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Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor

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This essay must be read as the outline of a wider research and writing project we are currently involved in.[1] At stake in our work is the proliferation of borders in the world today and the multi-scalar role they play in the current restructuring of working lives. In a way, we are trying to recast the expanding field of 'border studies' moving beyond the overwhelming concern for issues of security and identity – or, to be more precise, to reframe the very analysis of these issues from the point of view of the crucial role that borders play in the production of the deeply heterogeneous space and time of global capitalism. It is in this framework that we engage in a rethinking of Marx's concept of *labor-power* and in a critical discussion of the concept of 'international division of labor'. But we also try to contribute to the ongoing discussion on *translation* in cultural and postcolonial studies.

1. Border as Method

The border for us is not a mere object of analysis, even as we recognize the necessity to specify and analyze the empirical characteristics that pertain at any border or point along it. Rather, as the title of this paper suggests, the border is for us *a method*. By this, we mean not that the border provides an abstract

methodology that can be detached from its material contexts and applied generally across any number of empirical situations. We understand method to emerge precisely from the material circumstances at hand, which, in the case of borders, are ones of tension and conflict, partition and connection, traversing and barricading, life and death. Border as method thus entails not only an epistemic viewpoint from which a whole series of strategic concepts as well as their relations can be recast. It also requires a research process that continually accounts for and reacts to the multifarious battles and negotiations, not least those concerning race, that constitute the border both as an institution and a set of social relationships.

We are convinced that one of the key characteristics of current globalization processes lies in the continuous reshaping of different geographical scales, which can no longer be taken for granted in their stability. *Border as method* addresses this problem and tries to make sense of the different kinds of mobilities that traverse and intersect in different spaces, making the very concept of space increasingly heterogeneous and complicated in its constitution. Part of this complexity is evident in the conceptual metaphors used to describe these mobilities. There can be no denying that the hydraulic metaphor of flow has almost come to monopolize the critical discussion of the new forms of global mobility. In recent years, however, a number of important ethnographic and anthropological works have begun to question the dominance of this concept by foregrounding particular cases and patterns of transnational connection that seem better described by other conceptual tools and nomenclature.

To describe the dense global links that surround and fashion the deforestation of vast tracks of the Indonesian island of Kalimantan, Anna Tsing (2005) replaces for instance the metaphor of flow with

that of carving global channels (the point is to emphasize that these connections are created with great force, violence and enterprise rather than simply following established tracks). Similarly, in his work on resource extraction in sub-Saharan Africa, James Ferguson introduces the concept of global 'hops' rather than flows to describe how movements can efficiently connect 'the enclaved points in the network while excluding (with equal efficiency) the spaces that lie between the points' (2006: 47). The point is not altogether to disqualify the metaphor of flow, but rather to move toward an analytical spectrum in which we can begin to identify different kinds of global mobilities in a way that is not possible through any single ethnographic focus. The border is the methodological viewpoint that allows us to grasp these heterogeneous mobilities. Locating ourselves at the border we try to develop a *border thinking* (Mignolo 2000) that allows us to describe the very *production* of the deep heterogeneity of global space and time.

2. The Multiplication of Labor

Central to any consideration of current global processes is the fact that the world has become more open to flows of capital and commodities but more closed to the circulation of human bodies. There is, however, one kind of commodity that is inseparable from the human body and it is the peculiarity of this commodity that provides a key to understanding and unravelling this seemingly paradoxical situation mention. We have in mind the commodity of labor power, which at once describes a capacity of human bodies and exists as a good traded in markets at various geographical scales. Not only is labor power a commodity unlike any other, but also the markets in which it is exchanged are peculiar. This is because the role of borders in shaping labor markets is particularly

pronounced. The processes of filtering and differentiation that occur at the border clearly shape labor forces in and across variegated spaces. But there is also a peculiar tension within the abstract commodity form inherent to labor power which derives from the fact that it is inseparable from *living* bodies. Unlike the case of a table, for instance, the border between the commodity form of labor power and its 'container' must continuously be reaffirmed and retraced. This is why the political and legal constitution of labor markets necessarily involves shifting regimes for the investment of power in life, which lead for example to complicate the clear cut distinction between sovereignty and governmentality. It is also why the dimension of labor struggle that emerges within the constitution of these markets implies a confrontation with the question of the border.

