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Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Rest and the West: Capital and Power in a Multipolar World*, London: Verso, 2024. ISBN: 9781804296059 (paper); ISBN: 9781804296066 (ebook)

In the long wake of the 2007-08 crisis of global capitalism, Antonio Gramsci's (1971: 276) eerily prophetic words—"the old is dying and the new cannot be born"—have proved remarkably resonant for left intellectual formations around the world. Even as the historico-geographic contexts these formations respectively confront have often been marked by profound differences, the present moment certainly displays no shortage of "morbid symptoms" (ibid.). From the so-called "12-day war" launched by Israel and the US on Iran, the ongoing conflagration between Russia and Ukraine, and the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip that continues to be perpetrated with staggering impunity, the interregnum exhibits chaos and cruelty in equal measure. Yet if the word "crisis" rolls easily off the tongue of commentators across the political spectrum, it is far more difficult to elucidate the logics, powers, and potentialities gestating beneath the din of geopolitical discourse, and emergent within the flagrant brutalities of increasingly militarized forms of state power and capital accumulation.

It is this formidable challenge that Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson take up in their impressive and timely book, *The Rest and the West: Capital and Power in a Multipolar World*.

Explicitly inverting the title of Stuart Hall's (1992) now canonical essay, "The West and the Rest", Mezzadra and Neilson's third jointly authored monograph advances a theoretically rich and empirically rigorous analysis of multipolarity and multipolarism as defining features of the present conjuncture. Whereas Hall's discursive analysis sought to historicize and contest the dualistic genesis of the "West" and the "Rest", demonstrating that the latter was and remains materially and epistemically constitutive of the former, Mezzadra and Neilson interrogate a conjuncture in which the preponderance of the "West" can no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, they "concur with Adam Tooze that, at least since the financial crisis of 2007-08, we *already* inhabit a world characterized by 'centrifugal multipolarity'" (p.7, quoting Tooze 2021: 294). Mezzadra and Neilson take the proposition of waning US hegemony seriously, following Giovanni Arrighi's (1994: 30) articulation of hegemony as a state's capacity to "represent the

general interest" (cf. Gramsci 1971) by securing the conditions for the expanded accumulation of capital and stabilization of rule on a world scale. Tracking the concomitant ascent of China, and attending closely to the stakes of the incongruous tensions and interdependencies between China and the US for debates concerning contemporary interstate rivalries and the applicability of the concept of imperialism in the present, they nevertheless remain skeptical about the prospect that China will succeed the US as world hegemon. In fact, Mezzadra and Neilson make a powerful case that familiar (inter/nation-)state cartographies are woefully insufficient for mapping the fusions of and fissures between the logics of capital and territorialism (cf. Arrighi 1994) within 21st century global capitalism. They argue that what we are witnessing is an "*open transition*" (p.6), characterized by a complex entanglement of powers and propensities, contradictions and uncertainties, prospects and pitfalls.

What, then, do Mezzadra and Neilson mean by multipolarity? "Poles", as they conceive them, are indexical neither to the formal delineations of territorial sovereignty, nor even to neatly demarcated state-capital blocs. Multipolarity cannot be simply conflated with the political economic rise or fall of individual nation-states or regions, the inversion of the "axial division of labor" undergirding core and periphery (Wallerstein 2004: 17, passim), or the collapse of the "metaborder" between the "West" and the "Rest" erected in conjunction with modern civilizationist thinking (p.2; see also Hall 1992; Quinn 2024). Rather, polarities are constitutively entwined with the variegated "*operative spaces*" of capital—"the spaces where global processes are organized according to capitalist logics amid constant negotiations with a combination of powers, including states and other governmental actors" (p.21). These operative spaces, as they are realized across terrains of valorization such as extraction, logistics, and finance, unsettle "the very possibility of a territorial sealing or enclosure of poles as bounded, self-contained spatial units, in accordance with a traditional state-centric cartographic imagination" (ibid.; see also Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). Hardly a flat or uniform mapping of efferent globality, *The Rest and the West* makes clear that multipolarity is marked by the heterogenous and often fractious production of space, wherein globalized sites of production, supply chains, digital infrastructures, flows of "raw materials", people, money, weapons, and data are interwoven with

imperial ambitions and social upheavals in ways that render any cartography of centrifugalism as difficult and elusive as it is urgent.

