

**Martina Tazzioli**, *Border Abolitionism: Migrants' Containment and the Genealogies of Struggles and Rescue*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-5261-6093-5 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-5261-6092-8 (ebook)

Heightened practices of detention, confinement, and deportation of migrants are exposing increasing numbers of people to ever harsher forms of violence. Simultaneously the figure of “the migrant” has become embellished and attacked across the political spectrum in various countries, paving the way for more extreme, often racially-charged, politics across the world. In light of increasing levels of militarised and political violence being galvanised in their name, the stakes of producing a political and theoretical analysis capable of countering these developments could not be higher.

Within this fraught terrain Martina Tazzioli has consistently produced accounts which address border violence without reifying “the migrant” as a self-standing field of analysis. Her work has instead been concerned with tracing the contours of the legal, administrative, and political production of “the migrant” and their tight imbrications with produced “illegality”, which go hand-in-hand with multiple degrees of labour subordination. Situated on an axis which links criminalisation, political subjectivity, labour subordination, and racialisation, she has sought to displace any analysis which re-instates essentialist subjectivities, or privileges citizenship as the primary category of belonging. Focusing rather on *modes of control*—as opposed to an identity-based approach, or a delimited understanding of “border” practices as marks of exclusion alone—her interventions open up a conceptual space for privileging the *entanglements* of different forms of subordination, within which “the migrant” is interpellated.

Her latest intervention goes one step further along this trajectory, taking its inspiration from carceral, Black, and feminist abolitionist debates. She argues for placing this (now extensive) scholarship in dialogue with “autonomy of migration” approaches—despite the different political genealogies and contexts which have informed the historical emergence of both sets of theories. This dialogue recognises the integral role which practices of incarceration, in both a spatial and social sense, are playing in the cross-border management of migrants—in which migrants are not necessarily always expelled but “held” in degrees of containment, through which “their lives are choked, and their infrastructures and collective

spaces of liveability are dismantled” (p.1). Such conditions are increasingly evident in the Bibby Stockholm, the ship holding asylum seekers in the UK, the Greek island “hotspots”, and detention and removal centres, among many others. They can also be extended to more intimate scales of analysis to carceral labour conditions and immobilising forms of property regulations where dispossession operates in conjunction with forms of confinement.

A dialogue between sets of theories emerging from abolitionist and autonomy of migration traditions, Tazzioli suggests, hinges on the existing convergences between the two, the placement of labour exploitation at the core of both, and the emphasis on different forms of freedom at the heart of their theorising—“liberation” for the former, and “right to escape” for the latter. In this framing, migrants are cast as the contemporary iteration of a line of historically dispossessed figures, emerging from histories of chattel slavery, ghettoisation, vagrancy, and policing—the “global history of runaways” in Rediker et al.’s (2019) conception. Framing freedom of mobility within the genealogy of these struggles casts it as a contested ground for building up new internationalisms from below, in which “claims for freedom of movement [are] intertwined with struggles for social justice”. Tazzioli argues that these can also be envisioned as movements that have contributed to the production of a mobile common or processes of “communing”—insofar as they disrupt an individualistic understanding of rights and privilege “ways of being in common” (p.4). In her argument, border abolitionism refers not so much to liberal calls to open borders or a call for freedom of movement alone, but the “abolition democracy” as proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois, in which the abolition of racialised inequality requires the building of new institutions (p.18). Taking her lead from these two intertwined acts of dismantling and rebuilding, the book is organised along the entanglement of two lines—a critical analysis of the economy of confinements, and a genealogy of struggles and collective mobilisations to resist it, which might provide the grounds for envisioning new democratic and commoning institutions.

Such an approach is highly ambitious in its theoretical breadth and political imagination and deserves a close conceptual reading of the relations and framework(s) deployed—in particular of how Tazzioli theorises the exact nature of these different entanglements between violence and freedom, labour subordination and differentiation, amongst others. In this brief review I want to focus instead on a few of the *stakes* of these interventions, and set out some critical questions which might help clarify them further.

Distinct from a “no borders” framework, border abolitionism does not advocate for abolishing borders as such, but, rather, “for dismantling the material and political conditions under which the multiplication and persistence of borders appear as a condition for people’s safety and economic prosperity” (p.4). In this reading, it is the *heterogeneity* of bordering *mechanisms* which determine differential degrees of exploitation and subordination, in which the manifestation of European borders “is not to be found along the geographical border line of the Schengen area but rather in the records on the laptops of the border police” (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010: 374). This calls into question the relational arrangement of actors within the assemblage of migrant governmentality across national boundaries. While Tazzioli highlights the role of state-led violence, she calls for “shifting attention from national frontiers ... to provincialise the nation state as the main actor in containing migration movement” (p.15), critiquing instead the heterogeneity of a hybrid regime through a largely Foucauldian lens. This perspective is distinct from prison abolitionist work which foregrounds carcerality as a basic *state-building project*, and highlights some of the ambiguities of border abolitionism as a political project which both sets itself against state-led border violence and the demarcations of national frontiers, but is simultaneously, by its nature, operating along a mobile, transversal, terrain. Fundamentally, Tazzioli argues, the dismantling of bordering mechanisms cannot be limited to a critique of national frontiers—although perhaps the criticism of state-led violence should attain greater emphasis in a conjuncture in which different nation states are, in various guises, using migration control as a key organising ground for nationalist projects.

This tension between how to understand the social and spatial articulations of migrant governmentality emerges throughout the analysis. On the one hand, this is a spatially oriented account as Tazzioli maps a landscape of spaces of confinement, detention, islands—“the enforcement archipelago” in Alison Mountz’s (2020) conception, sites on the edges of sovereign space where struggles over access to rights transpire. On the other hand, Tazzioli articulates “mobile migrant collectives” as a “sort of counter-geography in action, unfolded through collective and individual mobilisations that have built up underground and precarious infrastructures of solidarity ... scattered across multiple sites and ... highly uneven and fundamentally unstable” (p.20). She envisions this “counter-geography” as taking the forms of knowledge exchange, counter-mapping, and infrastructures of mobility support, in which a

political horizon of critical knowledge production on migration governmentality plays a crucial role (p.19). This raises the question of what is required to build the *spaces* and practices of “abolition democracy” when they are, by their very nature, mobile, provisional, and simultaneously rooted in, yet unfixed by, specific geographies.

One of Tazzioli’s key analytical arguments is to develop a theoretical framework in opposition to a “*detractive logic of rights*”, in which a zero-sum opposition is set up between rights for migrants and rights for citizens. Tazzioli foregrounds the continuum which links citizens and migrants—what she terms “*the partial migrantisation* of some citizens”—in which a binary opposition between “migrants” and “citizens” and, relatedly, “deserving” and “undeserving” migrants, detracts from the (often racial) operation of hierarchies of criminalisation. Crucially, she grounds the detractive logic of rights in the historical functioning of capitalism, whose tendency is “not to homogenize but to differentiate” (Robinson 2000: 26). Her framework holds the potential to disrupt methodological nationalism which clearly delineates “the citizen” from “the migrant”, and to contribute towards theorising the multiplication of thresholds which work to fracture the unitary figures of the “worker”, the “citizen”, the “migrant”—and to consider the ways in which they are entangled within a global economy.

In this framework, much seems to hinge on the relationship between the “continuum of confinement”, and various hierarchies of value extraction, in which the logic of differentiation is enacted through a mix of juridical, social, and political markers. In her privileging of various unpaid labours, Tazzioli draws on feminist value of labour scholarship to help shed light on the mechanisms of fixation through confinement, and the capitalisation of social activities—in which she argues that individual migrants become new sources of value extraction through knowledge and data extraction from digital unpaid labour (p.81-82).

This theoretical breadth is a welcome addition to scholarship trying to disentangle more intimate forms of differentiation being enacted by advanced forms of capitalism. But perhaps her focus on refugee humanitarianism and value extraction from unemployed asylum-seekers detracts from the main power of her argument, re-substantiating the category of a particular migrant experience which, while valid for many, is not universal. In Turkey, for example, the underpaid, exploited, and alienated labour force of millions of Syrian workers has helped prop up a heaving Turkish economy for the past decade, and the Syrian

worker has a distinct position in the (often informal) labour force. An abolitionist framework has much to offer any analysis of the new forms of value extraction being generated through their subordinate position in society—not as “migrants” but as an active Arabic-speaking labour force working across a range of sectors, including humanitarian, who exemplify the blurred continuum between “citizen” and “migrant”. The distinctiveness of their position as “workers” cannot be subsumed within a transnational “migrant economy”, and highlights, again, the tensions between how best to politically mobilise categories of “migrant”, “worker”, and “migrant worker” without falling into essentialist understandings of who that worker is. Tazzioli’s account is a welcome addition for its potential to destabilise categories of *identity* by instead taking the question of labour and value production itself as the grounds for inquiry. I suggest it would be beneficial to take her framework beyond the realm of “refugee economies” to the living realities of cities in which carceral labour conditions co-exist with multiple visible and invisible forms of work—entrapping more and more people regardless of their legal status.

Perhaps most compellingly, an abolitionist approach provides some tools to rethink ways of building transversal “solidarity”. Here again the significance of the spatial and social dynamic, and a geographically oriented account, becomes most pressingly apparent. As Tazzioli writes, political solidarity involves a community of interests and values to be fought for (p.8)—but how should those values attain purchase between different polities? Following on from her claim, abolitionism should not be mobilised as an abstract theory which is valid across space and time, but as being grounded in specific contexts. Rather than criticising the limitations of the confines of her European-centred research, I take it as an invitation to consider the complexity of the task at hand of building forms of transnational and transversal solidarity between different socio-political contexts—in which migrants are attaining their own particular position within various, distinct socio-political conjunctures. Any migrant solidarity struggles built around a vision of “abolition democracy” necessarily requires a *geographical*, as well as material and historical, sensibility—how this is reconciled with the vitality and urgency of struggles for movement, the “commoning through movement” (p.162), must be a particular question asked within specific contexts, in conversation with others across an internationalist horizon.

These questions do not detract from the ambition, scope, and political vision offered by Tazzioli's work. In its historical sensibility, its rootedness in ongoing migrant struggles, and its lucid reading together of different frameworks, it demands serious engagement. The political and theoretical rigour which she presents to us helps to clarify, rather than diminish, the daunting task at hand. Rather than retreating into abstraction, her exposition traces a crack of light through the seemingly opaque and brutal practices of subordination, providing an innovative and stimulating reading of how they might be re-imagined and rebuilt.

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