

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

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BORDER AS METHOD

Review of: Sandro Mezzadra and Bret Neilson (2013) *Border as Method or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Duke University Press.

Krisis 2014, Issue 1

www.krisis.eu

Drawing the line ... somewhere

Liberalism is such a duplicitous ideology: Agency, but only for humans. Human rights, but only for citizens. Citizenship, but only for the deserving. Recognition, but only for the familiar. Dignity, but only for the civilised. Solidarity, but only for victims. Freedom, but only for the autonomous. Democracy, but only for liberals. Liberalism is the art of withholding something in the very act of providing it. It is this same duplicity, both as a set of political ideas and a set of political practices, that has acted itself out in that ominous thing we call capitalism. Producing unthinkable amounts of stuff and then putting it out of reach through the very relations of production. What a stunt. And we bought it. We bought it all.

What I learned by reading *Border as Method. Or, the Multiplication of Labor* by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) is that there really never was any reason to take liberalism seriously at all. Even when talk of universal freedom was earnest, it was disingenuous by being so. Liberalism, the idea that Every Man should be able to do as he pleases, cannot help but draw a line: 'do as you please, but...' Predictably, what comes after the *but* is all that really matters. Thus, I'd like to summarise Mezzadra & Neilson's program as follows: they refuse to treat liberal political thought and its analytical pendants as so many unfulfilled promises, yet to be realised by a more critical version of the doctrine. There is no progressive dialogue to be had with liberalism. Drawing the line was what it was all about anyway. Drawing the line is what gives us 'liberties' if they are any to be had. So let's talk, Mezzadra & Neilson propose, about what really matters in life. Let's talk about drawing the line.

Border as method

By border as method Mezzadra & Neilson designate a methodological approach to the study of borders *and* an activist engagement with border struggles. For them, activism and research are inextricably entangled. Yet over and above this double meaning of the phrase, 'border as method' refers to the idea that borders pose a far more evocative object than is addressed in the fields of border and migration studies. In these fields, 'the border' is still too directly associated with a territorial division. Yet, quoting Balibar, Mezzadra & Neilson pitch the question of borders as a far more rudimentary problem:¹

'The idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd: to mark out a border is precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it. Conversely, however, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders [...] The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition.' (2002, 76)

Thus, *Border as Method* is thereby not so much a book about territorial borders of states and the international management of human mobility, even if it deals with these issues extensively, but rather a book about how the border – as concept, vocabulary, site, concern, tool and weapon – offers ways to actively intervene in and critically interrogate the world in which we find each other. To Mezzadra & Neilson, borders properly conceived are crystallisations of many different processes and concerns and thereby form crucial sites of research and struggle:

‘The basic concepts that still shape our political languages, from citizenship to sovereignty, from constitution to representation, are all predicated on “implicit spatial representations” deeply embedded in the history and theories of the modern state, which means in its *borders*... This is also true for the concept of democracy, especially as far as the concepts and institutions of political representation, sovereignty of the people, and the nation are concerned.’ (303)

Border as Method seeks to disrupt the duplicitous antinomy that liberalism demands between enclosed unfreedom and disclosed freedom, between internal security and external agency. Thus, Mezzadra & Neilson evade, right from the outset, any program that would frame border struggle as the struggle against borders. They express respect and even support for movements that seek to eradicate borders – ‘no borders, no nations, stop deportations!’ – yet they seek to go beyond these positionings. As they show, page after page, borders are never dissolved. They may disappear, here and there, but only because they proliferate. What matters, is not, as liberalism would have us believe, the gradual eradication of impediments. The crucial questions are where, when, how, by whom, and with what, lines are drawn. At the heart of *Border as Method* is, then, a triple move: (1) to analyse how certain borderings – territories, cartographies, labor divisions, communities, sovereignties, subjectivities, disciplines, concepts – have come about, (2) *while* extracting out of those accounts new concepts of bordering (3) *without* forgetting that such concepts are themselves always already language evocative of border struggle. Studying borders in this way is always already a politicised mode of boundary work. Of course, denaturalising borders by demonstrating their contingency is hardly enough. Yet, neither is it sufficient to show how

certain conceptions of borders are performative of them and may be critically counterposed by other, more adequate concepts. Both the contingency and performativity of borders are themselves to be explored in view of border struggle.

