

Borders

Serhat Karakayali

The *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, with its 15 volumes and several hundred articles, might provide a good example of the negligent treatment issues around migration have received in the realm of Marxism in the past. Including entries about things such as “fairy tales”, the “occupy movement” and “Hollywood”, the encyclopedia makes no mention of borders, migration or migrants, which seems quite counter-intuitive considering the role of migration both for the labor market and the constitution of the working class as a political subject. However, as we will see, the *Dictionary* does not tell the entire story about the relationship Marxism has, and has had, to the question of borders. Also, this is not the conventional story about Marxists somehow misunderstanding and distorting Marx.

Going “back to Marx” does not seem to provide a good route to an answer, as Marx and Engels didn’t pay much attention to the role of borders, or migration in general, themselves. The reason for this might be that the meaning of borders has changed drastically over the last century. In Marx’s time, borders were important as boundaries separating political entities and national economies. Although Marx did not treat them directly with regard to the role they play in the regulation of populations, they can surely be considered as partial factors that constitute and determine the value of labor. The passage in *Capital*, in which Marx reflects about

what he calls the “historical and moral element” in “the determination of the value of labour-power” (*MEW* 23, 185; Marx 1976, 275) is particularly open for such an interpretation. When he writes that “the labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power” (*MEW* 23, 186; Marx 1976, 275), he talks about the costs that workers have to bear to raise their children. However, the mere notion that the general costs of labor power are also determined by a potential or virtual labor force certainly brings the question of migration into play.

When we think of borders today, we have in mind rather their function concerning the movement of people, particularly as part of a body of regulations that produces the distinction between citizens and foreigners (with plenty of subcategories). However, during most of the 19th century, workers in Europe weren’t citizens and were as disenfranchised as most labor migrants around the world today. This changed slowly, beginning by the end of the 19th century. Capitalist societies increasingly integrated workers – mostly as a result of political and economic struggles of the worker’s movement. With the increasing implementation of social rights into the framework of the state the “national social state” (Balibar 2003) took shape, i.e. a state that appears to represent not only the interests of industry and corporations, but that – to a certain extent – also regulates working hours, enacts basic welfare standards, and protects its working population by controlling the labor market. Parallel to this transformation of the state, the function of the border changed. Now it does not only delineate the space in which a particular state (and the power bloc that inhabits the core of the state) has sovereign power. On the material level, the border can serve as a tool to employ measures of economic protectionism, both against commodities and labor forces from abroad, since the influx of labor into a national labor market always has a significant impact on the price of labor. Symbolically, the border also begins to represent more than a purely economic space, as it delineates the boundaries of the “nation”, insofar as the workers, who have become citizens, identify with the nation and consider the state and its apparatuses as “theirs”. From this perspective, whoever penetrates a national border can be perceived not only as a competitor, but as “Schmutzkonkurrenz” [dirty competition], a contemporary expression often employed by socialists such as Franz

Mehring and many others. Thus, foreign workers who crossed the border were seen by their fellow workers on the other side of that border as the tools of capitalists for putting pressure on the national working classes.

If we understand the border to be part of the state, it is helpful to take a closer look at a Marxist interpretation of the modern capitalist state, which is another issue about which so-called Western Marxists particularly often complained with regard to Marx's own work. Marx, goes the argument, did not develop a coherent theory of politics, let alone the state, which is why many Marxist scholars such as Lenin, Paschukanis, Gramsci, Poulantzas, throughout the 20th century developed distinct theories, each taking a different cue from Marx's own thinking. Common to most of these approaches is an understanding of materialism with reference to the essential topology, which Marx formulated in the "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy". There, in a short paragraph, Marx distinguishes a social and material infrastructure from political and ideological superstructures. According to Marx, in any given society, the former determines the latter.

Marxist theories of the state often tried to tie the state rather to social classes and the power they exercise. One line of thought saw the state as an instrument of the ruling classes. Concerning borders this meant that the scale of their permeability was – as it were – "willed" by the state. Another line perceived the state not as an instrument in the hands of the class enemy but as an independent institution whose power was not derived from social classes. With this perspective one could explain why states actually regulated the flow of labor force – instead of establishing a global labor market, the wet dream of any neoliberal. Both paradigms treated the state (and, as a consequence, borders) as neutral or "empty" apparatuses. These views therefore treat the state and its border the same way as Marx has accused his contemporaries of treating capital, money, and labor, i.e. as things and not as the product of human interaction. If the aim of Marx's work on capital was to de-reify its appearance, i.e. to trace the social relationships that lead both to the way capital operates economically and the way it presents itself to the observer, then the same has to be done with borders. One important contribution in this direction comes

from the Greek/French Marxist Nikos Poulantzas, who essentially defined the capitalist state as being a "condensation of a relationship between classes" (Poulantzas 1978), thus avoiding the impasses mentioned above, in which the state is unrelated to the social struggles in a society. But what does this mean for the problem of borders?

In contemporary border studies borders are conceptualized mostly as institutionalized absolute sovereignty. Migrants, then, are thought of as objects of such an apparatus and only defined in terms of their mobility towards and across such borders. Such a perspective neglects that migration is connected to the history of labor, capitalism, and modern forms of governance, and that migration (transnational or internal) represents the capability of living labor to resist and to escape from the conditions of production (cf. Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). Looking at borders as a "condensation of relationships" means employing an essential insight of the operaist movement, which emerged in Italy in the 1960s in opposition to the "economistic" Marxism of the Third International, which is that transformations and dynamics are not driven from a supposed logic of capital but by the relation between "living" and "dead" labor.

However, what is important for this concept is that living labor cannot be reduced to a sociologically defined social group. The production of living labor consists instead of an endless chain of social connections, resources, knowledge, sentiments, and environments, which can by no means be relegated to the "productive sphere" and leads to an historically specific and variable excessiveness. In this perspective, for example, industrialization, i.e. the emergence of the factory as an institution, appears as a compromise attempting to deal with massive flights from the rural regions.

Migration does not indicate the sum of all migrant individuals, nor their spatial movement or subjective "motive" for migrating. Rather, migration refers to a subcutaneous reconfiguration of social life. In this sense, migration is an active transformation of social space and a world-making practice. Subsequently, this has consequences for the conceptualization of the border. The allegedly monolithic border

apparatus decomposes and falls apart into multiple factors: actors, practices, discourses, technologies, bodies, affects, and trajectories become visible, with migration as one of the driving forces.

The border can be understood as a site of constant encounters, tensions, and contestations, and migration as co-constituent of the border. The constant and structurally conflicting re-figuration of the border is a reaction to the forces and movements of migration that challenge, cross, and reshape it.

Many of the existing contemporary constructivist approaches in border studies also conceptualize the border as a result of a multiplicity of actors and practices as it is expressed in the notion of “border work” (e.g. Rumford 2008; Salter 2011). However, many of these highly interesting constructivist approaches either completely erase migration as a constitutive force or conceptualize the migrant as a passive victim. An approach informed by Marx’s fundamentally relational and materialist thinking puts “border struggles” at the center of the analysis (see also Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, 13f.).

References

Balibar, Étienne. 2003. *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Haug, Wolfgang F., Peter Jehle & Frigga Haug. 2004. *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*. Bonn: Argument.

Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital, Volume I*. London: Penguin.

Poulantzas, Nikos. 2000. *State, Power, Socialism*. London: Verso.

Mezzadra, Sandro & Brett Neilson. 2013. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Duke University Press.

Rumford, Chris. 2008. “Introduction: Citizens and Borderwork in Europe.” *Space and Polity* 12 (1): 1–12.

Salter, Mark B. 2011. “Places Everyone! Studying the Performativity of the Border.” *Political Geography* 30: 66–67.