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‘We are of the connections’: migration, methodological nationalism, and ‘militant research’

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In an effort to make some sort of contribution to ‘a genuinely critical scholarship of migration’, I have had occasion to make the following claim: ‘A genuinely critical scholarship of migration must in fact be addressed to the task not merely of describing but also theorizing—and critiquing—actual struggles, the real social relations of unresolved antagonism and open-ended struggle that continuously constitute social life.’¹ This proposition is not really anything very original or innovative. It simply adapts to the specific topic of migration and migrants’ struggles what Marx and Engels memorably asserted with regard to their own theoretical conclusions—namely, that they ‘merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes’.² Migration, on a global scale, is indeed a historical movement taking place all around us, ‘under our very eyes’. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the actual relations of migration must be apprehensible both in terms of an existing struggle (in the singular) as well as in terms of the plurality of more locally inflected struggles, simultaneously. Migrations are always irreducibly particular in their historical specificities and substantive characteristics.³ Yet, they remain nonetheless also instances of a larger dynamic of human mobility on a global scale.⁴ Migrant struggles, in other words, correspond simultaneously to the antagonistic interdependency that is intrinsic to and constitutive of the capital–labour relation, which ultimately operates always on a global scale, and also to the multiplicity of more locally inflected peculiarities through which distinct, historically specific migrations are configured politically in terms of ‘national’, ‘racial’, ‘cultural’, or ‘religious’ identities and differences, replete furthermore with all their abundant gendered, sexualized, juridical, and class particularities. Within the field of migration studies, this dialectic between migration’s singular or general character, on the one hand, and the multiple heterogeneous aspects of distinct migrations and all the complex tensions that ensue therefrom, on the other hand, is the very source of theory as such.

In the essay quoted above, I continue:

Here, it is crucial to specify that the very notion of ‘society’—the reified and fetishized ‘thing’ that tends to be casually called ‘society’—involves an uncritical presupposition whereby the presumed ‘object’ of social analysis is objectified on precisely a ‘national’ spatial scale […] The very processes of state formation and their compulsive nationalization must consequently be seen as part of what is in fact generated through the social struggles surrounding transnational human
mobility and the political conflicts of ‘immigration’, whereby the figure of ‘the immigrant’ is produced as an object of [...] nationalism [...] Part of what is at stake in these struggles [...] is no less than the state itself.5

These remarks were meant to formulate in a relatively succinct way the whole vexed conundrum that has come to be known as methodological nationalism. ‘[I]t is astonishing’, David Harvey reflects, ‘to note how much of conventional social theory as well as political practice was corralled within the unexamined territorial frame of the nation-state [...]’.6 As I have tried to underscore, moreover, the problem is not only one of an unexamined set of effectively ‘national’ (indeed, nationalist) presuppositions through which scholarship as well as much of politics have systematically and more or less methodically been confined. Rather, the problem has also been that the very struggles to which political theory and practice have been addressed and the very ferment of social life that social theory has sought to understand have been and continue to be fundamentally implicated in the ongoing re-production and re-fetishization of exactly those same naturalized ‘national’ formations. In other words, the dilemma of methodological nationalism has never been merely a problem of thought, never simply a matter of not thinking critically enough. It is indeed a manifestation of the veritable participation of researchers and scholars—whether consciously or unwittingly—in the very same socio-political processes and struggles through which the ‘national’ configuration of ‘society’ (or, the social field) is reified and actualized as the territorial expression of state power. In other words, when we engage in research or produce social theory, as Edward Said contends (with regard to a somewhat different but emphatically postcolonial problem), ‘we are so to speak of the connections, not outside and beyond them’.7 We are of the connections.

The larger quotation of Said from which this passage is borrowed is situated as the opening epigraph of the preface of my book Working the Boundaries. I describe the text as:

a book about the laborious condition of working men and women, and about the borders and boundaries that have meaningfully framed their lives and labours, but above all, it is about the everyday struggles that go into producing those boundaries [...] [and furthermore, it is] not only a book about the ways that the significant boundaries that define social life get elaborated in everyday practice, but also about working and re-working the boundaries of how we even begin to understand and think about those lines of difference and division that impose their dreadful order on the sheer restlessness and creative ferment of living and historical becoming.8

In those same opening passages, I add that my book ‘takes as its fundamental starting point the premise that “things” could have been different, and that nothing has to remain as it presently appears’.9 Hence, by juxtaposing these particular excerpts from my previous work, what I seek to convey here, as concisely as possible, is that I have long seen the questions of methodological nationalism and what might be called ‘militant research’ as deeply interconnected, indeed, as mutually constitutive, albeit in opposed and contradictory ways—interlocked in a larger process of antagonism and conflict that animates the
composition-decomposition-recomposition of ‘society’ itself. In short, as scholars of ‘migration’—and above all, as practitioners of ‘militant research’—we must attend to a self-reflexive critique of our own complicities with the ongoing nationalization of ‘society’.