It is precisely the relation between labor power and struggle that links the instances of border reinforcing and border crossing that we analyze in different *borderscapes* (on this concept, cf. Rajaram – Grundy-Warr, eds. 2007). This is not to imply that we deal with a stable or linear set of relations between labor forces, borders and political processes in various subjective and objective situations. Indeed, we seek to mark the constant and unpredictable mutations in these arrangements by introducing the concept of the *multiplication of labor*. On the one hand, this describes the intensification of the labor process and the tendency for work to colonize the time of life. On the other hand, it accompanies as well as supplements the more familiar concept of the international division of labor. By inverting this classical notion from political economy, we want above all to question the orthodoxy that categorizes the global spectrum of labor according to international divisions or stable configurations such as the three worlds model or those elaborated around binaries such as center/periphery or

North/South. We also seek to rethink the categories by which the hierarchisation of labor is specified within labor markets, however they may be defined or bordered.

At stake in the concept of the multiplication of labor is an attempt to rethink the relation of labor to power (and indeed the classical conjunction of labor-power) in relation to the striation and heterogeneity of space in the current transition of global capital. If we accept, with Nicholas De Genova (2008), the inherent linkage of labor and space, both as the conceptual and material coordinates of this transition, it follows that the nature of this link may change in different scenarios. In particular, we want to note how the heterogenization of global space implies on the one hand an *explosion* of established nation-state geographies and on the other hand an *implosion* that forces seemingly discrete territories and actors into unexpected connections that facilitate processes of production and labor exploitation. This leads to a situation that moves way beyond classical images of the international division of labor. It also supersedes what in the late 1970s the German social scientists Froebel et al. (1980) called the 'new international division of labor', which involved the shift of material production from developed to less developed nations with an enhanced role for the multinational corporation and effects of deindustrialization and dependency.

The concept of the international division of labor has a complex genealogy dating from the debates of classical political economy. Suffice it to note here that at least since the 1920s and the 1930s the concept would congeal to describe the division of the world into *discrete* labor markets delineated on the one hand by the borders of nation-states and on the other by the separation between centre and periphery. The writings of Jacob Viner (Viner 1951) are particularly important in this respect. In calling into

question the notion of an international division of labor, we do not want to make the obvious point that the international system of states is now thoroughly overlaid by transnational and global processes. To merely replace the adjective international with transnational or global is not sufficient as a theoretical move to derive adequate conceptual means for the analysis of current processes of transition and their implications for migration, labor and border control.

The reality is that transnational processes have always existed, and while the many efforts to trace their augmentation in the past decades have some analytical and explanatory utility, there is a continued need to account for the persistence, spectral or otherwise, of the nation-state. Whether one accepts Saskia Sassen's notion of a 'tipping point' at which the nation-state inserts itself into a new global logic of organization (Sassen 2006: 148ff) or the argument of Hardt and Negri by which the nation-state has been displaced as the monopolist of sovereign power within the emerging 'mixed constitution' of Empire (2000: 304ff), there is a need to recognize that global capitalism assumes particular forms and adopts specific strategies and practices in different sites. In its spread to China, for example, neoliberalism takes on particular forms that differ considerably from those established in the context of the representative democracies of Europe and North America (Wang 2003).

The proliferation of borders is related to this complex differentiation of capitalism and points to a model of spatial articulation of capital's hegemony that is significantly different from the one epitomized by the concept of the international division of labor and by the center-periphery model. If the border between center and periphery is not the only or even the principal separating device in contemporary modes of shaping the geography

of production and exploitation as well as labor mobility control, it is also necessary to rethink and complicate the primacy of *division* as a concept for describing the organization and exploitation of labor. It is in this sense that we speak of a multiplication of labor that accompanies the proliferation of borders. It is crucial to note that multiplication does not exclude division. Once again, we are not suggesting a substitution of concepts. Indeed, multiplication implies division, or, even more strongly, we can say multiplication is a form of division. By speaking of the multiplication of labor we want to point to the fact that division works in a fundamentally different way than it does in the world as constructed within the frame of the international division of labor. It tends itself to function through a continuous multiplication of control devices that correspond to the multiplication of labor regimes and the subjectivities implied by them *within* each single space constructed as separate within models of the international division of labor. Corollary to this is the presence of particular kinds of labor regimes across different global and local spaces. This leads to a situation where the division of labor must be considered within a multiplicity of overlapping sites that are themselves internally heterogeneous.

