Book Review: The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism by Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson

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Mezzadra, Sandro and Neilson, Brett. *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*. **Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 312 pages. Paperback, $27.95.**

This book offers a rich analytical framework for understanding radical politics *geographically* across time and space. The research covers a vast expanse, including the major areas and the margins of the world economy. The authors develop their framework with a set of related definitions and concepts that come largely from Marx, but also pull from case studies of business operations in extraction, logistics, and finance. The model, simply put: capitalist operations cause disruption as they expand to areas not yet integrated, only marginally integrated, and areas to be reintegrated anew under different circumstance into the world economy. The disruption causes political challenge as displaced peoples are pushed to action. The understanding shows the relevance of capitalist operations in diverse locales across a vast expanse around the world.

A brief review of a few key concepts involved in so ambitious an endeavor as the authors offer is worthwhile. Operations of capital, aggregate capital, and exploitation are key concepts the authors define and develop. These concepts highlight how anti-capitalist politics emerge from disruptions capitalist operations involve.

Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson define the concept of operations of capital as the internal *and* external interactions of space and time that are in and part of a cause and effect relationship (pg. 5), the sometimes (today increasingly often) *technical* cause and effect relationships at the heart of business, which business firms think about and exploit, ultimately, if they can, by organizing activities (in extraction, logistics, and finance) to bring such knowledge (i.e., the technical knowledge that a business operation involves) to market. The idea of external interactions involved in business operations is important. With it the whole world (of existing

social, legal, and political institutions, and natural environments) and the history that reside outside of "business," narrowly defined, come into focus as a fundamental aspect of "business" broadly defined.

Aggregate capital is the term the authors use for the cultural orientation (i.e., the values and beliefs) that drives capitalism as a political culture. Capitalism for the authors is a society whole and intact, wherein a logic, commitment, or culture holds of creating boundaries for the purpose of exploiting them. The logic is an informal *cultural* institution that structures capitalist relations generally. Aggregate capital builds on Marx's idea of movement capital. The concept highlights the general nature of capitalism as a social system that is "structurally oriented" to an outside to exploit (pg. 7). The authors define "outside" as the boundaries that capitalist operations inevitably create, the point beyond which private enterprise becomes difficult due to the limits of the infrastructure (social and political) that private enterprise necessitates. Not everything everywhere is market ready, privatized, or commodified, at least not yet anyway, the research points out. However, capitalist logic is self-fulling, so nothing and nowhere are off limits.

A revision of Marx's concept of exploitation is another key concept the authors develop. The revision draws attention to the exercise of political power evident in the dense material relations that exploitation (based on domination) involves. The material relations of capitalism, which make way for exploitation, take shape from business operations past, present, and future, for the authors. What subjectivity is apparent in the political power evident in the material relations that exploitation involves? "Master and slave" perhaps, wherein domination is operative. The revision enables the authors to imagine and discuss, within the general framework of Marx, important transformations of capitalism *within* history as politics and society change

and evolve. Transformations *across* history (i.e., from capitalism to communism) is subject matter associated with Marx by contrast. The change (political and social), which makes way for methods of capitalist exploitation to take root as they evolve, is subject matter the book's authors care about. The revision rescues exploitation from the economism that has long prevailed in Marxism, the authors say (pg. 7).

Mezzadra and Neilson accomplish a great deal in *The Politics of Operations*. They operationalize a set of definitions and concepts (many more than are described here) that contribute to understanding radical politics geographically. The insights are important, relevant, and exciting.

Why Marx, however, is a question I am left with having read the book. Why couch a study of the politics of economics with Marx, when Marx studies the economics of politics? The authors' study of anti-capitalist politics starts with economics, with the operations of capital in the tradition of historical materialism, aka Marxism. However, then the authors develop an understanding of capitalist exploitation that makes political subjectivity (not profit, not economics) fundamental. In other words, culture comes first.

The departure shifts the focus of the study in fundamental ways, or at least the thinking should. The culture that drives people in business and politics to make domination operative is subject matter to ask questions about to understand radical politics in the *cultural* definition of the research, which I am arguing should be operative, not business models in isolation (the model, exploitation based on domination). How or why is exploitation the subjectivity that drives the exercise of power in so many places around the world and thus development of the material relations of society "on the ground"?

The Marxist metatheory the authors embrace leads them to ask questions that seem out of place in a study with a focus on capitalist discourses and practices over the past half-decade, a period in which "the infectious rhetoric of big data and algorithms" grips observers (pg. 4). This is another problem with the study. Whether reform or revolution is the more effective social change strategy, is a question the authors ask.

This book is interesting and important, and worth reading for a description of the disruptions that result as geographies are made ready (and/or ready again) for private enterprise. For understanding processes of cultural change and formation that illuminate alternatives to exploitation as *the* culture of capitalism, however, another literature is needed— like research from practical democratic theory, which highlights the way the world takes shape in communities from the contributions of common ordinary everyday people. Literature like this would be a good place to start to understand culture formation, change processes, and is worth reading in tandem with literature from other sources.

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