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Back to Borders

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Abstract

What is a border? Who is a migrant? The paper uses these questions to distinguish between constructivist, Marxist and postcolonial answers provided by critical border scholarship, with three aims. First, identifying common concerns and interrogating divergent trajectories, the paper offers a practical invitation to dialogue between these various positions. Second, it evidences how critical border scholarship follows a social-to-spatial analytical trajectory to answer these questions: borders and migration function as a spatial confirmation of a pre-defined ontology of the social. As this is deemed unsatisfactory, third, the paper proposes turning this analytical trajectory on its head by going back to borders, i.e. by studying the spatial manifestations of borders and migration to investigate how the social is heterogeneously configured in place-specific and embodied settings. The paper argues that *what is left* after these debates is the need to focus on actual social hierarchies, as opposed to epistemological ones.

Keywords

borders, migration, production of space, Marxism, autonomy of migration, geography, political sociology

Introduction

What is a border? Who is a migrant? These questions have haunted critical theorists since the turn of the millennium.[1] The different answers advanced since then have offered sharp analytical tools to interrogate contemporary society, and to intervene progressively in its politics. In this respect, Marxist and postcolonial scholars have offered important critical contributions, adding their voice to the constructivist perspectives traditionally associated with the field of border studies. Yet, the vast number of scholars engaging with these themes has benefited from the breadth and span of these contributions only to a certain extent. Rather, the field has clustered around strands of scholarship that respond to quite different analytical perspectives and that develop in largely autonomous fashion from each other. Despite the acknowledgement of respective positions, similar political concerns, and some shared analytical traits, these different strands promote and sustain what appear to be competing epistemological projects. This seems unsatisfactory.

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In the context of public debates, and taking as an example the ongoing migration 'crisis' unfolding in Europe, this is unsatisfactory because contributions to public fora and the blogosphere seem to be primarily concerned with the realm of representation. Rather than attempting to explain the complexities associated with such a 'crisis', border scholars have instead offered competing interpretations of 'the' crisis, advancing *one* particular interpretation of current events without much engagement with other representations. Thus, for Balibar (2015), long concerned with the relation between migration, European borders and citizenship, the crisis provoked by the men, women and children entering, but not yet integrated into, Europe, is best characterized as one of demographic enlargement. This crisis should be overcome by offering these 'virtual citizens' access to European citizenship. However, reading Žižek (2015), one would be inclined to think that these men, women and children do not simply want to 'settle for a minimum of safety and wellbeing', but are rather pursuing a utopian dream that is out of reach for most Europeans. Europe, thus, should renew its commitment to provide for the dignified treatment of those fleeing 'failed states', but at the same time impose clear rules and regulations to 'control the stream of refugees'.

Bojadžijev and Mezzadra (2015), on the contrary, use such rules and regulations to evidence the 'necropolitical' character of the European border regime, which they see as the origins of the crisis. Cetti (2015) moves beyond concerns with borders and citizenship, and represents the crisis as a war waged by Fortress Europe on the 'victims of the global crimes perpetrated by capital' across the world. Are these men, women and children 'victims', 'virtual citizens', or are they a 'constitutive force' marching 'toward a future in which the label "refugee" is always already redundant' (Motha, 2015)? Should Europe's border regime be resisted, as the Calais Migrant Solidarity group has done since 2009 (CMS webpage), or is EU leadership 'more important than ever', as Human Rights Watch (2015) suggests? How are *we*, concerned individuals, to decide which of these representations is the most accurate one? Is it the speaker or the content of the message that will help us understand how and why the encounter between EU borders and migrants is producing so many deaths and so much desperation?

Although these questions are perhaps unfair, as they are addressed to short interventions aimed at shaping particular aspects of the public debate, they seem legitimate in the realm of academic scholarship, as this is where less immediate and more reflective arguments explaining these dynamics are and should be developed. Yet, as discussed throughout the following pages, similar interrogations can be made, as strands of critical border scholarship seem clustered around seemingly non-communicating epistemic communities, rather than engaging in a productive dialogue. This is unsatisfactory because contemporary dynamics associated with borders and migration – whether we observe them in the Mediterranean, in the Sonora desert or across and within South Africa's, India's or Cambodia's borders – pose analytical challenges that do not allow for neat methodological distinctions.

Granted, Marxist and postcolonial scholarship have responded to these complexities by theorizing the relation between borders and migration in ways that go beyond their earlier formulations, and by incorporating analytical dimensions traditionally escaping their core epistemological concerns. Marxist scholarship, for example, has broadened its conceptualization of the functions of 'immigrant labour' in capitalist economies (e.g. Castles and Kosak, 1972) to incorporate concerns for social reproduction and transnationalism (e.g. Ferguson and McNally, 2015) and for migrant-embodied journeys and transit routes (e.g. Cross, 2013; Hanieh et al., 2014). Postcolonial scholarship has accepted that scapes and hybrid spaces (e.g. Appadurai, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1987) need to be more forcefully set in relation to the multiplication and heterogenization of borders (e.g. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) and to citizenship regimes (e.g. Isin, 2012). Similarly, contributions from the field of border studies have increasingly been concerned with setting the significance of their localized studies across wider scales of analysis and representation (e.g. Wastl-Walter, 2012; Wilson

and Donnan, 2012). Indeed, there seems to be a convergence in the analytical concerns with which these dynamics are studied. Yet, as discussed in detail throughout the paper, these positions maintain important differences and their dialogue appears stifled.

Attempting a simultaneous engagement with various epistemic communities seems crucial, thus, given the 'sense of a renewed urgency for a critical inquiry that would be appropriate for the current global conjuncture' (Sinha and Varma, Introduction to this issue). Indeed, the limited dialogue between Marxism and postcolonialism and their scant engagement with the institutionalized field of border studies is unsatisfactory not only in an analytical sense, but also politically, as it may prevent the development of critical platforms that address the challenges posed by contemporary borders and migration dynamics.

As a contribution towards this dialogue, and in line with the objectives of this Special Issue, this paper wants to trace compatibilities and cleavages across strands of critical border scholarship. More specifically, the paper examines constructivist, Marxist and postcolonial answers to the questions set out at the beginning of this introduction, with three aims. First, the paper identifies common analytical and political concerns and interrogates divergent analytical and political trajectories across the field. Dis-entangling and setting in conversation different strands of critical border scholarship in this manner, the paper wants to offer a practical invitation to dialogue across them.

Second, it suggests that in spite of their differences, these strands of critical border scholarship answer the questions 'what is a border?' and 'who is a migrant?' following a similar analytical trajectory. They, first, define the social forces, practices and relations that, more than others, define what a border *is*, and, second, find in borders and migration a spatial confirmation of such (pre-defined) ontology of the social. Put differently, they resolve the articulation between the social and the spatial, by using (their own understanding of) the social as an explanatory tool for the spatial. In this social-to-spatial analytical trajectory, answers to the above questions are thus developed *away from* the border itself, as they rely on a pre-defined idea of the relative significance of these forces, practices and relations.

On the contrary, third, this paper suggests that inverting this analytical trajectory may offer points of contact and articulation across these diverse and often non-communicating positions. Rather than defining borders through a pre-defined (however complex) ontology of the social, it suggests investigating borders' spatial manifestation as a way of discovering how the social is configured in place-specific and embodied settings. Such research perspective does not presuppose, but rather investigates the manifold ways in which various social forces heterogeneously configure themselves through borders. Going *back to borders* in this manner forces scholar enquiry to investigate, rather than to assume, these configurations. A concern with actual (i.e. place-specific and embodied) social hierarchies, as opposed to epistemological ones, evidences the structured but fluid and multi-directional ways in which borders are shaped by and shape social life. It also complicates the definition of what border-related progressive politics could or should involve.

The paper pursues these aims in the following manner. The next section delves into the epistemological quandaries just highlighted, as it maps various answers to the question 'what is a border?' across strands of critical scholarship. It shows how the various definitions on offer are all premised on different understandings of the process of social production of space, and illustrates the social-to-spatial analytical trajectory that they all use. The following section complicates this consideration, as it focuses on contributions concerned with the relation between borders and migration, and assesses these positions through a political lens. The last section sketches tentative research agendas aimed at harnessing the potential of working across these contributions. *What is left* of these debates (Sinha and Varma, Introduction to this issue), it will be argued, is the need to focus on common political concerns, rather than competing epistemological projects.

What Is a Border?

In their most abstract existence, borders are lines that provide socio-spatial criteria for defining and identifying a 'here' and a 'there', (some of) 'us' and 'them', and what/who is and is not. They function as social signifiers that distinguish, differentiate, and classify people and things in relation to their location in space (Sack, 1986); more precisely, in relation to their location in the spaces that *they* themselves define. In this abstract sense, in fact, the definition of borders is syllogistic: the socio-spatial coordinates that they delineate define socio-spatial identities, which, in turn, confirm those coordinates. Indeed, as aptly suggested by Balibar (2002), attempting to define what a border is risks 'going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition'. Any definition of borders is in itself a representation of the social; any representation of the social rests on a conceptualization of borders. Therein lays the epistemological quandary at the heart of this paper. Do borders define spatial coordinates that capture social identities? Alternatively, do (particular sets of) social coordinates explain where borders spatially lie?

These questions may seem paradoxical, as any critical scholar would accept that the spatial and the social are inseparable. Yet they point to profound cleavages within border scholarship. In an attempt to overcome the epistemological trap just illustrated, different strands of critical border scholarship approach this inseparable socio-spatial articulation by attributing to 'the social' epistemological precedence over 'the spatial'. Premised on the notion that social space is constituted by social relations, critical border scholarship is animated by a common desire to overcome territorially trapped assumptions about society (Agnew, 1994), and shares a conceptualization of social space unfolding within, beyond and across the confines of national territories. Much like the identities which they define, all would agree, borders are neither static nor linear, but rather a manifestation of social forces, practices and relations. In fact, what *is* a border is precisely defined by those forces, practices and relations. Analytical cleavages within this scholarship, thus, relate to the identification of which of these forces and relations, more than others, shape this process. At least three different approaches can be identified.

Constructivist approaches to the study of borders see them as historically contingent and multidimensional human fabrications which appear, disappear and differently materialize depending on the place-specific experiences and engagements of those living near, or crossing, them (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Borders are 'a distinct spatial category that develops in relation to a multitude of social processes' (Popescu, 2012), and are thus fluid and dispersed as they are *constructed* in everyday life by a variety of social agents. From this perspective, borders are better understood as an ongoing and never complete b/ordering processes, the result of dynamic and more or less successful attempts at 'ordering' relations between places and people (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). Although driven by state actors, these processes can only be captured through situated and contextual analyses, as it is in place-specific settings that borders are made real, challenged, or ignored by those living near, or crossing, them (Jones and Johnson, 2014). It is only at the Polish-Ukrainian border (Andersen et al., 2012), for instance, that European integration processes are rendered concrete by the differential responses of petty smugglers and elite migrant youth. It is only on the island of Lampedusa (Cuttitta, 2014) that the 'border play' between European migration law, 'tough' and 'humane' border policies, and migrant bodies becomes tangible and observable. Borders are constructed by the actions of social agents that strategically use them as a resource in European (Sohn, 2014), African (Feyissa and Hoene, 2010) or Afghan (Goodhand, 2005) borderlands, that transgress them by tracing alternative economic geographies across the Himalayas (Harris, 2013), or that entangle them with localized narratives of belonging and community in Bengal (Cons, 2013).

In offering a dynamic understanding of the territorial and social identities defined by borders, the above contributions rightly emphasize the multi-scalar but situated nature of bordering processes. Their concern with dispersed agency and place-specific experiences, however, risks underplaying the systemic significance of the state-centred cartography that borders define. Focusing on the agency of those threading *each* line may dissolve the inherited structures that enable, constrain or channel contemporary b/ordering processes (O'Dowd, 2010: 1032–3). It may also reify the identities defined by borders which, however challenged or transgressed, ultimately seem to be confirmed by the actions of these 'social agents'. Marxist and postcolonial conceptualizations of borders, on the contrary, are precisely concerned with their systemic significance.

The main concern of Marxist geographers is to de-fetishize both borders and the identities that they define, focusing instead on capitalist social relations that actively produce space at the service of accumulation. The secret to capital's success lies in its ability to construct combined and uneven material geographies that facilitate the extraction and realization of surplus value during the accumulation process (Herod, 1997). Whether these geographies are explained in terms of a tension between the tendencies towards equalization and differentiation inherent in capital (Smith, 1991), of a relation between concentration and dispersal in its circulation (Harvey, 1982), or in relation to the organization of production processes (Massey, 1984), unevenness in space is produced by capital. Borders, from this perspective, are *functional* to accumulation: they are a product of, and reproduce, the conditions for, capitalist development. Borders define a fundamental scale for the reproduction of capitalist geographies, the national one, which projects the false separation between politics and economics at an international level (Anderson, 2012). The jurisdictional differences that they create solve crises of accumulation through spatial fixes and constitute a key operational scale and strategic site of interventions for powerful states (Harvey, 2003). Borders facilitate the control of and create divisions within the world labour force, as the identities that they create are functional to the social control and reproduction of labour in national contexts, and, through the regulation of migrant labour, on a global scale (see next section).

From a postcolonial perspective, Marxist geographies are problematic. They abstract from practices, encounters and distributions (Thrift, 1996) and they are Eurocentric, as they offer epistemic breaks that belong and happen within a conception of knowledge originated in the European Renaissance (Mignolo, 2011). Postcolonial geographies are, on the contrary, much more indeterminate (Raghuram et al., 2014). They are sensuous, embodied and performed (Thrift, 1996). The cartography traced by borders is *fictional*: a mythical construction where the West acquires scientific and political centrality (Gregory, 1994), a construction that continues to articulate our colonial present (Gregory, 2003; see also Slater, 2003; Sidaway et al., 2003; Sharp and Briggs, 2006). They thus need to be provincialized by infusing them, for example, with cosmopolitan theorizations that unsettle the Euro-American domination of geographical knowledge production (Robinson, 2003), or by bringing to the fore 'subaltern geopolitical perspectives', i.e. positions that are not completely other, resistant or alternative to state-centred understanding of space, but that rather occupy ambiguous positions of marginality (Sharp, 2011). More aggressively, such cartographies need to be de-colonized, in the sense of overcoming dichotomous concepts and categories and thus changing the terms, not only the content, of the conversation (Mignolo, 2011). People not only make history, but also geography (Gregory, in Kothari, 2006), and thus hybridize linearly defined places and identities (Anzaldúa, 1987). There is no such thing as a border, as all spaces are porous to a greater or lesser degree (Thrift, 2006; see also Massey, 2005).

None of these approaches is defined in as stark or blunt terms as those suggested in the above paragraphs, and most of the authors cited do account for the contextual and situated difference of each border history, and for the capitalist imperatives that historically shape the practices and imaginations of those threading borders. Yet profound epistemological differences remain; they

relate to their different understanding of the social process of spatial production. The state-centred spatial cartography delineated by borders is constructed, according to the first approach, by the fluid, dynamic and situated encounter between various social agents. This cartography is produced by capital through long historical trajectories, according to Marxist geographers who emphasize the functional role of borders vis-à-vis accumulation. It is a fictional cartography, if postcolonial analytical preferences for the relational spaces established by transnational practices and encounters are to be accepted.

Indeed, Balibar's warning that the representation of the border is a precondition for its definition seems apt to characterize their different emphases. The social and the spatial are inseparable, but each of these approaches seems to attribute epistemological precedence to the social over the spatial. That is, each establishes an analytical trajectory that (pre)defines the most relevant set of social forces, practices and/or relations producing space, and on those bases, they explain what a border *is*, and what the identities that they are inseparably articulated with *are*. This is, perhaps, unavoidable: different methodological inclinations lead to different understandings of the significance of the state-centred coordinates defined by borders. The implications of this point are political.

One consequence of this trajectory, in fact, is that it leads to profoundly different ideas about what progressive border politics may involve. This point can initially be exemplified by reference to recent scholarship (Walia, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Reeves, 2014; Jones and Johnson, 2014) concerned with defining borders in ways that explicitly overcome these cleavages. Though mostly originating from outside the (institutionalized) field of border studies and geography, these books, all published within the space of a few months, have enriched the breadth of studies concerned with state boundaries as they assertively situate their study in relation to broader concerns with socio-spatial hierarchies and cleavages. Analytical fault lines similar to those identified above can nevertheless be mapped onto their contributions.

Some of these authors focus on the ways in which borders are produced and re-produced by state and non-state actors. They are concerned with the localized study of borderwork, i.e. the messy and contested business of making territory integral (Reeves), which unfolds through the everyday lives of those living near or crossing them (Jones and Johnson). Others, much more attentive to borders' systemic significance, emphasize their complicity in joining, disconnecting, working together and working off practices of dispossession and of exploitation (Mezzadra and Neilson), or are concerned with the intersection between border controls, the violence of capitalism, precarious labour and systemic social hierarchies (Walia). Some accounts are ethnographically rich (Reeves; Johnson and Jones). providing interesting 'biographies' (see Megoran, 2012) of each border discussed, while others suffer from an empirical deficit,[2] as they weave politico-philosophical texts to define epistemic perspectives cutting across the above fault lines (Mezzadra and Neilson), or use 'voices of colour' to decolonize borders' imperialism (Walia). Some prefer to account for the temporalities of the border itself, and the ways in which it appears and disappears and re-materializes differently depending on the social agent and place-specific context under examination (Reeves). Others suggest instead that the heterogeneous and discrepant temporalities of migration, of visa regimes, and of global connections converge and produce diverse emplacements (Mezzadra and Neilson).

Most importantly for the argument developed here, while they all seem concerned with the social hierarchies, inequalities and injustices associated with (the spatial manifestation of) borders, their respective conceptualization of what a border *is* differs substantially. The border is alternatively defined as a contested marker of territories (Reeves; Johnson and Jones), a complex social institution defined by the intertwining of cognitive and geographical borders and the axiomatic workings of capital (Mezzadra and Neilson), or a regime of practices, institutions, discourses and systems (Walia). These diverging conceptualizations, in turn, lead to diverging definitions of the

'identities' that are produced by and that thread borders, as the latter are alternatively animated, resisted or transgressed by 'borderlanders' (Reeves, Johnson and Jones), destabilized by the struggles of living labour (Mezzadra and Neilson), or undone by migrant justice activist networks (Walia). Consequently, they all point to different realms for progressive politics, whether this is understood to be about translating struggles for the common (Mezzadra and Neilson), offering an analytical framework for organizing migrant movements (Walia), or is to be assumed (Reeves, Johnson and Jones).

In sum, the various strands of border scholarship examined seem to apply (pre)defined methods to define what a border *is*, and to inform their respective ideas about progressive border politics. As mentioned before, this is perhaps unavoidable. Yet, this suggests that their respective understanding of the social hierarchies and cleavages re-produced by borders is defined *away from* the border itself. What follows develops this consideration, as it discusses contributions concerned with the relation between borders and migration. Differences between these contributions are even less pronounced than the ones discussed here, yet their understanding of how border controls re-produce the forces of capitalism, racism and patriarchy lead to profoundly different understandings of progressive politics.

Who Is a Migrant?

In his/her most abstract existence, a migrant is somebody who moves from one place to another. Such an answer, albeit arguably the only possible one, is analytically weak, as the number of people that fit such a definition is too large to be meaningful. Lines of socio-spatial differentiation amongst all those 'who move from one place to another', and lines of social continuity cutting across the migrant/non-migrant divide, challenge any congruent definition that exclusively refers to such a criterion. Without specifying the socio-spatial coordinates through which such movement unfolds (i.e. who moves, where to, when and why, what are the social forces generating and reproduced through their movement, what are the effects of their movement and how are they accounted for, in other words), definitions of migrants' identities premised on the movement from one place to another seem vacuous. Similarly, without specifying the socio-spatial coordinates that define those two places (i.e. which material, institutional, symbolic, etc., relations connect/separate those places, which ones make movement between them more or less significant), point of origin and point of arrival are reified as bounded and separate entities. Much as in relation to borders, in this abstract sense the definition of the migrant is syllogistic. The conceptualization of the (socio-spatial) phenomenon of migration is inseparable from the definition of (socio-spatial) coordinates, and this leads to an epistemological trap that can only be resolved through the establishment of epistemological hierarchies.

The state-centred certitudes associated to classical migration models,[3] sustaining and sustained by patterns of 'economic' and 'refugee' mass migration prevalent until the 1980s, have progressively been shattered by the geopolitical and geo-economic transformations occurred over the last four decades, to the extent that these certitudes appear today as flawed concepts. What were initially framed as analytical challenges to the here/there (e.g. Guarnizo and Smith, 1998), us/them (e.g. Shacknove, 1985), or global North/South (e.g. European Alternatives, 2008) dichotomies permeating the study of migration have now become full-fledged theorisations that study migration as a way of studying these transformations (Samaddar, 1999; Tazzioli, 2015; Mezzadra, 2015).[4] Of particular interest in this section, are those contributions concerned with the relation between international migrants and borders.[5] At least three understandings of this relation can be identified, overlapping the three conceptualizations of borders discussed previously. Much like in relation to that discussion, lines of differentiation between these positions seem to revolve around the

establishment of which set of social forces, practices and relations, more than others, define this relation. These lines are more difficult to trace, however, as they all seem to be informed by a similar set of political concerns.

Scholars framing the study of the borders/migration relation through the lens of b/ordering, are primarily concerned with the analysis of its everyday life, and tease out 'the multi-vocal, mutually constitutive, shifting and contested meanings of contemporary bordering processes' (Yuval-Davis, 2013: 16). The encounter between state-led processes of border work, whereby territorial integrity is asserted, and border dwellers' everyday life, whereby individual and collective relationships between 'self' and 'non-self' are attached to cultural environment, traditions, social habits and emotions (Yuval-Davis, 2013), creates socio-spatially ambiguous 'border scapes', which disrupt linear conceptualizations of territories and identities (Ferrer-Gallardo and Van Houtum, 2013). Borders and transnational connections are not opposed, from this perspective, but rather co-implicated in the production of space (Bryce and Freund, 2015), a process shaped by migrants experiences (Gielis, 2009), as much as by art, literature and performance (Schimanski, 2015). In bringing to the fore the different strategies of actors that use borders as an opportunity to be exploited or an obstacle to overcome, this approach shows 'the border as a fluid field of political, economic, social, and cultural negotiations, claims and counter-claims' (Brambilla, 2015: 26). It thus has the critical potential to embrace ethical and normative issues of in/exclusion (Brambilla, 2015). Yet, it also risks, as discussed in the previous section, to underplay the systemic significance of borders in relation to the process of migration, as much of this scholarship does not seem to be too concerned with explaining the underlying drivers of migration and border controls. Indeed, in much of this work, the definition of 'social agents' constructing borderscapes, be they state actors or migrants, seem to reify the state-centred cartography delineated by borders, stretched and ambiguous as it may appear.

Marxist scholarship, on the contrary, sets the movement from one place to another in relation to the social spaces produced by capitalist development's imperatives, forces and relations. The structural causes of migration are embedded in the political economy of development and underdevelopment, as the uneven and combined development of global capitalism sets the parameters of both the development prospects of the South, and the dynamics of migratory flows (Munck, 2008). Capitalism is a social totality, and migrants are a specific form of the broader concept of class, a specificity that can only be grasped as you move between the abstract and the concrete.[6] This perspective is exemplified in a recent *Socialist Register* article by Ferguson and McNally (2015), concerned with domestic and agricultural migrant labour in the US and Canada. The article sets migration in relation to a 'first order' spatial cartography, which is defined by the 'hierarchically structured economic geographies' produced by primitive accumulation, global dispossession and the global labour market. These geographies are constituted by processes of accumulation taking place in both sending and receiving countries, such as those related to the establishment of Regional Free Trade Agreements and Special Economic Zones, land grabs and the appropriation of water resources, wars and conflict. They are structured by migration controls that regulate the movement between countries, the increased militarization of border controls and the mechanisms and regulations that mediate migrants' entry into labour markets, such as Temporary Workers Programmes. These coordinates define the conditions for the social reproduction of labour power. This does not mean that migrants' everyday life is outside their purview. On the contrary, the social reproduction of labour power rests on migrant households' transnational social reproduction. This 'second order' analytical perspective 'humanizes', in their view, accounts of migration, because it re-inserts in the analysis gendered, racial and cultural dimensions, as much as migrants' own strategies and tactics, needs and emotions, which exceed the mere reproduction of labour power.

Studies of the relation between borders and migration that fall under the generic tag 'Autonomy of Migration',[7] are equally concerned with migrants and their relation to capitalism and border controls, but follow a completely different analytical trajectory. They emphasize instead the 'subjective' dimensions of migration, the social excesses that characterize migration with regard to both labour markets (De Genova, 2010) and the order of citizenship (Mezzadra, 2015). They take subjective conditions, experiences and claims as their key object of analysis and concern, starting the analysis precisely from that point. Migration is not simply a response to political and economic necessities, as this conceptualization fails to capture the 'diversity of migrant mobilities, the dynamic power of migrants themselves, and the analytical value of taking mobility seriously as a starting point for understanding border policies' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014: 3). Rather, migration is a constituent force in the formation of polity and social life. The impossibility of defining, indeed, of translating, the 'identity' of migrants in relation to capitalism or border controls, is the *force* of migration. Migrants do not need translation; migration does not need mediation (Papadopolous et al., 2008). This approach is distinctive as it de-centres the logic of command and control that explains contemporary border management practices, by taking into account the constituent power of migrants' journeys, their unpredictability and turbulence. Read in this manner, border management practices become a way to make visible the routes and hubs of migrant movements (Cobarrubias et al., 2015).

As stated earlier, albeit they were presented in stark contrast from each other, the analytical distinctions between these three positions are even more difficult to trace than those delineated in the previous section. All these authors provide rich multi-disciplinary nuances and provisos,[8] and offer a series of convincing examples from across the world, which further nuance their arguments and positions. They all are concerned with inequalities, power distributions, and injustices, as they set their understanding of the borders/migration relation against the backdrop of capitalism, patriarchy, racism. Indeed, they even deploy and appeal to a similar set of analytical tools, notions and concerns.

For instance, all three positions appeal to and draw from 'feminist' methodologies for the study of migration, in their attempt to capture the multiple social forces that configure the relation between borders and migrants. Yuval-Davis (2013), for example, emphasizes feminist concerns with situated knowledge production, as she develops an intersectional approach to the study of borderscapes. Race, gender, and class, while maintaining their own ontological bases, are mutually constitutive in any concrete historical moment, and intersectional approaches link the interrogation of their concrete meanings to specific historical contexts, which are always shifting and contested (Yuval-Davis, 2013). Ferguson and McNally (2015) deploy feminist concerns with social reproduction to extend and historicize Marx's theorization of the two-sidedness of labour power, a commodity that can only be reproduced socially by (geo-politically, biophysically differentiated) people. Social reproduction concerns facilitate an understanding of class in which dynamics of gender and race are internally related parts of a complex social whole (Ferguson and McNally, 2015). Autonomy of migration accounts are informed by the conversation between Marxist workerist traditions, the black radical tradition, postcolonial thought, feminist criticism, and anticolonial and antiracist politics (Cobarrubias et al., 2015: 6). Feminist insights, from this perspective, are needed to capture the bodily and biopolitical aspects of the production of subjectivity, as they bring to the fore the tensions, encounters, and clashes between the practices and movements of migrants and the workings of the various apparatuses of governance and governmentality that target them (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Such insights provide analytical tools to grasp the processes of differential inclusion which migrants are subjected to (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Similarly, in all three accounts the notion of 'social excess' is used to capture the complex relation between borders and migration, albeit differently. Yuval-Davis uses this notion to discuss the

dynamic process of production of identities. Ferguson and McNally (2015) use the term to identify those needs for social reproduction that exceed the mere reproduction of labour power. Papadopolous and colleagues (2008) conceive of excess as the surplus originated by the dialectic between control and resistance, the turbulence to which border management practices respond. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) use the notion of excess to account for the irreducibility of the subject to either the legal person or the citizen, the battleground where political subjectivities are produced.

Many other such points of contact between these works can be found. Indeed, the voluminous number of publications spawned from each of these strands offers even more insights and points of contact, which are impossible to examine here in their full extent. Yet, in spite of these potentials for cross fertilization, these three analytical perspectives develop in what appear to be largely autonomous ways. Driven by similar concerns, examining similar processes, and, often, geographical contexts, each offers theorizations of the relation between borders and migration that are framed by their respective epistemological trajectories. Three recent articles concerned with border controls in the context of migration to Europe across West Africa (Cross, 2013; Andersson, 2014; Casas-Cortes et al., 2014) exemplify this point. All of them draw from extensive bouts of field research, were published in the space of a few months, are simultaneously concerned with global forces and embodied perspectives, with EU's border management practices and their harrowing effects on migrants, and with the same geographical context and migratory route. Somewhat resembling the methodological positions presented so far, however, their respective insights could not be more different.

Andersson (2014) focuses on the productive aspects of the encounter between 'hunter and prey', i.e. between border controls and migrants, the way in which it perpetuates the problems that it aims to resolve, and the distressing human consequences it produces. This encounter stretches the EU-African border across migration routes, and progressively inscribes the category 'illegal migrant' onto the bodies of clandestine travellers. Cross (2013) is concerned with sketching the relation between labour regimes and unfree labour mobility, and the ways in which migrants' personal histories intersect with accumulation by dispossession. Here, global capitalism and states dominate modes of production and livelihoods through an integrated system of underdevelopment, dispossession, illegalization, control and exploitation. Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles (2015) are concerned with the EU externalization of border controls, which they see as a territorial and administrative expansion of the border obtained through the multiplication of institutions involved in border management. In this case, borders do not define the contours of a sovereign administrative unit, and interregional border controls are not so much the product of global capitalism and states' strategic actions. Rather, borders are a reactive process that responds to the autonomy of migratory movements.

These three articles are excellent examples of the sharp analytical tools that critical border studies can offer to interrogate contemporary society and to intervene progressively in its politics. They point to different sets of social processes and relations that are complicit with establishing and maintaining hierarchies and injustices in contemporary society. In turn, they all point to different realms of intervention for progressive politics. Indeed, much as the contributions discussed in the previous pages, they illustrate how their understanding of borders' spatial manifestation is shaped by their (prior) epistemological understanding of the socio-spatial coordinates that define both borders and migration. Conceiving the relation between borders and migration as an embodied encounter evidences the dispersed and negotiated nature of contemporary border controls and the manifold forces that generate, and are generated by, them. Situating that relation within the socio-spatial coordinates produced by capital highlights process of dispossession and labour exploitation and the continuities and differences with which borders have sustained them, historically and in contemporary settings. Privileging the autonomous gaze of migrants brings to the fore their

irreducibility to synthetic representations, their constituent force, to which border controls react. Can we simultaneously use *all* these insights to formulate progressive border politics?

Back to Borders

Are borders constructed in everyday life, and scaped by the political agency of migrants? Are they repressively configured by capital to control the migrant labour force? Is their proliferation a response to the pressure of class and interrelated contestations of race and gender struggles? What comes first the migrant or the border? The answers to these questions that critical border scholarship provides suggest different strategies for the definition of progressive politics concerned with borders. These strategies, according to scholarship explored in the previous pages, may involve developing a transversal politics that recognizes the situated positioning of different social agents. They may be geared towards fostering and supporting a working-class movement that champions every struggle for enhanced social reproduction, by organized and unorganized workers, whether in the workplace or outside it. They may involve the facilitation of migrants' attempts to cross borders, regardless of whether this is done through regular or irregular means. They may require engaging in processes of translation of the various border struggles for the common. How are *we* to decide?

The act of tracing any border revolves around the definition of identities, their differentiation and separation from other possible ones (Balibar, 2002) and this is, clearly, not an uncontested, unequivocal or unidirectional process. There may well be, in fact there always are, alternative criteria for distinguishing, differentiating and classifying places and people, which are premised on alternative sets of borders. Tracing a border and defining identities requires a reduction of complexity, the application of a simplifying force; and this 'complicates things' (Balibar, 2002): the identities defined by borders, much like the borders defining them, resist any attempt at synthetic representation. Which social identities are analytically more accurate, if any, for the identification of people and places? Which ones are more significant, politically? This is what complicates things. Not only are borders a simplifying force in themselves, but also defining what is a border, or who is a migrant seemingly requires the application of a simplifying force. It ties their definition to analytical, hence political, debate.

The previous pages have attempted to illustrate how different strands of critical border scholarship resolve this conundrum by applying an epistemological simplifying force to conceptualize borders and their relation to migration. What a border *is*, is defined by (pre)conceived understandings of the social process of spatial production. Who a migrant *is*, is defined by (pre)conceived understandings of their relation to borders. Critical border scholarship's analyses and politics are thus developed *away from* the border.

This seems unsatisfactory, first, in an analytical sense, as this social-to-spatial trajectory seems to inhibit dialogue across strands of scholarship. Each strand sustains, while being sustained by, epistemic communities that discuss their respective contributions in what appear to be bibliographically aligned conferences, workshops and publishing outlets. Surely, this is in part caused by the complexity involved in studying borders, and is compounded by the difficulties associated to scholarly dialogue in contemporary 'academic capitalism' (Paasi, 2015) and the force of institutional funding that promotes it (O'Dowd, 2010). It is more intrinsically driven, as it has been suggested in the previous pages, by methodological rigour, and the attempt by various strands of border scholarship to advance seemingly competing epistemological projects. Dis-entangling various conceptualization of the border/migration relation, the paper has highlighted the vibrancy that characterizes this field of enquiry, and has offered a practical invitation to dialogue across different epistemological traditions.

This seems unsatisfactory, second, also in a political sense. The migration 'emergency' unfolding across the Mediterranean at the time of writing has captivated the political imagination of most of *us*. The analytically unmediated sense of injustice, and rage, felt by watching daily news about shipwrecks, lorries, jungles, fences, racism, humanitarian and military armies, war, law and the economy, can and should be harnessed towards the definition of progressive political claims and struggles. Indeed, critical border scholarship, as a whole, offers sharp analytical tools to explain the complexities of these dynamics, tools that could be productively set in conversation with each other to develop critical political platforms.

The above discussion suggests, in fact, that a materialist reading of borders and migration can account for long-standing patterns of uneven and combined development, for processes of exploitation and surplus value extraction. It also suggests, however, that reducing migrants claims, aspirations and desires to the logic of capital, brushes away their complex (political) subjectivities. It finally suggests that empirical analyses are needed to embody, stretch and situate the interactions between these two sets of relations. These three dimensions seem *all* relevant for understanding the complex multi-scalar and multi-directional processes that shape contemporary borders and migration dynamics. For this reason, the remainder of this concluding section attempts to sketch an investigative perspective that is precisely concerned with the interaction between these various dimensions.

Premised on the understanding that social space is constituted by social relations, and *at the same time* constitutes them, the investigative perspective sketched here suggests inverting the analytical trajectory with which the articulation between the spatial and the social is studied. An analytical trajectory that starts from the spatial to investigate the social does not presuppose which social forces, practices or relations are analytically or politically more significant in the definition of bordered social identities. On the contrary, it investigates their relative significance in place-specific and embodied settings. This involves *going back* to borders and, perhaps paradoxically, back to the abstract socio-spatial criteria that define 'here/there' and 'us/them' to investigate empirically their spatial manifestations. What can be tentatively called the socio-spatial *distance* between the abstract definition and the actual manifestation of places and identities can be used as an indicator of the relative strength of these various social forces, practices and relations. This perspective, in other words, investigates where the border lies and for whom, as a way of investigating why it does so. Brief examples are necessary.

First, investigating where a border manifests itself and for whom, may offer insights on the *actual* (i.e. place-specific and embodied) significance and heterogeneous configuration of the social forces, practices and relations defining borders. For example, borders between the EU and West African countries provide (abstract) socio-spatial criteria for identifying 'Spain/Morocco' or 'Italy/Tunisia' borders, and yet these borders have progressively been displaced across West Africa for the purposes of migration controls. Such externalization is variously theorized by the scholarship discussed in the previous pages as the result of encounters and engagements defining Euro-African borderscapes, as the effect of capitalist imperatives and states' responses to them, or as a reaction to migrants' constituent force.

Regardless of how we conceive of its main drivers, this externalization manifests itself differently, in different places and for different individuals. It takes different forms and operates through different mechanisms, whether we are examining it in Dakar, across the Sahara desert, in Ceuta, or when a shipwreck manages to reach Lampedusa, Sicily, *or* Apulia after crossing the Mediterranean. In any of those places, furthermore, it is likely to be more or less significant, to acquire heterogeneous meanings and to produce divergent experiences, claims, and aspirations for each of the individuals and social groups involved, regardless of how they are defined by others or how they self-ascribe their identities. Across all these places, finally, many seem to

benefit directly or indirectly from the process of externalization and from the sufferings and injustices that it causes.