Il should be clear by now that our criticism of the concept of 'international division of labor' does not take as a point of reference the idea of a 'smooth' space of global capitalism. Just the opposite is the case: we rather stress the fact the increasing dominance of 'abstract' powers such as knowledge and finance in current capitalism corresponds to a deep heterogeneity of labor regimes and positions. The proliferation of borders plays a key role in the articulation of this heterogeneity and in its insertion into wider global circuits. The multiplication of elements of connection and division produces a multi-scalar geography of contemporary

capitalism: this geography is of course shaped by huge divides in wealth and power, but its complexity increasingly challenges not only such images as the 'three worlds' or 'the global North' vs. 'the global South', but also any rigid use of such concepts as 'center' and 'periphery' in order to articulate a consistent image of the 'international division of labor'.

In the many instances of this proliferation of borders that we analyze in our research, ranging from Africa to China's internal borders, from the 'external frontiers' of the EU to the US-Mexican border, from Australia's 'Pacific solution' to the Bengali borderland, we trace differential regimes of filtering and stratification that function as means of stratification and control of migrant labor. With this mobility and proliferation of borders, the divisions and hierarchies that are a necessary feature of the organization of labor under capitalism acquire an unprecedented intensity and diffusion. To work with the concept of the multiplication of labor is to recognize such divisions as not merely given but always produced, imposed and reimposed, often in reaction to the movements of migration themselves. There is at once a governable and ungovernable aspect to the operations of multiplication here. As labor power travels, ducks and covers, traverses and remakes borders in various parts of the world, so its mobility is also shaped by real and violent processes of subjectification, which increasingly take place through the temporality of blocking, decelerating and accelerating as well as the correlate processes of differential inclusion.

3. In the Space of Temporal Borders

In his book *Global 'Body Shopping'*, Xiang Biao provides an ethnographic account of the Indian labor system known as body

shopping for the transnational mobility of Indian IT workers. This is a complex system by which consultants around the world work to recruit IT workers from India, to arrange their passage to different countries, and then to farm them out to clients as project-based labor. By mediating between the needs of firms and the juridical arrangements regarding migration in host countries, this transnational labor system allows the matching of mobile labor to volatile capital, often through methods of delay or practices that prey upon the underpaid labor or investments of family members in India. Xiang's book is a very important contribution to current debates on global processes and their connection to 'local' transformations: it particularly opens up new perspectives on such concepts as ethnicization and transnationalization. But what interests us here is a more precise point, which allows us to move from spatial to 'temporal' borders.

For the body shop system to function there is a need for labor agencies to mobilize specific mechanisms and legislation loopholes in the jurisdictions into which workers travel. This is the concern of the field work conducted by Xiang in Sydney, Australia. Here the 457 visa, allowing entry of skilled workers with employer sponsorship, enabled the body shops to sponsor workers and then hire them out to industry and government on flexible terms otherwise not allowed under the sponsorship arrangements. From his analysis of these practices, Xiang is able to make a general point about the changing logic of labor supply and demand in the IT industry:

> Whether or not there was a real gap between IT labor demand and supply, is less important; what matters more is employers' desire for an ever enlarging labor supply to maintain the momentum in their expansion. Unlike a real shortage, a *virtual* shortage like this can never be

> balanced out, as more supply is likely to create more shortage. Thus, the coexistence of a skilled shortage and a significant level of professional unemployment can be a long-term feature of the New Economy, a feature epitomized by the routine practice of benching workers in body shops even as more are being hunted (Xiang 2007: 17).

The practice of 'benching' referred to here involves the holding in reserve of body shop workers, who while benched are paid very small amounts, for outsourcing to private and government enterprises. This system of benching and the creation of 'virtual shortage' implicit in it can be understood as a technology for the timing and pacing of IT labor supply with respect to demand. From the point of view of the benched workers, it is a time of forced suspension in which their expensively acquired cognitive skills are frittered away but also continuously updated as they simultaneously perform unskilled tasks such as taxi driving or shop assistance. Here again we see the multiplication of labor in action. The division of skilled from unskilled work collapses as these tasks are performed by a single person. More accurately, we can say that the very taxonomy of skilled and unskilled labor needs to rethought in a dynamic temporal frame that exceeds traditional closed models of supply and demand, trade-off between unemployment and inflation, GDP, migration push and pull factors and so on.

