



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE DELLA RICERCA

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Critical border studies

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Mezzadra, S., Neilson, B. (2024). Critical border studies. Cheltenham : Edward Elgar.

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/966953> since: 2024-04-02

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/>

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

Critical border studies as critical political theory

Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson

Sandro Mezzadra (PhD, History of Political Thought and Institutions, University of Turin, 1993) is Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Bologna, Department of Arts and adjunct research fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. With Brett Neilson, he is author of *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013) and *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2019).

Brett Neilson (PhD, English, Yale University, 1993) is Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. With Sandro Mezzadra, he is author of *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013) and *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2019).

1. In the aftermath of the Second World War the study of borders remained confined in the West to traditional disciplines like geopolitics and political geography. Consequently, the border was not acknowledged as a basic concept for political theory and science. It was rather taken for granted and considered as a kind of neutral institution, and borders appeared as stable. Elsewhere in the world, the situation was quite different. In the framework of the struggles and turmoil of decolonization, in particular, the establishment of new borders led to bloody conflicts, in a way foreshadowed by the catastrophe of the partition of the Indian sub-continent. The end of the cold war substantially changed the situation, and in particular in Europe the wars that spelled the end of Yugoslavia were a dramatic warning regarding the new relevance of borders. While mainstream authors were celebrating the steady emergence of a “borderless world” driven by market economy and liberal democracy, there was a pronounced awareness among critical thinkers in the early 1990s that what was discussed as “globalization” was indeed characterized by a proliferation and at the same time profound transformations of borders. The work of Étienne Balibar (1992) can be considered as symptomatic in this regard.

Balibar’s work has been definitely very influential for the formation of the lively and heterogeneous field of critical border studies. Another book that deserves to be mentioned in

this regard is the one by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987). On the one hand, that book emphasized a whole set of questions that did not figure in the research agenda of traditional studies of the border, ranging from cultural and linguistic hybridization to the panoply of clandestine passages that involve negotiation of the hatred and violence constitutive of borderlands. On the other hand, Anzaldúa focused on movements of migration across the U.S. border, which would become a kind of iconic topic for critical border studies. More generally, it is precisely the nexus between borders and migration that spurred the development of the field, amidst a whole set of developments that since the 1990s were characterized by a reinforcement and even fortification of borders against movements of migrants and refugees in many parts of the world. Critical border studies became intertwined with new forms of border activism and solidarity with migrants, while research and theory in the field worked the boundary between a number of disciplines, including legal and political theory, anthropology and critical geography, cultural and postcolonial studies (see De Genova, Mezzadra, and Pickles 2015).

The nexus between borders and migration remains central in critical border studies today. From the point of view of political theory and science, there is a need to stress that crucial political concepts have been tested by such studies over the last years. The question of sovereignty, for instance, has been often reconsidered from the angle of the border, be it claiming its reinforcement following the lead of Giorgio Agamben (1998), or tracking its transformations and even waning (Vaughan-Williams 2009; Brown 2010). Citizenship has been also analyzed, in a way taking the border as a crucial site for the production of its code, either focusing on exclusion or deploying more nuanced notions such as “differential inclusion” as an angle on the internal hierarchies of citizenship (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Issues of political subjectivity are more generally an important focus for critical border studies, in particular for scholars working along the lines of the “autonomy of migration approach,” which emphasizes the political dimensions of movements and struggles of migration as well as of the challenges they posit to borders (see for instance De Genova 2017). The transformations of territory, to conclude this necessarily incomplete list, is another important political topic that has been tackled by critical border studies, in an attempt to go beyond any “territorialist epistemology” and exploring the emergence of new territorial formations from the privileged angle provided by the transformations of borders (Parker, Vaughan-Williams, et al. 2009).

2. Sovereignty, citizenship, and territory, three of the notions that we have just mentioned, are obviously foundational concepts for modern Western political theory. It is not surprising that critical border studies engage with them. The border is indeed a constitutive element of each of those notions. We can even add something more, which means that without the tracing of a border neither sovereignty nor citizenship and territory can exist. This is the reason why we contend that the border has a “productive” nature and that it makes sense to take it not only as a research object but also as a “method” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). What we mean by this is that the point of view provided by the border invites us to focus on the constituent moment of a whole series of concepts and institutions. Therefore, it allows us to grasp the interplay and relations of forces, the violence at stake in their working, and at the same time it opens up spaces where thinking their radical transformation becomes possible. One can even say that there was a pronounced awareness of the scandalous, constituent role played by borders for politics at the very origin of modern political theory, for instance in the work of Thomas Hobbes. Nevertheless, it is symptomatic that the most significant reference to borders in *Leviathan* (1651) is not to be found in Part II (“Of Common-wealth”), but rather in Part I (“Of Man”), chapter 13, famously dedicated to the “Naturall Condition of Mankind” (Hobbes 1981, 187). A kind of neutralization of the border had already started.