We, as researchers or scholars of migration, are indeed ‘of the connections’ between migrants’ transnational mobilities and the political, legal, and border-policing regimes that seek to orchestrate, regiment, and manage their energies. We are ‘of these connections because there is no ‘outside’ or analytical position beyond them. There is no neutral ground. The momentum of the struggle itself compels us, one way or the other, to ‘take a side’. Indeed, the larger juridical regimes of citizenship, denizenship, and alienage configure us to be always-already located within the nexus of inequalities that are at stake in these conflicts. Investigating and producing knowledge about these struggles merely implicates us further, more directly, more immediately. In his foundational postcolonial critique of the discipline of social anthropology, Talal Asad memorably indicted the ethnographic myopia that systematically precluded anthropological knowledge from including within its purview a critical analysis of the wider (effectively global) socio-political system of colonialism. As a result, the distinct expertise that was thus generated could only be judged to have been, in Asad’s damning phrase, ‘malformed’.10 So it is likewise with migration research: it must strive to rigorously account for its own material and practical conditions of possibility within a field of socio-political struggle in which the stakes are precisely the survival and reproduction or erosion and subversion of a global political order predicated upon territorially-defined formations of state power, of which methodological nationalism is merely the most routine and banal reflex. Otherwise, we contribute to the production of a knowledge that is distorted, contorted, perverted, compromised by its own collusion or unwitting complicity. Thus, there is no neutral vantage point. The migration researcher is a part of the field of struggle and a participant therein. A part of the conflict, a party to the dispute, one way or the other, s/he is therefore a partisan, a ‘militant’. At the risk of perhaps rendering things overly simple, the question is, simply put, ‘Which side are you on?’

Wherever one stands, however, and regardless of where one’s sympathies and solidarities lie, the complexities remain and the challenges persist. It is obviously insufficient to seek consolation in the complacencies of a ‘militant’ posture or a dogmatic activist allegiance. For, as I have already suggested, methodological nationalism and the still more general problem of what may be called methodological statism exude their elusive allure and exert their subtle force regardless of a researcher’s mere affirmation of the ‘right’ ideas. What allows the conceits of nationalism and statism to operate in so methodical a manner is that they correspond to ‘real abstractions’—‘purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations’.11 It is not merely a problem of thought. Rather, it is a dilemma that is inextricable from the continuous requirement that our fetishized social ‘realities’ be re-fetishized, that their objectivity be re-objectified, and therefore, that the force and vitality of human subjective powers be persistently subordinated, indeed subjected, as the
externalized, ‘objective’ truth of ‘society’ and the power of the state (‘national’ or otherwise).  

The persistent reification of migrants and migration—even in critical migration studies—thus (re-)fetishizes and (re-)naturalizes the epistemological stability attributed to the (‘national’) state as a modular fixture of geopolitical space. This is especially pertinent for the elaboration of postcolonial critiques, because the global modularity and presumptive universality of the nation form have been both the profound consequence of anti-colonial insurgency and decolonization on a planetary scale, as well as the pernicious and perverse effect of a ubiquitous postcolonial elision of the enduring and unresolved legacies of empire. Yet, even prior to the demise of Europe’s colonial fortunes, George Orwell memorably and incisively noted, ‘the over-whelming bulk of the British proletariat [did] not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa’. That is to say, prior to the institutionalization of the nation form as the ubiquitous normative modality of political life worldwide, during that protracted era when the majority of humanity did not inhabit the territories of states with even a nominal claim to the semblance of ‘national’ sovereignty and independence, the colonial order of things ensured that the epistemological tenacity of nationalism relegated various populations of subjects, denizens, and citizens to ostensibly discrete bordered spaces, and deemed them to be presumptively immobile, effectively incarcerated as ‘natives’ in their natal places. Indeed, human mobility only appears as a ‘problem’ once it comes to be subordinated within the global purview of this sort of colonial regime of mobility control and large-scale immobilization, accumulating populations within the confines of the vast de facto prison-labour camps known as colonies. 

