

BORDERS AND PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY: FOR A POLICY OF TRANSLATION

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1. Global space and border proliferation

The temporal distance that separates us from the publication *Borders as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, written by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013)¹, allows us to test and carry out an initial verification of some of its main thesis. Since its actual publication, some tendencies of the theoretical and political debate about globalization have increased in response to some events taken as turning points, or even a radical change of paradigm. We can start by looking at some events following the publication of the book so far, in no particular order: the “refugee crisis” of summer 2015, with important repercussions on border policies and with the subsequent containment agreement with Erdogan’s Turkey; the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States; the rise in Europe of extreme right-wing and nationalist movements, widely represented in the East in the so-called Visegrad area, but threateningly growing everywhere; Brexit with its complex separation of the UK from the EU which is still underway. This panorama has partly changed the scenario within which the book was written; but, in my opinion, it makes the impact of the basic argumentation even clearer, and more urgent the deepening of the theoretical and political research lines, that it opens.

1. The volume has an Italian translation by G. Roggero: Mezzadra e Neilson (2014), *Confini e frontiere. La moltiplicazione del lavoro nel mondo globale*.

This series of events that has invested us has produced different interpretations that have as a common denominator the idea that the process of globalization has been interrupted. On the contrary, we have explicitly read this phase as the opening of an overall cycle of de-globalization. The construction of a single global space, as we have imagined it in many theoretical constructions that characterized the nineties, would have been interrupted, leaving space primarily for a resurrection of places and a reappearance on the scene of the centrality of the national states, or at least some of them. Reading this text by Mezzadra and Neilson a few years on, now seems to underline the strength of the fundamental theses of the book precisely in responding to the reconstruction of our present in linear terms of deglobalization or “return to national states”². This is not because everything is the same as before and we must not even counter the profound discontinuities that have occurred in recent years in the development of the crisis and its consequences. The point, however, is that the tools, the vocabulary, the background hypotheses put here at work are such that they allow us to read these discontinuities, without having to resort to hypotheses, which would certainly be reassuring like all those basically founded on some “home return”, but unable to grasp the complexity of the lines around which the global space is decomposing and recomposing itself on multiple and diversified levels.

After all, Mezzadra and Neilson clearly explain their distance from the theses on the “end of globalization”, and, what is more, they reject the readings that intend to declassify the process of globalization. The point, however, that reinforces their thesis, and perhaps makes it even more convincing now, is that the reading of globalization is not offered in terms of creating a *smooth* space, which reduces or eliminates faults and areas of fracture. The centrality of the theme of a border is instead taken precisely to offer a reading of globalization that does not declassify it as ideological narration, but at the same time inserts the production of different areas and a composite geography within the same construction of global spaces. Therefore, no smooth spaces but rather a reading of the process of globalization that insists not only on the elimination of borders, but on their *proliferation* and *heterogenization*. Proliferation because the boundaries multiply, reorganizing and radically re-articulating the spaces; heterogeneity because the boundaries take different forms and functions. The authors rightly recall Saskia Sassen, and her idea of an “actual and heuristic disaggregation of the border” (Sassen, 2007, p. 214; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 3), extending her idea of a disarticulation through

2. For example, among the many possible references on the point, he supports, even if very problematically, the hypothesis of a deglobalization (Esposito, 2017).

