

Book review

Nicos Trimikliniotis, Dimitris Parsanoglou and Vassilis S. Tsianos, *Mobile commons, migrant digitalities and the right to the city*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan Pivot, 2015; 144 pp. ISBN 978-1-349-48953-4, 60.98 Euros (softcover)

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Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos' co-authored book, *Migrant Commons, Migrant Digitalities and the Right to the City*, blends fieldwork in Istanbul, Athens, and Nicosia with theoretical discussion of capitalism, digitalities, and the right to the city. The book works with what it calls a multiple southern perspective, referring to its desire to work with migrants to understand how cities take shape, and to draw on feminist, critical race, and postcolonial theory. It also points to the gap which often opens between theory and praxis, and through its engagement with Istanbul, Athens, and Nicosia, attempts to, in the words of the authors "take a theoretical step forward by thinking beyond the narrow confines of anti-theoretical empiricism without however losing track of its grounding in social reality and social action" (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, & Tsianos, 2015, p. 13).

The book covers an impressive range of contemporary critical theory and major debates in the broad field of critical migration and border studies. The first chapter sets out a theoretical overview, moving through a range of debates across the field, touching upon critical discussions around citizenship, autonomy of migration scholarship, bordering, and the production of space. The proposal made in this chapter is that the book shifts theoretically from an autonomy of migration perspective toward mobile commons. The emphasis here, like in autonomy of migration scholarship, is on mobility before control—or, in other words, on what migrants do, and how they actively engage in their lives and environments, as opposed to the power exerted by states through practices of bordering to interrupt these political acts. In this context, the introduction of commoning is a means to turn toward how migrants occupy and make use of spaces beyond state control.

Across the book's following three chapters, the conception of mobile commoning is put into dialogue with discussion of the histories, spatialities, and "snapshots" taken from current day Istanbul, Athens, and Nicosia. These snapshots look at how city space is occupied, and what tactics migrants engage in while occupying this urban space. One example given of mobile commoning within these snapshots is a description of

a tactic used during police raids on migrant groups in Nicosia: those who have their residence permission in order are the first to run, so that they are the ones chased by police, relieving pressure for those who do not have the same type of documentation. As the authors write, in their understanding, "this remarkable but so simple street-practice is in fact a *common*; it is an act of resistance-and-solidarity that has allowed many irregular migrants to avoid getting caught" (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015, p. 71, emphasis in original).

The digital seems to appear within the book as one means, among others, that knowledge can be shared between migrants. The authors are clear that they do not see digitality either as purely revolutionary in its own right, or purely subsumed under state projects of surveillance and control. Instead, in keeping in line with the book's commitment to attending to what migrants do, the book understands technology not as deterministic, but as a tool that is put to use. This means the authors are interested in how new technologies intersect with human agency, sociality, and social struggles. With that in mind, I would have been interested to learn more across the book about the specific role of the digital, and the implications of this digitality. If digital technologies can be understood, as the authors argue, as a means to produce mobile commons, then how precisely are these digital technologies used by migrants, and how are the effects of using digital means to share knowledge different than sharing knowledge in person? For instance, to return to the reference to the "mobile commons" described above and the sharing of knowledge it entails, I was interested in what significance the authors saw in different modes of knowledge sharing. What might be different about utilizing digital networks, or specific to their uses?

Another point of interest for me in the book was its relationship to critical and feminist postcolonial theory. As has been pointed out across the broad field of border and migration studies in recent years, engagement with feminist and postcolonial work can sometimes be slim across the field (Basham & Vaughan-Williams, 2013; Walters, 2015). In addition to the explicit claim that the book locates itself in relation to these bodies of work, certain choices across the book gesture toward its location in relation to these fields. For instance, one choice the authors make is to refer to migrants as "subaltern migrant," thus gesturing toward theories of subalterity, though not explicitly discussing the relation of this terminological choice to these theories. This raised questions for me. More specifically, though not located

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through referencing in the book in more than an elliptical way, it called to mind the work of Gayatri Spivak as an important theorist of subalternity, and for whom migrants are not subalterns. She is quite clear about this:

Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism. Please do not confuse it with unorganized labour, women as such, the proletariat, the colonized, [. . .] migrant labour, political refugees, etc. (Spivak, 1995, p. 115)

As Nikita Dhawan has explained, for Spivak, the “very definition of the subaltern entails ‘immobility,’ whereby the cultural space of subalternity is cut off from the lines of mobility” (Dhawan, 2007, np). Instances such as this one left me wondering how precisely the book positioned itself in terms of feminist and postcolonial theory, or what role it saw this body of work playing in the overall theoretical framework.