In this regard, migration scholarship (however critical) is implicated in a continuous (re-)reification of ‘migrants’ as a distinct category of human mobility (or, mobile humanity). After all, if there were no borders, there would be no migrants—only mobility. Another way of saying the same would be that the elemental and elementary freedom of movement of the human species necessarily posits a relation between the species and the space of the planet, as a whole. From this standpoint, territorially-defined ‘national’ states and their borders remain enduringly and irredicably problematic. Likewise, the methodological nationalism that rationalizes this whole conjuncture of borders-making-migrants supplies a kind of defining horizons for migration studies as such. 

Borders today seem to have become inextricable from migration, even perhaps predominantly concerned with and oriented to migration. As William Walters incisively notes, ‘the border has become a privileged signifier: it operates as a sort of meta-concept that condenses a whole set of negative meanings, including illegal immigration […] At the same time, the border holds out the promise of a solution to these hazards’. The distinction between a guarded and protected ‘domestic’ space for ‘us’, which presumptively ought to be one of natal entitlement and nativist protection, and the ‘foreigners’ who may be deemed to properly belong elsewhere, beyond the borders, is nevertheless routinely destabilized, as the ‘natives’ of other (formerly colonized) places defy their (postcolonial) spatial incarceration through cross-border mobility projects that transgress these very borders, and assert their presence within the metropolitan spaces defined by those protectionist boundaries.
Borders, then, are most salient inasmuch as they are perceived to be always-already violated, and thus, perpetually inadequate or dysfunctional, if not frankly corrupted. And this is true in spite of ever-increasing border securitization; indeed, the securitization of borders only intensifies the perception that they are in fact always insecure, supplying the premier site for staging the perpetual demand for more securitization.²⁰ No number of borderzone apprehensions or deportations could ever be sufficient to sustain the semblance of ‘security’, but rather only the seeming verification of a thankless and relentless task, a job that can never be completed. Despite the ideological construction and affirmation of borders as the form of a kind of enclosure, therefore, they are operative primarily as equivocal sites or amorphous zones of permeability, perforation, transgression, and thereby, encounter and exchange.

In spite of the appearance of inadequacy or dysfunction, however, borders serve quite effectively and predictably as filters for the unequal exchange of various forms of value.²¹ The filtering character of borders is especially visible as the intensified enforcement of border crossings of easiest passage relegates migrant mobilities into zones of more severe hardship and potentially lethal passage.²² In a de facto process of artificial selection, these deadly obstacle courses serve to sort out the most able-bodied, disproportionately favouring the younger, stronger, and healthier among prospective illegalized (labour) migrants. The militarization and ostensible fortification of borders, furthermore, prove to be much more reliable for enacting a strategy of capture than to function as mere technologies of ‘exclusion’. Once migrants have successfully navigated their ways across such borders, the onerous risks and costs of departing and later attempting to cross yet again become inordinately prohibitive.²³

Although they provide a context for exchange, therefore, borders are enduringly productive. Borders, in this sense, may be considered to be a kind of means of production—for the production of space, or indeed, the production of difference in space, the production of spatial difference.²⁴ As enactments in and upon space, like any means of production, borders must themselves be produced and continuously re-produced. Yet, they are generative of larger spaces, differentiated through the relations that borders organize and regiment, facilitate or obstruct. Nonetheless, the differences that borders appear to naturalize—between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between ‘here’ and ‘there’—are in fact generated precisely by the incapacity of borders to sustain and enforce any rigid and reliable separations. Thus, we may say that borders are deployed strategically but always operate tactically, intervening within fields of force that are constituted by a wider variety of contending energies and projects than could ever be encompassed only by state powers and their techniques of bordering.²⁵ Here, of course, I have in mind above all the autonomy and subjectivity of migration as a recalcitrant and obstreperous force that precedes and exceeds any border authority’s capacities for comprehensive regimentation and control.²⁶ Indeed, if it is true that were there no borders, there would be no migrants, it may likewise be increasingly the case, nonetheless, that if there were no migrants, there would be no borders. Serhat Karakayali and Enrica Rigo, for instance, argue persuasively that the virtualized borders of ‘Europe’ are literally activated by migrant mobilities: ‘virtual borders do not exist unless they are crossed’.²⁷ Thus, the
ubiquity of migrant mobilities comes first; the ubiquity of borders (in their contemporary configurations) and the diverse panoply of new techniques and technologies of border policing and immigration enforcement come always as a response, a reaction formation. As Vassilis Tsianos and Serhat Karakayali contend, ‘The question is not who is the winner of this game, it is rather: who initiates the changes of its rules?’ Indeed, ‘migration regimes produce the transformation of mobility into politics’.