the global space of the various “assemblages” that had been unified in the form of the modern state. In the first place, therefore, we are faced with –how literature blossoming around *border studies* has highlighted (Prescott, 1987)– a differentiation between various types of boundaries, even beyond the known distinction between boundary and border: between the geometric line, of invention of modernity, which divides the political state spaces, and the strip of land, mobile and not well-defined, inseparable from the movements of colonial expansion. Secondly, even beyond this boundary-border alternative, and the multiplication of other types of separating lines, walls, controlled crossings, etc., the authors criticize the prevalence of the traditional function of *exclusion* that the border would cover: exclusion, on the other hand, is increasingly graduated and modulated in different forms of control and selection, giving rise to a complex function of excluding inclusion (and of respective including exclusion) (p. 7). The fundamental consequence of this process of proliferation and of the transformation of borders is that their multiplication does not coincide with the strengthening of the political geometries centered on the modern state at all. The multiplication of borders denies any interpretation of globalization as the production of a smooth and continuous space. Globalization multiplies and differentiates spaces, and produces new modes of connection and separation, very different from the traditional borders of states. Precisely for this reason, interpretations that read globalization itself as mere ideology are completely inadequate and off-putting, organizing themselves to celebrate unlikely returns of the nation-state (p. 3).

2. The border as a method

In a more general manner, this insistence on boundary heterogeneity/proliferation is used by Mezzadra and Neilson to criticize the prevalence of the geopolitical image of the world –and the method of analysis that binds to that image– that the speeches instead tend to reaffirm the reaffirmation of the centrality of the state. For the same reason, the authors are skeptical about the real critical capacity produced by the *areas studiese* to explain adequately of their proliferation. It is certainly true that in post-state geographies, the organization of space in large continental areas emerges as a process of absolute importance: instead what must be criticized is the unrelated and static image, which is offered in these re-articulation processes when an exclusively geopolitical reading prevails. In fact, this reading ends up, on the one hand, hiding the mutual trans-

formations and the transits that make it possible, but at the same time complicate and continually put the same production of continental or sub-continental areas into crisis; on the other hand, it hides the subjective elements of mobility, autonomy, conflict that occur continuously through and around the borders that rearrange these global spaces.

Assuming the boundary not only as an object but as a method instead aims to overcome the risks deriving from the objectification of global spaces, produced by traditional geopolitical analysis. Assuming the border as a point of observation of transformations and of conflicts, involves overcoming a static –and almost “fetishistic”– reading of the border itself, opening the analysis to the processes through which the boundaries are continually created and transformed. Border means *production*: for the authors, this assumption is so central to play not only a methodological role but rather that of a real, explicit and claimed ontological background. The borders are at the same time *produced*, because it is the whole image of the world that is always a collective production: it is the idea, of which the authors rightly and forcefully recall a Renaissance and humanistic genealogy, of *fabrica mundi* (p. 30). Modernity tends to “freeze”, to transform into a simple epistemological operation of tracking and projection of boundaries on the map, a work of creation and production of the world whose boundaries are an instrument and in which borders are always involved. Reactivating this productive ontology, against an objectified and pacified image of the border, means reopening the production processes behind the tracing/creation of the border.

Second element: considering the border as production also implies the assumption of the full methodological relevance of *subjectivity* in the study of the production of global spaces and their relationships. On the one hand, there is no boundary that does not profoundly affect the construction of subjectivities: the border as a production is also, to put it in Foucault’s terms, a *dispositif* of the production of subjectivity. On the other hand, the movements and transformations of subjectivities, the conflicts they give rise to, actively produce the boundary and continually modify it. There is no global geography that is structured if not starting from the struggles, from the mobility, from the push of the subjects that cross it. The lesson from Italian operaism is evident and declared here, or more precisely its method is, and we are talking about Italian workerism: capital appears to the working class as “subject” only in the political confrontation; a clash in which at the same time the transformation of the working class, sociologically understood, into the political subject of the proletariat (Tronti, 2006). First the struggles, then the development, the operaism said. First the struggles, then the border and its spatializations, affirms the “boundary as a method”. However, with a necessary and

evident gap, with respect to the tradition of the first operaism: while, despite the complexity of the class composition and its continuous transformations, the first operaism maintained the idea of the centrality of a subject that is ultimately homogeneous, here everything the movement of subjectivities is always marked by unsurpassable heterogeneity. A heterogeneity that corresponds to the heterogenization of the boundaries and spatial dimensions produced by global processes (pp. 84-85).

