts a position ‘within the struggles’, particularly focusing on the migrants’ practices of the border crossing. Therefore, the point is not denying the constitutive ‘mobility’ as a paradigm of our era, but rather to shed light on the grey areas of the global connections, showing how flows and borders, far from describing a dichotomy, indicate a productive contradiction, a mutual articulation. Here, there is a radical overturning of the consolidate approaches in global studies. Pointing to the borders as necessary *dispositifs* for the articulation of the flows indicates a concrete matrix of the ‘movement of the world’, disarticulating the logistical fantasy of a smooth global space. Moreover, Mezzadra and Neilson stress that finance dictates the rhythm of the actual proliferation and heterogenization of borders, which – far from being ‘classical’ lines on a map – are taking a myriad of shapes and are melting in a weird material, kneaded of time, as well as of space. Borders prove to be “complex social institutions”, fields of tension between border enforcement and border crossing, dual entities, the material base of what the authors define as the “real globalization”.

Accordingly, contemporary capital

negotiates the expansion of its frontiers with much more complex assemblages of power and law, which include but also transcend nation-states. Looking at the expansion of capital’s frontiers and considering the proliferation of political and legal boundaries, we are thus confronted with a geographical disruption and a continuous process of rescaling. A deeply heterogeneous global space corresponds to this process, and the border provides a particularly effective angle from which to investigate its making (pp. 5-6).

The only apparent sequel between the border as a method and the adoption of heterogeneity and multiplicity as a lens of inquiry originally situate this book within the stream of critical knowledge that, over the last decades, has reflected upon the philosophical and political image of ‘the multitude’ –but strongly bringing back at the core of the debate the elusive concept of ‘class’. These two terrains have in *Border as Method* multiple overlapping, whereas the knot is not untied between seeing the multitude as a phenomenological image of class composition and the multitude as an ontological dispositive.

The border as an epistemic perspective leads the argumentation against the Agambenian emphasis on 'the exception', as well as towards a sophisticated critic of David Harvey's concept of "special fixes" (1989), Beverly Silver's notion of "technological and financial fixes" (2003), and, more generally, moves into a reassessment of the so-called World system theory: "such concepts as core, semi-periphery, and periphery seem to overemphasize (even from a historical point of view) the stability of the global geographies produced by the expansion of capital's frontiers on a world scale" (p. 74).

*Border as Method* is a huge and complex archive. Here lies its preciousness, as well as its limit. The density of the theoretical profiles sometimes becomes a vortex; the interpretative keys rarely lead to a defined thesis. This is probably due on one hand to a specific choice from the authors, and on the other hand, it is indicative of a thought aiming to honestly assume the complexity characterizing our times. So, moving within complexity, Mezzadra and Neilson are not always able to reduce it in a manageable way through solid analytical and theoretical tools, losing something in terms of 'usability' of the book, but in the meanwhile keeping open multiple and inspiring fields of investigation.

*Border as Method* is a 'hungry' book, voracious but able to hone a sophisticated multi-graduated lens on the encounter/clash between labor and capital at the planetary scale. Imaginative, in search of metaphors, with a rapid pace and unusual juxtapositions of Marxian analytics, cultural studies, postcolonial insights, transforming regimes of accumulation and class composition, racialized, gendered and classed power relations, and even more... Everything merged within a provocative methodology oriented towards "a different means of knowledge production, one that necessarily involves practices of translation, although more in a conceptual than a linguistic sense" (pp. 9-10). Mezzadra and Neilson engage with ethnographic works, alongside writings from fields such as geography, history, and jurisprudence, aiming to provide an empirical foil to test their conceptual propositions. Moreover, they aim to "proceed with the commitment that breadth can produce depth, or better, produce a new kind of conceptual depth, 'new ideas'. Our study is thus deliberately wide-ranging" (p. 10). It is precisely at this stage that they state that "method for us is as much about acting on the world as it is about knowing it" (p. 17).

Along this pathway, we could grasp the link between the two pieces of the title of the book. *Border as Method... OR, the Multiplication of Labor*. If chapter one is a sort of long introduction, chapter two engages the spatial dimension of borders working between the history of cartography and the history of capital, focusing on "the making

of the world” (called *fabrica mundi*). The two chapters underlie a critical investigation in chapter three of the political-economic concept of the international division of labor, showing the intertwining between the above-mentioned conceptualizations. In other words, it is possible extracting two conceptual couples intimately connected: borders/ the making of the world and frontiers of capital/multiplication of labor. Let’s have a look at the second.

Chapter three juxtaposes a discussion about the multiplication of forms undermining the ‘stability’ of global space (the logistical connections of channels, corridors, scales, zones) as a crucial geographical disruption at the core of global processes, with the concept of a “multiplication of labor”. Therefore, morphological and social dynamics are considered as mutually interacting, in this way challenging the ‘fixed’ image of a rigid division of the world market emanated by Marxian theories of the international division of labor. We are confronted here with a very political point, one that recalls Lenin’s writings on imperialism and his distinction between the economic and territorial division of the world. This variance is mobilized by the authors as a precedent for the distinction between “the expansion of the frontiers of capital and the proliferation of political, legal, and social borders that informs the approach of border as method” (p. 80).

Furthermore, “emphasizing the element of multiplication over the one of division, we want to point first to the disproportion between the intensified social dimension of contemporary labor [...] and the deepening of the social and technical division of labor” (p. 91), Mezzadra and Neilson state, pointing to the active role of capital in producing this new scenario. The ‘rigidity’ produced by the working class was historically smashed by capital via an outsourcing of labor –geographically and to the entire society. This produced an intensification of labor (colonization of the whole life); a diversification (expanding of different kinds of labor, forms of production, systems of needs); a heterogenization (in terms of its social and legal organizational regimes). These considerations also displace the Marxian idea of the ‘free’ wage labor as a capitalist norm, passing through postcolonial and ‘global labor histories’ and on the pivotal role of race, slavery and citizenship in defining the labor market, emphasizing their aim “to understand how emerging global modes of production work by exploiting the continuities and the gaps –the borders– between different labor regimes” (p. 65).

However, needless to say, the stress on differentiation does not carry out towards a disarticulation of the capitalist system (and “the switch between the abstract and the concrete does not necessarily produce the homogenizing effects that give rise to what

Marx saw as a revolutionary working-class subject. This is the origin of the problem of heterogeneity that we discuss from the point of view of global space and time and from the point of view of the composition of global labor” (p. 97)). There is another apparent contradiction here: “the highest degree of isomorphy seems to coexist in contemporary capitalism with the highest degree of heterogeneity” (p. 86), sustain the authors, somehow introducing what is widely discussed in chapter four. Does capital’s ability to be unitary by dividing living labor underpin a possibility of reversal?, Mezzadra and Neilson seem to ask. Again, a strong political question at stake, tackled through an analysis (that resonates with Saskia Sassen’s one originally developed in *The Global City* (1991)) of carers and traders as iconic figures of contemporary labor. How, then, would it be possible to think (again) the unity of ‘the working class’ within its constitutive heterogeneity? Their argument is that the proliferation of borders in the contemporary world makes possible a political organization of labor only in an irreducibly multiple sense: “only by analyzing the heterogeneous constitution of global space and the complex ways it crisscrosses the production and reproduction of labor power as a commodity is it possible to begin the work of translating between subjects and struggles” (p. 95). Along this ambitious and complex political trajectory, one of the lack of the analysis, for us, lies in the downplaying of the strategic role of urban spaces as sites where the re-articulation of citizenship, sovereignty, and space materially occurs. Indeed, in the book, cities are mainly addressed as points of condensation of multiple trajectories. Yet, the relevance of the events, struggle and social reproduction occurring inside the situated spaces of the city, and their role in exerting a transformational power and disarticulating internal borders is downplayed as a result of the nevertheless declared prioritization of border as the strategic analytical thread.

According to these analytical lines, the second part of the book is concerned with inquiring the product of the constitution of border as method, and the turbulence of migration, onto three main trajectories: definition of spatiotemporal geographies; sovereignty; subjectivity. The first trajectory is explored mainly in chapters five and seven, that condensates the reflection about the intersection between borderscapes, governmentality and mobility operations shaped by the just-in-time, to-the point capitalist trajectories depicted in the previous chapters. The fluid, multi-scalar ‘emerging spatiality of globalization’ (p. 210) that the authors configure is indeed the outcome of the “asymmetrical and asynchronous interaction of sovereignty and governmentality in the wide transcontinental spaces” across the globe (p. 214). As such, it is mapped according to points of reference such as the detention camps, bor-

ders, even extra-territorial waters that, far from being the ‘peripheral’ ending of the mapped lands, become the center of post-developmental, fragmented geographies made of corridors, contested lands and points of rupture. From the latter, both autonomous movements and the border logic branch, and pour into the proliferation of internal borders and devices of differential inclusion that shape the everyday experiences of movement and settlement of migrants through an extended (and potential never-ending) spatiotemporal span.