As a whole, *Migrant Commons*, *Migrant Digitalities and the Right to the City* takes on the challenging task of both engaging extensively with theoretical work in the broad field of border and migration studies and engaging in fieldwork in three distinct cities. It is published within the “pivot series” of Palgrave Macmillan, meaning that it is a publication scaled to be a shorter overall piece of work than a traditional monograph (or, in this case, “trigraph”) and published much more quickly. The goal of this model is to allow contemporary research out into the world so that it can speak to the urgent themes of our times. And this is precisely what this book takes up.

Interview With the Authors

1. *My first question is about your usage of “mobile commons,” which is also related to the role of digitality in your book. There is one sense in which it’s possible to read “mobile commons” as a commons on the move, echoing the movements of the migrants who produce these commons (p. 9). At other points, you suggest that “mobile commons” references knowledges that may be communicated by digital means, though these knowledges might also be communicated by word of mouth (p. 64). In that your approach to migrants and the digital is in part directed by the recognition that migrants do use and engage with digital technologies, and that the digital is not only about totalizing surveillance, I wondered to what extent it is this second sense of “mobile commons” (communication by digital means) which is most important to your argument? Another way to phrase this might be to ask, in what ways is your discussion of “mobile commons” a means to describe the ways that migrants make use of the digital in their movements? And what unique role do these migrant digitalities play in the production of the mobile commons you describe?*

You have rightly spotted the “mobility” element in the very definition of “mobile commons,” which raises

analytical-theoretical, as well as empirical issues, when studying movements-in-the-making and attempting a *sociology of praxis*. The commons is a product of this motion, mobility, movement, and the encounters produced. It cannot be static. Commons emerge as spaces and trails generated in the context of digital materialities, which are cognitive, knowledge-based, communicative action, as much as they are practical and live. We therefore cannot distinguish between the “first,” “second,” or “third” definitions that derive from sedentary paradigms of social theorizing. Our concepts derive from studying migrant and mobile groups in action utilizing John Urry’s “mobilities paradigm” in a world characterised by “global complexity.” As critical scholars, we define these spaces of mobility as the polar opposite of neoliberal projects which appropriate “mobility” by defining it within the austerity-and-deregulation paradigms to counter the so-called “labor rigidities” to make factors of production “mobile” and “flexible.” Moreover, we take seriously the production of knowledge, by us as scholars but more significantly by our subjects themselves. The very terms used and how they are understood cannot be detached from the way they are derived and practiced. Concepts cannot be superimposed from above or from outside; hence we insist that this is a dialogue that overcomes the East-West and North-South binaries. Neither do we pretend that we are mere “mouthpieces” without our views and ideas, which is shaped by our academic, political, ideological and active engagement: let’s not forget Henri Lefebvre here when reading how subaltern migrants and movements redefine “the right to the city.” As Ari Sitas reminds us “ordinary lives” of these people tell us loads about modes of livelihoods, socialities, solidarities and connectivities long experienced in the Global South and the East. We have tried to capture something from this by studying and connecting it to digitalities-on-the-move. “Mobile commons” is not something invented out of the blue—it derives from a collective engagement with our subject and is the result of communities of scholars; we have given our own reading but acknowledge that this “knowledge” derives from a “common.” *Migrant digitalities are the modality upon which the mobile commons are produced, practiced and developed.*

2. *My second question is about your description of migrants as “subaltern migrants.” What are your reasons for choosing this language, what are the political effects of naming migrants in this way, and how do you locate your choice in relation to postcolonial literature on subalternity?*