Mezzadra and Neilson nevertheless insist upon retaining the language of *global capitalism*, which refuses the lure of ascribing a plurality of capitalism*s* to respective poles (p.20). This insistence derives from their commitment to analyzing the composition of "aggregate capital" (their translation of Marx's *Gesamtkapital*), in turn rooted in their understanding of capital as, "first and foremost, a social relation" (p.19, 23). The strength of this methodological orientation is that it illuminates the prominence of specific *fractions* and *operative logics* within the composition of capital on a world scale. Moreover, it provides a unique vantage from which to "investigate mutations of capital from the perspective of its antagonistic relationship with its main *other*—the subjective figure of living labour" (p.23). This avowed unity of method and politics may be fruitfully explicated by turning to Mezzadra and Neilson's effort to understand emergent entanglements of circulation, reproduction, and production, particularly as they have been shaped and thrown into relief by the concatenation of pandemic and war. After all, one of Mezzadra and Neilson's more provocative wagers is that, in the present configuration of global capitalism, circulation and reproduction not only assume new forms and functions, but may even be said "to guide processes of valorization and accumulation of capital, subordinating production to their temporality, spatial arrangements, and rationality" (p.54).

The Rest and the West argues that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a pathogenesis itself rooted in the contemporary dispensation of global capitalism (see, inter alia, Davis 2022; Wallace 2020), has accentuated, exacerbated, and accelerated crisis-tendencies that preceded it. Though wary of the epistemic privileging of crisis, Mezzadra and Neilson are nevertheless keen to stress "the productivity of crisis" (p.34), which has played an essential part in capitalism's development over the *longue durée* (Arrighi 1994; Moore 2015). With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, they highlight, for example, the role of crisis in both signaling and issuing a "reorganization of mobility", encompassing the "movements of people and things" (p.40). The virus's rapid transit through and then disruption of supply chains, transportation networks, and labor forces provided a monstrous vindication of the logistical and infrastructural turns, while the

pandemic catalyzed numerous "rebordering[s] of the world" (p.40), including but hardly limited to the supply chain shift "from *just in time* to *just in case*" models (p.41), new biopolitical technologies, platformization sustained by racialized, classed, and gendered geographies of hyper(im)mobility, and a necropolitical (Mbembe 2019) regime of global vaccine apartheid. The "hardening and multiplication of borders", a tendency which promises to become more pronounced as climatic transformations gather momentum, has proceeded apace with reinvigorated state and capitalist drives to produce, capture, and/or master the infrastructures that "lay the conditions that enable flows of commodities, signs, resources, and peoples" and the logistical systems that organize "those flows according to calibrated protocols and standards" (p.48, 53).

Meanwhile, the pandemic forcefully dispelled any illusions that the so-called "asset economy" could flourish in the absence of labor, bringing the figure of the "essential worker" to the forefront of public discourse. Building on the insights of several strands of Marxist feminism, Mezzadra and Neilson show how the essential worker became the object of mendacious acclamation and increased precarity, "[a]t once indispensable and expendable" (p.50). While "essential work" has found differentiated expressions across the world, it has in every instance been profoundly racialized and gendered. Encompassing labor in sectors such as healthcare, food and agriculture, logistics and transportation, and much more, "essential work" foregrounds those laborers who, often at the risk of illness, debility (Puar 2017), or death, kept the supply chains and the "biopolitical infrastructures" (p.52) that sustain both living labor and its antagonist, capital, functioning.

Significantly, *The Rest and the West* intimates the structural proximity of "essential work" and *extraction*, the latter of which they regard as a fraction of capital and operative logic that plays a crucial role in the contemporary composition of aggregate capital. Drawing on the work of Rosa Luxemburg (2003) in particular, they advance a concept of extraction as "a form of economic activity that structurally needs an *outside*", often regarded as "free for the taking" (p.69). In this mode of accumulation, resonant with if not reducible to Marx's so-called "primitive" or "original" accumulation, "capitalist actors … target and exploit processes of social cooperation from the outside, without directly organizing or coordinating the underlying

productive activities" (p.19). Here they would appear to find at least partial theoretical common ground with Jason W. Moore (2015), whom they affirmatively cite (p.107-108), with respect to his emphasis on historical capitalism's reliance upon the appropriation of the unpaid work of human and extra-human natures. In their view, multifaceted expressions of extractive logics and operations crisscross and permeate the arenas of circulation and reproduction in ways that have immense implications not only for the material and subjective composition of the antagonism between labor and capital, but also for grappling with new geographies of imperialism in a multipolar world.

Though they still find utility in the concept of imperialism, Mezzadra and Neilson argue imperialism's contemporary manifestations should neither be reduced to direct expressions of the ambitions or drives of neatly defined national states or capitals, nor to a structure of predation between a clearly demarcated core and periphery. Rather, they use "the term *imperialism* to describe both the facilitation of different patterns of capital valorization and accumulation across the poles of world power and the often-unsuccessful attempts of states, firms, and other entities to overcome the limits of these processes" (p.159). The advent of centrifugal multipolarity suggests the need for renewed attention to imperialism's variegated forms. For instance, the US, Russia, and China, each of which Mezzadra and Neilson regard as "*imperial* or *continental states*" (p.148), are each implicated in the projection of power in starkly different ways.

The war between Russia and Ukraine, launched by Russia in late February 2022, and in no small part as consequence of NATO's aggressive expansionism, is a case in point. While Mezzadra and Neilson do not underestimate the bloodiness of the global order constructed under US hegemony, which always reserved its most unmitigated brutalities for the black, indigenous, and formerly colonized peoples of the world, they stress the significance of the fact that "the Ukraine war is a European war" (p.126). Beyond the inflationary continuities with the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine introduced new systemic shocks. The war not only shattered the already-tenuous "project of European integration", but also signals a deepening and acceleration of centrifugal multipolarity and the ongoing dissolution of the post-1945 "rules-based international order" (p.126, 12)—rules which, *The Rest and the West* makes clear, were always partially specious, since the retreat of formal colonialism by no means abolished "the

zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'" (Mbembe 2019: 77).

Questions of circulation, reproduction, and extraction have proved to be particularly important to the Russia–Ukraine war's unfolding. The form of "political capitalism" (p.23, passim) that predominates in Russia's continental imperium has relied heavily on extractivism, especially in oil and gas, for its oligarchic consolidation. While circulation is essential to this formation, whether one looks to energy infrastructures or the matter of sanctions, "social reproduction appears to be narrowed and curtailed", with the Russian state doubling down on heteronormative chauvinism and civilizationist rhetoric as alternative means of mobilization and displacement (p.131). The launching of the war just hours after Ukraine began transitioning its electricity grid from the Russian to the European Union operated transmission system, the European scramble to reduce dependency on Russian gas, and the targeting of transportation and energy infrastructures would all seem to support Mezzadra and Neilson's contention that interimperial rivalries are increasingly fought out on infrastructural, logistical, and financial terrains. China's Belt and Road Initiative—the massive infrastructure development project with horizons stretching across Eurasia, Latin America, and Africa—provides a strikingly different illustration of the centrality of circulatory operations within contemporary interimperial rivalries, as does the US's projection of power through "dollar dominance", even if the latter may be eroding (p.181).

Despite imperialism's diverse expressions, Mezzadra and Neilson stress a *general* proliferation of "war regimes" across the multipolar world, marked by "a militarization of political and economic life that exceeds the actual engagement of military forces on the ground and may even exist independently from such mobilizations" (p.128). Although the Russia–Ukraine war and the Israeli assault on Gaza are hardly analogous, Mezzadra and Neilson argue that "in the current conjuncture they are strictly *concatenated*"—differentiated manifestations of the global proliferation of war regimes (p.x). They point to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an instantiation of the potential for more complicated political and economic entanglements to devolve into "forms of territorial simplification and imperialism that may be exploited by nationalist and other reactionary movements" (p.27). Moving with their argument, the Israeli

assault on Gaza stands as a horrifying exhibition of the threat of "territorial simplifications" that take the form of outright genocide.

The resonances of Gramsci's writings notwithstanding, Mezzadra and Neilson suggest that perhaps the most compelling historical analogue for our time is not the interwar period, but 1914 (p.8). Recall that, in Arrighi's (1994) history of the capitalist world-system over the *longue durée*, periods of hegemonic transition have consistently been marked by colossal military conflagrations, the last of which (World War II) is estimated to have claimed more than 50 million lives. Today there is a very real danger of plunging into a nuclear Third World War that would have unimaginable consequences for all forms of earthly life. Indeed, as I write these words, Trump has loudly dispatched two nuclear submarines to strategic positions near Russia, the latest escalation in the game of interimperial brinkmanship.

Even if nuclear catastrophe does not come to pass, the momentous socio-ecological transformations teeming beneath the banalized and often obfuscatory moniker, "climate change", are already profoundly implicated in the increasingly uneven prospects for inhabiting the earth. Little surprise, then, that Mezzadra and Neilson say that "[t]his is not a time for easy optimism" (p.274). Nevertheless, they do direct our attention to heterogenous forms of social struggle that are advancing challenges to domination, exploitation, and dispossession, and which are themselves constitutive of multipolarity. In keeping with their analysis of the mutations of capital and power, they particularly emphasize struggles over social reproduction and circulation. They extend the latter category beyond the forms the late Joshua Clover (2016: 31) envisioned when he spoke of "circulation struggles"—"the riot, the blockade, the occupation and, at the far horizon, the commune"—to encompass politicized migration and border struggles, the organizing of transportation and platform workers (including transnational labor organizing at Amazon and Alibaba), and more. Mezzadra and Neilson also point to "powerful intersectional coalitions" (p.235), from the Movement for Black Lives to the feminist Latin American movement, Ni Una Menos (Not One Less), as exemplary instances of struggles that are foregrounding the racial and gendered dimensions of "class writ large" (p.235).

While acknowledging the invaluable legacies of Tricontinentalism, Pan-Africanism, and other anticolonialisms, Mezzadra and Neilson turn to more recent struggles in Latin America in

their effort to illustrate the prospects for and pitfalls of the cultivation of "critical regionalism or continentalism" (p.264). Briefly glossing Latin America's "pink tide", which began its retreat following the 2007-08 crisis, they gesture to the complex interplay between movements and states, in which "the former were often caught between conflict and co-optation" (p.266). However, they note that, even after the pink tide receded, regional integration has continued apace, not only in terms of state-driven associations and trade agreements, logistical and infrastructural projects, but also in terms of popular mobilizations and revolts. Without idealizing the Latin American experience as "a model for a politics of liberation in a multipolar world", they do suggest that it offers an important "instance that illuminates a horizon of possibilities, whose actualization remains an uncertain wager" (p.269). Indeed, they are emphatic that the proliferation of war regimes provides ample opportunities for reactionary escalations, and their readers are surely aware that fascistic movements and potentialities are on the rise across all six continents. Whether collectivities are able to seize the "conjunctural opportunity for a new internationalist politics to come, whatever its name will be" (p.273), may well determine whether the advent of multipolarity ultimately yields a more livable world or one which is even more unforgiving than our present order.

The Rest and the West is without a doubt a crucial contribution to the urgent work of rethinking capital and power in the face of tremendous historical transformations, and it is the book's strength, in my view, that it leaves its readers with as many questions as answers. In closing, I pose a few questions to think with alongside Mezzadra and Neilson's incisive intervention, each of which pertains to their special interest in extraction, circulation, and reproduction.

Mezzadra and Neilson are clear that they "do not believe we are facing the end of historical capitalism", invoking Walter Benjamin's lament "that capitalism will not die a natural death" (p.136, quoting Benjamin 2002: 912). Although the authors affirmatively cite Moore's work in conjunction with their analysis of the importance of extractive operations within contemporary global capitalism, they do not take up his conception of "commodity frontiers", or "frontiers of appropriation", central to his historical theory of the relation and balance of appropriation and exploitation under capitalism (Moore 2015: 63, passim). What are we to make

of Moore's contention that we are today witnessing the exhaustion of these indispensable frontiers of unpaid labor? Or how might the *historicization* of extraction over the *longue durée* impact our assessment of capitalism's prospects, as well as the prospects for the dreams or nightmares that might succeed it?

Mezzadra and Neilson similarly affirm Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's suggestion that logistical capitalism has its roots in the transatlantic slave trade, situating raciality and blackness at modernity's genesis (Harney and Moten 2013: 89-99). They also emphasize that reproduction always concerns "the reproduction of specific forms of subjectivity" (p.56). But how might taking stock of the racial underpinnings of the post-Enlightenment subject (da Silva 2007), the bourgeois order of property and sovereignty (Bhandar 2018), and even the ontological codification of human subjectivity and the human itself (Wynter 2003) influence or unsettle our visions for radical coalitionalism, a renewed internationalism, or, for that matter, seizing the means of the production of subjectivity?

Finally, how might we think about the relationship between what Mezzadra and Neilson identify as "a general crisis of social reproduction", with acutely raced and classed inflections (p.80), the swelling ranks of Marx's "surplus population" within the global composition of living labor (p.226; Marx 1976: 794), and the genocide unfolding in Gaza? Certainly the "logic of elimination" (Wolfe 2006) undergirding the settler colonial project of Zionism is not simply a function of the present conjuncture, as evidenced by the long arc of the former's "hundred years' war on Palestine" (Khalidi 2020). But if Noura Erakat is correct in her suggestion that Palestinians are being made a proverbial "canary in the coal mine" (*Democracy Now!* 2025), how are we to understand the world-historical significance of this condition? William I. Robinson (2024) has argued that "Gaza is a microcosm and extreme manifestation of ruling class strategies to create new geographies of containment and butchery of surplus populations that stand in the way of transnational capitalist appropriation and expansion". He goes so far as to suggest that "genocide may become a powerful tool in the decades to come for resolving capital's intractable contradiction between surplus capital and surplus humanity" (ibid.). How might Mezzadra and Neilson's effort to theoretically grapple with the emergent contours of global capitalism, particularly with respect to the often disjunctive logics driving regimes of war,

inform our understanding of the catastrophes unfolding in Gaza, Sudan, and beyond, with an eye toward revivifying the strategies and tactics of movements of solidarity and resistance? These are no doubt just a few of the many questions that *The Rest and the West* will generously spark amongst its readers.

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David Kalman
University of California, Berkeley
dkalman@berkeley.edu

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