The more extravagant that border policing becomes, the more in fact it participates in what I have called the Border Spectacle—persistently and repetitively implicating the materiality of border enforcement practices in the symbolic and ideological production of a scene of ‘exclusion’ that is always in reality constitutive of an obscene fact of subordinate inclusion. Migration studies, critical or otherwise, have long been challenged not to become ensnared in this spectacle. Particularly in the denunciatory mode of a putative critique of border militarization and aggressively restrictive immigration policies, migration studies frequently risks becoming an unwitting accomplice to the spectacular task of broadcasting the one-dimensional falsehood of border enforcement as the perfect enactment of ever more seamless and hermetically sealed exclusionary barriers.

If borders are thus productive of differences in material and practical ways—in short, if borders produce differentiations—then it is crucial to note that they not only involve a physics (through the mobilization of various technologies of bordering) but also sustain a definite metaphysics—one that is centrally implicated in the particularization of the political (a global relation), according to the universalization, modularization, and normalization of the nation form as the standard mode of territoriality of a nationalist world order. At the level of each particular border and each particular ‘national’ state, this metaphysics never ceases to re-animate the familiar but unrelenting zombie of methodological nationalism. Yet this metaphysics of borders also plays a role on an effectively global scale. At the global level, this metaphysics is what I take to be at stake in Étienne Balibar’s reference to the world-configuring function of borders. This is similarly suggested by Barry Hindess in his discussion of (bordered) citizenship as a technology for the international management of populations, or by William Walters in his discussion of deportation as a governmental technology for the international police of aliens. Indeed, we may be reminded here of Hannah Arendt’s memorable account, at the dawning of the era of decolonization, of what she depicted as ‘the new global political situation’ characterized by ‘a completely organized humanity resembling a barbed-wire labyrinth’.

Borders, as we have come to know them, do not only distinguish the official outer limits of nation-state territory and institute the (postcolonial) division between one nation-state space and another, but also sub-divide the planet as a whole and thereby re-regiment the cruel inequalities that are the global heritage of centuries of colonialism. Hence, if there were no borders, there would indeed be no migrants—only mobility. We are challenged, therefore, to more rigorously and consistently conceive anew the relation between the human species and the space of the planet, as a whole.

This, it seems to me, is the urgent task of any genuinely critical—and postcolonial—scholarship of migration—the central
problem for our militant theory just as it must be the project of our militant practice.

Notes

8 De Genova, Working the Boundaries, p 1.
9 De Genova, Working the Boundaries, p 1.
12 De Genova, ‘The Deportation Regime’.
16 De Genova, ‘Bare Life’.
19 De Genova, ‘The Deportation Regime’.
In this regard, Michel Foucault discusses the difference between warfare as strategy and the disciplinary tactics of the military: ‘It is strategy that makes it possible to understand warfare [or, alternately, borders] as a way of conducting politics between states; it is tactics that makes it possible to understand the army as a principle for maintaining the absence of warfare within civil society. The classical age saw the birth of the great political and military strategy by which nations confronted each other’s economic and demographic forces; but it also saw the birth of meticulous military and political tactics by which the control of bodies and individual forces was exercised within states’ (Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975), Alan Sheridan (trans), New York: Random House, 1979, p 168). Likewise, one of Foucault’s most important insights into what he calls ‘governmentality’ is that its end is the employment of tactics, and ‘even of using laws themselves as tactics—to arrange things in such a way that […] such and such ends may be achieved’ (Michel Foucault, ‘Governmentality’, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds), The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp 87–104, p 95).

31 De Genova, ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability’.
37 De Genova, ‘Bare Life’.