A political theory of the border requires a pronounced awareness of the historicity of the concept of border we are familiar with today – which means with the idea of the border as a line that separates on the map discrete political territories. It is important to repeat that such concept is relatively recent, since it emerges in Europe between the 16th and 17th century through the combined effect of the birth of modern cartography and modern political theory that went hand in hand with the steady development of the modern territorial state (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, ch. 2). At the same time, it is obvious that the globalization of the border as a line was only possible through decolonization. Perhaps less obvious but quite important is the fact that European colonial and imperial expansion did not imply the “export” of the bordering techniques connected to the border as a line. The domination of colonial peoples and territories followed completely different blueprints, with a panoply of gradations, differential and hierarchical distribution of power and subjecthood, and “anomalous” spatial formations (Benton 2010). While this divergence of European and colonial histories of borders is a topic relevant in itself, colonialism provides us with a rich archive of bordering technologies and territorial arrangements that in many ways and in unexpected combinations are reemerging today across diverse geographical scales.

The border as a line continues to be the main normative reference for international politics and quite often for political theory and science in our present. Moreover, processes of border reinforcement shape political rhetoric and even concrete border policies in many parts of the world. Imagined or concrete walls are springing up, while national security and even independence are often invoked to advocate a restrictive border politics. The ensuing impression can be that the border as a line continues to be firm as it is designed to be. Critical border studies (at least some of them, the ones that we find more interesting and challenging) provide us with a radically different picture. The point is of course not to deny the absolutely concrete effects of processes of border reinforcement – first of all on migrants and refugees, whose border crossing is made more exhausting, perilous, and too often lethal. What is worth emphasizing is rather that, at the same time, borders are made more and more flexible and mobile, drawing complex and even elusive geographies of control. Processes of “border externalization,” which means the involvement of third countries in the border policy of a given state usually with respect to migration, are a classical example of such mobility of borders and are more and more widespread today (see for instance De Genova, Mezzadra, and Pickles 2015, 73-77 and Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015). Take for instance Mexico, which has been turned into a “vertical border” by pressures of the U.S. and negotiation with other Central American governments (see Aquino, Decosse, and Varela 2013). As Balibar wrote several years ago, borders do not exist anymore simply “at the edge of territory, marking the point where it ends.” They “have rather been transported into the middle of political space” (Balibar 2004, 109).

3. Before picking up again on Balibar’s words, there is a need to point to another important question. We highlighted the relevance of political questions for critical border studies. Less explored in the field is the critique of the political economy of borders, which we find crucially important. What is the relation of capital, in history and present, with borders? We know from Marx that capital is characterized by an expansive drive, by a push against any “limit” (Marx uses the German word *Grenze*, which also means “border”). Capital’s space is ultimately and necessarily the “world market” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). At the same time, it continuously negotiates its relations with what scholars of “world system theory” call “territorialism” (see Arrighi 1994), it inscribes its expansive frontiers within shifting assemblages of territorial boundaries. Looking at migration in particular, it is easy to see that especially since the nationalization of labor markets in the late 19th century in Europe, the

border played paramount roles in the production and reproduction of labor power. This provides us with an important critical angle on the operations of borders even today, although in conditions that have dramatically changed with respect to not only the 19th century but also the height of industrialization and “Fordism.” Besides this, borders have also historically enabled the forging of specific national frameworks for the development of capitalism and have mediated the access of specific capitals to the “world market.”

Needless to say, such questions are not merely economic, they are rather deeply political. And there is a need to study them in the present conjuncture. Contemporary capitalism seems significantly different to previous capitalist formations also from the point of view of its relations with borders. To be clear, borders continue to matter, they often provide indispensable devices of articulation for the global processes that enable contemporary forms of valorization and accumulation of capital. The flexibility of borders enables recruitment schemes of migrant labor adequate to the flexibility of production, while the rigidity of borders filters and stops unwanted migratory movements, often producing “illegal” workforces (De Genova 2005). Even processes of financialization are far from ethereal and are predicated upon complex relations with territory and borders.

Nevertheless, what needs to be emphasized is that today capital is able more than ever to produce its own spaces. Logistics, which is definitely important for the working of contemporary capitalism, is particularly important from this point of view. Deborah Cowen (2014) notes that logistical spaces are characterized by the prevalence of what she calls “seams” as opposed to borders that seal a political space. If one looks at the peculiar spatial formations connected to the operations of logistics, from the hub to the corridor, from the special economic zone to the hotspot, it is easy to see that a new capitalist geography is emerging, with relevant potential frictions with the political geography predicated on borders. Needless to say, also this geography has its lines of demarcation and exclusion. Both those frictions and these lines of demarcation should figure prominently in the future research agenda of critical border studies.

