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# The capitalist virus

**Sandro Mezzadra**

University of Bologna, Italy

**Brett Neilson** 

Western Sydney University, Australia

Politics

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## Abstract

Borders and mobilities have played key roles in the transformations of capitalism that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. We attempt to distinguish novel developments in the control of movements of bodies, labour, and capital from processes of renationalisation, financialisation, and platformisation that were in train before the outbreak. Focusing on logistical techniques and technologies that govern the global circulation of people and things, this article explores the spatial shifts and ruptures that have marked the capitalist crisis occasioned by the pandemic. We give empirical attention to movements and struggles of migration in China, India, the Americas, and the Mediterranean.

## Keywords

borders, capitalism, logistics, mobility, pandemic

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## Framing migration in the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been in many ways a crisis of mobility. While the virus spread across channels of mobility that enable the global stretching of supply chains and the circulation of commodities, the slowdown and in many cases standstill of logistical operations were among the immediate consequences of the outbreak. Indeed, management of the pandemic crisis was primarily a management of mobility, which targeted both people and ‘stuff’. International borders were selectively closed, with a reinforcement of the hygienic-sanitary component of the border regime (Stierl and Tazzioli, 2021). Internal boundaries proliferated even more than in the recent past, circumscribing worksites and productive zones, administrative territories, and even individual bodies and private homes (Mezzadra, 2021). Far from considering such bordering processes as fixed, we ask in this article which kind of experimentations, tensions, and conflicts are played out around them, foreshadowing crucial aspects of a future in which the virus will not disappear.

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### Corresponding author:

Brett Neilson, Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia.

Email: [b.neilson@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:b.neilson@westernsydney.edu.au)

As a conjuncture shaped by a crisis and management of mobility, the pandemic had a huge impact on movements and struggles of migration. From the beginning, migrants' experiences of the outbreak were deeply uneven. Forced immobility describes one pole of those experiences. Crossing borders became even more difficult and risky, in the Mediterranean Sea no less than in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States or in the Bay of Bengal. Thousands of migrants remained stuck in transit countries, often in detention centres where abject living conditions nurtured the risk of contagion. Forced immobility took on different although no less scary characteristics for many migrants whose reproduction and social life rely on informal economic circuits and related practices of mobility. Contrasting this pole of forced immobility is the pole of forced mobility, which was apparent in the experience of migrants working in sectors deemed 'essential' by governments – from agriculture to logistics and 'last mile delivery'. The pandemic has highlighted the need to rethink forced mobility beyond the terms of the debate on forced migration, which focuses on refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. That many migrants continued to work in industries such as agriculture and logistics was due not only to the essential designation of these sectors but also to the fact that these workers had no way to sustain themselves other than by pursuing these jobs, often at the local level, as is the case for platform delivery workers. In these instances, forced mobility occurs not because of war, famine, or environmental disasters but due to a combination of pandemic conditions and wage compulsion.

To these experiences of forced immobility and mobility, one must add episodes such as the massive and painful exodus of internal migrants from metropolitan centres to the countryside in India (Samaddar, 2020), a dramatic instance of what Biao Xiang (2020) terms 'shock mobility'. Other instances of shock mobility include the fleeing of 300,000 residents from the Chinese city of Wuhan in the 8-hour period after lockdown was announced on 23 January 2020, or the return from Colombia of over 68,000 Venezuelans to their crisis-ridden country in the weeks between March and May 2020.

To make sense of migrants' pandemic experiences, it is important to locate them within the framework of the more general reorganisation of mobility that is a key feature of the current transition and mutations of capitalism. By titling this article 'The Capitalist Virus', we register not only how the pandemic has intensified capitalist forms of extraction and exploitation but also how capitalism has acted as a vector of disease, both by pushing agricultural production and environmental conditions to a point where the virus could emerge and by facilitating transmission through circuits of capital and the humans who labour in them. In this latter respect, the relations between migration and capitalism come to the fore. Since publishing *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), our work has approached movements of migration as a creative force that shapes the development of capitalism. Far from subordinating movements of migration to movements of capital, or from reproducing a hierarchy between migrants exploited as 'workers' and refugees fleeing from human or natural catastrophes, we emphasise the subjective dimensions of migration and how they multiply vistas of struggle, even when they do not involve announced activism or political organisation.