Too often the so-called spatial turn in the study of capitalism and globalization has led to a neglect of the temporal dimensions of transnational movements, conflicts, blocking and stasis. We do not wish to deny the valuable contributions and insights made by thinkers such as David Harvey, Doreen Massey and Neil Smith in this regard, but the specific temporal dynamics we want to

highlight can deliver a greater sense of the conflictual processes at stake when practices of global mobility and stasis insinuate the constitution of subjectivity into various spatial and territorial arrangements. Let us take the example of detention centers in borderland Europe. From the spatial perspective these are strategically located sites that have an instrumental role in establishing and reinforcing borders. They form part of an elaborate assemblage of border control technologies deployed by states and by the EU to select and filter the passage of migrants into and out of the European territory. If we highlight the temporal dimension, however, this element of geographical control must be reconsidered in the light of asynchronous rhythms of detention, transit, prolongation and acceleration that not only cross the subjective experiences of bodies and minds in motion but are also key to the inscription of this motion into labor market dynamics and the social and symbolic fabric of citizenship.

This has been demonstrated by a transnational group of researchers known as TransitMigration, who have, for instance, emphasized the subjective experiences of detained migrants in the Agean region, where the detention centers serve more as points of entry into the European space than points of departure. As Panagiotidis and Tsianos (2007: 82) write: 'The governance of migratory movements aims to force their dynamic into temporal zones of hierarchized mobility in order to produce governable mobile subjects from ungovernable flows'. Andrijasevic (2008) explains that this approach breaks 'the progressive linearity by means of which migrants' journeys are commonly portrayed (i.e. a movement from A/origin to B/destination) and draws attention to interruptions and discontinuities such as waiting, hiding, unexpected diversions, settlements, stopovers, escapes and returns`. Writing of the camps in the EU's southern neighboring countries,

she contends that their purpose is not to prevent or block migratory movements in general but to regulate the time and speed of migrations. This allows the development of the concept of 'temporal borders' (Rigo 2007), which are not coextensive with spatial borders but rather serve to reconfigure, strengthen and attenuate them.

One way of conceptualizing the links between the system of administrative detention and the shaping of labor markets is to describe the detention center as a 'decompression chamber' (Mezzadra & Neilson 2003) that serves to equilibrate, in the most violent of ways, the constitutive tensions that underlie the very existence of labor markets. The practice of benching described by Xiang Biao can, from this point of view, be considered a peculiar form of detention, even though it does not involve violent confinement. What is at stake is precisely a practice of bordering with implications for employment and exploitation within a particular juridical frame (in this case, the Australian 457 visa for the employer sponsorship of skilled migrants). While such bordering obviously implies a division within the labor market (separating for instance the body shop workers investigated by Xiang from regular IT workers in the Australian national labor market), it also implies a distinct multiplication of labor (which becomes apparent when we consider precisely the global dimension of the body shopping practice – the relation of these workers to relatives in India, to similar IT workers in the US, to intermediaries in locations such as Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, etc). But while the experience of detention centers allows us to understand something in the experience of benching, the opposite is also true. Seen through the reference to benching, detention centers seem to be much more related to the production and reproduction of the peculiar commodity termed labor power than

to the exercise of sovereign power on 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). The approach we are calling the multiplication of labor thus requires a rethinking of the division of sovereignty and governmentality introduced by Foucault as well as the temporal and spatial relations constitutive of these two categories.

It is not a matter of placing an either/or between the concepts of sovereignty and governmentality but rather a question of keeping them both at work in any adequate analysis of contemporary power relations and the concomitant dynamics of subjectification. Key to understanding the interaction of these forms or strategies of the exercise of power is an analysis of how borders in the contemporary global order serve not simply as devices of exclusion but as technologies of differential inclusion. In this perspective, the devices and practices of border reinforcing shape the conditions under which border crossing is possible and actually practiced and experienced. Metaphors such as Fortress Europe underestimate the extent to which the selective filtering of labor mobilities is crucial to the economic sustainability of Europe and its member states, particularly for the maintenance of pension systems. There is also a need to recognize that, as Étienne Balibar (2004) puts it, borders no longer exist only '*at the edge of the territory*, marking the point where it ends' but 'have been transported *into the middle of political space*' (109).

