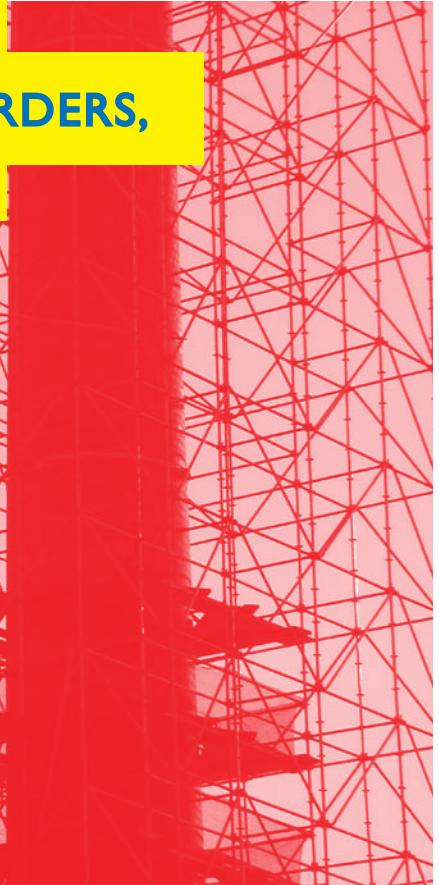


FROM FLOWS OF CULTURE TO THE CIRCUITS OF LOGISTICS: BORDERS, REGIONS, LABOUR IN TRANSIT

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When jurisdiction can no longer be aligned with territory and governance does not necessarily assume liberalism, there is a need to rethink the relations between labour, mobility and space. Bringing together researchers from different parts of the world to discuss and pursue various paths of investigation and collaboration, the Shanghai Transit Labour Research Platform moved between online and offline worlds. Sometimes sequestered in seminar spaces and at other times negotiating the city and the regulatory environment, the participants drifted toward a collective enunciation. We could say this was about the production of new kinds of labouring subjectivities that build connections between domains which are at once becoming more irreconcilable and more indistinct: life and work, public and private, political and economic, natural and cultural.

CONJUNCTURAL CARTOGRAPHIES

The craze for China in academic publishing is as suspicious as the contradictory narratives it rattles out: the shift from world factory to global target market to hub of the Asian creative economy, the centre of a new and possibly quite attractive eco-authoritarianism, the

whipping boy of an exhausted human rights discourse, the silent interlocutor in the dialogue on the role of natural law, the cultural engine of the global counterfeit trade. Transit Labour's initiation of research in China is not part of a search for alternative modernities that articulate post-war geocultural visions. Such an effort ultimately expresses a modernity fatigue that seeks refuge in anachronistic regionalisms and a retrieval of the idea of culture as civilization.

Modernity is a global phenomenon and not merely the result of the upheavals, industrialisation, revolutions and enlightenments that began to occur in Europe over five centuries ago. At the very least there is acceptance that modernity must reckon with the history of European colonialism and that the two-way traffic between metropolis and colony was central to its emergence. Yet what needs to be asked is why a commitment to alternative modernities so often accompanies a retreat to the local and a rejection of theory's imperialism through recourse to positivist methodologies.

The alternative modernities perspective recognizes different paths to and outcomes of modernity. But its interest in flows, hybridities, overlappings and

contestations is not enough to displace a geographical vision that rests in civilizational narratives and divides the globe into continental, national or cultural regions that tend to replicate the established categories of area studies. Alternative modernities were conceptualized in the immediate post-cold war era, acknowledging the inadequacy of tricontinentalist cartographies as much as the need to attend to the coloniality of modernity's multiple constitutions. Today we no longer speak from within the same conjuncture.

We don't believe that the current global conjuncture is characterized by disjunctive flows any more than we accept the narrative of resurgent nation-states. There is a need to investigate how contemporary movements of people and things intersect in governed ways. This is the work of logistics. The Transit Labour Research Platform discerns and engages the labouring subjectivities required and produced by this work, as well as the technical apparatuses that contribute to this labour of extending circuits and building connections.

CULTURES OF CODE

Logistics is about the management of the movement of people and things in the interests of communication, transport and economic efficiencies. Its operations incorporate but extend beyond the biopolitical management of populations. Logistics calibrates and coordinates movements across different populations and borders, taking into account the varying conditions that shape their formation. The aim is not to eliminate differences but to work across them, to build passages and connections in an ever more fragmented world. Gaps, discrepancies, conflicts and encounters are not understood as obstacles but as parameters from which efficiencies are produced.

The concept of circuits has electronic connotations that resonate beyond processes of manufacturing. Logistics is a programmer's game. Code is king. From the automated high-frequency algorithmic trading that already ushers in a new phase of capitalism to the global movement of smart objects monitored by virtualized business processes, logistics modulates relations through the architecture of code. Once designed as an end-to-end system to empower the margins, the fantasies of control built into client-server relations that have come to organize the world's online communications infrastructures are now threatening to circumscribe the horizon of our political imagination. But rather than reflecting on how to live well in the cloud designed and maintained in the netherworld of corporate network cultures, we prefer not to ... and

rather refuse the logic of a becoming-client to declare logistics itself a new terrain of the political.

In such a perspective, China becomes something other than an economic juggernaut, reconfiguring civilizational regions and world-systems. Instead, we want to attend to the multiple processes of bordering that internally divide and connect the continent to wider and differentially scaled circuits of labour, capital, technology, culture and life. We understand these connectivities in terms of the production of subjectivities that occurs across the event processing field. Commonly understood as a form of situation awareness meant to serve flexibilization and hence further spread corporate actors across complex networks, we contend that such awareness also signals recognition of the centrality of the management of subjectivity in transcultural production processes.

On logistics's cutting edge everything happens in real-time. Multiple streams of rapidly changing information are fed into the system and monitored by event pattern-matching applications that can recognize scenarios and execute rules in parallel. Integrating both time- and location-based data sources, this provides an unmatched scalability that surpasses the data and logic constrained capabilities of point-to-point systems. Not only can labour be matched to demand as defined by post-Fordist just-in-time production, but labour inputs can be modulated across multiple supply chains. The production of circuit boards, for instance, can be correlated with the disposal of waste, the loading of containers or the creation of designs. Here we detect the future-present of labour and economy beyond a post-Fordist paradigm of capitalist organization.

In the pursuit of a maximization of efficiencies and maintenance of control, new circuits are routed, new interfaces are created and new protocols are established. But crucially, labour cannot be exhausted as mere input to logistical systems. Unlike the organic union of technoutopianisms, the real subsumption of the work of the soul necessarily introduces restlessness along the supply chain. As these architectures multiply their points of entry, transfer and translation, possibilities for a de- or re-coupling become equally numerous. This is why political imagination must once again enter the technological field rather than retreat into political ontologies that are blind to the dynamic renegotiation of culture/nature dichotomies.

As the territory of logistics expands and capital accumulation adapts to new contingencies, the rise of circuits linking the financialization of capital with networks of extraction, production, use and disposal

turns the circuit itself into a meme of political thought. New vectors of relation necessitate adaptation within systems of governance. It is this work of adaptation in the interests of modular interoperability and value extraction that prompts us to see logistics as a dominant architecture of control in the age of information economies, network societies and increasingly algorithmic cultures. Just as the science of police gave rise to biopolitical governance, the military practice of managing flows has expanded across the techno-social field of biopolitical production in ways that cut across mere distinctions between public and private, between labour and life, or between state and market.

LOGISTICS AS GOVERNANCE

Practices of self-organization undergird the logistical remapping of life and labour across circuits. Without engaging these practices it is impossible to discern the emergence of protocols whose functionality is rooted in the simultaneity of the formal and the informal. Nor is it possible to grasp why new points of transfer and translation must not only be mapped but be identified as sites of constitution.

We can glean lessons in the laboratory of China from patterns of self-organization in the informal economies of waste recycling industries. Like many without metropolitan *hukou* (residential permits), workers in waste recycling across China's major cities comprise part of the vast floating populations whose movement and forms of work are often shaped by social connections from the home town or village in the provinces. Aside from high profile occasions such as the Beijing Olympics or Shanghai Expo, when the city becomes a public relations event space, the informal economy of migrant workers in the recycling industries is tolerated by the authorities. Indeed, the self-organization of migrant workers provides a crucial point of connection between the formalized system of waste recycling and the informal economy whose capillaries form a network of collection and distribution that feed into the value chain of waste recycling.

These informal economies underpin the possibility of urban life across China. More notable in first and second tier cities, the integration of informal and formal waste economies connects with urban development, real estate prices, creative hypes and class transformation. To subtract the work of these migrants is to render the city dysfunctional and would amount to a form of economic sabotage. Here lies the potential power, barely visible and only translated with difficulty into established registers

of political expression, of the itinerant migrant worker whose mode of informality must necessarily be integrated within logistical systems of population control and economic management.

Consider the work of Chen Hangfeng. His short film *Santa's Little Helper* (2007) documents the Christmas decoration industry of a small village in Zhejiang Province. Based on agriculture and the manufacture of traditional crafts only two decades ago, the village is now the primary site for the production of the world's Christmas decorations, connecting the work of the villagers to the logistical systems adopted by global companies such as Wal-Mart. While the villagers organize their work through the relatively informal structure of the family unit, as distinct from the factory assembly line, it is precisely this informality that makes possible the fluctuation in worker numbers based on global demands for the decorations. Chen describes how the population of the village has grown from 1000 inhabitants 20 years ago to 10,000, based on the movement of migrants within China due to growth in the decoration industry.

That logistics is always adapting to contingencies tells us much about its pervasive power. No longer understood simply as a management framework but a political horizon, its forms of governance are intermodal and therefore relational. Logistics does not function exclusively within a system of representation. Linking formal and informal logics, forms of production that occur within this organizational paradigm include constituent as much as representational practices.

Logistical governance cuts across existing forms of territorialization, opening the borders of regions, culture and subjectivity to continuous modulation. It is crucial that we not simply dismiss logistics as the mere corollary of corporate fantasies of decentralized power, but begin to map the ways in which new circuits of biopolitical production require us to explore and engage their constituent elements. This includes the ways in which culture, nations and regions persist, not because of an essential status ascribed in political ontologies, but because of the way they frame the organization of (cultural) production. It is because of this materiality that culture can play its role as the condition of possibility of political reality.

CONSTITUTION AS PRACTICE

Social mobilities reshape the borders of regions and cross with logistical systems of culture and commerce. By extension, value creation is generated through

environmental protocols by multinational firms in China whose autopoetic 'norm hungry' regimes (Teubner) intersect with global supply chains. By way of example, we refer to the Transit Labour visit to an IT factory that makes printed circuit boards in Songjiang industrial zone on the outskirts of Shanghai. During the introduction by the company's customer relations officer, we were informed that the branding and packaging of circuit boards occurs only in the final step of the chain with so-called Original Equipment Manufacturers. In the case of the factory we visited, these included Pioneer, Ericsson, NEC, Fujitsu, Apple, Alcatel, Sanjo, Canon, Sharp, Foxconn and Sony. The Original Equipment Manufacturers issue the factory with certificates attesting their adherence to industry and client determined environmental protocols. These include standards such as ISO 14001 for the promotion of 'effective and efficient environmental management' as well as RoHS (Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive) and WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive).

Adherence to these standards directly affects the creation of value at other points in the supply chain. Beyond their function in supply chain management, the certificates confirming compliance have become important branding devices that offer reassuring and desirable messages to environmentally conscious consumers. This creation of value occurs through a multiplicity of industry and individual regulation mechanisms, increasingly monitored by private agencies rather than sovereign entities more directly subject to political control. It also links in multiple and ambivalent ways – compliance may reflect actual improvements in workplace health and safety – bringing producers and consumers in a web of relations shaped according to a new logic of circuits. And because logistics offers a framework to start mapping the agency of objects and subjects, we accord it a special significance in reflections on the political.

Because of their scope and centrality to the organization of life and labour, we contend that such practices of relation amount – in their aggregated effects rather than in a substantialist sense – to a new form of constitutionalism. We have obviously not entered a post-sovereign age where nations have ceased to exercise power over their territories, but we have entered an era in which economic and state sovereignty has been disaggregated to an extent even neoliberal theorists did not anticipate, giving non-governmental actors unprecedented influence. Not only does this inaugurate a new structural transformation of social and economic life, it also ushers in a new valency whose potential for political power combines distributed communication networks with focal points of intervention.

Logistics may or may not be able to contain and capitalize on such energies.

The constitutionalism enacted by and across such mixed governance regimes is not only partially disconnected from the state but also from international organizations created by states. Far from closing the gap between national or international rule making and the transnational operations of private actors, we see the disconnection of constitutionalism from its traditional link with representative politics and its adaptation to the social and cultural spheres. Arguably a new body of law and para-legal norms is emerging alongside and even against national and international law. The normative world is fragmenting as private governmental actors devise rules with global validity but sectoral limitation. The rules and standards that generate a particular kind of ecological branding device, for instance, are neither publicly comprehensive nor territorially differentiated.

Constitution, in this sense, requires neither legal texts nor mere situation awareness. Rather, it attests the growing indistinction between the rules of a system (or community) and the empirical facts or situations to which such rules should apply. This is precisely what we see in logistical systems of adaptation and innovation, which are constantly generating new rules. Constitution, to put it simply, is practice. As such, it is necessarily accompanied by a constituent excess that at once generates the system and refuses to be absorbed by it. Be it the self-organization of informal waste workers or the collective enunciations of platform researchers, there is always the impulse to connect by disconnecting. This is why the production of subjectivity continues to move through practices like logistics and spaces like China. Such movement defines the contours of a new politics.

[HTTP://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/CULTURAL-FLOWS-LOGISTICAL-CIRCUITS](http://TRANSITLABOUR.ASIA/BLOGS/CULTURAL-FLOWS-LOGISTICAL-CIRCUITS)