The EU-Africa border manifests itself in different places for different people, in other words, whether they experience it in the waiting lounge of a Paris-bound plane in Dakar, through the gendered violence of smugglers, or at the hands of the Italian Red Cross on board a Navy ship. The *actual* (that is, place-specific and embodied) socio-spatiality of EU's border externalization, thus, is dynamic, fluid, and selectively enabling; it may be transgressed, resisted and reappropriated. It remains to be discovered. Investigating the socio-spatial distance between the abstract 'EU'/'African' border, and its actual socio-spatial manifestations, may be used as an indicator of the place-specific and embodied significance of the various social forces defining what that border *is*.

Second, developing the example from the other direction, borders between the EU and African countries provide (abstract) socio-spatial criteria for identifying 'nationals' and 'foreigners'. Scholarship examined above variously theorizes these identities as a constructed narrative ordering relations between the two groups, as a mechanism of control of the labour force, as a fictional distinction that abstracts from practices and encounters. Investigating, rather than assuming, the *actual* significance of these identities may offer insights on the heterogeneous configuration of the social forces, practices and relations defining them in place-specific and embodied settings.

Regardless of how we conceive of these identities, in fact, the (abstract) identity 'foreigner' affects *all* those that are not 'nationals'. Yet, this identity is made more or less significant by other social identities, in place-specific and embodied ways. Much like above, it is likely to acquire heterogeneous meanings and to produce divergent experiences, claims, and aspirations, and to be differently significant in Dakar, across the Sahara, or in Italian shores, for each of the individuals and social groups involved. The *actual* socio-spatiality of the identity 'foreigner' is thus fluid and dynamic and may be selectively enabling. Once again, the experience of being a 'foreigner' manifests itself differently, whether we think of people waiting to board a plane, crossing the Sahara or reaching European shores. Investigating the socio-spatial distance between the abstract 'them', as generic 'foreigners', and the actual 'them', as defined by the different manifestations of that identity, may be used as an indicator of the relative significance of various social identities defining the men, women and children attempting to enter Europe, in place-specific and embodied settings.

Third, and importantly, investigating the socio-spatial manifestation of the 'national/foreigner' distinction can also offer insights on the lines of continuity and social differentiation across 'us' and 'them'. For instance, the ways in which EU border externalization differently configure *actual* inequalities between and across clandestine travellers, transnational executives, FRONTEX personnel and, indeed, academics, can offer insights on the ways in which *we* relate to each other, in Dakar, across the Sahara or in Italian shores. Accounting for 'us' while we concern ourselves with 'them' provides nuance to these relations as it accounts for the multiple and multi-directional relations that define *our* living together.

Discovering the social through the spatial, in other words, does not assume how various social forces configure themselves through borders to structure heterogeneous encounters between social agents, to define relative degrees of exploitation, or to nuance political subjectivities, but rather it investigates such encounters and their place-specific and embodied outcomes. These encounters are likely to be structured, turbulent *and* constructed. They are thus unpredictable and cannot be assumed; they need to be investigated. A spatial-to-social research trajectory explains the systemic, pervasive and diffuse power of borders through an investigation of its heterogeneous, situated and differential outcomes, rather than the other way around.

Analytically, this perspective avoids pre-suppositions in respect to which one of the above theorizations is analytically more accurate or politically more significant, but rather attempts to harness

the insights originating from their respective modes of reading borders and migration. It should thus help fostering dialogue across strands of scholarship. Politically, this perspective nuances, contextualizes and situates the prescriptions offered by the above theorizations by simultaneously considering their insights. Indeed, *what is left* after these debates is the need for an increased attention to the place-specific and embodied configurations of social hierarchies, and their distinct political implications. From this perspective, progressive politics is likely to involve forms, objectives and directions that are different in different settings. It may involve struggles at the national level *or* transversal ones. It may be informed by concerns with the common material conditions across the 'us/them' distinction *or* with the specificity of 'their' condition. It must involve different concerns, framed around exploitation, social reproduction *and/or* knowledge production.

The dynamics shaping the borders/migrant relation in the Mediterranean *and* elsewhere are complex and require equally complex political platforms. Critical border scholarship, as a whole, has the potential not only to offer insights in respect to the explanation of the current conjuncture, but also the capacity to indicate possible avenues for addressing its abhorrent border refractions.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Newman and Paasi (1998), Paasi (1999), Balibar (2002), Balibar et al. (2011), Casas-Cortes et al. (2015), Mezzadra (2015), and references throughout the text.
2. I take this phrasing from Nick Dines, who used the term in a study group discussion on 'Border as Method' organized by Emma Dowling and me. I am extremely grateful for the precious insights gained through this conversation.
3. For a review see Massey and Taylor (2004).
4. See also references throughout this section.
5. I will therefore not consider issues related to distinctions between 'internal' and 'international migrants', or between 'economic migrants' and 'refugees', which would require a much-expanded discussion.
6. I owe this formulation to the numerous engaging talks I had with Adam Hanieh on the subject
7. This term covers a wide variety of approaches, responding to the different analytical and national trajectories through which this perspective has evolved. See Cobarrubias, Casas and Pickles (2015) for a discussion, and the website http://translate.eipcp.net/.
8. More so in their public talks than in their written material, however.

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