3. The multiplication of work

The productive ontology involved in the assumption of the *fabrica mundi* requires the reconstruction of the new global spaces not to be disengaged, as well as their profound dissymmetry with respect to classical geographies, by close comparison with the laboratories of production in a specific sense, that is with the transformations of the capital and labor. The boundary as a method, precisely because it brings together the idea of productivity of spaces with that of the production of subjectivity, becomes the key to a survey inspired by the decisive option for a *geographical materialism*. In a double sense: both because the production of space is itself an essential element of the new production systems, and because the processes of production of spaces are materially implanted in the transformation of the labor-power. As the boundary is at the same time a *dispositif* for the production of subjectivity, and produced by the struggles and the mobility of subjectivities, so the relationship between the articulation of spaces and the workforce continuously crosses the spatial element with the processes of constitution and transformation of the work and subjectivity of the class. The metaphor of flows, which dominates – and also for good reasons – the debate on global capitalism, is thus not rejected, but at least outlined and relativized: space is inserted into the materiality of the management/control of flows, characterizing itself as one of the determining actors in the construction of new scales and new hierarchies that at the same time allow capitalist valorization and are continually formulated and recreated by the valorization itself (pp. 209-211). While not constituting a smooth space, nor a management of flows without faults arrests or blocks, as the hydraulic metaphors are likely to make sense, the boundary geography, within which the processes of contemporary capitalist valorization are built, does not coincide with the geography of political boundaries State actors. Neither do Mezzadra and Neilson insist the boundary geography can be rearticulated according to homogeneous areas, but rather cross the classical distinctions, develop-

ment and underdevelopment, metropolis and province, industrial areas and agricultural areas, opening them all and diversifying *within them*, to reconnect them according to codes that do not use the traditional rigid categories.

The image of the construction of the world market offered by Karl Marx, even if it is not enough to explain the ways in which today's global plan is articulated, the proliferation of spatial differences and heterogeneity of the subjective figures of labor is summoned by the authors because it allows us to read the actual coexistence of these plans very well. At the same time, we have on the one hand an effective constitution of the global dimension (interpretations of which in terms of deglobalization and return of the national state cannot be grasped), which produces a plan of abstraction capable of connecting special areas and unique processes of reterritorialization and/or re-spatialization; on the other hand, a production of "concrete" differences, a series of heterogeneous operations constituting the processes of valorization, different ways and spaces in which the "abstraction" touches the ground and allows the extraction of value (pp. 67-69). This reading allows the authors to develop an important and very useful critique of positions that, on the contrary, tend to lead to rigidly new categories and to net polarizations this complex and dynamic relationship between the abstraction of the value and the heterogeneity of the singular devices of value extraction and of subjectivities. Speaking of multiplication of labor, in other words, serves to take a critical distance from the theories focused on the "new international division of labor", as well as from the repetition of interpretations in terms of traditional imperialism or uneven development. These readings all end up moving within a binary logic based on a rigid opposition between an inside and an outside, between a high-tech center and productivity and a periphery with a very high rate of exploitation and a low-cost work tank. Just as in the classical theories of imperialism, a close homology between political spaces and productive spaces, between state borders and lines of capitalist valorization. But it is precisely the maintenance of this homology that seems impossible today: frontiers of capital and national borders, but also devices for capturing the value and multiplication of the work figures, chains of valorization and movements of real work, can no longer be grasped within homologies or logic of mutual mirroring (pp. 82-84).