4. Rethinking Translation beyond Equivalence and Articulation

The concept of the multiplication of labor allows us to rethink current debates about social inclusion, extending well beyond the usual concerns of inequality, poverty, welfare etc. within a single nation-state. Inclusion, in this perspective, is not an unambiguous social good, but a differential system of filtering and stratification

that functions as a means of hierarchisation and control. At stake is a means of thinking about the political constitution of society in a way that goes beyond the familiar argument by which a society defines itself through the act of exclusion. There are many versions of this argument, but one of its most sophisticated recent elaborations can be found in Ernesto Laclau's (2005) work on populism. Laclau argues that it is only through exclusion that society can constitute itself as a totality. Such exclusion, for him, 'presupposes the split of all identity between its differential nature, which links/separates it from other identities, and its equivalential bond with all the others *vis-`a-vis* the excluded element' (78). For the excluded element to become a populist movement, it must undergo a 'partial surrender' of the particularities that compose it, 'stressing what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common' (78). But as different particularities are linked along this 'chain of equivalence' so their meaning is weakened up to the point where 'popular identity functions as a tendentially empty signifier' (96). A populist movement thus becomes 'a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community' (81), establishing an 'internal frontier' within society.

Such an 'internal frontier' is very different from what we, following Balibar, call an 'internal border'. For a start, Laclau understands the people to be constituted as the result of a populist identification that challenges an established power, but always within existing borders, whether those between political territories or those between existing institutional forms. As Laclau's co-author Chantal Mouffe (2005) writes: 'there is no consensus without exclusion, there is no "we" without a "they", and no politics is possible without the drawing of a frontier' (73). These thinkers frame the relations of social practices and struggles to political articulation in a way that replicates a model in which the former

are merely *particular* and therefore incapable of producing new political forms, outside the existing institutional architecture of nation-states and international relations. Articulation functions as a moment of capture of this particularity in a pattern of equivalence, which is not questioned and which, more often than not, simply proliferates without end. Furthermore, this logic of equivalence becomes the very ground of the common upon which political contestation is possible.

The perspective of the multiplication of labour emphasizes not the proliferation of meaning along an equivalential chain but the proliferation of borders that cut across and exceed existing political spaces. Corollary to this is the system of differential inclusion, which far from constituting the political through exclusion involves a selective process of inclusion that suggests that any totalization of the political is contingent and subject to processes of contestation. Indeed, we see the border as a site of intense material conflict where life and death, partition and connection, traversing and barricading are all involved. Consequently, the construction of the common is not about the operation of difference within a logic of equivalence that weakens all differential claims in the name of an empty populism. From our point of view, the people can never be other than the constituted subject of existing political forms and thus the very construct under contestation in border crossing and the production of subjects in transit.

It is not a matter of imaginging and fantasizing some easy alliance or solidarity between the very heterogeneous experiences and labor market positions of different migrants and subjects in transit. To consider these figures as instantiations of the processes of multiplication of labor is rather to highlight certain commonalities of their insertion within labor markets that can no longer take the continuity and stability of production and reproduction of labor

power for granted. The mode of interconnection between such subjects is not an articulation that collapses all differences into equivalences but rather a process of *translation* that, as Naoki Sakai (1997) writes, cannot be conceived as 'form of communication between two fully formed, different but *comparable*, language communities' (15). At stake in the elaboration of such a concept of translation is also a questioning of the logic of exchange that undergirds the very structure of capital which operates through the constant equilibration of heterogeneous values to the general equivalent of money. By rethinking translation outside the frame of equivalence and neutral arbitration, it is possible to distinguish patterns of multiplication and proliferation of meaning that do not result in a politically dehabilitating dispersion of forces and alliances. Conversely, such a heterolingual approach to translation does not imply the reduction of political thought and action within a series of haphazard articulations which are nonetheless constrained by the existing institutional arrangements.

To reconceive the political within this frame is not to obscure or abandon its conflictual dimension. The practice and experience of struggle is not incommensurable with a practice of translation that does not seek to level all languages onto an even field. Such translation, however, does lead us to ask how a politics of struggle in which one either wins or loses can be thought across a politics of translation in which one usually gains and loses something at the same time. What is required is a reorientation of the political that allows for both these moments and their different possible temporalities. At stake is neither a politics of the event, which foregrounds the moment of uprising and disruption, nor a politics of articulation, which foregrounds how contingent social arrangements provide possibilities for strategic and limited contestations. By highlighting at once the struggles and the

necessary work of translation that are constitutive to any construction of the common, we wish to demonstrate how the multiplication of labor and the proliferation of borders must be taken into account in any attempt to elaborate a new concept of the political.

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[1] The results from the research are to be published in a book.