Our approach is sometimes identified as affirming the 'autonomy of migration', although this is a label we resist. Drawing on diverse influences, including post-Operaist Marxism, postcolonial studies, and philosophical discussions of sovereignty, governmentality, and citizenship, we chart how migration under capitalism takes place under a pressure that compels many people, above all those confronting poverty, to commodify the 'mental and physical capabilities' contained in their bodies. In doing so, we approach

migration from the angle provided by a specific reading of the Marxian notion of labour power. However, we contest any economistic understanding of this notion by stressing that labour power is not only a commodity bought and sold in the capitalist world market but also an embodied quality of persons inseparable from gender and race. In this way, we join an analysis of migration and labour market dynamics of exploitation, domination, and bordering to a fuller account of the production of subjectivity. This approach to the desires, expectations, and behaviours of migrants provides a basis on which to assess the extent to which migration opens a political field in which the physical movement of bodies generates a social force that exceeds state and legal control and impels capitalism to change.

To claim that migration shapes capitalism is not to argue that it is the only force to do so or that migrants are responsible for the intensification of exploitation and extraction that drives and results from capitalist development. Capitalism evolves in heterogeneous ways across the disjunctive unity of times that constitute the present and within the social spaces in which these times are embedded and articulated (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: chap. 2). Migration, however, is an important force in establishing the terms of this heterogeneity, and thus contributes to setting the paths along which capitalism transforms. Two ways in which this occurs are relevant in the present conjuncture.

The first has to do with the labour market. Since Marx's classical analysis of 'so-called primitive accumulation', we know that the existence of such a market is not spontaneous. It is rather politically and legally enabled by processes and procedures that violently discipline mobile proletarian bodies. As several scholars demonstrate, the regulation of migration continues to play crucial roles in the legal and political constitution of the labour market (see, for instance, Bauder, 2006), providing a supplement to its dynamics and aiming to establish an equilibrium between its multiple sectors and niches. In recent decades, such regulation has taken forms fundamentally different from the guestworker or postcolonial schemes that prevailed in the West at the height of the industrial and national moment in the history of capitalism. The flexibilisation of economy and the turbulence of migration (Papastergiadis, 2000) led to the emergence of flexible recruitment schemes, sectoral policies, temporary and return migration programmes, ultimately following the logistical rationality of a 'just-in-time and to-the-point migration' (Xiang, 2012). There is a need to ask whether and in which forms the pandemic will entrench this trend enabling new experimentations with the logistical rationality we just mentioned.

The second way in which migration shapes the development of capitalism relates to its global geography. In recent times, what migration scholars used to call 'migratory systems' (i.e. the routes that connect 'countries of origin' and 'countries of destination' based on historical, cultural, and political factors) have exploded. New destinations, routes, and entanglements proliferate. While the notion of migratory systems has always seemed to us too rigid, such proliferation confronts us with a new situation, where migrants' capacity to produce new spaces emerges in full light and operates in tension with established political spaces and more elusive spaces of capital.

These new spaces interact with established and emerging regionalisms, among tensions and conflicts which, like the war in Ukraine, redefine the geopolitical scripts that emerged in the wake of the Cold War. The geographical turmoil precipitated by the faltering global hegemony of the United States is a major factor in this transition, catalysing, for instance, the realignments among China, India, and Africa or the regional assertions associated with labels such as Eurasia and *Russkiy Mir*. Although the formation of new migratory spaces does not correlate directly with these geopolitical transformations, it

cannot be separated from shifting capital circuits in a world where geopolitical conflict tends to exacerbate and work through capitalist competition. The reach of China's Belt and Road Initiative into Africa, for instance, both facilitates and is enabled by the growing presence of migrants from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali in Chinese cities like Guangzhou (Castillo, 2021). An analysis of the intertwining of the spatiality of migration and the geography of global capitalism is an important task. The pandemic provides a lens on both.

## Mutations of capitalism

Although our writings (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: chap. 2) argue for the conceptual unity of capital, we follow Marx in understanding capital as a 'social relation' and thus inseparable from relations of social and spatial difference. In this view, capital functions along an expanding frontier and produces forms of capitalism that confront differentiation and variegation as internal features. This approach colours our perception of capitalism's mutations, transitions, and crises. Capitalism may encounter shocks generated either internally or externally, but its dynamism makes it inherently unstable and prone to temporal upheavals and transformations as much as spatial variegations. Any assessment of the pandemic's impact upon the global geographies of capitalism must grapple with this fact. We have already spoken of the pandemic as a crisis of mobility with effects on the politics of migration. In this section, we position this crisis with respect to mutations of capitalism, taking stock of the crucial roles played by heterogeneous forms of mobility (first and foremost of labour power) for the accumulation of capital. In so doing, we provide a frame in which to interpret the changing spatiality of migration with respect to wider processes of transition that both exceed the pandemic and have been hastened by it.

