**Notes for Lecture on Borders (2020).**

**Introduction**

In last week’s session, we focused on the problem of global inequalities. This week we turn our gaze to an intimately connected issue: the problem of borders. I will again address two main questions, in relation to a host of core readings on the topic. This time, the two questions are:

1. Are border walls and fences but a last vestige of a dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty? and
2. How useful is the concept of “border imperialism”?

The core readings which we will review in order to bring these questions into focus include chapters from Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*; Reece Jone’s *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*; and Harsha Walia’s *Undoing Border Imperialism*. We will also integrate into our discussion important arguments that can be found in Étienne Balibar’s article on “Europe as Borderland”; Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova’s article on “Theorizing from the Borders”; as well as a collaborative, interdisciplinary “Intervention on the State of Sovereignty at the Border.” Finally, we will also incorporate insights from the work of Achille Mbembe on “Borders as Bodies” and on “The Idea of a Borderless World”; and from Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s important book, *Border as Method*.

**What is a Border?**

Let us begin with the matter of definition. To be able to frame borders as a global social problem, of course, requires that we can understand that to which we are referring when we mention the word borders. However, there are many kinds of borders, some material and physical, others conceptual or epistemological. What’s more, as Étienne Balibar would emphasize in a rightly-influential essay, published in 2002 with the title ‘‘What Is a Border?,” there are particular difficulties inherent in providing a concrete and concise definition of the concept of the border. Indeed, according to Balibar, “[t]he idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition absurd.” This is because, he argues, “to mark out a border is precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it.” And yet, “[c]onversely, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders.” Which poses a clear danger for any “theorist who attempts to define what a border is,” namely, the “danger of going round in circles,” since “the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition (p.76)” (in Mezzadra and Neilson, p.16).

In the same essay, Balibar also highlights “the ‘polysemy’ and ‘heterogeneity’ of borders,” while nevertheless “noting that their ‘multiplicity, their hypothetical and fictive nature’ does ‘not make them any less real’ (p.76) (Mezzadra and Neilson, p.4). For Balibar, “[n]ot only are there different kinds of borders that individuals belonging to different social groups experience in different ways, but borders also simultaneously perform ‘several functions of demarcation and ***territorialization***—between distinct social exchanges or flows, between distinct rights, and so forth’ (p.79)” (Mezzadra and Neilson, p.4).

Moreover, as Mezzadra and Neilson have seconded, “borders are always overdetermined, meaning that ‘no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states’ but is always ‘sanctioned, reduplicated and relativized by other geopolitical divisions’ (p.79). ‘Without the world-configuring function they perform’, Balibar writes, ‘there would be no borders—or no lasting borders’ (p.79)” (Mezzadra and Neilson, p.4).

In his 1950 classic, *The Nomos of the Earth*, the controversial but profound German jurist and philosopher Carl Schmitt had insisted that “[e]very new age and every new epoch in the coexistence of peoples, empires and countries, of rulers and power formations of every sort, is founded on new spatial divisions, new enclosures, and new spatial orders of the earth” (in Brown, p.43).

Balibar’s argument is certainly reminiscent of Schmitt’s. For Schmitt had “maintain[ed] that the tracing of borders within modern Europe went hand in hand with political and legal arrangements that were designed to organize an already global space. These arrangements, including different kinds of ‘global lines’ and geographical divisions, provided a blueprint for the colonial partitioning of the world and the regulation of relations between Europe and its outsides. To put it briefly, the articulation between these global lines of colonial and imperialist expansion and the drawing of linear boundaries between European and Western states has constituted for several centuries the dominant motif of the global geography organized by capital and state” (Mezzadra and Neilson, p.4).

More recently, in his essay on “Europe as Borderland,” Balibar has elaborated, along more or less expressly-Schmittian lines, that “every border has a double meaning, local and global: it is a ‘line’ (more or less accepted, stable, permeable, visible, thick or thin) separating territories which, by virtue of its drawing, become ‘foreign’; and it is a ‘partition’ or ‘distribution’ of the world space, which reflects the regime of meaning and power under which the world is represented as a ‘unity’ of different ‘parts’” (p.201).

In the same article, Balibar carefully sketches “four conflicting patterns of [world]-political spaces,” relating each to different “representation[s] of European borders” in particular, these being a “clash-of-civilizations pattern,” a “global network pattern,” a “center-periphery pattern,” and, finally, a “crossover pattern, corresponding to a representation of Europe as ‘borderland’” (p.194).

But perhaps we get ahead of ourselves. If borders are always imagined within, and at the same time help to configure, what Schmitt conceptualized as “world-space,” they also always have a more local meaning and function. For, clearly, as Balibar also insists, “the question of borders” turns out to be “central when we reflect about citizenship, and more generally, about political association” (p.190).

The birth, or “invention,” of the border is one of the constitutive components of the emergent Euro-centric model of the modern nation-state. In Balibar’s words: “It is, indeed, a commonplace among historians (and probably also geographers) that the constitution of the modern nation-states through the ‘invention’ of borders, which replaced the ancient forms of ‘marches’ or ‘limes’, combining on the same ‘line’ administrative, juridical, fiscal, military, even linguistic functions was, in particular, a transformation of the (more or less indefinite, heterogeneous) space into territories controlled by a ‘monopolistic’ state power, thus rendered ‘homogeneous’. This could be called generally a process of the ***territorialisation of space***, which forms a precondition for the emergence of ‘politics’ as such, in the modern sense” (pp.191-192).

The ***territorialisation of space***, understood as a precondition for the emergence of “political modernity,” or of “modern conceptions of political life,” is captured nicely, as well, by Benedict Anderson, at the outset of his extremely influential account of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*,where he distinguishes such “modern conceptions of political life” from presumably “pre-modern” conceptions associated with the “dynastic realm.” According to Anderson: “Kingship organizes everything around a high centre. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are subjects, not citizens. In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another. Hence, paradoxically enough, the ease with which pre-modern empires and kingdoms were able to sustain their rule over immensely heterogeneous, and often not even contiguous, populations for long periods of time” (p.19).

**Borders and Sovereignty**

And so we come to the word sovereignty. The concepts of the border and of sovereignty are closely connected. As Peter Sahlins has persuasively put the point (though he uses the term *boundaries*): “Modern definitions of territorial sovereignty focus on political boundaries as the point at which a state’s territorial competence finds its ultimate expression. States are defined by their exclusive jurisdiction over a delimited territory; and the boundaries of territorial competence define the sovereignty of a state. A recognized authority on international law, Charles de Visscher, wrote that ‘the firm configuration of its territory furnishes the state with the recognized setting for the exercise of its sovereign powers. The relative stability of this territory is a function of the exclusive authority that the state exercises within it, and the co-existence beyond its boundaries of political entities endowed with similar prerogatives … It is because the state is a territorial organization that the violation of its boundaries is inseparable from the idea of aggression against the state itself’” (pp.2-3).

To return to Balibar once again, we can say, with him, that territories “are not only associated with the ‘invention’ of the border, but [are] also inseparable from the institution of power as **sovereignty**. More precisely, they combine in a single unity the institutions of (absolute) sovereignty, the border, and the government of populations. Borderlines which allow a clear distinction between the national (domestic) and the foreigner express sovereignty as a power to attach populations to territories in a stable or regulated manner, to ‘administrate’ the territory through the control of the population, and, conversely, to govern the population through the division and the survey of the territory” (Balibar, p.192).

Moreover, as Balibar continues, “[t]his is especially clear in early classical thinkers of the absolute monarchy, such as Bodin, who defines the (national) citizen as combining private freedom and public subjection on a given territory … a free/franchised subject under the rule of a sovereign. The most important ‘marks’ of sovereignty (a terminology also used by Hobbes) concern the use of borders to secure the fiscal administration of the territory and the settlement of religious conflicts among the population through the preeminence of the state's authority within the national borders. The state then becomes the ‘representative of the people’ (or, the common interests of the people, against its ‘sectarian’ interests or the interests of specific subgroups) on ‘its’ territory” (p.192).

Furthermore, “as the sovereignty of the absolute monarch becomes replaced by the sovereignty of the (absolute) people, or its abstract incarnation the (democratic) state, this structure of appropriation becomes able to work in both directions: the citizens ‘belong’ to the state, which, in turn, is their ‘property’, or ‘belongs’ to them in an exclusive manner.” As such, according to Balibar, “**[t]he absolutization and sacralization of borders is perhaps even greater in the democratic state than in the monarchic state, which invented it, precisely because it expresses now the fact that the state is ideally the people's property just as it is the eminent representative/owner of the population's rights**” (pp.192-193).

In a word, the “invention” of borders cannot be disassociated from the emergence of the doctrine of sovereignty. Now, towards the outset of her decisive 2010 intervention in her book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown skilfully sketches “a composite figure of sovereignty drawn from classical theorists of modern sovereignty, including Thomas Hobbes, Jean Bodin, and Carl Schmitt,” and proceeds to suggest “that sovereignty’s indispensable features include supremacy (no higher law), perpetuity over time (no term limits), decisionism (no boundedness by or submission to law), absoluteness and completeness (sovereignty cannot be probable or partial), nontransferability (sovereignty cannot be conferred without cancelling itself), and specified jurisdiction (territoriality).” She further continues: “If nation-state sovereignty has always been something of a fiction in its aspiration and claim to these qualities, the fiction is a potent one and has suffused the internal and external relations of nation-states since its consecration in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia” (Brown, p.22).

But now, signs are proliferating, to the effect that we are more and more coming to inhabit a “a post-Westphalian world” (p.21). Along such lines, Balibar has emphasized that the absolutized and sacralised status of borders “has been relativized in the history of the 20th century, already before the official advent of ‘globalization’, especially in the case of the European territories, both in the form of the emergence of supranational (super)borders, and in the form of a progressive dismantling of the multiple administrative functions of the national borders: some being steadily reinforced (particularly the police function, controlling the flows of immigrants, etc.), others being weakened and separated from the borderline (eg. the monetary independence or the fiscal control)” (p.193).

The recent transformations in the status and function of borders, and the relation of such transformations to the much discussed crisis of sovereignty of the nation-state, is the focus of Wendy Brown’s book. Brown contends that “over the past half century, the monopoly of [the] combined attributes [of sovereignty] by nation-states has been severely compromised by growing transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, goods, violence, and political and religious fealty. These flows,” she continues, “both tear at the borders they cross and crystallize as powers within them, thus compromising sovereignty from its edges, and from its interior” (p.22).

Nor are these the only trends at work to compromise sovereignty. According to Brown: “Nation-state sovereignty has been undercut as well by neoliberal rationality, which recognizes no sovereign apart from entrepreneurial decision makers (large and small), which displaces legal and political principles (especially liberal commitments to universal inclusion, equality, liberty, and the rule of law) with market criteria, and which demotes the political sovereign to managerial status. Nation-state sovereignty has also been eroded by the steady growth and importance of international economic and governance institutions such as the IMF and WTO. And nation-state sovereignty has been challenged by a quarter century of postnational and international assertions of law, rights, and authority that sometimes openly aim to subvert or supercede the sovereignty of states” (p.22). In a word, for Brown, “the walls and fences” proliferating at borders around the world are best interpreted not as “a sign of strength and state power, but a last vestige of a dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty” (Jones et. al., p.2).

Along similar lines, the Cameroonian philosopher and leading postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe has even spoken of the emergence by the early twenty-first century of “corporate sovereignty,” which he considers “an unprecedented form of power, whose main aspiration is to free itself from democratic oversight.” Indeed, Mbembe warns that, “[a]s a result, we might no longer live in an epoch when sovereignty was exercised by the demos. The demos properly understood might no longer be the sovereign. Finance capital in the guise of a ubiquitous digital architecture might have definitely become the new Leviathan. We are witnessing the historical bifurcation between liberal democracy and finance capitalism, and the emergence of a new form of sovereignty – corporate sovereignty – which claims for itself the law of immunity and the powers of exception” (p.7).

In a word, for Mbembe, “[t]he globalization of corporate sovereignty, the extension of capital into every sphere of life and technological escalation in the form of the computational are all part of one and the same process” (p.8).

For her part, Brown emphasizes that globalization, or “[w]hat we have come to call a global world,” comes with dialectical tensions. More specifically, it “harbors fundamental tensions between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription. These tensions materialize as increasingly liberalized borders, on the one hand, and the development of unprecedented funds, energies, and technologies to border fortification, on the other” (pp.7-8).

Emblematic of, indeed, crystallizing these tensions, is the proliferation of “new walls striating the globe …” (p.8). Such proliferation, Brown emphasizes, is “paradoxical given that the most potent forms of power and violence today are uncontainable by physical walling” (in Jones et. al., p.2). Indeed, Brown articulates what she considers to be three paradoxes inherent in this phenomenon of proliferating border walls: “one featuring simultaneous opening and blocking, one featuring universalization combined with exclusion and stratification, and one featuring networked and virtual power met by physical barricades” (p.20).

Brown contends that one striking fact about these new barriers is that “they are not built as defences against invading armies, or even as shields against weapons launched in interstate wars. Rather, … they target non-state transnational actors” (p.21).

Brown situates her account of the contours of the crisis of nation-state sovereignty by contrasting it, on the one hand, “with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s claim that nation-state sovereignty has transformed into global Empire,” and on the other, “with Giorgio Agamben’s [claim] that sovereignty has metamorphosed into the worldwide production and sacrifice of bare life (or global civil war).” She argues, instead, “that key characteristics of sovereignty are migrating from the nation-state to the unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanction political violence” (p.23).

Which brings us to the crux of her argument about the proliferation of border walls. Brown insists that, “[c]ounterintuitively, perhaps, it is the weakening of state sovereignty, and more precisely, the detachment of sovereignty from the nation-state, that is generating much of the frenzy of nation-state wall building today. Rather than resurgent expressions of nation-state sovereignty, the new walls are icons of its erosion” (p.24).

These icons of the erosion of nation-state sovereignty are certainly not bereft of irony. One such irony associated with proliferating border walls, Brown points out, is that they end up blurring the very distinction between inside and outside that their construction is intended to perform, to mark, and to enforce. In her words: “a structure taken to mark and enforce an inside/outside distinction – a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and between friend and enemy – appears as precisely the opposite when grasped as part of a complex of eroding lines between the police and the military, subject and *patria*, vigilante and state, law and lawlessness” (p.25).

Brown emphasizes the theatrical, the performative, even the spectacular, function of these walls. She argues that “the new walls project an image of sovereign jurisdictional power and an aura of the bounded and secure nation that are at the same time undercut by their existence and also by their functional inefficacy;” and so, “[they] function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict” (p.25).

Brown goes further still, to stress the way in which this performative contradiction, “[t]his theatricalized and spectacularized performance of sovereign power” serves to “bring into relief” what she calls the “theological remainder” of nation-state sovereignty (p.26). In a word, the walls “stage an aura of sovereign power,” and are thus intended to induce a sense of awe. Brown introduces a psycho-analytic component into her argument here, to suggest that “the walls respond in part to psychic fantasies, anxieties, and wishes,” indeed, that they are capable of “producing psychic containment,” even if they are not effective at “doing what they purport ‘to do’” (p.109). In other words: “[w]alls generate what Heidegger terms a ‘reassuring world picture’ in a time increasingly lacking the horizons, containment, and security that humans have historically required for social and psychic integration and for political membership” (p.26).

Though the walls are thus performative and spectacular, and respond to psychic fantasies, their consequences are very real. Indeed, they are part and parcel of the surge of reactionary nationalism across much of the globe. This because “[w]alls built around political entities cannot block out without shutting in, cannot secure without making securitization a way of life, cannot define an external ‘they’ without producing a reactionary ‘we’, even as they also undermine the basis of that distinction. Psychically, socially, and politically, walls inevitably convert a protected way of life into hunkering and huddling” (p.42).

In sum, Brown argues that the proliferation of border walls are best interpreted as “a political-theatrical response to eroding nation-state sovereignty. Barriers like those at the US-Mexico, India-Pakistan or South Africa-Zimbabwe borders [are] generally ineffective in blocking what they formally aim to interdict. However, contemporary border walls function as symbolic and semiotic responses to crises produced by eroded sovereign state capacities to secure territory, citizens and economies against growing transnational flows of power, people, capital, religions, ideas or terror” (in Jones et. al., p.2).

Indeed, Brown goes further still, to insist that “walls do not merely index but accelerate waning state sovereignty: they blur the policing and military functions of states and also generate new vigilantism at the border; they increase organized criminal operations (and expand their transnational links) for smuggling humans, drugs, weapons and other contraband across borders; and they intensify nationalist sentiments that in turn spur demands for greater exercises of state sovereignty, more effective walling and less flexibility in responding to globalization's vicissitudes and volatilities. In all of these ways, the new border fortifications tend to deepen the crises of sovereignty to which they also respond. Far from mere palliatives or props for degraded sovereign powers, they are a kind of *pharmakon*, worsening the problem they respond to even as they throw a sop to constituencies anxious or angry at states' declining capacities to uphold social contracts to secure order, prosperity and protection” (in Jones et. al., p.2).

**Border as Wall or Border as Method?**

Brown’s interpretation of the phenomenon of border walls has been highly influential, at least among liberal academic circles. But it has also been, as should be expected, the subject of several very interesting critiques. Unquestionably among the most nuanced and insightful of these is an argument advanced by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson in their 2013 book titled *Border as Method: Or, the Multiplication of Labor*.

Mezzadra and Neilson contend that the “**image of the border as a wall**, or as a device that serves first and foremost to exclude … is misleading in the end.” Indeed, they insist, to “[i]solate a single function of the border does not allow us to grasp the flexibility of this institution. Nor does it facilitate an understanding of the diffusion of practices and techniques of border control within territorially bound spaces of citizenship and their associated labor markets” (p.7).

For Mezzadra and Neilson, then, it is important to look beyond the border’s function of exclusion to cast a critical gaze at its role in processes of inclusion as well. Here they caution against the trend in most accounts to treat inclusion “as an unalloyed social good,” and emphasize instead how, as devices of inclusion, borders function to “select and filter people and different forms of circulation in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures.” They set out to show “how borders establish multiple points of control along key lines and geographies of wealth and power,” and they conceptualize “inclusion [as] existing in a continuum with exclusion, rather than in opposition to it.” Doing so allows them to “focus on the hierarchizing and stratifying capacity of borders,” and to “examin[e] their articulation to capital and political power whether they coincide with the territorial limits of states or exist within or beyond them” (p.7).

But how, exactly, does this argument relate to Brown’s? Mezzadra and Neilson certainly acknowledge the force of Brown’s main point that “the proliferation of walls and barriers in the contemporary world is more a symptom of the crisis and transformation of state sovereignty than a sign of its reaffirmation.” They especially appreciate her thesis that “even the most physically intimidating of these new walls serves to regulate rather than exclude legal and illegal migrant labor,” producing a zone of indistinction ‘‘between law and non-law of which flexible production has need.” Nonetheless, they insist that their “argument goes beyond Brown’s by considering how borders regulate and structure the relations between capital, labor, law, subjects, and political power even in instances where they are not lined by walls or other fortifications.” In a word, Mezzadra and Neilson would have us “separate the border from the wall,” because only by so doing can we come to see “how the regulatory functions and symbolic power of the border test the barrier between sovereignty and more flexible forms of global governance in ways that provide a prism through which to track the transformations of capital and the struggles that mount within and against them” (p.8).

Mezzadra and Neilson thus urge us to go beyond the focus on borders as sites of exclusion. In their perspective, “far from serving simply to block or obstruct global flows, [borders] have become essential devices for their articulation. In so doing, borders have not just proliferated.” Furthermore, they contend, borders “are also undergoing complex transformations.” Indeed, they follow Saskia Sassen in claiming that borders are being disaggregated, both actually as well as heuristically. Mezzadra and Neilson thus “speak not only of a proliferation but also of a heterogenization of borders.” To this end, they argue that “the multiple (legal and cultural, social and economic) components of the concept and institution of the border tend to tear apart from the magnetic line corresponding to the geopolitical line of separation between nation-states” (p.3).

Moreover, they emphasize that “migration control has only quite recently become a prominent function of political borders” (p.3). And they insist, in a manner not altogether dissimilar from the argument advanced by Brown, that “[t]oday borders are not merely geographical margins or territorial edges. They are complex social institutions, which are marked by tensions between practices of ***border reinforcement*** and ***border crossing***” (p.3).

According to Mezzadra and Neilson, only by bringing into focus this dual nature of border practices, of *border reinforcement* and *border crossing*, can we come to comprehend the crucial role that borders play in “producing the times and spaces of global capitalism,” as well as in “shaping the struggles that rise up within and against these times and spaces—struggles that often allude problematically, but in rich and determinate ways, to the abolition of borders themselves” (pp.3-4).

**Borders and Violence**

Which brings us to the subject of violence. Mezzadra and Neilson stress that even as borders are, on the one hand, “becoming finely tuned instruments for managing, calibrating, and governing global passages of people, money, and things,” they are, on the other hand, simultaneously “spaces in which the transformations of sovereign power and the ambivalent **nexus of politics and violence are never far from view”** (pp.3-4).

Mezzadra has elsewhere sought “to expand the model of ‘war’ to the study of the violent processes of control and suppression which target ‘illegal migrations’ and also affect asylum seekers,” in particular “at the ‘outer borders’ of the so-called Schengen space.” His work attempts “to show [the] political function [of the border] in a world of rapidly expanding exploitation of ‘nomadic’ labor force which is also a world of endemic violence or overt wars (in particular, in the ‘South’, through either internal conflicts or external interventions, where they add to the insecurity and the uprooting of entire populations).” It furthermore “aims to show what kind of uncontrollable social and juridical consequences this expansion of the model of war (or police in the form of war) is now producing for [Europe]” (Balibar, p.202).

What’s more, “Mezzadra's description of the ‘border war’ of Europe does not only refer to statistics of the permanent increase of death.” It also brings into view “the contradictory effects of the violent security policies waged ‘in the name of Europe’ by the bordering countries, now aggravated by the conjuncture of the ‘global war on terror’” (Balibar, p.202).

The “border war” in Europe, Mezzadra contends, is not really about stopping the flow of migrants. “There is, indeed, no question of suppressing the flows of migrants towards Europe.” Rather, it is about the propagation of fear: “the new proletarians (in the original sense adopted by Marx, these are workers without a social ‘status’ or ‘recognition’) must be transformed into subjects and objects of fear, experiencing fear of being rejected and eliminated, and inspiring fear in the ‘stable’ populations” (Balibar, p.203).

A similar sentiment has been echoed by Mbembe, in whose judgment: “[B]orders are no longer merely lines of demarcation separating distinct sovereign entities. Increasingly, they are the name we should use to describe the organised violence that underpins both contemporary capitalism and our world order in general. The border is no longer just a particular point in space, but both a technology and the moving body of undesired masses of population” (p.5). Indeed, somewhat differently from Mezzadra, Mbembe argues that rather than speak of borders per se, it is in fact more exact, more precise, to speak of “borderization,” by which he means “the process by which certain spaces are transformed into uncrossable places for certain classes of populations.” Such classes, he continues, “undergo a process of racialization,” a process that is structurally violent. Transforming certain spaces into uncrossable places for certain classes of people entails rendering these spaces as “places where speed must be disabled and the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable are meant to be immobilized if not shattered” (pp.8-9).

Mbembe emphasizes the way in which technological innovations have transformed the border, their acceleration facilitating “the creation of a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes” (p.9). In this respect, Mbembe’s argument converges with the work of Gabriel Popescu, who has highlighted how governments have “begun embedding their regulatory functions in various networks of global flows with the help of digital technologies,” thereby “dislocating linear border functions and pushing them both outward into other states’ territories and inward into national societies.” At the same time, Popescu notes, “bordering practices [have been] digitized through the automation of data collection in databases and data analysis.” Such developments have rendered borders “mobile and portable, thus opening up the entire space of the globe to potential bordering processes” (p.4).

In a word, according to Popescu, “there has been an increase in bordering instances, as people can encounter borders in various forms in a multitude of locales within their daily lives.” Moreover, “the nature of an individual's encounter with borders has changed, since this is often mediated via diverse digital devices and managed by private actors” (pp.4-5). At the same time, “border control has become more individualized, as digitization allows surveillance to zero in on the smallest spaces, such as the body, and continuously monitor them” (p.5). And finally, “[b]order security practices … have taken a keen interest in the connection between the human body and identity as a means of achieving detailed control over the territoriality of movement. In the digital world of databases, the body achieves spatial co-presence, resulting in non-homogenous geographies. The algorithms querying biometric data fragment the body and then recompose it in databases across space” (p.5).

These are precisely the kinds of technological innovations about which Mbembe also speaks, and which are embedded and employed in “[c]ontemporary migration regimes,” which, Mbembe insists, are “aim[ed] either at slowing down the dynamics of people’s interactions, at creating distance or at shattering the chains of relations between them, so as to institute new patterns of separation.” Nor are restrictions on movement “limited to national boundaries.” Instead, “[t]hey are at work on a global scale,” effectively “deepening the space and time asymmetries between different categories of humanity while leading to the progressive ghettoization of entire regions of the world.” Indeed, most provocatively, Mbembe concludes that, “[t]o a large extent, this [process] is akin to a universalization of the Israeli model” (p.11).

In sum, Mbembe surmises, quite dramatically, that “borders are meant to concretize the principle of dissimilarity rather than that of affinity. They are not only obstacles to free movement. They are boundaries between species and varieties of the human. As such, they play a crucial role in contemporary modes of production of human difference and relatedness. Human bodies are increasingly divided between those that matter and those that do not, those who can move and those who cannot or should not, or should only move under very strict conditions. Bodies that should not move are those that are uninsured. They must be tracked, captured, and dispensed of. Such bodies are kept shifting between invisibility, waiting and effacement. They are trapped in fragmented spaces, stretched time and indefinite waiting” (p.11).

So too have other activists and scholars emphasized the role of violence in relation to borders. “Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape” wrote Gloria Anzaldúa [over thirty years] ago in describing the background for the emergence of what she called the ‘new Mestiza’” in her classic, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (in Mezzadra and Neilson, p.6).

Likewise, Harsha Walia has insisted, in her 2013 book titled *Undoing Border Imperialism*, that “Western governance [in particular] and statehood is constituted through multiple modes, including the primacy of the border that delineates and reproduces territorial, political, economic, cultural, and social control.” To this end, Walia quotes Alessandra Moctezuma and Mike Davis, who write, “All borders are acts of state violence inscribed in landscape.” We will return to explore the contours of Walia’s thesis about border imperialism below.

But first, let us mention the work of Reece Jones, whose 2016 book titled, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, not only emphasizes the role of violence at the borders, but also links the emphasis to a critique of Wendy Brown’s argument about “waning sovereignty.” In the book, Jones contends that “the existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it.” To this end, he argues that “[t]he border creates the economic and jurisdictional discontinuities that have come to be seen as its hallmarks, providing an impetus for the movement of people, goods, drugs, weapons, and money across it.” Furthermore, he stresses “the hardening of the border” over recent years, a hardening achieved “through new security practices,” that he interprets as “the source of the violence, not a response to it” (p.5).

In emphasising the violence of borders, Jones operates with a “nuanced definition of violence” (p.9) that encompasses not only overt, but also more covert, structural forms. By honing in on the violence, Jones seeks expressly to counter the argument made by Brown, among others, “that globalization is undermining the position of the state.” To the contrary, Jones contends, “the global scale of border violence demonstrates that the state remains the dominant container of political power in the world.”

Jones perhaps makes too much of his differences with Brown. For he is, after all, willing to acknowledge “a reorientation of the role of the state in the global economic system, as the older system of borders and sovereign states is challenged by the cross-border movements of capital, goods, and people.” Indeed, he explicitly recognizes that “[r]egional trade groups like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), supranational institutions like the European Union, global organizations like the United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF), global corporations, nonstate militant groups, and terrorist organizations are all vying for power in the global system and operating through and around the borders of the traditional state.” Nevertheless, he rather vehemently denies the notion that such developments have led to a decline in state power. To the contrary, he insists, they have led to a “reassertion of it, specifically through the construction of walls, fences, and other security apparatus at the border. As the movements of people threaten their ability to control resources and populations, states around the world have responded by hardening borders and violently enforcing their authority. The hardening of borders represents a rearticulation and expansion, not a retreat, of state power” (pp.67-68).

To help render this claim about the rearticulation and expansion of state power in relation to the border plausible, Jones highlights “the increased cooperation between states in the management of their borders.” He notes that “[m]ost borders have ceased to be lines of dispute between states competing for control over territory,” despite exceptions such as “[t]he situation on the Korean peninsula, between Russia and Ukraine, and on the Line of Control in Kashmir.” At most borders, however, “conflict has been replaced with cooperation as neighboring states work together against shared threats to their sovereign control over their territories.” Such increased collaboration between states, Jones insists, has allowed them to “retain their central role in the control of political space.” Not only do “[s]tates work together at the UN to recognize each other’s sovereignty and reject secessionist and independence movements;” so too do they “work together at borders to manage and regulate – to make legible to each other – people who do not acknowledge the state’s exclusive right to control their territory: migrants, smugglers, terrorists.” And he goes on to mention “many examples of these cross-border partnerships against shared threats” (pp.68-69).

Like Mbembe, and to some extent Mezzadra, Jones hones in on the relationship between border violence and the restriction of movement. But more explicitly than others, Jones is concerned not only to trace recent transformations, but to detect longer-term continuities in the processes he observes at work at the borders today. Indeed, he takes the long view that “movement restrictions at borders today are part of a long-term effort to control the movement of the poor, which has its roots in slavery, vagrancy, and poor laws” (p.11).

At times, in fact, Jones proves willing to trace the roots of such restrictions further back still, such as when he claims that “[r]estrictions on movement at borders are part of a long-term conflict between states and people who move, a conflict that goes back to the earliest states and human settlements. While the regulation of movement takes different forms through various historical periods, the underlying desire to protect privileges accrued through the control of resources and opportunities remains the same” (p.69).

At his boldest, Jones thus claims to have deciphered the very same motivation, expressed albeit in different forms across different historical periods – namely, the desire to restrict the movement of the poor on the part of the powerful and the privileged. To put the point, again, in his words: “The true source of the crisis is that movement restrictions at borders continue to allow states to contain the poor and protect the wealth and privilege of their populations” (p.28). In striking contrast to Mbembe, however, Jones has little to say about processes of racialization at work.

This despite the fact that, as Harsha Walia has argued, “the reinforcement of physical and psychological borders against racialized bodies” has been “a key instrument through which … the sanctity and myth of superiority of Western civilization” has been produced and reproduced.

**Against Border Imperialism**

It is worth now considering in some detail the notion of “border imperialism” advanced by Walia in her dual role as both activist and scholar. Walia contends that this concept of border imperialism provides a “useful analytic framework,” one capable of “reorient[ing] the gaze squarely on the processes of displacement and migration within the global political economy of capitalism and colonialism.” According to Walia, border imperialism is “characterized by the entrenchment and reentrenchment of controls against migrants, who are displaced as a result of the violences of capitalism and empire, and subsequently forced into precarious labor as a result of state illegalization and systemic social hierarchies.”

Like Mezzadra and Neilson, Walia centers the “circulations of capital and labor stratifications in the global economy,” but moreso than they; while reminiscent of Mbembe, she simultaneously centers how “narratives of empire, and hierarchies of race, class, and gender within state building,” arguing that these “operate in tandem to lay the foundation for border imperialism.” In sum, hers is a story about “the unequal relations between rich and poor, between North and South, between whiteness and its others,” coming up against “the hybridity of human societies and the desire for movement.”

Walia sketches four defining process within border imperialism. The first of these is a dialectic of “displacements as a result of the coercive extractions of capitalism and colonialism,” on the one hand, and “the simultaneous fortification of the border—often by those very same Western powers that are complicit in these displacements—which renders the migration of displaced people as perilous,” on the other. Large-scale displacements and the precarious conditions into which migrants are cast are not coincidental but rather foundational to the structuring of border imperialism.”

To illuminate this dialectical dynamic, Walia cites the work of William Robinson, one of the leading contemporary theorists of global capitalism and transnational conflicts. Robinson relates in a systematic way the causal connection between the transnational circulation of capital and the transnational circulation of labor. According to Robinson: “The transnational circulation of capital and the disruption and deprivation it causes … generates the transnational circulation of labor. In other words, global capitalism creates immigrant workers.” Which in turn leads him to make the point that such transnational circulation of labor, in a sense, “must be seen as a coerced or forced migration, since global capitalism exerts a structural violence over whole populations and makes it impossible for them to survive in their homeland.”

Walia builds on this point by Robinson to maintain that the structural violence propelling “the dual processes of displacement and migration” must be considered a constitutive feature of “the specific trajectories of [both] colonialism and capitalism.” To this end, she invokes Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation, a concept about which we had much to say in last week’s lecture.

Walia contends that “capitalism requires precarious and exploitable workers to facilitate capital accumulation, and creates those precarious lives through hierarchies of systemic oppression along with its extractions of labor and land.” She goes on to recall that “[i]n Karl Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation, capitalist modes of production explicitly require conquest, enslavement, and the dispossession of communities from the lands on which they subsist,” before turning to cite the Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard, who has argued that colonialism “forcefully opened-up what were once collectively held territories and resources to privatization (dispossession), which, over time, came to produce a ‘class’ of workers compelled to enter the exploitative realm of the labor market for their survival (proletarianization).” Accordingly, Walia concludes that “[c]olonial and capitalist interests continue to expropriate Indigenous lands, dispossessing Indigenous nations of their territorial base and livelihood, particularly within but not limited to settler-colonial states.”

This focus on the process of primitive accumulation in turn allows Walia to identify “a critical connection between the Western state and capitalism,” in which she sees “the state serving as a key instrument to accumulate capital.” At the same time, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the settler-colonial nature of states such “as Canada and the United States, [whose] encroachment on Indigenous lands is compounded by genocidal attempts to subjugate Indigenous governance and assimilate Indigenous cultures.”

If the first defining process of border imperialism is thus the dialectical dynamic of displacement as a result of the coercive extractions of capitalism and colonialism, the second defining process, according to Walia, “is the criminalization of migration and the deliberate construction of migrants as ***illegals*** and ***aliens***.” In her words: “Migrants, particularly undocumented migrants or asylum seekers arriving irregularly, are punished, locked up, and deported for the very act of migration. In order to justify their incarceration, the state has to allege some kind of criminal or illegal act. Within common discourses, the victim of this criminal act is the state, and the alleged assault is on its borders.”

Walia here notes a certain anthropomorphization of the state, its embodiment as a nation, whose territorial integrity must necessarily be protected. As she puts the point: “[t]he state becomes a tangible entity, with its own personhood and boundaries that must not be violated.” Walia refers in this regard to the work of leading queer theorist Judith Butler, who has “describe[d] the policing of the state and its national subject as a ‘relentlessly aggressive’ and ‘masculinist’ project.”

Which leads her to address explicitly the carceral institutions that have been constructed in what Mbembe referred to as the process of “borderization.” Whereas Mbembe has observed that “[w]herever we look, the drive is simultaneously and decisively towards contraction, towards containment, towards enclosure and various forms of encampment, detention, and incarceration” (p.8); for Walia, “[m]igrant detention regimes are a key component of Western state building and its constitutive assertion of border controls.”

Indeed, the affinities between the work of Mbembe and the thesis of Walia are especially noteworthy in relation to this point, despite the fact that the two theorists seem unaware of each other’s work. For Mbembe has emphasized how “[s]patial violence, humanitarian strategies, and a peculiar biopolitics of punishment all combine to produce … a peculiar detention space in which people deemed surplus, unwanted, or illegal are governed through abdication of any responsibility for their lives and their welfare” (p.12). Along similar lines, Walia contends that “[p]ractices of incarceration and expulsion, often shared across Western states, demarcate zones of exclusion and mark those deemed undesirable.” Moreover, she insists, “[t]he construction of illegals within border imperialism is part of a broader logic that constructs deviants in order to maintain state power, capitalist profiteering, and social hierarchies.” As such, for Walia, the logic of border imperialism is always already inserted within broader dynamics by which unjust hierarchies are produced and reproduced.

Especially prominent among these hierarchies for Walia, as we have already seen, are hierarchies of race. Which brings us to “[t]he third constituent structuring within border imperialism” – namely, “the racialized hierarchy of national and imperial identity, which anchors and shapes the understanding of citizenship and belonging within the nation-state as well as within the grid of global empire.” The way Walia seeks to situate the border within “the grid of global empire” recalls Balibar’s invocation of Carl Schmitt, who had emphasized the role of borders in the recursive configuration of world, or geo-political, space. Walia is also again close to Mbembe here, insofar as she highlights the role of racialization in the configuration of such a global grid.

However, more explicitly than any of these, and in some ways reminiscent of Jones, Walia is at pains to connect the perpetuation of these hierarchies, in relation to restrictions on movement, with the process of resource extraction. To this end, she quote the activist organization Frassanito Network, whose manifesto, “Borders Are There to Be Undermined,” insists: “The very act of dividing the earth and the sea surface by tracing borders whether they are physical, virtual, or legal also allows for the appropriation of its resources. However, the resource which borders appropriate is not simply the portioned territory. Rather, it is also the subjective claim of people to freely choose the territory in which to settle and the kind of relation they wish to establish with this territory. In other words, borders transform people’s claims to movement into a resource which can be appropriated and exchanged.”

Walia further contends that “[t]he fourth and final structuring of border imperialism is the legalized, state-mediated exploitation of the labor of migrants by capitalist interests.” Here Walia’s thesis closely converges with the work of Mezzadra and Neilson, who emphasize processes of hierarchization and stratification at work in border crossings and border inclusions. Walia stresses that all racialized workers “generally contend with underemployment, low wages, and long hours,” but she nevertheless highlights that “workers without legal citizenship constitute a distinct category of labor in relation to border imperialism.” Moreover, the undocumented among them find themselves in a particularly precarious situation, insofar as they have “no legal authorization to reside or work in the country, and hence have no (theoretical) legal recourse in the face of violence and exploitation.”

To this end, Walia cites the work of Nandita Sharma, who has depicted the vulnerability of migrant labour as “lying at the heart of the flexible accumulation process.” In Walia’s words, such vulnerability “ensures legal control over the disposability of the laborers, which in turn embeds the exploitability of their labor.” This point again echoes Mezzadra, who as we have seen, has emphasized that the promotion of fear rather than actual exclusion is the purpose of Europe’s so-called “border wars.” Likewise, Walia contends that “[d]espite anti-migrant exclusionary rhetoric, it is not in the interests of the state or capital to close down the border to all migrants.” Furthermore, she cites David McNally in this regard, who has argued: “it’s not that global business does not want immigrant labor to the West. It simply wants this labor on its own terms: frightened, oppressed, vulnerable.”

Walia emphasizes the compounding impact of multiple and sequential modes of structural violence exercised upon the migrant worker. First “[d]isplaced by imperialist and capitalist foreign and trade policy,” subsequently rendered “displaceable by colonial and capitalist immigration and labor policies.” The “illegalization of migrant and undocumented workers,” Walia insists, their “denial of full legal status,” serves to force upon them “a condition of permanent precarity,” thereby “legalizing the trade in their bodies and labor by … capital.”

Walia is not alone in advancing such an argument. As Mezzadra and Neilson have argued, the border serves a function that goes well beyond exclusion; indeed, they contend, the border “plays a decisive role in the production of labor power as a commodity. According to them, “the ways migratory movements are controlled, filtered, and blocked by border regimes have more general effects on the political and juridical constitution of labor markets, and thus on the experiences of living labor in general” (pp.20-21).

Likewise, Walia cites “[t]heorists Carlos Fernandez, Meredith Gill, Imre Szeman, and Jessica Whyte, who have insisted: “Without the border, there would be no differential zones of labor, no spaces to realize surplus capital through the dumping of overproduction, no way of patrolling surly populations that might want to resist proletarianization, no release valve for speculative access.”

The work that borders do, thus, definitively goes beyond exclusion. In fact, their mode of inclusion serves to guarantee a hierarchization and stratification connecting citizenship with labour. As Walia puts the point: “Within border imperialism, migrant and undocumented workers are included in the nation-state in a deliberately limited way, creating a two-tier hierarchy of citizenship ... The noncitizen status of these workers guarantees that they fall outside the realm of the state’s obligations; they can be paid less than minimum wage, prevented from accessing social services, and deported during recessions without the elite having to worry about unemployment rates or social unrest.”

Moreover, noncitizen workers are systematically subject to processes of stigmatization and racialization. Again, as Walia puts the point: “[t]he classification of migrant workers as foreign, which embeds labor exploitability, is concurrently maintained through racialization.” The normalization of “[s]ubjugation and exploitation” is achieved through rendering noncitizen workers as racialized outsiders, and reinforced by the “legal branding” of them as foreigners. In this regard, Walia quotes the work of “political scientists Gargi Bhattacharyya, John Gabriel, and Stephen Small,” who have argued: “Capitalist expansion has depended so heavily on mythologies of race and their attendant violences that the double project of racial economic subjugation is a constitutive aspect of this expansion.”