Multiplication of labor

For Mezzadra & Neilson, it is not just a matter of replacing the outdated, inadequate and deceitful language of liberal discourse – with its neat little narrative of gradually opening up protective enclosures – by a critical theory that *does* know where the divisions in labor and capital can be found. As if it would be enough to unmask the liberal deception of a borderless world by demonstrating that borders are alive and well, that capital vitally depends on borders. The interventions that Mezzadra & Neilson make in a variety of directions actively redraw borders, but never with the aim of settling them as if borders can ever be in their proper place. So when, for instance, they discuss how borders are drawn across living labor, they not only critically assess the concepts of ‘international labor division’ and ‘world market’, nor do they merely seek to establish alternative conceptualisations. They aim to create concepts that deliberately foreground the unfixedness of borders. The concepts they work out in order to deal with the problems of political economy – multiplication of labor; axiomatic of capital – are not meant to prick through ideological veils and show us where the real divisions lie, but should rather enable us to analyse the dynamics of bordering and instigate particular engagements in border struggles that go beyond a contestation with liberal orthodoxy.

Through the *multiplication of labor* they want to address how extraction of surplus is never merely a matter of imposing divisions onto labor. If this would be so, our critical engagement would stop at their dissolution as if an ever-expanding, ‘international’ solidarity would be enough. Mezzadra & Neilson emphasise ‘how emerging global modes of production work by exploiting the continuities and the gaps – the *borders* – between different labor regimes.’ (65). Capital is just as much in the business of imposing divisions as it is in redrawing them because the creation of new kinds of

openings and closings between labor regimes offers ever new ways of extracting value. In political economy, ‘there is little attention to the creation and reproduction of labor forces, which is to say that these approaches tend to elide precisely what border as method seeks to highlight and politically explain: the production of subjectivity’ (83). Contesting the imposition of divisions onto labor is not nearly enough. There will have to be struggles about who can use which means to redraw borders across labor. Creating the entire spectrum of temp and flex jobs, for instance, is a question of releasing some boundaries and drawing out new ones. It is precisely in the movement from one set of labor arrangements to another that value can be extracted.

Moreover, the importance of capital’s constitutive outside is not denied, but it should be conceived in much more varied ways than a merely territorial idea of labor that is not yet taken up in the relations of the world market. Capital’s frontiers are not just pushed extensively outward but also at once intensively redrawn:

‘[...] the combination of “absolute” and “relative surplus value” in understanding the (extensive and intensive) expansion of capital’s frontiers opens up a new perspective on the continuous *production* of this constitutive outside (through the “production of *new* needs and the discovery and creation of new use values”) that can continue well beyond the point when territories literally lying outside the domination of capital no longer exist.’ (72)

As new technologies of expression and communication develop, new frontiers appear within already commodified lives as certain people already desire these possibilities and others are yet to be won over.

It’s not that capital imposes divisions that suit its current phases of development across the world system. It’s that it works the borders to continuously reinvent divisions and connections that may proliferate across chains of dependency. The illustrious ‘working day’ is mined to the nth-degree as ever newer borderings come to produce forms of desire and labor that constitute new frontiers and new value. Far from a gradual homogenisation of the world market to capitalism’s most progressive mode,

in which it has supposedly become most like itself, Mezzadra & Neilson propose the concept of an *axiomatic of capital* that understands the expansion of a capitalist world-system as an emerging ‘isomorphism between situations and scenarios that are in fact quite heterogeneous in kind.’ (81). Capital does not reduce labor to similar subjects the world over, all with merely their labor to bring to market and basically similar desires of sustenance. Nor does capitalism tend towards such a revolutionarily pregnant future. Anyway, it doesn’t need to. As long as isomorphic lines can be established, surplus value can be accumulated.

Around the world in 80 ways

I’ve dwelt here on questions of political economy not only because Mezzadra & Neilson most certainly seek to critique and contest capitalism, but also because their engagement with capital illustrates nicely how *Border as Method* goes about rearranging concepts and arguments in particular fields of inquiry and political struggle. The book is a remarkable, immensely rich exposé across a wide range of debates, research programs, activisms, sites, and issues. In all of these directions, Mezzadra & Neilson seek to show how border struggles can provide lenses through which established ways of understanding politics and subjectivities can be further developed. I’ll briefly go into some of what they do.

They try to interconnect new *figures of labor* that are apparently very different yet become intertwined when seen from the border. They link up the migrant care worker to the financial traders moving across their highly transnational labor market: “Like the migrant care workers Akalyn studied, traders sell not a predefined set of personality traits but their ability or potential to *become* the right person, the one required by their employers (or by the market) as circumstances change.” Solidaristic organisation with regards to these figures of labor could only arise through varied and shifting translations, never comprising a settled class subject. With regard to migration, citizenship and inclusion, they discuss a whole array of temporal borders that place subjects at differentiated remove from effective civic status. Labor is made available at just the right moment, while

denizen migrants are not-yet or partly recognised as citizens, always (de)portable at some future time.