There is a tension between speaking of the pandemic as initiating a crisis – say, a crisis of mobility or an economic crisis – and approaching the pandemic as part of a deeper crisis that marks the contemporary human and planetary condition. Ien Ang (2021) invokes the Gramscian notion of organic crisis to argue that the pandemic is not a temporary disruption to business as usual but the symptom of a longer term and broader economic, political, and environmental crisis that permeates all levels of society. We are in sympathy with this view. The pandemic upheaval relates to capitalist transitions in ways different from other recent events that have occasioned economic downturns. Take the crisis of 2007/2008, which was initiated in the banking and finance sectors. In this instance, a combination of subprime lending, debt collateralisation, real estate speculation, and the accumulation of toxic assets prompted a contraction of financial market liquidity. The pandemic crisis, by contrast, was triggered by a virus jumping the zoonotic barrier between humans and other animals, leading to a wave of infections and lockdowns. Although the pandemic's causes were rooted in capitalism, the contagion it enacted was not restricted to financial markets but transmitted between bodies that, as already emphasised in our analysis of migration, are bearers of labour power.

We learn something about the current state of capitalism by noting that the pandemic crisis resulted from a labour supply shock due to lockdowns. Regardless of arguments that maintain that speculation on flows and movements of money has replaced the extraction of surplus value from labour as the main source of value in capitalism, the pandemic showed that labour still plays a crucial role in sustaining the circulation and accumulation of capital. The absence of workers from sites of production and circulation resulted in a double dip in global economic activity, first as lockdowns hit China and then as they

unfolded in the rest of the world. Data drawn from marine navigation systems shows a marked downturn in world trade in February 2020 and then again in April–May 2020, corresponding to these periods of lockdown, followed by a return to start-of-year levels in October (Antràs, 2021). This disruption to global supply chains was itself endemic, which is why many governments deemed logistics workers among those with essential occupations. Clearly, this labour supply problem was uneven across space, time, and economic sectors. No political analysis of the pandemic is valid without acknowledgement of those workers who had little choice but to risk infection in pursuing their livelihoods. Similarly, it is necessary to recognise that much managerial and service labour continued during lockdowns, facilitated by communication technologies and platforms whose more general effects we will discuss later. But the point remains that the pandemic demonstrated the continued need of capital for labour and the social cooperation it accomplishes despite the entrenchment of a highly financialised capitalism.

This realisation of capital's ongoing need to extract value from labour and social cooperation is a starting point for an analysis of mutations of capitalism in the pandemic. If the codification of essential work constitutes both formal recognition of this need and a means of corraling people to work despite the risk of infection, a consideration of jobs classified in this way offers clues about capital's priorities in a world learning to live with environmental and health catastrophes. Although essential industries varied across jurisdictions, we can classify them into two kinds. First are industries necessary for the circulation of goods and services, including logistics, energy, food supply, and communications. Second are jobs in sectors that ensure the reproduction of labour and life, such as health care, education, and housing. Without commenting on the prevalence of migrants in these occupations, the race and gender profile of those who occupy them, or how they multiply precarious and unpaid forms of labour, we can observe that these industries do not privilege production in the traditional sense of the term. Although food and pharmaceutical production continued during even the tightest lockdowns, most jobs classified as essential involved circulatory or reproductive tasks. This is not to claim that industrial production is in decline. Statistics tell us that it is on the rise in many parts of the world. Nor is it a question of circulatory and reproductive logics somehow eliminating or replacing production, which continues to occur in many social contexts, including those that are not organised or cannot be classified according to the industrial model of the factory. However, in these essential sectors, production tends to blur with logics of circulation and/or reproduction, even as labour in them may be productive or subject to measures of productivity. This is one tendency or mutation of capitalism that the pandemic has amplified and that invites us to carefully analyse how current struggles and transitions reshape the very terrain of production.

In terms of circulation, the need to keep things moving in the face of lockdowns and supply chain disruptions proved primary, often without regard to labour conditions or relations. In some cases, there were slow downs. In the shipping industry, for instance, travel and quarantine arrangements left more than 400,000 seafarers stuck onboard vessels, some for as long as 20 months. An equal number of their counterparts were confined at home, unable to work due to the inability to change crews (Markkula, 2021). In sectors such as food delivery and e-commerce, the pandemic brought a speed-up. The image of a migrant gig worker making a delivery to an urbanite in comfortable lockdown is surely one of the most iconic of the months following March 2020. Perhaps it is because such a picture presents two sides of the pandemic predicament: the worker who risks infection to keep goods and services moving and the privileged shut-in who, apart from this

doorstep encounter, manages their work and social lives through digital mediation. What joins these figures is a logistical connection facilitated by a platform app, although it is important to add that platformisation processes have also reshaped the work of the ‘shut-in’, not least through the proliferation of workplace surveillance software.

