

# INTEGRATION, LOGISTICAL COMPLEXITY, TIME, AND SOME HINTS ON THE POLITICAL PRESENT

**Giorgio Grappi**

*Università di Bologna*

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In the pages that follow I will address the topic of this special issue, ‘inclusions’, moving from some insights that I draw from *Border as Method* as well as my work on the politics of logistics. In its basic terms inclusion refers to the act of making a part of a structure or a group and, from the Latin word *includere*, to confine. In geology, this is expressed in clear terms as inclusion means a body of distinct composition embedded in rocks or other materials. This concept has been widely associated with the history and trajectories of the nation-state and modern citizenship. The concept of differential inclusion adopted by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) in *Border as Method* grasps in this sense the “varying degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination, and segmentation” (p. 159) that correspond to the fickle spheres of contemporary politics. As they argue, financialization of capital and the coordination of production across global assembly chains has not only unbalanced the relationship between labor, time, borders and production, but also fostered the formation of heterogeneous political spaces. Drawing from anthropologist Anna Tsing’s works on ‘supply chain capitalism’ they review different “emerging spatialities of globalization” paying attention to “the logistical operations that make its production possible” and “the bordering processes that channel practices of mobility and attempt to discipline working lives” (p. 210). The changes in the relationship between labor, time, borders, and the production of value that characterize contemporary capitalism, they write, “become particularly visible in the workings of transnational labor systems that establish new kind of spatial connection and temporal control” (p. 136).

With *Border as Method* and their further interventions, Mezzadra and Neilson form part of a series of scholars that see logistics as a force that transforms time, space, and territory recasting jurisdiction beyond the realm of transportation and distribution. This scholarship has illustrated how infrastructural spaces are sites where forms of polity are created at a pace that overcomes the dimension of the state and the regulatory capacity of governance (Cowen, 2014; Easterling, 2014). These processes are ignited by a logistical power that challenges both theories of centralized sovereignty and theories of dispersed governmentality and, as I discuss more in length elsewhere, has the capacity “to articulate the apparent contradiction between the strategic dimension of command and a dynamic of mobile and flexible power, open to changes and based on equivalences among differences and abstraction through parameters” (Grappi, 2016, p. 70; Neilson, 2012). The kind of dynamics associated with logistics shows the deconstruction of discrete entities and a situation where practices of confinement corresponds to the direct participation in interconnected networks of production, communication, and transaction. While citizenship and nationality play a role in the definition of the conditions of this participation, however, if we turn our gaze in the direction of “the emergence of a political world beyond the nation-state” the very concept of inclusion takes different shapes (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 166).

A useful exercise in this regard is to think together inclusion and integration, two concepts that often overlap and lose a clear meaning in public discourses and in the practices of governances. While inclusion implies to make something or someone part of something else, integration refers to the act of combining or mixing different parts so that they work together. Inclusion and integration are thus intertwined but different logics, and they help to shed light on different processes. The operational dimension of integration, with its accent over processes of clustering and interlinking rather than the participation in a pre-existent entity, is more apt to grasp the nature of the social interlinks produced by global forms of power such as logistics, where what is generalized is the entanglement of different realms while the promise of inclusion vanishes.

One way to briefly illustrate this point is by considering how logistics fosters integration through the formation of geographically concentrated ‘logistics clusters’ (Sheffi, 2012). The formation of these new areas that host transport services, warehouses, ITC networks, and intermodal facilities is often associated with activities that need to be performed locally and cannot be offshored, such as delivery and distribution. However, these conglomerates where factories, services and infrastructure merge are the result of

the very process of dissemination of production brought about by the logistics revolution. Even the specialist literature is indeed very clear in maintaining that globalization and better communications led to increased ‘geographical clustering’ of economic activities and increased the relative unevenness among different areas (Nordås, Pinali, Geloso & Grosso, 2006, p. 6). Forgetting to consider the global dimension of capital and the world market, these ‘post developmental geographies’ have been often improperly described as deindustrialization (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 205).

These spatial fixes of contemporary capitalism are embodied by multiple and heterogeneous temporalities, while, drawing from Marx’s insights on the formation of the world market, it is acknowledged the aim of logistics to ‘annihilate space by time’ in what David Harvey (1989) has dubbed ‘time-space compression’. This perspective stresses peculiar dimensions of logistics, which are the speeding up of the pace of production and the uneven synchronization of the diversity of conditions encountered across the globe. Logistics reduce time complexity into measurable elements, abstracted from social and political dimensions, that can be processed by algorithms and represented into performance charts to develop and implement chronological dimensions of schedule, organization, and evaluation (Dawson, 2014, p. 302). In asking what kind of political quality we can identify in these tempos of logistics, my interest is to enquire on the kind of social relations they embody beyond the realm of transportation and the dimension of management.

Logistical integration fosters the conception, derived from quantum mechanics theories of change, that time must be considered as “part of performative being” among entangled and mutually constituted parts. Otherwise, said the degree of integration of processes inside interlinked networks that defines logistical complexity changes the quality of time and its parameters. Suffice to consider the pervasiveness of the just in time principle. From a strategy to reduce at minimum inventories, just in time has become an “overall organizational phenomenon” that spills over the shop floor imposing targets and discipline and redefines social relations around strategic “infrastructure practices” (Sakakibara, 1997, p. 1246).

Just in time implies coordination, and the greater a process logistical complexity, the more phases and operations are involved and thus the greater the number of relations and the amount of information which are needed to make it successful (Funk, 1995, p. 67). Time thus becomes a critical junction between the “interconnectedness and unpredictability of the system” and contingency, as the latter implies the need to adapt to the environment (Thomé, Soucasaux & do Carmo, 2014, p. 680). The more a

system is complex the more is enmeshed in a diversity of factors. But while technical literature renounces the role and presence of social relations, a critical and extended vision of complexity and contingency must recognize that they reflect the different political conditions that logistical processes encounter and help to reshape along their operations. This has direct political implications if we consider how the relevance of borders and administrative practices is tremendously increased by the level of complexity and integration of transnational regimes of production, communication and labor; and how they can produce dead times not as much because they affect the speed of the process, an element always under the spotlight, but because their political dimension may result in “continued lack of predictability” (Nordås, Pinali, Geloso & Grosso, 2006, p. 16).

If hard infrastructure and machines can be considered parameters of technical speed, the growing recognition of the role of ‘soft infrastructure’ of multilateral governance in the formation of logistical corridors reveals the difference between time compression and the quality of time that is built in predictability and reliability. Hard infrastructure remains just dead capital without the soft infrastructures that allow them to work. These dimensions made the core of a global reconfiguration that I describe as the politics of corridors (Grappi, 2018). The focus on compression is indeed a matter of speed and connection and highlights the shortening of time among different spaces. But what if this is just one side of the coin and implies other features of time that remain behind the veil? Transience and mobility of flows are in fact a social effect both of logistical complexity and just in time processes, and of the fixity of infrastructure spaces where logistics is anchored. Besides being a measure that makes logistical integration possible, the logistical time contains a dose of perennial transit: transitory solutions are offered for problems that are perceived in technical terms as contingent, transitory and temporary. But behind this façade of transience logistics is rooted in trajectories of planning and multi decennial projects for building infrastructures, extract natural resources and organize industrial conversion at a large scale.

This reveals the paradoxical dimension of logistical time as both transient and lasting, and its internal tension between continuous change and the search for stability. While contingency is the technical nightmare of logistics, logistical power creates contingencies translating any different time in something that can be processed in its own terms: it relegates to the short term any situation perceived as disturbing and forces other times to present themselves as temporary questions. The managerial principle of just in time is thus translated into a political just in time where any

question is considered a limited one, an obstacle to overcome, a problem to solve. When the pervasiveness of logistics has invaded the realm of production and takes the form of a global political discourse this produces deep political consequences as it fosters the de-politicization of constitutional elements of our present, ruling out the possibility of radical transformation (Grappi, 2016, 2018). Nothing as the principle of supply chain resilience, which considers anything from a natural event, an armed conflict or a strike as interruptions that need to be confronted through re-routing and contingency plans, encapsulates better this principle.

The relation of logistics with contingency is thus binary: while in the name of continuous improvement glitches, differences and even conflicts are not just obstacles, but parameters to feed algorithmic calculations and data extraction to produce value, these are treated by logistics as transient as they reveal its incapacity to form a stable order. We can, therefore, infer why logistics simultaneously weakens and reinforces the state, as it overcomes its capacity of control but needs a supplement of violence and continuity to execute its plans. We can track this interlink between logistics and the state in the global consensus that sees together policymakers and investors around the renovated consideration given to infrastructure and the access to global networks of production that goes together with the apparent return of authoritarian forms of government.

The relevance of these questions is further manifested by the Chinese ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, often referred to as the New Silk Road. While the strategy responds to specific Chinese goals, in fact, it also marks a shift in international relations where integration and the priorities of logistical complexity are for the first time explicitly posed as the basis for a geopolitical strategy (Neilson, Rossiter & Samaddar, 2018). The success of the Belt and Road Initiative in reshaping global dynamics shows the paradox of a logistical time that roots its mobile connectivity on stable and predictable plans. As a recent column in the Italian edition of *China Newsweek* explains, indeed, “notwithstanding there is who criticize the Chinese political system, democratic countries cannot establish plans of thirty or even fifty years” as the Belt and Road (Lanbo, 2017, p. 4). We know that this is only partially true and efforts are made everywhere to direct new forms of planning in different time tracks from the unpredictability of politics.

In this intervention, I discussed how logistics changes the coordinates of space and time of contemporary politics. Fostering practices of geographical clustering that corresponds to the direct participation in transnational networks of production and transaction logistical power generalizes the operational dimension of integration, while the

promise of inclusion vanishes. Contingencies and the complexity of global regimes of production, communication, and labor, as well as the emergence of 'soft infrastructure' such as transnational corridors, mutates the relevance of borders, administrative practices and states with direct implications for a critique of contemporary capitalism and forms of power.

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