

common, for a politics of the common ‘must extend beyond any rhetorical invocation of a world without borders’ at the same time that it must ‘renounce any attempt to turn the border into a justice-giving institution’ (p. 281). Such a politics cannot be simply local; it must work across all scales, while avoiding the sometimes totalizing impulse of distinguishing ‘genuinely’ political projects from those that supposedly fail to meet those criteria.

In sum, Mezzadra and Neilson offer a work of great scope and ambition, the stakes of which are nothing less than the ‘making of the world’ (p. 310). This book decisively reframes debates in border studies and migration studies. For geography, the authors provide ample material for discussion and perhaps even grounds to transform some of the disciplinary articulations that define contemporary geopolitics. More importantly, this

is a book informed by contemporary struggles and will serve as a crucial text for activist scholars as border struggles continue to dominate the political landscape.

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Geography is not enough

Reviewed by: Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson,

We would like to start by thanking Ugo Rossi who took the initiative to organize this forum in *Dialogues in Human Geography*. We must add that we are very pleased that geographers are among the first to discuss *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. We are not geographers, and our work on borders is not primarily conceived of as an intervention in the field of border studies. Linn Axelsson is right when she notes that many standard references in this field are absent in the 35 pages of our bibliography (although the essay by Newman and Paasi she mentions is duly listed in it). Nevertheless, the engagement with critical geographers has become more and more important for us in recent years and has helped us to make our work on borders more concrete and ‘case-sensitive’. Moreover, we are convinced that the current ‘spatial turmoil’ underlying capitalist globalization requires a detailed account of the production of a global space that can no longer be conceptualized in terms of a ‘smooth’ space of flows. To identify the disruptions and

specific antagonisms at stake in these patterns of turbulence and variegation, there is need of new methods and conceptual frameworks. For us, this means taking difference and multiplicity as the irreducible starting point for any analysis. It is not a matter of setting sharp definitional parameters within which ‘analytical clarity’ can unfold but of grappling with ambiguities and instabilities that fundamentally unsettle the ‘making of the world’ today.

We are happy that Nathan Clough recognizes that we ‘take geography seriously’. However, we do not believe that geography holds a disciplinary monopoly on the political study of space. In reality, *Border as Method* does something more than bringing a temporal perspective to the spatial analysis of borders, although this is crucial to the book’s interest in ‘seeing like a migrant’. By emphasizing the subjective stakes of what we call ‘border struggles’ we hope to provide a new frame for the analysis of capitalist globalization. Central to this is the distinction between political borders and ‘frontiers of capital’, which allows us to describe how the current proliferation of borders opens spaces that capital colonizes through primitive accumulation and other means of extraction. For us, the production of space

is always implicated in the production of subjectivity (and vice versa). This is why it becomes difficult to restrict the discussion of borders to geopolitical boundaries or indeed to spatial demarcations per se. Such restrictions have their analytical and disciplinary ends but they are ultimately limiting for political investigations of the current global order, particularly when questions of labor and mobility are at stake. To understand how the production of subjectivity is connected to practices of border crossing and reinforcement, it is necessary to heed what we call the ‘heterogenization’ of the border, which means recognizing how its semantic reach extends beyond the geopolitical or territorial domains. In this sense, geography is really important for us. But it can never be enough.

Both Axelsson and Clough press us on the question of the border’s heterogenization and the differences between political borders and sociocultural differentiation. The former sees this as matter of ‘clarity’, while the latter finds the application of the concept of bordering to both of these instances ‘generative’ and potentially obfuscating. We have to answer that the analysis of current global capitalist operations means that elucidation is frequently accompanied by complexification. This is one of the main problems we face when encountering the heterogenization of the border. But it is not a problem confined to *Border as Method*. As Joshua J. Kurz recognizes, it is a difficulty faced by political geography itself. Perhaps this is why Kurz judges the book to provide ‘grounds to transform some of the disciplinary articulations that define contemporary geopolitics’. We do not expect that all geographers will welcome such transformation. Yet, we are open to querying our own approach and place much stock in the productive political potential of dialogues such as the present one.

The existence of the geopolitical border as a line is a relatively recent invention. Critically analyzing the waning ability of this line to fix the border or to articulate in predictable ways other kinds of material, epistemic and symbolic demarcations is a tricky business. Speaking of heterogenization does not mean that we refuse to distinguish between different types of borders or pay due attention to the problem of their articulation, connections, and disconnections.

For instance, our analysis of special economic zones in China is careful to explain how the borders of the zone articulate on the one hand to national boundaries and global economic divides and on the other to differences of gender, class, and the rural–urban split. What remains crucial in our approach is the use of the border as a method or as a privileged epistemic viewpoint from which to observe and analyze the conflicts and struggles that crisscross processes of capitalist globalization. This is why ‘thinking space and time together’, although for Axelsson a ‘useful provocation’, seems to us only a necessary preliminary to studying the resonances and dissonances that mark the emergence of political subjects across the world’s border scapes.

In investigating this emergence of political subjects, we draw from a great variety of sources. We are pleased to read Clough’s words when he writes of our ‘resolute lack of theoretical orthodoxy’. Indeed, although in different ways, Italian autonomist Marxism, or, *operaismo* (recently categorized, ‘and perhaps normalized’, as Rossi correctly writes, as part of a supposed ‘Italian Theory’), has played an important role in our intellectual as well as political training. Readers of *Border as Method* will have many occasions to notice that. At the same time, both in our collaborative and in our individual writings, we have been engaged for several years now in attempts to ‘provincialize’ that particular strand of revolutionary thought and practice (see Neilson, 2005).