It is clear, even in Marx, the power of abstraction, the soul of the construction of the global market, was reflected in the political construction of a subject made homogeneous by the abstractive and homogenizing force of capital. The logic of global capital certainly preserves Marxian tension between abstraction and progressive socialization of living labor. But, as Mezzadra and Neilson underline, incorporating here the main

results of the analyzes in terms of cognitive and post-Fordist transformation of contemporary capitalism³, the productive socialization that occurs along the global cognitive networks works as an assemblage and connection of differences; therefore, maintains the heterogeneity of the subjects as a constitutive element of the productive labor force, even in the powerful process of socialization that cognitive production allows (pp. 137-138). Contemporary capital works by producing differences and at the same time it values an extremely socialized labor force, which lives along the networks of cognitive production, and which concretizes the perspective that Deleuze and Guattari (1980) drew, in the abstract, in the machinic assemblages and in the stratifications of a *Mille plateaux*. And precisely from the lexicon of Deleuze and Guattari, Mezzadra and Neilson draw the concept of “axiomatic of capital”: the “axiomatic” produces abstraction through the connection of differences without homogenizing synthesis, but rather proceeding by disjunctive synthesis, for assemblages that do not eliminate the constitutive heterogeneity (pp. 81-86). The border as a method, and its play of proliferations, differences, and connections, thus gives us a whole political passage that does not have the classical form it assumed in the Marxist tradition. The abstraction of capital continues to occur on a global level, but there is no automatic transition between the construction of the global market today, and the production of a transnational proletariat. The “Unite!” of the *Communist Manifesto* must necessarily be *translated* into the constitutive heterogeneity of living labor.

4. Images of politics: articulation against translation

The border as a method gives us a continuous extension of the spaces invested by capitalism, together with a complex map of intensification and set of transformation of the methods of exploitation of labor. At the same time, this plan is constantly crossed by multiple and heterogeneous figures, whose struggles and mobility contribute to continuously change the same economic geographies and codes of value extraction. The challenge of political thought, but also of the political practices of those who resist the logic of exploitation and those who struggle around and across borders, is how to think the logic of the political subjectivation emerging from these productive transformations. The production of political subjectivity is now all immersed in the spaces and

3. See for a wider debate Hardt and Negri (1994, 2000); Moulier Boutang (2007); Vercellone (Eds.) (2006); Marazzi (1999); Fumagalli & Mezzadra (Eds.) (2007).

production chains of the global market: in a production of value that is simultaneously production of subjectivity, no abstract transcendence of political subjectivity is imaginable with respect to the spaces and times of the production of value. Politics can only be –we could synthesize– a politics *of* production, never politics abstractly intended as a restoration of the Political *on* production. In other words: the border as a method does not give room for resurrections of the autonomy of the Political. Moreover, the traditional pivot of the autonomy of “modern” Politics is lacking, which is the centrality of the national state: which, if observed by the proliferation of borders, certainly does not disappear or is liquidated, but in any case sees its functions completely transformed and it constitutes only one of the points (of passage, of selection or of conflict) of the control of the workforce.

The political hypotheses of articulation of differences, which in recent years have been presented as a hypothesis of reconstruction of the political subject, or directly of political reconstruction of a “people”, are effectively criticized by Mezzadra and Neilson, from the point of view of the assumption of the border as a method. Options like the populist *à la Laclau* start from a radical assumption of the end of homogeneity and of the homology between social space and political space, and take radically the heterogeneity as a starting point (Laclau, 2005). But then they convert that heterogeneity into a construction of the universal which provides for the incorporation of an absolute difference, which differs from any other difference, re-establishes a binary logic of inclusion/exclusion and with it a perfect logic of equivalence. A *transcendental* moment is thus restored, which, from a more strictly political point of view, always forces the projection of a shadow of national statehood and its geography on these projects of reconstruction of the people through a hegemonic articulation, making every principle fail from the beginning serious attempt to confront the complex global plan on which financial accumulation is based. Moreover, this logic forces to treat differences to “articulate” always as political demands to be satisfied, always grasped in a regime of constitutive lack, and incapable of producing new political forms. The struggles, for the populist hypothesis, are always particular, and overcome their horizon of particularity only through the transcendental articulation, which capture them in a model of equivalence (pp. 285-288). It is obvious the unrealism of these reductive operations in a neoliberalism that does not act within the simplified border logic of national states, and that has ample capacity to anticipate and transform social demands, to treat them in a much more dynamic way than these projects of hegemonic articulation they manage to put in the field. Against this idea of hegemonic articulation, the hypothesis that