4. Going back to the quote by Balibar, who contends that borders have been transported “into the middle of political space,” we need to note that over the last years we have witnessed a growing attention to a panoply of “internal” boundaries. Both the flexibilization and the reinforcement of border regimes in many parts of the world, which critical scholars attempt

to grasp through the notion of “border regime” (see for instance Hess and Kasperek 2010), have run parallel to a whole set of processes that challenge the homogeneity of citizenship, territory, and labor. New and old borders proliferate to nurture a differential and hierarchical governance of such processes of heterogenization. New urban boundaries emerge, intertwining with old ones, demarcations surround specific productive, logistical, and extractive sites, legal boundaries penetrate the fabric of citizenship, new hierarchies cross and divide the composition of labor, gender and race establish peculiar boundaries that are spread across society as a whole. Needless to say, none of the boundaries we just mentioned is completely new. But we are convinced that nowadays we are confronted with a new scale in the proliferation of boundaries across formally unified political spaces. While there is a need to take stock of the implications of such proliferation for the main political concepts we continue to employ, it is also necessary to trace the connections between the new salience of internal boundaries and the ways in which international borders are managed and governed.

Thinking of specific borders and borderlands, where tensions and conflicts surrounding movements of migration are particularly intense, images of humanitarian catastrophe come to mind – people dying in the desert or drowning at sea, child detention or overcrowded detention centers on islands. Such scandalous images nurture an indignation that builds a key feature of critical border studies. While it is important to acknowledge that humanitarian actors have been relevant figures in border activism (and often also in border regimes) over the last two decades, it is also necessary to critically analyze the kind of “gaze” on the border that is nurtured by the “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2012). On the one hand, the border is unilaterally posited as the scene of a “crisis,” of an “emergence” that obscures the relations with wider processes on both sides of the border. On the other hand, “humanitarian reason” reproduces a patronizing gaze on the people to be “rescued,” a “victimization” that ultimately deprives them not only of any agency but also of their peculiar histories. One of the main challenges for the analysis of border politics today lies precisely in the forging of an alternative approach, one that emphasizes the agency of people on the move while recognizing the persistent role of race, gender, and class that are often inscribed onto their very bodies.

Such an approach allows researchers to remain focused on the specificity of what happens at a single border while at the same time connecting it to wider processes that are prompting a proliferation of borders and the emergence of new territorial formations elsewhere. The

notion of “border struggles” can be helpful here to politicize such an analysis (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, ch. 8). Speaking of struggles with respect to what is often framed in terms of a humanitarian catastrophe emphasizes the political stakes surrounding borders and the challenges posited to them by movements of migration. Needless to say, it does not necessarily imply any form of “consciousness” on the side of migrants. It simply attempts to grasp the intensity of a material clash among forces, without in any way losing sight of the often-tragic outcome of that clash. Border struggles remind us that it is at the border that crucial aspects of citizenship, territory, justice, and labor markets are fabricated every day. And while there is a need to repeat once again that border struggles fought along international borders remain absolutely specific since they are too often struggles for life or death, we are convinced that the notion of border struggles has a much wider scope. It needs to be operationalized in a way that allows an analysis of the proliferation of borders that crisscross the present with a focus on a proliferation of struggles. Indeed, a cartography of borders needs to be at the same time a cartography of struggles.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Aquino, Alejandra, Amarela Varela, and Frédéric Decossé, eds. 2013. *Desafiando Fronteras. Control de movilidad y experiencias migratorias en contexto capitalista*, Oaxaca: Frontera Press/Sur.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. 1994. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso.
- Balibar, Étienne. 1992. *Les Frontières de la Démocratie*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2004. *We the People of Europe. Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Benton, Lauren. 2010. *A Search for Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2010. *Walled States, Waning Democracy*. New York: Zone Books.
- Casas-Cortes, Maribel, Sebastian Cobarrubias, and John Pickles. 2015. ‘Riding Routes and Itinerant Borders,’ in *Antipode*, 47, 4: 894-914.
- Cowen, Deborah. 2014. *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in the Global Trade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De Genova, Nicholas, ed. 2017. *The Borders of “Europe.” Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- De Genova, Nicholas. 2005. *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and ‘Illegality’ in Mexican Chicago*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press.
- Hess, Sabine and Bernd Kasperek, eds. 2010. *Grenzregime. Diskurse, Praktiken, Institutionen in Europa*. Berlin: Assoziation A.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1981. *Leviathan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mezzadra Sandro, Nicholas De Genova and John Pickles, eds. 2015. 'New Keywords: Migration and Borders,' in *Cultural Studies*, 29, 1: 55-87.

Mezzadra, Sandro and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.

Parker, Noel, Nick Vaughan-Williams et al. 2009. 'Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies,' in *Geopolitics*, 14: 582-587.

Vaughan-Williams, Nick. 2009. *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

This is a draft chapter. The final version is available in Encyclopedia of Critical Political Science edited by C.W. Barrow, published in 2024, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800375918>

It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Without limiting the author's and publisher's exclusive rights, any unauthorised use of this work to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited.