

KONTUR

The border, drawn in the air and carved on the skin

CONVERSATION ON GLOBAL CAPITALISM, COLONIALISM & BORDERS

7

BETWEEN

Nicholas De Genova, Olivia Maury & Daria Krivosos

NICHOLAS DE GENOVA, OLIVIA MAURY AND DARIA KRIVONOS

Conversation on global capitalism, colonialism and borders

Daria: In this situation of severe lack of political imagination, let's try to imagine, what would a world without borders be?

Nicholas: A world without borders would be a world without states and nationalism. I think that to have that conversation seriously, we have to be able to imagine the world where free mobility would pose other questions such as that of a world without capitalism. If you can discuss migration and borders in a way that opens up that question, then it begins to be possible to ask the question of what a world without borders would look like.

Thus, removing borders is not an end in itself, it is part of a larger repertoire of ways to begin to understand that we can imagine everything to be different.

Olivia: In your Marxian analysis of borders, you mention borders as means of production for producing space and difference in space.

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This reveals that the question is not only about achieving free movement but that it also concerns the destruction of the means of production that produce those hierarchical differences. Would you like to elaborate more on borders as means of production?

N: I make an argument in the first place that we cannot think of borders as things. The common assumption is to imagine that the border is an objective place, a site, and in that sense a real thing and then we begin to associate the border

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with things that populate that space such as border guards, fences and checkpoints. For me the instructive reference is Marx's discussion of capital: capital not as a thing but as a social relation. If we understand the border as a social relation, we understand that all those other things are just forms of work that go into maintaining borders—a dynamic process that involves constant production and reproduction.

Moreover, borders become means of production for the maintenance of differences in space which are first and foremost associated with the nation-state and the ways in which nationalism partitions the whole globe and subdivides humanity into separate populations. Of course, that is not a trans-historical fact of the human condition. The division into states is quite recent, but even more recent is the nation-state as the presumptive and ubiquitous form of political life, and in a way it is the product of decolonization.

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It was not long ago that the world was divided into competing empires. The anti-colonial struggles broke the back of colonialism which then produced the reconfiguration of the world in which the nation-state model, as a specific feature of the post-colonial world order, became the norm and the universal form for the organization of our politics. This means that the world is nowadays more crisscrossed by militarized and policed borders than ever before. In that sense, borders are means of production for the maintenance

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of differences across space that contribute to the nation-state project of producing its people, which opens up the affinities between nationalism and various kinds of racialized constructions of difference among us.

You could understand the state similarly, not as a thing but as social relation that represents a composite of particular histories of struggle.

Various processes of state formation correspond to particular histories of struggle that then become more or less institutionalized, materialized and entrenched. The deeper history of all these things is the history of capitalism, which was about conquest, colonization, genocide, and enslavement.

All the things Marx discusses in terms of the “so called primitive accumulation of capital” really are not only formative of capital and a condition of capitalism, but they have never ceased. The

history of capitalism remains deeply predicated on the world that colonialism and slavery created, and we are talking about a very shallow historical

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window in which we have seen the demise of traditional colonial empires. For example, Europe after WWII is incomprehensible without reference to the histories of colonialism that basically produced many of the borders that define these new independent nation-states.

D: Was it not so that the former colonies reconfigured as formally independent states were not considered fully sovereign in the beginning?

7 **N:** The process of decolonization sometimes was one of anti-colonial wars of independence, but in many others involved a rush to arrive at a certain compromise solution, which sometimes gets called neocolonialism, meaning that some of the same arrangements between former colonial powers and colonies were reconfigured and renovated. The other historical context was precisely the Cold War and the ways in which over a period of several decades the existence of the Soviet Union created a certain escape hatch for those anti-colonial struggles that were the most uncompromising. If we want to try to understand our own present, the end of the Cold War is another decisive juncture where the larger post-colonial world order becomes reconfigured as one in which the US remains the so-called “unipolar” superpower without any viable enemy to speak of, and which represents the greatest military power in history of the human race, but is also maintaining a global order of neoliberal capitalism. That means that all the fundamental impossibilities of some of the visions of decolonization that came to be implemented under the rubric of nationalism become more exposed for how bankrupt they have been. That means the world historic question of envisioning a world where people might actually be free—free of those colonial legacies that are inseparable from being free from world capitalism—gets reconfigured in our historical moment. **In that light, it seems**

to me that contemporary migration and refugee movements are in some sense the premier place where you can actually encounter the question of decolonization anew, in part because it calls the question of how the wealth, power and prestige of Europe as a whole, or the United States or other wealthy countries that become destinations for migration movements, have been built on the pillage of countries that were colonized.

D: Some would probably say that the Nordic countries are outside this colonial system. What would you say to them?

N: I would say two things. One is that the Nordic countries have never been outside the history of colonialism: they were at least indirect beneficiaries of the European colonial power, but oftentimes also very directly implicated in it—in the form of everything from business enterprises engaged in the slave trade or colonization, to Christian missionization. These are the deep colonial histories that themselves do not require being a colonial power. On the other hand, Denmark itself was a significant colonial power. Not to mention that the biggest part of European history involves the colonization of Europeans by one another, their neighbors. So there are those kinds of questions as well that are unevenly distributed among different European countries.

And the second point is that in this era of European integration and the formation of the

7 EU, you cannot be part of Europe without being part of the legacy of Europe, without being part of the legacy that produced Europe as Europe. The only way we can speak honestly and adequately of Europe is by affirming that the power and prestige and the wealth of Europe is derived from colonization. It then becomes part of the collective heritage of every European country participating in the European project; even countries which are not part of the EU per se are still the beneficiaries of this configuration of power. Moreover, some of the largest groups of people who today migrate to the Nordic countries are Iraqis and Afghanis, which refers us to the colonial *present* and the fact that even without some direct historical relationship between particular people from a particular place and the place they migrate to, there is the history of the US imperial power that was built on the back of the European colonial powers. This means that we cannot understand the enormous footprint of the US as a global power without referring to the European colonial histories.

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D: Whiteness is also one of those legacies of colonial Europe, isn't it? In order to identify with Europe you have to identify yourself with the project of whiteness.

N: Absolutely. And that was true for all European colonial endeavors: it was all based on the subjugation of people in the rest of the world on a racial basis; Europe's colonial enter-

prises were partly about the enactment of the socio-political order of white supremacy in their colonies, but that obviously had ramifications at home as well, even as they were also constituting a world order. The European empires understood each other as rivals but also as peers in a shared project, and this shared project came under such perverse names such as “civilization”, which they all understood each other as competent to pursue in the name of some shared European vision of white supremacy. You can’t talk about whiteness without referring to its European heritage. Today we see this remarkable proliferation of new formations of far-right anti-immigrant racism, and sometimes very specifically anti-Muslim racism, what people refer to as “populism”. This anti-immigrant racism sometimes adapts a nationalist dis-inclination and dis-affection for the European project but oftentimes these projects articulate themselves precisely in terms of a politics of Europeanness. Take for example Pegida in Germany, which adapts many of the themes of a very classic German nationalism and neo-Nazism. Nonetheless, the name of the organization itself is *Patriotic Europeans* against the Islamisation of the West. Similarly, Breivik’s manifesto was called the *European Declaration of Independence*. So you have a variety of explicitly Europeanist projects that are undeniably associated with a racist European politics of whiteness that articulates itself transnationally as being

about Europeanness. Clearly this is not only about some old history of crypto-nationalisms but the product of precisely the historical moment of European unification and integration, all fortified by new European borders.

O: Let's take a few steps back and discuss borders and capitalism a bit more. In what ways do you see borders as a modality of capture?

7 N: Part of what I have argued in various ways is that we cannot understand borders, such as the reinforcement and escalation of borders, border policing, the ways migration law is deployed and the punitive actions against migrants, as narrowly exclusionary. They present themselves as if they are about exclusion and as though it is simply a matter of keeping out unwanted people. They may keep out some people but what they also do in very meaningful ways is to continuously refine and revise the conditions under which people who cross borders are compelled to go on living in ways that they are subject to punitive recriminations and become permanently susceptible to various forms of punishment—including detention and deportation. That is not about their exclusion in any simple sense but about inclusion: it contributes to the legal production of their precarity and vulnerability, which discipline them as labor. In that sense, borders become strategies of capture because everyone who gets across the border—particularly securitized and militarized borders—has not only undergone a

long process of suffering to get across the border, but they most likely would prefer to never have to do that again. In that sense borders serve to capture these migrants under the conditions that tend to make people available as labor for capital, while they remain susceptible to criminalization and deportation.

O: When we talk about borders we talk about the existence of nation-states and therefore of capitalism. Do you see a potential of migrants in destabilizing not only the nation-state but also the capitalist system?

N: I think it is a complex question because it goes without saying that the greatest part of migration, including a big part of refugee experiences, comes to be conditioned and disciplined by the ways in which the state, laws and borders mediate a global relation between capital and labor. There is no denying in that sense that capital avails itself of various forms of migrant labor that involve extraordinary possibilities for exploitation precisely because migration is inseparable from a kind of reconfiguration of labor relations and class relations and oftentimes inseparable from a variety of social struggles concerning the inequalities of citizenship and racial subordination. It means that migrant struggles in some ways become a frontline battle in the relation between labor and capital. Without any automatic notion about migrant struggles necessarily lending themselves to any anti-

capitalist prospect, I think we nonetheless see over and over again that migrant labor often steps forward as a vanguard in anti-capitalist struggles.

O: We could then understand migrant labor as a premier subject of radical working class politics. The notion of class is however often used as a rather depoliticized descriptive category. What do you regard as a productive use of the concept of class?

N: I think it is important to retain class as an analytic category but I think that there is a tendency in radical politics to resort to a kind of identitarian politics of class that relies on a descriptive sociological notion of class that wants to distribute people into neat boxes of discrete class categories. I think that is an unproductive way to think about class. It is one thing to distinguish people into categories but the reality is that those categories are always historically contingent. So, I'm against the kind of identitarian politics of class that wants to fetishize the working class as some kind of romanticized heroic subject of history.

The real question is when does labor move from being labor for capital to being labor against capital, and what conditions provide for the possibility of labor to become an insurgent force that unsettles the larger dynamics? Otherwise, as in the bureaucratized labor movement, you can have working-class people organized into struc-

tures that effectively serve the interests of capital and organize working people against their own interests. Sometimes people talk about migrant labor with the trade unionist conceit: “we need to organize the unorganized”, but with a closer look you see that many times the real vanguard of the working class has been people who don’t have a formal trade union and are partly or completely migrant populations. In the US, for example, the whole rejuvenation of organized labor starting in 1980s—90s, every major struggle was basically a migrant struggle.

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D: Lastly, what do you think a post- or non-nationalist welfare state would be? Is there a way to critique the dismantling of the welfare state without reproducing nationalist and exclusionary ideas of who this welfare state is for?

N: One of the remarkable things that I first discovered in Scandinavia was that what anti-immigrant nativist movements in the US were fighting for, some things that were absolutely unimaginable there, were already implemented in the Nordic countries, such as, for example, excluding the children of undocumented people from school or refusing even emergency medical care to undocumented people. So, as a politics of citizenship, the welfare state in the social democratic context became more exclusionary in some ways than the wildest fantasies of the

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most vicious right-wing movements in the US.

On the other hand, of course, there is a defense of the welfare state that is strictly articulated from a liberal point of view that carries the same contradictions. It reminds us of what the welfare state actually represents historically—a certain compromise solution to contain militant labor struggles. Even in the countries with a rather pathetic social welfare system, like in the US, you can see that this is a way for the state to contain massive working-class struggles. Once those struggles are de-mobilized, however, the ruling class remains very interested in eroding their gains and subverting them. Thus, these gains come under various sorts of pressure in the history of neoliberalism, which is all about dismantling the welfare states.

But the other way to answer your question is to ask: what does it take, for example, to make sure that everyone is housed? As far as I can tell, there are luxury hotels in all cities, which are full of empty rooms that could house people. It only requires the political will, and so re-posing the question from that point of view re-opens the whole question of what we even mean by the welfare state.

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