We chose this term for practical-analytical as well as for political reasons. In practice, we were not studying “elite migrants” but those at the bottom: the unwelcome, the irregular, the sans-papiers. Yet, it is also a conscious choice of taking a stance and acknowledging the contribution of Postcolonial thinking and Southern theory and praxis. It is impossible to make sense of what these migrants themselves are articulating, practicing and seeking. The “subaltern” are

not only “speaking” but they are actually ‘doing’; they are a vital force in the process of changing the world. They bring their own knowledge, experience, forms of resisting, theorizing and sharing when they are encountering the parts of the world designated as “the West,” “the North,” Europe, and so on. Thus, they are engaging in the redefinition of the world. We are not idealizing here; we are studying. As scholars, all three of us, who studied at Universities in European Capitals, “imperial metropolises,” we have had encounters with spaces of migrant and movement of commons, and we had read various other important studies which shaped us. However, it was our study on movements in Athens-Istanbul-Nicosia, a boundary-triangle par excellence, which pushed us to theorize matters in this particular way. It is at this intersection that was in practice the importance of postcolonial thinking. Hence, as critical migration scholars, if anything we identify with the South by acknowledging a knowledge-debt, drawing ideas and inspiration from the encounters with modes of knowledge that derive from migrants’ own experiences, once they encounter and defy “border regimes,” surveillance and control. Moreover their entry, residing, moving in the arrival cities generates new socialities, solidarities and contestations. The world is not mimicking the West or the North, as Modernisation theory had it. To use Stuart Hall, “the Rest” are not copying “the West.” The world is in a mess and to make sense of this complex system requires labor and serious rethinking. Sitas allow us to see how we are witnessing modes of livelihoods which are kinds of socialities, solidarities and connectivities long experienced in the Global South, the East and what was thought of as “backward Rest” and Well, there is something crucial here: these poor and unwanted migrants do not come from a forgotten past, but from the future. In our own modest way, this is part of what we are trying to say—the *subaltern are speaking in ways never perhaps expected*.

3. *Finally, I wondered if you could say a bit more about how you understand gender and race, specifically in their intersection with what you call austerity citizenship, the forces of gentrification you describe, and their relationship to the “multiple matrix of contestations and social struggles” (p. 110)? And what role do you see postcolonial theory, critical theory and gender or feminist theory playing in your theoretical work to attend to these intersections?*

We allude to such issues but to properly develop them we must do another study. Theorizing such complex issues of the poles of differentiation, division, contestations, relations of oppression and exploitation, or solidarities as concrete social relations is no easy matter. Gender, race, class, and so on must be properly integrated in the analysis. Lately, the notion of intersectionality is in vogue attempting to capture the interaction of these modes. This innovative is welcome in many ways to capture these complex issues. However, we must not be trapped in schemas that are unreal and problematic—Floya

Anthias suggests that we must move toward other formulations proposing “translocational positionality” instead. In our book we do consider intersections, but in a concrete manner: for instance, in the study of Nicosia, we examine how relations are both racialized and gendered and how such relations, perceptions, modes of power, and so on feed into the spaces frequented by migrant women, with all sorts of patriarchal and demeaning and sexualized connotations and practice, in the intersection between “citizenship” and “labor.” You can find these intersections in the instances we discuss in Athens and Istanbul. However, it is vital we locate the specific social relations which connect them and differentiate them from other types of racialized and gendered relations. As Angela Davis insists, what we need is “intersectionality of struggles” and “not so much intersectionality of identities.” It is our thesis that the central concept here is *austerity citizenship*: relations of race and gender and other differentiations pivot around this notion, that is, the relationship between *sovereignty* and labor. Once this is recognized, we can construct intersectional relations as they are built upon them. We can pin the intersections on austerity citizenship and the capitalistic forces of gentrification by placing them within a highly complex relations, which we call multiple matrix of contestations and social struggles. This is how the migration processes for subaltern migrants works—as elite migrants have different options and routes: race, gender, class are defined by the transformations of these two: (a) *Sovereignty*, and its particular manifestation in the production and reproduction of the “subject” with or without rights with all the struggles these entail, as Wendy Brown reminds us. (b) Labor, around which struggle occur for survival, subsistence, betterment and the exploitative relations in an unequal society. As you see we draw on Marxism, the autonomist traditions, postcolonial theory, critical theory and gender and feminist theory to make sense, so as to theorize a highly complex and unruly “world out of joint,” as Wallerstein calls it.

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