The book also seeks to make considerable contributions in the fields of cartography, critical geography, and the study of borderlands, where they reassess the very notion of area, discuss the formation of new territorial species, sovereignties and legal pluralism. Particularly evocative is their treatment of sovereignty and governmentality. As seen through borders, sovereignty does not necessarily coincide with the state when a multitude of agents are authorised to arrest, to make wait, to let through, to speed up. Only some of these borderings are directly related to state territorial border management. Moreover, there is a governmentalisation of the border when the specific functioning of borders becomes part and parcel of neoliberal governance, mobility control and management of labor power. In Deleuzian terms, sovereignty is an abstract machine that makes territories governable and government territorial without the unwarranted assumption that ‘sovereign state’ and ‘governed territory’ refer to the same domain or unit. Thus, it:

‘[...] is important to stress that the sovereignty we are talking about is at the same time immanent to governmentality – because it tends to be subjected to its rationality – and transcendent to its devices – because it retains its autonomy, otherwise it would not [be] possible for it to act as a supplement of governmentality. It is this paradoxical and “monstrous” apparatus that we call the *sovereign machine of governmentality*.’ (203-204)

Finally, Mezzadra & Neilson draw these engagements together in a re-articulation of the common. Here too, they are unsatisfied by any straightforward attempt to know, seek out and struggle for the common as an open, un-bordered domain conceived to be in opposition to the enclosures, accumulations and particularities of capital. Not only is the common never just something to be found disfigured by power and reclaimed by the people, it is to be actively produced while its access can only be maintained through translations that never fully exhaust what the common is. So not only is the liberal tragedy of the commons rejected, its social democratic is also critiqued as it still conceives of the common as a

good. The common is always in excess, there is always more to it, albeit not more of the same. It is the peculiar character of the common that struggle over its production, access and distribution is itself enactive of commons. Only insofar as it is dealt with as one and the same resource – air, water, welfare, time –, ultimately expressible in one coherent language of access and distribution, does it become a good that can be privatised – which includes social-democratic forms of collectivisation – and does struggle over it revert into institutional politics.

In pursuit of everything

Border as Method is more than a sprawling inventory of concepts and a dispersal of interventions. As I’ve tried to show, I think there is a consistent argument being effected throughout the book, an argument that strikes at the heart of liberalism’s duplicity. Indeed, Mezzadra & Neilson are purposefully shifting across a vast variety of questions and issues as it is precisely an appreciation of particularities *and* yet unexpected connections between them that they want to seek out in analysing and engaging with border struggles. Against liberalism’s duplicitous dream of a universal political language, *Border as Method* explodes on the scene voraciously combining, re-inventing, pulling apart, putting together, layering, sifting and dissecting contemporary theories and knowledge of what our capitalist world is becoming and how we might change it. The sense of *disorientation* is, I take it, deliberately evoked in the reader. I’m certainly not unsympathetic to such a strategy, if you can call it that. Yet, it is particularly in the last two chapters, where the discussion centres most on the politics of border as method, that this reader wondered to what extent the method became an impediment to itself.

It is here that the central claim of the book – borders never dissolve, the point is to redraw them – begs for specificity. To some extent, the book resembles Deleuze & Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. There is a deliberately provoked dizzying effect. *Border as Method* is an apprenticeship in dislocation. It is not that Mezzadra & Neilson fail to illustrate what *Border as Method* might concretely entail in a variety of border struggles, but

that the central argument of the book has the tendency to pack, well, most everything into border struggles. So even if the book foregrounds specific issues in different chapters – on geography, on labor, on temporality, on subjectivity –, the book aims to show how one set of borderings – special economic zones – inevitably leads to others – different theories of capitalism – once approached through border as method. The point is to redraw the lines, yet border as method primarily does so by proliferating them. Border as method, at least as performed in this book, lets specific kinds of borderings cascade into others whereby the specificity of struggles over particular borders becomes untenable.

The dislocatory effect is, indeed, deliberate. The point is precisely to show how it is important to interrelate all kinds of borderings, and seen from a hopelessly divided field of research and engagement that impulse is indeed a valuable one. Yet, it also means that border as method seems haunted by a voracious appetite, a pursuit of everything. In the end, I think this means that *Border as Method* is a book to read, confront, struggle through and, then, put down to hastily proceed with whatever one was doing...and lines will start to be drawn.

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¹ Quoted from Balibar, E. (2002). *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso.