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Humanitarianism Destroys Politicality

An interview with Sandro Mezzadra by Davor Konjikušić

Sandro Mezzadra / Davor Konjikušić

Sandro Mezzadra, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Bologna and adjunct researcher at the Institute for Culture and Society of the University of Western Sydney, was recently a guest speaker at the public discussion entitled, “Remember Gastarbeiters – So that You Don't Forget the Reality in which You Live,” in Nova Gallery, Zagreb. On this occasion, we spoke with professor Mezzadra about his last book, which he co-authored with Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (2013).

Davor Konjikušić: Can you explain your concept of the global multiplication of labor?

Sandro Mezzadra: I must immediately emphasize that I developed the concept of the multiplication of labor together with my colleague Brett Neilson. With this concept we try to identify the characteristics that define labor in contemporary capitalism. It is important to say that the concept of the multiplication of labor is closely connected to the more commonly known concept of the

division of labor, and can thus be understood as its supplement. This represents the reality in which labor colonizes our lives while simultaneously undergoing a general heterogenization. Perhaps this kind of reality should be set in contrast to the economic policy that we usually call Fordism or mass industrialization, which is characterized by the hegemony of what is usually considered the standard in labor regulation, better known as the forming of "free" wage labor. Of course, not every worker had such a contract during Fordism, but the entire labor market was organized around that standard. Today we are faced with the implosion of that same standard, even in regard to the legal regulation of contract labor through various multiplied and heterogeneous methods that are regulated by that standard. It is important for us to focus on the contradictions between the processes of colonizing labor and life through labor, the powerful processes of the diversification of labor, and the ways in which those processes are experienced. This has all radically changed the very framework of exploitation today.

How do these transformations concretely influence our everyday experiences?

The ideal of long-term employment has become endangered by recent developments of capitalism under the precarization and flexibilization of labor. Working subjects' experiences are becoming increasingly characterized by the fragmentation of employment relations. It is all connected to the processes of colonizing life through labor. The intensification of labor means that people work more and more, whereas the diversification occurs in both a legal sense and in the sense of different working activities. The flexibilization of labor law, and particularly the explosion of contractual arrangements corresponding to the decline of collective bargaining, is particularly relevant from a legal perspective.

What is the difference between the old figure of the migrant worker, the so-called Gastarbeiter*, typical to industrial societies, and the figure of the contemporary migrant worker in the time of global modernity? What are the employment relations like today, even though we deal with advanced capitalism in both cases?*

It is an extremely important question. In order to understand past migrations, we have to focus on the figure of the guest worker, or *Gastarbeiter*, which is a familiar concept for people in this part of Europe. The *Gastarbeiter's* experience was connected to massive processes of industrialization, which resulted in establishing Fordism in countries such as West Germany, Austria, and even Italy. We also had the experience of belated industrialization up to the late 1950s in Italy. This kind of experience is characterized by great internal migrations from South to North. There is no massive industrialization without migration. One of the obvious examples is the industrialization in the United States, which led to dramatic transatlantic migrations at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. If we look at all of these historical instances, we can very easily see that specific experiences of migration are connected to the processes of organizing the entire labor market around "free" wage labor. The experience of Italian, Spanish, and Yugoslav *Gastarbeiters* after World War II consisted of the arrival and combining of an additional workforce to the existing workforce in Western countries. Many of these workers were not directly employed in factories, but most of them were, and that was the standard, which shaped the whole experience of migration in that specific historical moment. Now, however, all this has changed completely, because the experience of contemporary migration is based in the socio-economic environment, which has completely been defined by the flexibilization of the economy and of society.

Today it is impossible to define a standard figure of a migrant worker, which could replace the figure of the *Gastarbeiter* of the 1950s and 1960s. The contemporary migrant experience is defined by different types of labor. Today we have workers in construction, agriculture, the service sector, street vendors, household workers, etc., and that makes an important difference.

Furthermore, the image of the *Gastarbeiter* was constructed upon the experience of industrial male workers, notwithstanding the fact that a large number of them were female. The invisibilization of female migration in the age of guest workers is an important topic in and of itself. Today it is impossible to deny the relevance of the female experience of migration against the backdrop of powerful processes of the feminization of migration, which also contribute to the diversification of migrant labor. We can see that in the example of babysitters or housekeepers, which are jobs mostly done by female migrant workers. At stake in the feminization of migration is something more than the mere fact that almost 50% of migrants in today's world are women (ILO 2010). Even more relevant are the conflict-ridden and tense processes of crisis and transformation of gender relations and the sexual division of labor that lie behind this huge increase of women's participation in migratory movements. At the same time it is important to emphasize that the "feminization" of migration is associated with dramatic transformations of care and service labor, which have given centrality to tasks and skills historically constructed as typically "feminine." If we analyze the means of recruiting workers, we can see important and dramatic differences. *Gastarbeiters* were recruited by factory's headquarters, whereas today government offices are the ones that recruit workers – occasionally, targetedly, and for a certain period of time. Migrations are controlled in order to recruit the exact number of migrant workers needed. The spread

of points-based systems for the recruitment and management of migrant labor, sectoral and temporal recruitment programs, and the growing roles of a panoply of workers and agencies are all part of a migration management spurred by the dream of a "just-in-time" and "to-the point" migration. This kind of control is clearly a fantasy, but it spurs the evolution of migrations regarding temporary migration, circular migration, seasonal migration, sectoral migration... These are the consequences of the ways the authorities control Migration, which shape the contemporary map of migrations and politics in many parts of the world.

The British newspaper The Economist *has recently published a map which shows that the number of walls, fences, and barbed wires at borders will soon surpass the number of fortified and militarized borders during the Cold War. What does that mean in terms of migration, labor, and exploitation?*

It is impossible to negate that in Europe, but also in other parts of the world, there is a strong desire for erecting walls. This is a defensive and reactive attempt at controlling migration. However, I think there is a contradiction between multiplying walls and the rationality of neoliberal capitalism. It is extremely interesting to reflect upon these contradictions. The walls stop the turbulent and autonomous forms of migration and they can create preconditions for its management. This kind of reaction to the challenges of migration is telling regarding the general crisis of the European Union, which needs mobility yet its mobility system is completely paralyzed at the same time. My impression is that we are faced with the crisis of a border regime that strives towards combining methods for both blocking and facilitating mobility.

Have you ever wondered why Germany took in the largest number of migrants compared to other countries, such as France, Austria or Great Britain, which apply a rather restrictive policy towards migrants?

It is not easy to respond to this question, as I believe there are a few reasons for these decisions by German Prime Minister Angela Merkel. One of the reasons is definitely the need for the reaffirmation of German "moral" leadership in Europe, especially after the Greek crisis. These reasons are also related to internal political motivations and dynamics. But I am also convinced that one of the reasons is also that Merkel, and a large part of the German political establishment, are aware that there is a problem with the European mobility system. Therefore, they see this as an opportunity for testing new forms of migrant integration in a country whose economy depends on migration. Wolfgang Shäuble stated that several times in the last few months.

Could we then say that this is about Germany getting a cheap new workforce?

It is a simplification, but it could be put that way. There is an attempt at experimenting with jobs offered by entrepreneurs who employ people dependent on welfare. These jobs are only paid one euro per hour. For migrants, the pay is even lower: 80 cents per hour. It is absolutely clear to me that this is an attempt to deepen the diversification of the labor and workforce market. We should also analyze the situation in other countries such as Great Britain, where there is an extremely large amount of migration from Eastern Europe, and consequently no longer a need for migrant workers currently.

It is interesting that you refuse to look at migrants solely as victims, and that you perceive migration as a social movement. Departing from these assumptions, is it possible to configure their political subjectification in a time when migrants are most frequently depicted as victims and migrations as a humanitarian problem?

Of course, that is one of the crucial questions. Let us start from the humanitarian approach to migration management, which actually presents a deep depoliticization of migration. The "critique of the humanitarian reason," to quote the title of a book by Didier Fassin, is an important task for anybody engaged in critical migration studies in the present. Today, we are confronted with humanitarianism, which is becoming increasingly connected to the process of the militarization of borders – as many critical analyses of what is going on in the Mediterranean demonstrate. I am not trying to criticize humanitarianism in a simple way, because it is a complex problem. The humanitarian regime of migration control conveys contradictions and opens spaces that migrants can use for negotiating and crossing borders. Migration in itself is a social movement with objective political implications, which means that we have to perceive migrations through the subjectivity of migrants and their subjective behavior. This is extremely important if we want to inform a different way of how migrants view themselves, a view that does not merely reduce them to victims of the system, which is, as it is well known, at the very core of humanitarianism. Migrations are a social movement in an objective sense, which does not mean that migrants are themselves necessarily political subjects. This also does not mean that migrants are subversive subjects, but it does mean that their experiences and performances contain a whole set of contradictions. Their movement and struggles very often politicize these contradictions. A migrant is

not a political subject of radical transformation *per se*, but s/he is in a way constituted through that set of contradictions, which s/he controls through subjective tensions. This creates the politicality of migrations. In many places in Europe, migrants are also engaged in great examples of struggles. One of the important questions is how to connect these movements and struggles with other movements and struggles in order to create a wider coalition for more radical democratization.

How do you see the future of contemporary migrants in Europe, especially regarding their relation to the local workforce? In what ways will they be integrated into the labor market?

This is an extremely complicated question. Today's situation does not make me an optimist. I think that we have to realistically analyze the European situation, which is characterized by the rise of old and new right-wing forces. They intensively work on closing down their societies by spreading fear, which is justified by the fear of terrorism. In this kind of situation, it is objectively very difficult and complicated to achieve migrant integration. There is a risk for integration to become a framework for unilateral processes of inevitable migrant adaptation, which supposes a loss of the values of the societies that integrate them. In this kind of situation, I believe there is a possibility for a further entrenchment of social hierarchies, and migrants might consequently have to pay a high price. That is why it is important for us to fight for the construction of a social and political space in which migrant movements and struggles can join other movements and struggles. In Europe, there is an urgent need for forming a democratic movement, a movement whose most important long-term task will be a radical critique of capitalism.