Opening *operaismo* up toward productive encounters and exchanges with the black radical tradition, with postcolonial and feminist criticism, with anti-colonial and anti-racist constellations, as we do in *Border as Method*, is not for us a way to conform to some academic ‘etiquette’ or ‘style’. It is rather our awareness of the limits, which also means, if you wish, of the historical geographical determination of Italian *operaismo* that leads us to stage these dialogues and exchanges. Just to mention a few examples, the notion of ‘multiplication of labor’, as Kurz nicely emphasizes, challenges the very theoretical status of ‘class’, and ‘multitude’, while it attempts to open up new ways of using the concept of ‘composition of living labor’. Our discussion of ‘abstract labor’ (as well as our parallel study of care labor and

financial traders) intervenes in debates surrounding such concepts as ‘immaterial labor’ and ‘cognitive capitalism’, which have been associated over the last two decades with the development of *operaismo* and its ‘post’ (post-*operaismo*). And while we challenge through this intervention the very possibility of locating a ‘hegemonic’ figure within the contemporary composition of living labor, we also take a radical distance from the linearity that has shaped the understanding of ‘development’ and the concept of ‘tendency’ within autonomist Marxism. Incidentally, this is one of the points where our engagement with the work of critical geographers has been most important.

Nevertheless, it is true that *Border as Method* remains profoundly influenced by the developments of *operaismo*. To answer the second question asked by Clough, instead of pointing to the myriad theoretical aspects of our argument where the traces of that influence are apparent, we would like to refer to one of the main points we make in the book. When we insist that borders must be considered as ‘social relations’ and not merely as ‘things’ (although ‘things’ clearly important in their organization), we have in mind the analogous statement by Marx regarding capital, which was crucial for the constitution of Italian autonomist Marxism in the 1960s. Our prioritization of movements and struggles of migration in the analysis of shifting border regimes across diverse geographical scales (as well as our notion of ‘border struggles’) is the outcome of several years of engagement in critical migration studies, of intense conversations with migrants, anthropologists, and geographers. But it is also a way to adapt the ‘Copernican revolution’ prompted by Mario Tronti (1964) in his article ‘*Lenin in Inghilterra*’ (‘*Lenin in England*’), where he sought to reverse the classical relation between capitalistic development and workers’ struggles, to identify in workers’ struggles the real dynamic element (the real ‘mover’) of capitalistic development and to affirm the latter’s subordination to workers’ struggles.

This brings us to Clough’s comment regarding our emphasis on production of subjectivity and the presence of ‘actual subjects’ in *Border as Method*. It is a point that relates closely to our engagement with ethnography. Just as we don’t believe that geography

holds a monopoly on the study of space, we also question the notion that ethnography provides exclusive access to the ‘actual’. *Border as Method* seeks to valorize ethnography without fetishizing it. This means searching for continuities between ethnographic and theoretical approaches, rather than isolating the former as a privileged path to politically relevant knowledge. As kurz writes, the book ‘is arguably an attempt to put to rest the debates within border studies about whether borders should be studied in their singularity (an ethnographic approach) or in their totality (a world systems, or political economic approach)’. Because our investigation begins with multiplicity and difference, rather than feigning to discover or produce them, it necessitates an engagement with material circumstances and struggles. This is an issue we broach through our discussion of translation, understood—as again kurz recognizes—as ‘a social praxis forged from the ground up’. It is worth remembering the quotation we cite from Gramsci’s writings on translation in Chapter 8:

Every truth, even if it is universal, and even if it can be expressed by a mathematical formula of an abstract kind (for the tribe of the theoreticians), owes its effectiveness to being expressed in the language appropriate to specific concrete situations. If it cannot be expressed in such specific terms, it is a Byzantine and scholastic abstraction, good only for phrase-mongers to toy with. (1971, 201)

Gramsci’s words provide some important cues on the kind of knowledge production we pursue. Concepts for us must be adequate to concrete situations. They are not carved in stone or inscribed into totalizing systems. At the same time, concepts do not merely reflect material realities. If their interface with concrete situations is no longer interesting or productive, we can always make new ones. This is why we see the concepts invented and deployed in the book—from differential inclusion to the multiplication of labor—as strategic interventions rather than ‘scholastic abstractions’. Equally, however, we do not see the concrete situations we investigate merely as examples that illustrate the working of particular borders. It is rather the tension

between concepts and concrete situations that we are interested in exploring and in making productive.

Take the benching of Indian information technology (IT) workers, which we draw from a discussion of Xiang Biao's ethnographic research and of which Axelsson asks whether greater specificity regarding the particular borders at hand is warranted. Our interest in benching derives from its temporal dynamics and their shaping and regulating of labor markets in ways that cannot be conceived within a solely national frame. We see affinities here with the workings of administrative detention in controlling and pacing the entry of workers into labor markets. But these instances are clearly different in terms of the violence deployed and the subjective privations experienced. A comparative analysis makes no sense. Rather we are interested in translating between these 'cases' to produce useful and interesting resonances. By seeing both the internal labor market borders established by benching and the territorial borders at stake in detention as temporal borders, we are able to throw light on how they are involved in the production of labor power as a commodity.

Such resonances are central to the way we analyze and relate borders to each other across the

heterogeneity of global space and time. They are also important to the way the book hangs together. If Clough has encountered 'dead-ends' and 'alleyways' in negotiating them, we are confident that he has gained some sense of the blockages and delays faced by many 'actual subjects' on the move. To come finally to the third question posed by this same reviewer, resonances are also crucial to how we envision the circulation of the concepts forged and tested in our work. We want these concepts to rub against material circumstances of struggle more than we expect them to circulate in academic canons. Scholarly dialogues are vital, but it is only in material encounters that the concepts and arguments we have invented will live or die.

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