The second trajectory about the constitution of contemporary sovereignty is comprehensively addressed within chapter six, although it flows as a subtext throughout the book. Once again, the situated standpoint of the contested borderscapes becomes a lens for observing how “concepts such as governance, governmentality, and governmental regime, once they are critically understood, allow us to grasp some of the crucial political transformations that are connected to the global processes that crystallize on the border” (p. 176). In developing these reflections, the authors broadly draw upon the Foucauldian theoretical repertoire for describing, on the one hand, the operating of border management through disparate governmental assemblages that present a panoply of dissonant discursive registers, practices and agendas. On the other hand, Mezzadra and Neilson point out that borders and borderscapes epitomize the role of ‘traditional’ forms of sovereignty that, far from being consumed as Negri and Hardt’s formulation of the *Empire* (2000) implied, represent “a necessary supplement for governance, particularly in cases when the latter fails to reproduce the framing of its operations, for instance, through appeals to humanitarianism” (p. 169).

The authors describe the inherently biopolitical nature of the vast array of biometric devices, information technologies marshalled to managed borders, as well as of the discursive and material devices through which the rhetoric registers about universal rights and humanitarianism is articulated. The latter aspect is what bridges the discussion about sovereignty with the theme of the configurations of subjectivities emerging in the contemporary borderscapes, as streamlined throughout the second part of the book and more specifically in chapter eight. It is exactly within this analysis that we can locate one of the more generative contributions of the book, which is the notion of differential inclusion. The latter aims at overcoming the prevailing emphasis of critical studies of borders and migration on “the moment and technologies of exclusion as the decisive elements of differentiation and power relations” (p. 159). To this purpose, it traces genealogically and theoretically the constitution of the ‘migrant’ figure from the experience of bordering institutions (such as checkpoints and detention camps) towards the

prolonged (and possibly never fully accomplished) experience of settling. As Mezzadra and Neilson phrase it, the

focus on what we call processes of differential inclusion entails a conviction that the figures who inhabit the world's borderscapes are not marginal subjects that subsist on the edges of society but central protagonists in the drama of composing the space, time and materiality of the social itself (p. 159).

Therefore, differential inclusion captures the uneven temporality of the condition of migration and the enforcement of differential regimes of exclusion, mobility, and exploitation, while debunking two misleading 'myth' in relation to the migrant subjectivity. Firstly, it deconstructs the assumption of the 'migrant' subjectivity as an homogeneous and smooth one, whereas it points out the differential paths of mobility experienced by people within the contemporary regimes of border management that value, accelerate and direct differently movement according to the 'migrants' diverse labor force, understood in the Marxian notion of the overall human characteristics (as the examples of the points-based visa systems such as the Australian one, or the contemporary 'selection' of deserving refugees portray). Secondly and consequently, it overturns the misleading 'myth' of total exclusion which depicts migrants as victims of annihilating coercion who are deprived of any right, agency, and voice. The latter aspect is particularly generative not only for the theoretical reflections it bears but also for the political implications as for the conceiving and thinking of solidarity practices within contemporary social movements.

Indeed, these critique of citizenship in relation to the 'legal' logic and the discursive register of rights is particularly poignant in respect to citizenship as a viable political demand in the light of the contemporary debates about *ius soli and ius sanguinis*, citizenship, 'multiculturalism' and 'assimilation' as outcomes of a 'successful' migratory trajectory. Hence, the authors' discussion fits organically within the debate about the political constitution of the political, citizenship, rights and their insurgent practice threaded by Engin Isin's *Acts of citizenship* (2008), or by Ethienne Balibar (2007) accounts' of the *banlieusards* condition underpinning the revolt in banlieues defined as "border areas and frontlines" (p. 48). Besides, it is actually one analytical part in which the strategic dimension of cityness comes into play in quite compelling terms. For instance, Mezzadra and Neilson point out the role played by the security-oriented policies and anti-terrorism enforcement as a way of territorialising borders inside the urban

spaces, while establishing “multiplied lines of division and partition within and between communities and territories” (p. 153).

Pulling up the diverse theoretical strings elaborated in the book, the last chapter investigates the connection between the border and the common. Being the more overtly political chapter of the book, it investigates and pluralizes the commons as a collective process that pertains the materiality of the “social, juridical and political matters” (p. 278) in relation to the border. Indeed, extending their ‘usual’ meaning, they are configured as a counterpart to the biopolitical primitive accumulation exerted by capitalism on the bodies of the people on the move. Yet, the gap between theory and the material constitutions of the commons as tools and product of territorialized struggles for the Common remains mainly in the background. This is due to the fact that the commons are mainly theoretically partitioned than politically investigated in relation to their potentialities for developing alternative forms of social reproduction and fostering autonomous solidarity, settlement, and mobility, as authors like Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) would later propose by formulating the radically open notion of ‘mobile commons’.

In conclusion, *Border as method* can be considered as an ambitious archive of references, theories, and original concepts. As such, it represents a generative toolbox from which drawing plenty of analytical frameworks for interpreting current movements and border regimes beyond the distorting lenses of emergency and contingencies that migrant, social movements and even scholars are inevitably confronted within our convoluted contemporariness.

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