the volume traces is that of a political connection of the subjectivities that play instead of the *translation* card, to be understood not only in the strictly linguistic sense but to fall within the ontological productive background of the *fabrica mundi*. To translate means to experiment a *lingua franca* that connects the singularities in a production of the common, without reproducing the model of abstract universality, which is rebuilt through the exclusion of an absolute difference, just as it returns to make the model of the hegemonic articulation.

By designing this model of translation of political subjectivities, Mezzadra and Neilson evidently proceed by experimentation and approximation: translation, in their sense, does not and cannot be a normative model for designing an ideal scheme of political organization. However, this is a way of thinking for concatenations and assemblages, rather than equivalence and absolute difference, which has the merit of not reducing political subjectivities to abstract *demands to satisfy* political subjectivities, but to always grasp them as “subjects in transit” and in transformation (p. 289). The authors try to maintain the reference to the production of subjectivity, which has as in the whole book: both in the sense –subjective genitive– to reiterate that subjectivities are always characterized by autonomy and mobility, both in that –objective genitive– for the which subjectivities are always also the product of devices that try to govern and capture that mobility, to make capitalist valorization possible.

Production of subjectivity, in these two senses, is precisely the labor power, in its Marxian meaning of *potentiality*: a potentiality that runs through the whole field of *governance* animated by different and conflicting regulatory regimes⁴. Investigated, however, from the point of view of the production of subjectivity and the labor power, *governance* changes sign, and this is perhaps the theoretical contribution that constitutes the fundamental core of the book: it no longer describes a linear passage from the traditional modes of government, and in particular from state sovereignty, to horizontal and reticular governance techniques, but it opens on a politically crucial tension, within the proliferation and the differentiation of borders, between mobility and capture; or, better, “a line of conflict drawn from the alternative of the capture of life’s potentiality and its appropriation as a common basis for a multiplicity of exit and escape strategies” (p. 204).

4. The authors here open a productive comparison with theories of the postsystemic law (Fischer-Lescano & Teubner, 2006). It would lead to very interesting results comparing the theory of legal globalization as conflictive normative pluralism and difficult to contain in an orderly key, crossed by the permanence of a concept of sovereignty, completely transformed to modern tradition (Catania, 2008).

The production of subjectivity, the potential that is the heart of the labor power, with its characteristics of plasticity and mobility, produces the transformation of the ancient “sovereign” and unitary government into a multiplicity of regulatory, autonomous and often conflicting regimes; at the same time, it inserts a continuous necessary recourse to a supplement of power, to a presupposition in its own way still “sovereign” (even if far removed from the characteristics of unity and transcendence of classical modern sovereignty), which exceeds the framework of simple neoliberal rationality and of its multiple governance and/or governmental operations. The authors speak of the *sovereign machine of governmentality* (p. 175) to indicate these “sovereign effects” (p. 203), through which global capital intervenes to reassign those devices of value extraction that the production of subjectivity equally continually challenges. In this field, which cannot be depicted neither as a space for neoliberal *governance*⁵ and rationality, nor on the contrary as a permanent exception *à la Agamben* (Agamben, 2005), struggles across borders continually redefine subjectivity, criticising the traditional political subject, neither communitarian/organicist, or “transcendentally” rebuilt. At the same time, “transcendentally”, but at the same time they experience the production of a *common* that assembles and connects the differences: inside and against the machine of capitalist exploitation that is both governmental and sovereign of capitalist exploitation and inside and against the logic of domination of class, race and gender that constitute the modalities of operations of capital, certainly heterogeneous but not in any way less ferocious.

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5. For a critique of the univocal reading of the neoliberal rationality contained in the CDs. governmentality studies, see also Mezzadra (2008).

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