In sum, for Walia, “within border imperialism, the state-capital nexus relies on the apartheid nature of citizenship status to expand a pool of disposable migrant and undocumented labor that lowers the wage floor for capitalist interests without disturbing the normative whiteness of the nation-state.”

All of this leads Walia to criticise those who would make appeals for migrant justice by making such claims as “Immigrants are American too” or “Refugees want to enjoy the freedoms of Canada,” since these kinds of claims only serve to “buttress the legitimacy of the state and its illegitimate foundations in settler colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and oppression.” Rather, Walia would endorse instead non-state-centric, more radical slogans such as “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” and “No one is illegal, Canada is illegal.” Such slogans, she contends, “reflect an understanding of border imperialism as a key pillar of global apartheid, and borders as cartographies of anticapitalist, antiracist, anticolonial, and antioppressive struggles.”

**Thinking from the Border**

And so we come to the notion of ***border struggles***. Mezzadra and Neilson employ this concept in their important book to refer to “those struggles that take shape around the ever more unstable line between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between inclusion and exclusion,” as well as “to the set of everyday practices by which migrants continually come to terms with the pervasive effects of the border, subtracting themselves from them or negotiating them through the construction of networks and transnational social spaces” (p.13).

Leading decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo, in collaboration with Madina Tlostanova, have in turn posited a dialectical relation between, on the one hand, the violence of imperial and territorial impositions (that is, first of frontiers, and then borders), and, on the other, the often creative and resilient responses to such violence by those branded as primitive, as inferior, as Other.

Mignolo and Tlostanova emphasize that “[b]orders are not only geographic but also political, subjective (e.g. cultural) and epistemic;” nor are they an inevitable “outcome of natural or divine historical processes in human history;” rather, they were “established by the coloniality of power,” that is, “structured by the imperial and colonial differences.” In other words, they were “created in the very constitution of the modern/colonial world (i.e. in the imaginary of Western and Atlantic capitalist empires formed in the past five hundred years),” and are thus reflective of the “perspective of European imperial/colonial expansion,” encompassing not only “the massive appropriation of land accompanied by the constitution of international law that justified” such appropriation; but also, crucially, “control of knowledge,” what they call “the epistemology of the zero point as representation of the real,” along with, conversely, the “disqualif[ication of] non-European languages and epistemologies; as well as the “control of subjectivities (by conversation, civilization, democratization) or, in today’s language – by the globalization of culture” (p.208).

Against such geographic, political, subjective, and epistemic imposition, Mignolo and Tlostanova champion the emergence of ***border thinking***, or ***thinking from the borders***, which as a response can be traced back to “the very inception of modern imperial expansion,” but whose preconditions have perhaps most emblematically been maintained by “[r]ecent immigration to the imperial sites of Europe and the USA.” Border thinking, Mignolo and Tlostanova insist, “is grounded in the experiences of the colonies and subaltern empires,” and promises to “provide the epistemology that was denied by imperial expansion” (p.206). Indeed, they contend, it constitutes “the epistemology of the future, without which another world will be impossible” (p.207).

According to Mignolo and Tlostanova, “[b]order thinking (or border epistemology) emerges primarily from the people’s anti-imperial epistemic responses to the colonial difference – the difference that hegemonic discourse endowed to ‘other’ people, classifying them as inferior and at the same time asserting its geohistorical and body-social configurations as superior and the models to be followed. These people refuse to be geographically caged, subjectively humiliated and denigrated and epistemically disregarded” (p.208).

The concept of border thinking has an elective affinity with that of “double consciousness,” as originally articulated by the African-American sociologist W.E.B. Dubois. Like double consciousness, it is inevitably associated with “epistemic and political projects of de-colonization” (p.211). Nevertheless, Mignolo and Tlostanova contend, if “[t]he imperial and colonial epistemic differences create the condition for border thinking,” they “do not determine it” (p.212). Indeed, when “border thinking does not emerge, the alternatives are competition, assimilation, or resistance without a vision of the future” (p.212).

The standpoint from which border thinking “would have to happen is the colonial and ex-colonial locales of the subaltern empires, among the people who were multi-marginalized and denied their voice by Western modernity – directly and through subaltern imperial mediation” (p.213). Border thinking thus “emerges in the crack and it emerges as an epistemic shift. It is,” they claim, “a shift from theo- and ego- to geo- and body-politics of knowledge” (p.214).

Exactly what Mignolo and Tlostanova mean by this can certainly seem difficult to comprehend. But what is clear is that they are arguing for a displacement and de-centering of Europe. They even question the categories of “center,” “periphery,” and “semi-periphery” as employed by world system theory, while emphasizing instead the urgency of “think[ing] from the border.” For indeed, theirs is an effort to center histories, spaces, and subjects that have been marginalised and subjected by the workings of modernity-cum-coloniality. Nevertheless, as Mezzadra and Neilson have pointed out, Mignolo and Tlostanova would seem at times, to “reinscribe the consistency (and hence the borders) of Europe and the West” (p.18), such as when they refer to border thinking as an “epistemology of the exteriority” (p.206). Nevertheless, their articulation of border thinking as being “of the outside, created from the inside” would seem more consistent with their purportedly subversive aims (p.206). This because border thinking, always already located in the midst of border struggles, should help expose “the problematic nature of the [very] distinction between interior and exterior” (p.18), especially in our desperately “entangled” world.

**Conclusion**

Let us, therefore, conclude. In this lecture, we sought to bring into focus the idea of the border as constituting a global social problem. To do so, we began by providing an overview of the difficulties involved in providing a definition of the border. We proceeded to analyse the intimate connection between borders and sovereignty as a still-dominant political ideal. We paid special attention to Wendy Brown’s provocative thesis that the proliferation of border walls is better interpreted not as a sign of strength and state power, but rather, “as a last vestige of a dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty” (Jones et. al, p.2). This discussion, in turn, led us to a rather in-depth treatment of the relationship between borders and violence, in which we dealt with, as well, issues associated with the technological transformation of the border. We then considered the concept and thesis of “border imperialism,” before concluding by centering the notion of border struggles and introducing the promise of border epistemology.

Next up: the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic.