

## Notes on the Frontiers and Borders of the Postcolony

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On 22 June 2007, the Australian Prime Minister declared a *de facto* state of emergency over remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The overt reason given for this extraordinary move was the protection of children from abuse – or, more specifically, its occasion was the release of the report by the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse in the Northern Territory. There have been countless other reports on the conditions, often described as “Fourth World”, that many indigenous peoples endure, particularly in remote areas. There are more than enough indicators – deaths in police custody, highly disproportionate imprisonment, awful rates of life expectancy and infant mortality and, not least, extreme destitution. But it is important to note that this most recent report into child abuse was anecdotal, and did not find that child abuse was any more or less ‘endemic’ than in the rest of Australia. Nevertheless, the measures so far announced under this state of emergency proffer a rather dubious theory of the causes of child abuse, suggesting that the principal question being posed (and answered) here is not, in fact, that of how to stop children from being abused. Those measures include the banning of alcohol and x-rated pornography, the attachment of normative conditions to welfare payments, and the suspension of (what is currently in some cases) communal titles over indigenous land and local controls over the movement through them.

Indeed, numerous indigenous commentators have suggested that the government has used the scandal of child abuse to “to justify the weakening of Aboriginal communal rights to land under the guise of economic development” (Phillips, 2007).

One could remark here that the report’s title – *Little Children Are Sacred* – already speaks volumes about the restoration of a centuries-long coincidence between governmental “Aboriginal Protection” agencies and Church missions that had – prior to the more recent transfer of land titles to some indigenous communities from the 1970s – assumed the task of the “protection” and conversion of indigenous peoples into hardworking Christians. Appearing toward the end of a period of wars of colonisation and the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands, the doctrine of protection emerged upon claims of an impending ‘extinction’ and through the institutional practice of removing children (in many cases, those deemed to be ‘half-caste’). Many of those children were then

removed to missions. But this often tragic history – and the widespread abuse that occurred in missions until very recently is also well-documented – cannot fully explain the revival of a missionary approach in these times. Just as the Australian government has increasingly subcontracted health and welfare functions to Church organisations in recent years, so too has the US government, and on a global scale; going so far as to refuse funding to, for instance, HIV/AIDS organisations in Africa and Asia that distribute condoms and seek harm reduction. The obvious question being posed here is why, after cutting health and welfare services to indigenous communities, it has required a paramilitary intervention to, purportedly, ensure the health and welfare of those same communities.

One could, moreover, easily point to the parallels with the events around the *Tampa*, the military seizure and interdiction in 2001, by the Australian government, of the Norwegian freighter that had rescued over 300 undocumented migrants from drowning. Not to mention the allegation by government ministers some time later, since exposed as a lie but generally believed as plausible at the time, that undocumented migrants were ‘throwing their children overboard’. The Tampa ‘events’ preceded an election the government was widely expected to lose, as does this declaration of a state of emergency in the Northern Territory. In both these instances, what have been ongoing and widely-reported occurrences (undocumented boat arrivals and child abuse) were reconstructed as singularly alarming events providing the pretext for authoritarian displays of sovereignty – that is, declarations of an exceptional situation demanding, without question, the suspension of the normal functioning of the law so as to restore the presumed integrity of the Australian body politic.

One could also recall here the sense in which Giorgio Agamben’s analyses of “*homo sacer*” – “the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereign” (1998, p. 84) – and the “exception” have resonated in Australia, well beyond a philosophical idiom or the supposedly temporary or recent ‘exceptions’ enacted in response to the ongoing global ‘War on Terror’. Here, much of Agamben’s work was translated as the stark question of a persistent fracture within and of the postcolony. Most recently and notably, Australia’s was the first Western government to introduce the automatic and indefinite internment of undocumented migrants, the extra-territorialisation of detention camps to the Pacific, and the excision of parts of Australia from the ‘migration zone’ for the purposes of evading *habeas corpus* and the functioning of asylum laws and conventions. Much of this rests firmly on Australia’s history as a penal colony, and is attested to in its record as a mostly anxious outpost of imperial power.

It might be noted that this latter aspect is evident in the recent occupation of countries in the Asia-Pacific by Australian military and police. Such exercises are presently conducted under the rhetoric of ‘failed states’ and ‘humanitarian intervention’ – with little, if any, opposition voiced against such from within Australia, so deeply seductive is this disposition of benevolence. And it might also be remarked that this most recent declared emergency in the northern parts of Australia closely resembles this discourse of ‘failed states’ and its practices – though this time as an ‘internal’ re-colonisation. Indeed, the person previously

responsible for the administration of the Australian police presence in the Solomon Islands has been appointed to the taskforce that will oversee the current 'emergency' in Australia.

Agamben's eloquent accounts of the sovereign exception and 'bare life' are helpful, but insufficient to explain what is transpiring *in the detail*, as a process. To understand much of what has been occurring here, it is crucial to re-pose the question of the frontier – and of the relation between border and frontier – as a question of *the scalable techniques of the contract*.

Before elaborating on this, let me turn to the frontier (and the border) as these are understood according to a Euro-American perspective. This is less to propose that such a view remains applicable *in* Europe or the US than that it emerges in the context of a modernist dialectic of a figural Europe and a European idea of America. This dialectic – even as it re-acquires a certain purchase due to technics (encompassing questions of art and of labour, in relation to questions of the human and non-human), and various ambassadorial manoeuvrings around so-called US unilateralism – is a *partial* understanding of the world and, for that matter, of the conditions and conflicts that increasingly obtain in Europe and the US. It is, to put it another way, a perfectly Hegelian dialectic, proclaiming the inexorable movement of the European Spirit through a world delineated by zones in which there is history, norm and contractual peace (i.e., mutually agreed-upon borders), and frontier regions, those marked by perpetual war, deemed to be a natural state (what in Social Contract theory is presented as the "state of nature", and in Hegel as the absence of history, historical change and epochality).

In these latter zones, the seeming perpetuity of misery is oftentimes explained in racialising terms as the *inherent* condition of groups of people, or as anomalous or foreign to the norm. I will come back to this, but let me note that this is in no way to argue for an impartial perspective. On the contrary, it is to suggest that the perspective from the *other side* of the frontier becomes crucial to challenging the re-inscription of colonial forms of governance in metropolitan spaces (such as the internment camps; and the recourse, during the riots in the *banlieues*, to the 1955 law that allowed French colonial authorities to impose curfews in Algeria). As Mezzadra and Rahola (2003) have astutely remarked, these measures derive from the conduct of 'total war' in the colonies, as well as from the (re)colonisation of spaces on the grounds of their depiction, whether utopically or dystopically, as frontier spaces. This involves a transformation not only of the very sense of the frontier (not least as it becomes deployed in prominent analyses of technics, labour, war and the exception) but also the border.

Put another way: the distinction between frontier spaces and bordered realms correlates with the distinction – in Social Contract theories – between the 'state of nature' and 'society' that, in turn, are the ideal-typical placeholders for the 'West' and the colonies. Pessimism and optimism are, here, two sides of the same coin – a process of coinage, if you will – in which the measure of capital and its values are applied to land, bodies and life. In other words, if the pessimistic – which is to say, Hobbesian – view of frontier spaces regards them as sites of desolation and suffering whose causes are intrinsic (as an

expression of, say, barbarism), in its utopic dimensions the frontier is often horizon approached as possibility. And it is this latter which has informed prominent understandings of exodus and empire and, I would argue, has led to a political and theoretical impasse.

In a brief, though at times ambiguous discussion on exodus, Virno distinguishes frontier from border in this way: “The border is a line at which one stops; the frontier is an indefinite area in which to proceed. The border is stable and fixed, the frontier mobile and uncertain. One is obstacle; the other is chance”. He nevertheless adds, almost in passing, that the frontier is “the presence of a boundless territory to colonise” (2005, pp. 20-21). Hardt and Negri, however, are far less ambivalent. For them, the distinction between border and frontier – and the ascription of the latter with a positive political value: the “boundless frontier of freedom” and “frontier of liberty” (2004, pp. 406, 169) – is pivotal to the presentation of “absolute democracy” as a desirable, if not entirely radical, political strategy.

And yet, it is clear from Virno’s account that while the frontier is so often conceived as a space of expansion without limit, it is also – in its paradigmatic, European sense – the rolling out of limits in the form of the proliferation of borders. That is, unlike the border against which it is so often defined, and as this delineation arises in the contract between an ‘old Europe’ and a ‘new America’, the frontier is that space into which people carry those borders with them as they might their own personal possessions.

In the final pages of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*, which Virno refers to, the significant differences between European and American class struggles lie in the “constant transformation of the wage-labourers into independent producers”, in view of a relative absence of surplus labourers (as distinct from a superfluous population) and the availability of ‘free land’ in the colonies. By this logic, the possibility of land ownership and a ‘labour shortage’ opens up the chance of escaping the condition of wage labour – but, importantly, that ‘escape’ takes the (largely idealised) form of becoming a small property owner. Marx cites Edward G. Wakefield,<sup>1</sup> a theorist of colonisation and a principal founder of New Zealand, who complained of a “parcelling-out of the means of production among innumerable owners” that, Marx adds, “annihilates, along with the centralisation of capital, all the foundations of a combined labour” (1978, pp. 720-21). The historian F.J. Turner would present the frontier as the very thesis of American exceptionalism (1961), in terms not entirely dissimilar to Marx. For Turner, the frontier is productive of individualism and therefore of a democracy and egalitarianism grounded in the diffusion and perpetual expansion of property in land.

Thus, the utopic version of the frontier does not imply escape so much as escape whose sense is exhausted by and as individuation – and individuation in some very precise terms: as self-possession, sovereignty, the ability to enter into contractual relations, to see oneself (one’s body, one’s labour, one’s relations) as a question of property ownership and propriety.

In other words, the frontier is also a way of depicting, as Turner puts it, “the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (1961, p. 38). The sense of ‘chance’, from the ‘European’ side of that encounter, is reminiscent of Machiavelli’s famous

advice to the Prince to violently take command of Fortuna, “to keep her down, to beat her” (1979, p. 162). In other words, what the optimistic version of the frontier elides is the violence that is inherent to the definitions of freedom, escape and selfhood as self-possession, individuation, and so on. Moreover, here the Machiavellian understanding of chance – of gambling and its measures of success – joins with Lockean notions of rights, property and enclosure to produce not (as Marx suggested) the annihilation of class, but its naturalisation in the form of individuated, meritocratic explanations of any ‘failure’ to ‘succeed’.

However, from the perspective of the colonial side of the frontier, the encounter was not a tale of individuated self-mastery and freedom, but an experience of dispossession, carried out through (often extreme) violence. Behind the concept of ‘free land’ is the process of colonisation; behind estimates of ‘labour shortage’ is the existence of populations deemed unassimilable or superfluous to the conditions of the wage contract and productivity. All of this requires borders. But, contra the understanding of borders as closed that derives from the figural opposition between the ideas of Europe and America, borders are in fact porous, selectively inclusive (and exclusive).

The measures announced under the recent state of emergency in Australia are not merely sovereign judgements of an exception, but technologies that seek to filter. They do not all seek to apply punitive measures against an entire community, as with the wholesale bans on pornography and alcohol which function to imply that indigenous peoples cannot, in these instances, ‘control themselves’. Rather, many of the measures are directed toward contractual individuation, as in applying punitive measures (such as cutting welfare payments) where there is deemed to be a failure of individual compliance with certain norms; shifting land tenure arrangements from communal holdings to private real estate; and so on. It is evident that the national government is seeking to squeeze those who live in remote communities into the model of the ideal property-owning, proper bourgeois subject.

Impossible to fulfill (since it is impossible, for instance, to send one’s child to a non-existent school, even when threatened with welfare cuts), such measures impose an abstract equality that, in its real-world application, produces and cements inequalities. The border, in this sense, is that which filters between those zones deemed to be frontier spaces (and in which the law of exception is applied), and the ostensibly peaceful domain of the contract. To be sure, peace here does not mean the absence of conflict but a normative status accorded to the conflict of competition. And, in overtly defining the contract as the voluntary association of equivalent, accomplished and willing subjects, it is simultaneously presented as the condition of ‘society’ and functions as the depoliticisation of its conditions. In this depoliticisation, there are no longer any questions; only moral imperatives for actions that cannot be questioned. To put this another way: the contract is the means by which ‘society’ – and *the* political – seeks to immunise itself – but perhaps less from some mythical state of nature (persistently relegated to the frontier) to which it becomes possible to transfer and ascribe all manner of presumable deviations – than from politics. In this sense, the contract is the ‘internal border’ *par excellence*.

But there is more at stake in exploring this ambivalent nexus between border and frontier than its appearance during the state of emergency declared against indigenous people in Australia. It is also a question of the concepts and traditions of radical analysis that have come to shape the problematic of current theoretical endeavours and debates. As Virno asserts, the frontier has been a significant theoretical point of departure – for Marx, perhaps – but also for those readings of Marx that would go on to emphasise ‘desertion, refusal and exodus’. This set of concepts has been pivotal to the traditions of radical protest that characterised *Operaismo*, *Autonomia* and so-called Autonomist Marxism. But the resurgence of the concept of the frontier is not simply a question of theoretical traditions. It is also a matter of technics and its utopian regard, the sense that changes to the form and character of work brought about by technics occurs in a progressive manner. As J.J. King has suggested: “the Internet became constituted in the popular mind of the last decade as a ‘new frontier’, a ‘wild west’, a ‘place’ in which exploration, innovation, self-fulfilment, self-realisation and wanton speculation were, as on the original imaginary frontier, the rule: the grand narrative of the American Idea played out over this novel information network...”

Internet-as-cyberspace-as-frontier is still a powerful formulation today. Beyond its resonance in the re-composition of the conditions of labour (and of life), it is also a question of the coincidences of *techné* and war; of ‘development’ which assumes the character of war; of forms of sociality (such as ‘social software’) which disavow their eco-technical condition in war (notable in the internet’s origins in military innovation); and, not least, war as the literal re-inscription of borders. Moreover, one should not understate the ways in which the armed export of democracy and the militaristic humanitarianism of the past two decades is also a part of this ‘grand narrative’ in which the *jus bellum* (‘just war’) is understood as the means to forcibly ‘civilise’ frontier spaces.

What, given this and more, does it mean to grant a paradigmatic status to a concept that is inseparable from a colonial trajectory? Or, to put it another way, what does it mean to apply that concept indifferently, without a sense of the material specificities of, most notably, the experience of coloniality?

At stake here is the question of difference in understandings of exodus, desertion and refusal. While this set of concepts has been crucial in emphasising the ways in which struggle does not always, or even necessarily, occur on the side of integration, inclusion or participation and, not least, has been significant in challenging the sense of the political in the movements of migration, there is nevertheless a residual Eurocentrism (in, say, the understanding of subjectivity) that will have to be reckoned with. Approached from one side of the frontier, these concepts become not a way to sense difference – the differences of colonial encounters, among other things – and hence to practice politics, but a means through which the classical political subject of contractarian politics re-acquires political advantage by association and in the neutralisation of differences. Here, one might note the prominence of ‘eco-tourism’ in its many, sometimes progressive aspects – and hence of a

certain version and trajectory of escape – in the propositions of indigenous, entrepreneurial ‘development’ that have accompanied the proclamation of the ‘state of emergency’, posited as a result of the failure to ‘develop’.

One could also refer to certain understandings of concepts that simultaneously serve as declarations of a new epoch and function as attempts to retrieve what has been deemed lost. What comes to mind, most notably, is the concept of precarity tendered as a lament for security; or that of cognitive labour as the recuperation of ontological or analytical primacy in the midst of its crisis. While discourses of precarity sometimes speak of the longstanding precariousness of, for instance, women and of labour in the colonies, and while those of cognitive labour insist that intellectuality is a form of labour and therefore subject to exploitation as is the case with other forms of work, all too often this representation of differences merely serves to ennoble what remain relatively privileged strata in the service of ‘intra-class’ hegemonic projects.

In any case, this convolution between exodus and frontier is the problematic that shadows current thinking and functions *as its horizon*. This is the line that distinguishes the (legal) commons from the undercommons, the demand for recognition from the refusal of abstract right, and the redistribution of sovereignty from its desertion. If one accepts, for instance, that net-related work (or digital networking) is indeed a form of labour, then it follows that it involves particular forms of exploitation and subjection that can shape the ways in which those workers conceive politics. In the realm of immaterial labour, visibility, recognition and rights have a purchase that is both affective and economic. In itself, this is a matter of interest – but, in relation to other forms of existence and of work, such as that of undocumented migrants, it becomes debatable whether strategies that seek visibility are of any use or, for that matter, might result in deportation or internment.

From the deliberations of Hardt and Negri on absolute democracy (2004), to the debates over Web 2.0, the question of whether frontiers will continue to be visualised according to a specifically Euro-American provenance is also a question of the extent to which declarations of a frontier are but an inducement or prelude to colonisation; whether they are the advance, in highly individuated and intimate form, of would-be property owners – or citizens – through ‘savage’ spaces. What is at stake, then, is the foreclosure of subjectivity in a colonial demeanour – whether this occurs in relation to the indigenous peoples of Australia, on the net, or in the delimitation of the very sense of what it means to relate to others, *as others*. The disposition toward appropriation assumes many aspects, sometimes ostensibly progressive, or even helpful, ones. But what has become more than clear, in the declaration and conduct of the ‘emergency’ in Australia’s Northern Territory, is that even the most benevolent of appropriative demeanours can easily transform into a clamour for the application of paramilitary force when the universality of acquisitive subjectivity is refused.

## Editors' Note

For an account of state policies and the implications of being "unAustralian", see Linda Carroli, "Be Offended, Be Very Offended", in *Sarai Reader 06: Bare Acts* (CSDS, 2006, Delhi), pp. 376-87. Reader 06 online text: [http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader\\_06.html](http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader_06.html)

See also Francesca da Rimini, "Lepers, Witches and Infidels & It's a Bug's Life", in *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts* (CSDS, 2005, Delhi), pp. 26-38. Reader 05 online text: [http://www.sarai.net/reader/reader\\_05.html](http://www.sarai.net/reader/reader_05.html)

## Note

1. As Marx ironically notes in *Das Kapital*, Volume 1, Chapter 33: "Wakefield discovered that in the Colonies, property in money, means of subsistence, machines, and other means of production, does not as yet stamp a man as a capitalist if there be wanting the correlative – the wage-worker, the other man who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will. He discovered that capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things. Mr. Peel, he moans, took with him from England to Swan River, West Australia, means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. Mr. Peel had the foresight to bring with him, besides, 3,000 persons of the working-class, men, women, and children. Once arrived at his destination, 'Mr. Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river.' Unhappy Mr. Peel, who provided for everything except the export of English modes of production to Swan River!"

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