Digital platforms have been among the winners of the pandemic. COVID-19 has made more relevant the growing literature on platform labour with its emphasis on gendered and racialised forms of exploitation, indirect employment relations, algorithmic modes of measure and control, and possibilities for worker organisation (see, for instance, De Stefano, 2016; Pirone, 2019). Furthermore, the pandemic has hastened a more general platformisation of the economy, a process that takes different forms and trajectories but is far from occurring only in the ‘West’ (Davis and Xiao, 2021). An increasing encroachment of platform logics and technologies on working lives and social relations has deepened capital’s extractive capacities by generating data rents as well as service rents, effecting different kinds of digital enclosure, and producing capital convergence, for instance, through intersecting investments in technology, real estate markets, and the banking sector (Sadowski, 2020). Fintech platforms are among those that have expanded rapidly, driven by the appetite for contactless payments. As Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon (2020: 10) argue, these platforms seek ‘to produce new market structures that will secure new oligopolistic and monopolistic positions’. As such, they are an important part of the platform consolidation that the pandemic has entrenched.

As the example of food delivery shows, processes of logistification and platformisation are linked to dynamics of reproduction. That many locked-down metropolitans could come to depend on exploited gig workers for their sustenance registers a perversely privatised form of reproductive labour. Home confinement exacerbated issues of domestic violence, unequal parenting, and unwaged household work, giving new relevance to arguments about social reproduction that emerged from second-wave feminism (Federici, 2021). Changes in the regulation of the conditions of many domestic workers deserve closer investigation. What happened in Hong Kong, where migrant domestic workers were targeted by specific, highly discriminatory sanitary measures is peculiar, but resonates with developments in other parts of the world (Wang, 2021b). Moreover, the pressure placed on health care workers charged with tending to the sick exposed cracks in health systems. In places such as Hong Kong, the United States, South Korea, Kenya, Spain, Bosnia, and Peru, health care workers went on strike. Nurses were at the forefront of these actions (Essex and Weldon, 2020). An increased focus on health care combined with the need to compensate workers who lost work also prompted serious debates on the future of welfare (Mezzadra, 2020b). The discussion encompassed the feasibility of using digital platforms to distribute welfare payments as well as renewed calls for a universal basic income (Huws, 2020).

The prevalence of recovery packages, such as the Next Generation EU Program, the American Rescue Plan, and the American Jobs Plan, to manage the crisis of reproduction spurred by the pandemic is another factor. It is important not to underestimate the significant funds these programmes directed to areas such as education and health. But it is also dangerous to ignore how this debt-driven funding was matched by financial stimulus measures such as the European Central Bank’s asset-purchase programme or the United States Federal Reserve’s emergency lending to banks, the latter of which contributed to reverse the market falls initially brought by the pandemic and create by the end of 2020 a short financial boom, particularly for technology and platform company stocks. As Susan Watkins (2021: 21) explains, a ‘2020s form of compensatory, centrally monetized capitalism will operate in a tighter, more competitive environment, balanced upon teetering piles

of debt, with financial instability an ever-present risk'. In this regard, the 'compete with China' rhetoric mobilised to justify these recovery packages, especially in the United States, is just as important to emphasise as their potential to contribute to new welfare designs or strengthening of social reproduction. Social movements and struggles around such issues as public health and education have prominent roles to play in the ensuing field of tensions.

In a geopolitical and geoeconomic sense, the changing global position of China is another transition process that the pandemic has accelerated. We cannot comment on the longer term unfolding of this shift in this context, although it seems to us that Giovanni Arrighi (2007) and other world systems theorists are right to see it as a crucial element in the mutations of world capitalism. More recently, talk of a new Cold War between China and the United States has taken the form of technological competition around chip manufacture, 5G rollout, artificial intelligence, and supply chain control. Flash points such as the 2019/2020 Hong Kong struggles attest to a scenario where continuing globalising processes are marked not only by state competition but also by fractious state–society relationships (Pang, 2021). These dynamics are changing the global geographies of capitalism, creating fault lines and divisions such as the 'liminal island chain' linking Okinawa, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Wang, 2021a). How the Ukraine War will contribute to such powerful changes, entrenching long-term trends or significantly altering them is an open question at the time of writing this article.

Competition surrounding the production and distribution of vaccines is another vector of geopolitical change within world capitalism. Pharmaceutical companies and states make complex agreements in which the former sometimes act as emblems of the latter and, at other times, express intellectual property rights as quasi-territorial claims that divide the world according to brand competition rather than state rivalry. The forging of an air cargo corridor to move Chinese-made vaccines between Shenzhen and Addis Ababa by logistics company Cainiao and Ethiopian Airlines, for instance, becomes a story about soft power diplomacy (Egbunike, 2021). Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer, BioNTech, and China's Fosun Group sign agreements that divide the world into territories where they have exclusive rights to sell branded vaccines. These arrangements mean that the vaccine commonly known as Pfizer must be labelled as Fosun in Hong Kong and Taiwan, sparking concern for governments that have promised their populations not to use vaccines made in China (McGregor, 2021). Beyond a commercial expression of great power rivalry, this example shows how the pandemic brings mutations of capitalism in which states and companies jostle for power across territorial divides.

Summing up, capitalism is undergoing significant mutations in the current conjuncture. Dynamics of disease and death haunt and shape its development. The increasing intertwining of epidemiology and logistics that foreshadows a kind of 'virologistics' (Neilson, 2020) is a symptom of this predicament, but also an attempt to manage it. The crisis of mobility occasioned by the pandemic provides the framework for the further entrenchment of digital and platform capitalism, whose operative logics are increasingly financialised. In many parts of the world, migrants figure prominently in the composition of platform labour. The presence of a mobile and precarised workforce, whose reproduction often depends on informal economic activities, is a key condition for the operations of digital platforms, particularly in metropolitan spaces (Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). Importantly, platformisation processes are increasingly predicated upon migration from rural areas, reproducing and complicating the rural/urban divide. More generally,



circulatory and reproductive logics play a key role in the reorganisation of labour. Precarity, legal fragmentation, and an expanded working day shape labour conditions in sectors that have emerged as strategic in the pandemic. Is it possible to imagine a reformism capable of addressing these conditions today? The relevance of care and reproduction in Joe Biden's original infrastructure and jobs plans lead many to think that an experiment is underway. But the situation is uncertain, and dominant capitalist actors today seem to operate according to a completely different logic.

The role of states in shaping the world as it emerges from the pandemic deserves closer examination. The management of the pandemic has attributed new tasks and even a new centrality to many states. At the same time, the production of vaccines and related 'vaccine diplomacy' has prompted the emergence of old and new hierarchies between states. As we argue in previous writings (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: chap. 5), there is a need to analyse states beyond the assumption of their institutional unity, investigating how specific state structures and capabilities operate in the face of capital. We are convinced that such a method retains its validity in the current conjuncture. But it needs to be supplemented by an analysis of the roles played by states in the reorganisation of global space, which continues to be the ultimate reference for capital operations. Speaking of global space does not mean speaking of an abstract and smooth space. What we see today is the tension-ridden emergence of multiple world regions, whose unity cannot be taken for granted (just think of how China is projecting its economic power through the Belt and Road Initiative, making its 'regional' geography both extended and unstable). Once again, the Ukraine War can accelerate or deviate this tendency. In the configuration of these regional spaces, mobility in its multifarious forms is once again crucial, particularly as it operates through channels and corridors that traverse regions and link them to other spaces and global processes. Mobility should be written in the plural here since those channels and corridors facilitate and manage the mobility of commodities as well as of humans. This is an important point to keep in mind when looking at migration today.

## **Bordering mobility**

As we explained at the end of the first section of this essay, an important viewpoint on migration concerns its capacity to produce new spaces. This capacity must be investigated in the framework of the geographical disruption and tumultuous transformations that shape capitalism at the global level. This is not something new and is at least associated to the crisis of the prospect of a 'new American century' in the early 2000s. The COVID-19 pandemic has multiplied and intensified faultlines and tensions across world regions. The securitisation and reterritorialisation of previously global medical supply chains (Liu and Bennett, 2020: 159) is an instance of a process of renationalisation that nevertheless runs parallel to the intensification and complexities of vaccine diplomacy that we describe above. Although some states are better positioned than others in the ensuing competition, processes of renationalisation (not only of medical products but also of food and energy security) are doomed to lay the basis for new forms of global integration or for new forms of governance of global processes. And the scale of the region is going to remain strategic for the management and articulation of global processes.

In speaking of regions, we do not think of stable and bordered geographical constructs. What we have in mind are economic and political spaces in the making, crisscrossed by tensions and conflicts within each of them and traversed by global processes that exceed the regional scale. While this complex global spatiality must be analysed from the angle

of the global competition between the United States and China (without forgetting the role of Russia), what interests us more here are its implications for movements and struggles of migration. The regional scale provides a viewpoint on those movements and struggles, and particularly on the combination of forced mobility and forced immobility that characterises many migratory experiences in the pandemic. Old and new borders have operated since the start of the pandemic to manage both that immobility and that mobility. Besides national borders, Xiaofeng Liu and Bennett (2020: 158) write with respect to Hong Kong and mainland China, ‘more unconventional bordering practices . . . have materialized, from the scale of countries to communities and homes’. New disciplinary techniques have been deployed in the management of mobility and a new geography of control has emerged that is not going to wane quickly. These experimentations will leave deep traces for the future.

Because the pandemic crisis was a crisis of mobility, the constitutive character of the latter, its strategic role in contemporary capitalism and life, was widely recognised by governments and in public opinion. This is the case with the mobility of ‘stuff’ as we argued earlier regarding logistics. But while international migration was widely stopped or at least decelerated during the pandemic, the role of migrant mobile labour was at least implicitly recognised once we think of the high number of migrants among essential workers. China is a specific, but interesting case because the country’s demographic and class structure has been dramatically transformed over the past decades by mass movements of internal migration with pronounced gender effects (Pun, 2016). Xiang Biao notes that while in 2003 rural–urban migrant workers were the main target group in the Chinese government’s attempt to contain the SARS epidemic, this did not happen with the COVID-19 outbreak when policy measures targeted all residents, with no difference between migrants and locals. Xiang (2020: 524) explains that the main reason behind this change is a shift in the meaning of mobility in China, which ‘is no longer a special behavior of migrant workers; instead, it is now an important part of ordinary social life’. This is key to understanding the transformations of Chinese society and economy over the past years – in the ongoing process of transition from the ‘factory of the world’ to a different formation. Xiang (2020: 525) adds that one of the forces driving this transition is ‘logistification’, which he defines not only in terms of investments in infrastructural projects but also as a subordination of production to the conditions of circulation. The ensuing processes of mobilisation and casualisation of the labour force are apparent in the condition of platform workers, with an intensification of the pace of delivery that has made their work ‘one of the most dangerous professions’ (Delivery Workers, Trapped in the System, 2020), but which also more generally reshapes labour and life in China. Internal migration is at the heart of these processes, immersed in practices of continuous mobility. The combination of hypermobility and authoritarianism that Xiang (2020: 528–529) underscores for China may take different but no less compelling forms in other parts of the world.

We have already mentioned the painful exodus of internal migrants from metropolitan centres to the countryside in India. This is another case that deserves closer consideration, particularly from the point of view of the relation between migration and the legal and political constitution of the labour market. Again, logistics and logistification play crucial roles here. Migrant workers were, as Ranabir Samaddar (2021: 149) explains, ‘the motor of India’s logistical development in these two decades of our century – from working in the booming waste reprocessing industry to construction of ports, highways, toll plazas, new towns, smart cities, informal and artisanal mining, and fast corridors to setting up

digital infrastructure'. Unsurprisingly, logistical development goes hand in hand in India with the spread of informal labour and processes of labour casualisation. But the Indian economy was in crisis well before the pandemic, which was used as a kind of *force majeure* by the ruling classes to experiment with a violent reorganisation of the labour market. Labour laws were suspended by many state governments, opening the possibility of 'increasing the precarity of migrant workers more than what it was already' (Samaddar, 2021: 147). Samaddar (2021: 156) goes so far as to speak of a new 'primitive accumulation' facilitated by 'social Darwinism and a neo-Malthusian population management' that aims to manipulate and reorganise the labour market under the exclusive rule of capital. Under such conditions, Samaddar resists reading the internal migrants' exodus merely as a form of 'reverse migration'. Among dire conditions that included living in camps, death *en route*, hunger, contagion, and forced labour, migrant workers resisted and protested, engaging in 'a classic bio-political act from below' and even staging 'a completely novel form of strike' (Samaddar, 2021: 147; see also Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2020). It was the sheer and stubborn movement of migrant workers that ultimately sabotaged the government's attempt to keep them in the state they were trapped in, recruiting them into manufacturing, construction, and farm sites – according to a logic that transformed 'stranded labor' into 'forced labor' (Samaddar, 2021: 146). This form of struggle will leave deep traces in India.

'Reverse migration' has characterised several migratory landscapes during the pandemic. Examples abound in the Americas, where, as Soledad Álvarez Velasco (2021:24) writes, it 'is an unprecedented form of mobility that gives a glimpse of mobility as a mechanism for sustaining migrants' lives amidst the pandemic'. Migratory trajectories across the Americas are diverse and cannot be reduced to the South–North route (see Cordero et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the role of Mexico in the geography and dynamics of migration in the Americas is crucial, due to the multiple political pressures of the United States and to the transit migration heading North from Central America that has complicated older patterns of Mexican migration to the United States. In the pandemic, Mexico has even become a transit point for migrants heading to the United States from countries as far afield as Brazil and India (and more recently from Ukraine and African countries), where the toll of COVID-19 has been distressingly high (Jordan, 2021).

To put it in the language of logistics, Mexico has become during the pandemic a kind of bottleneck or chokepoint. The country's migration governance regime has collapsed, and the closure of the network of *casas del migrante* ('migrants' houses'), unable to cope with the health emergency, has left thousands of transit migrants stranded without aid (Irazuzta and Ibarra, 2021). A strange sense of immobility has substituted for the frantic working of the migration governance regime in Mexico and beyond. 'Everything is put on hold', says Roger, a Venezuelan migrant living in Chile (Álvarez Velasco, 2021: 13). The temporality of waiting, which is not new in migration (see Jacobsen et al., 2021), seems to dominate the present, while spaces of confinement, formal and informal, have proliferated. Nevertheless, under the appearance of standstill, the tension between mobility and control continues to play out. While the hardening and multiplication of borders foreshadow new disciplinary techniques and legal apparatuses that will shape future regimes of control, practices of mobility and struggles of migration continue to reorganise themselves. New forms of migrant mobility open new routes and struggles for regularisation intensify, while a 'micro-politics of care and solidarity' provides help from within migrant communities to people on the move (Álvarez Velasco: 32). There is no evidence, Álvarez Velasco concludes, that restrictive migratory policies, reinforced during the

pandemic, or migrant mobilities will decrease in the Americas. They rather ‘co-exist in tension’, outlining an assemblage of authoritarianism and mobility, to echo Xiang’s analysis of China, although there is a need to stress that ‘authoritarianism’ does not necessarily refer here to an explicitly authoritarian political regime and may well signal the proliferation of authoritarian governmental practices within formally democratic states.

The persistence and even stubbornness of migration challenges are also apparent in other borderscapes, including the Mediterranean. Over the past years, the Mediterranean has become what Charles Heller (2021: 118) terms a ‘deathscape’ and simply put the most lethal maritime border in the world, ‘a fault-line of the world system’. Soon after the outbreak of the pandemic, passage became even more risky and shipwrecks multiplied, culminating in what is known as the ‘Easter massacre’ in April 2020, when several boats escaping from Libya were left unassisted for days. Nine migrants travelling on a precarious boat died of drowning or dehydration ‘despite having been detected by aerial assets of the Armed Forces of Malta and the EU border agency Frontex’ (Stierl and Tazzioli, 2021: 2). The lack of assistance by authorities regardless of international law obligations has a relatively long history in the Mediterranean, leading to conflicts with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists engaged in Search and Rescue operations (Mezzadra, 2020a).

This official indifference to migrant plights continues to characterise the Mediterranean borderscape and the management of the European maritime frontier. It also casts their effects on land, for instance, along the so-called Balkan route that is taken by thousands of migrants coming from the Eastern Mediterranean to reach core European countries like Germany (see Collins and Minca, 2021). In the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic, the Schengen Area of free circulation that the Mediterranean borderscape should circumscribe along with the Eastern land border was increasingly fragmented by measures to confront the pandemic, leaving thousands of migrants and refugees on the move within Europe stranded in enclaves and niches close to ‘internal borders’. A crisis of asylum and a deterioration of living conditions of asylum seekers were general trends in Europe, with obvious implications for people attempting to cross the Mediterranean (Meer et al., 2020). Nowhere is this crisis and deterioration more apparent than in the shameful ‘hotspot’ of Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos, where thousands of migrants and refugees were stranded in horrible conditions (see Garelli and Tazzioli, 2020) before the fire that devastated it in September 2020.

‘Quarantine ships’ at sea and other ‘cramped spaces’ on land have been the destination for migrants arriving in Italy during the pandemic. Nevertheless, migrants continue to cross the Mediterranean, putting their lives at risk to challenge the European border regime. This predicament finds one of its sources in the peculiar situation in Libya, although many migrants also leave from Tunisia. Libya is becoming a hotspot of geopolitical tensions, with the presence of Turkey, which has ongoing conflicts for extraction rights in the Eastern Mediterranean with Greece, and the shadow of Russia haunting Western European powers like Italy and France traditionally influential in the country due to the colonial past. This situation shows how migration is captured in wider power games and resource clashes. Thousands of migrants, who are part of wider networks of transnational and transcontinental mobility, continue to be held in detention camps, where they are exposed to violence and forced labour. And they continue to look for ways to escape, by any means necessary. In early 2022, hundreds of them organised demonstrations and sit-ins in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) building in Tripoli, drafting a manifesto, and explicitly politicising their claims (Refugees in

Libya, 2022). This explicit form of struggle is of course very important, although it should not obscure the relevance of other mobility struggles, a notion that can be applied to all the contexts we discussed once their heterogeneity (even regarding the constitution of such positions as migrant and citizen) is emphasised. Race and gender, in particular, cut through both the working of border regimes and related mobility struggles, in ways that deserve a detailed investigation and careful political reflection.

## Conclusion

The four cases of China, India, the Americas, and the Mediterranean offer snapshots of migration in the pandemic conjuncture. Although the language of crisis has narrative limits and as time goes on the arrival of COVID-19 seems to signal a permanently changed condition rather than a cycle of boom and bust, we think the notion of a double crisis of mobility and capital, which figures in the title of this special issue of *Politics*, offers an analytical perspective on the transitions at hand. The notion of crisis does for us here a kind of descriptive job, shedding light on a series of a set of pitfalls, bottlenecks, and obstructions that have emerged in the field of mobility since the outbreak of the pandemic, although they are part and parcel of long-term trends. In speaking of the capitalist virus, we seek not only to register how capitalism provided fertile ground for the emergence of COVID-19 but also to show how the pandemic has exacerbated tensions between mobility and control in ways that shape the circulation of capital and the social reproduction of labour. The focus on migration is not for us a casual or even strategic choice but one necessitated by material overlap and tensions among migratory movements, the regulation and working of labour markets, the reorganisation of spaces of capital, and emerging configurations of capital and state. Certainly, these relations take different forms across the world's variegated and shifting regional and geographical spaces. Interruptions to hypermobility in China, resistance to neo-Malthusian population management in India, the tightening and testing of migratory chokepoints in the Americas, continued migrant pressing across the Mediterranean's deathscapes and Europe's reorganised internal borders – these are incongruous experiences deeply embedded in social and political histories that guide processes of bordering, experimentation, and conflict. These unfolding migratory situations illustrate the heightening of relations among mobility and capital, and how the pandemic has intensified them.

We do not think that COVID-19 will lead migration to decrease in coming years, although the ongoing challenges and effects of the pandemic will probably mean that migrants take on new characteristics and forge new routes. In this context, it is difficult to predict what will happen with projects of global migration governance such as the one instantiated by the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration' promoted by the United Nations and signed by several governments in December 2018. We tend to agree with Ignacio Irazuzta and Idalia Ibarra (2021: 5, our translation) when they write that 'the engagement for orderly, regular, and safe migration . . . simply recognizes the disorder, irregularity, and unsafety of world migration to manage it through a new regime'. Once again, it is in struggles like those of migrant workers in India, as well as in the stubbornness of migrants stuck in detention camps in Libya or the Greek islands, that we see the potential for forging a different regime of mobility. Yet the stakes of these struggles are not restricted to the realm of migration alone. As we contend, they have ramifications for the future of world capitalism and the health and happiness of those who work within and against this heterogeneous and seemingly omnipresent planetary system.

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## ORCID iD

Brett Neilson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6958-9656>

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### Author biographies

Sandro Mezzadra is Professor of Political Theory at the Department of Arts, University of Bologna, and Adjunct Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. In the past decade, his work has centred on the relations between globalisation, migration, and political processes, on contemporary capitalism, as well as on postcolonial theory and criticism. He is an active participant in the 'post-workerist' debates and one of the founders of the website Euronomade ([www.euronomade.info](http://www.euronomade.info)). Apart from writings with Brett Neilson, he has published widely in the Italian, English, German, and Spanish languages. His latest book in English is *In the Marxian Workshops: Producing Subjects* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

Brett Neilson is Professor and Deputy Director at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. In the past decade, his work has centred on issues of migration, borders, and globalisation, logistics and digitalization, contemporary capitalism, geopolitics, and automation. With Sandro Mezzadra, he has published *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013) and *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2019). His writings have been translated into Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Slovenian, Turkish, Arabic, Polish, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.