Manuela Bojadžijev and Serhat Karakayalı

Recuperating the Sideshows of Capitalism: The Autonomy of Migration Today

This text is a reflection on our 2007 contribution to the TRANSIT MIGRATION research project, "The Autonomy of Migration: Ten Theses Towards a Methodology."[1] Within the project, we analyzed the movements of migration and the migration policies deployed against them at the edges of the EU, in order to decipher the contours of a new regime of emerging migration politics. We were interested in investigating, from the perspective of social theory, what was symptomatic in movements of migration. We were interested in tracing the crossing of borders, the traversing of territories, the enmeshing of cultures, the unsettling of institutions (first among them nation-states, but also citizenship), the connecting of languages, and the flight from exploitation and oppression – interested, in other words, in investigating what migration teaches us about the conditions of contemporary forms of sociality, and that which goes beyond them. With this article, we pick up the thread and offer some further thoughts.

Ten years ago, we gave a name to our efforts to create a new basis for political work dealing with migration: the autonomy of migration. Dazzling term, slogan, and program all at once, its use, first and foremost, functioned for many as an act of liberation. It not only demanded that migrants *themselves* be allowed to speak of their struggles (or, more generally, that migration discover its own language) nor did it simply seek to interrupt the helpless recourse to the history of victimhood that oppresses through racism; and it certainly was not about adding another decentralized social movement to those that replaced the workers' movement after its demise – on the contrary, the idea was to contribute to the construction of new connections within the social struggles concerned with migration, in order to gather the different layers of subjectivity (as men and women, as workers and employees, as citizens and the illegalized) to form a foundation with which to accelerate these struggles in emancipatory ways. Ultimately, this opens the possibility for analytically and practically connecting various struggles within the context of migration, beyond national limits; for understanding the transformation of borders both on the edges of the European Union and within it; for allowing these transformations to become the locations of conflict.

We considered the autonomy of migration to be a program of research into both the political and the pitfalls of an emancipatory politics that was too purely focused on either the global or national levels. We hoped that migration, understood from this perspective, could offer a research framework that could take into consideration both the local and the global, while also revealing the separations and

segregations that characterize our lives today – a framework, in other words, able to bring the contradictions of capitalist sociality to the fore in a manner that might indicate how those same contradictions can be left behind.

Poster of Kanak Attak's first Berlin event, SO 36, Kreuzberg, 1999.

Various effects followed from the deployment – by ourselves and others – of the concept of the autonomy of migration. It unsettled several things that had until then been taken for granted within anti-racism debates; a coherent "politics of autonomy," however, did not emerge. The autonomy thesis was rebuffed where it was interpreted phenomenologically, as an empirical description of processes of migration; as if we had presumed migrants to be autonomous individuals who "did their thing" regardless of border controls and migration policies. There was fear that the turn away from the misery of migration could prove a flawed strategy; that the emphasis on the agency of migrants would play into the hands of those who had always inferred *homo economicus* and the pursuit of self-interest in migrants. But this quickly becomes a fatal, circular argument that rests on the precondition that migrants may only

ever be regarded as the victims of circumstance. The liberals set the precedent, and for the Left there only remains the option to play along or lay the groundwork for the Right. Instead, one must ask how it could be possible to lay the foundation for a broader movement in the concerns of migrants? Beyond basic pity and general human rights, what could be brought into play as a common terrain?

The following questions have emerged, owing not only to the difficulties that have arisen within political practice, but also to the pace with which the parameters of the struggles, the issues, and the lines of conflict have shifted within Europe and beyond in recent years. These are questions that we cannot answer at this point, but that we are completely convinced have to be posed if we are to initiate a discussion among all those who no longer believe the struggles of migration to be a sideshow of history.

1. "Fortress Europe"

The original focus of the debate that started roughly ten years ago surrounding the concept of the autonomy of migration was a critique of the metaphor of "Fortress Europe." An important aspect of this critique was its questioning of the presumption that migration policies were exclusively determined by states and the institutions of border control. The metaphor of the "Fortress" also had consequences for the understanding of the political, and this served to illuminate the debate over the last ten years. In other words, how does critical knowledge about migration "ally" itself with political stratagems? While revealing the deadly realities of the border regime was intended to mobilize a humanistic public against such a "Fortress," this strategy did not address the tricks and ruses used by migrants to slip over borders unnoticed. These issues mostly became the preserve of right-wing opponents of immigration, engaged in the baiting of "asylum cheats" and "illegals." In the tragic tale told by supporters of "Fortress Europe," the "migrants' perspective" ultimately resembles an obituary – that is, it is assumed that they will absolutely fail. Hence the Mediterranean is often described as a mass grave, and rightly so. In light of a skewed discussion in which the "migrants' perspective" is only ever included as a supplement to the discourse of walling-off, we ask ourselves wherein a possible alternative conception could arise and, therefore, what political project could be articulated through migration? In the first instance, it is an appeal to investigate "Fortress Europe" from the perspective of the practices of migration.

The border regime does not transform of its own accord, but rather obtains its dynamic from

the forms of migration movements. This is not to say that states are helpless in the face of population movements; rather, it is in part to pose the questions: What defines states' activities in relation to migration and the efforts to control it? Wherein arises the function of containment of a population in a territory under the conditions of its Europeanization? And which different interests come into play in the process? The metaphor of "Fortress Europe" presumes that within the "Fortress" a truce prevails. In truth, however, the discussion and the representation of the entity called "Europe" is itself a part of the political effort to produce this unity. Europe, and every nation-state within the hegemonic European project, is in reality traversed by fundamental conflicts, concerning among other things the question of borders and their respective degrees of (im)permeability. If and when migrants cross the borders – which, generally, does not happen on boats – they do not step into a closed container. They are already (and then, in a new way) a part of national and global social relations, which they also themselves transform.

2. Control
In the "Not on Tap" section of our "Autonomy of Migration" paper, we appealed against the view of migration as a phenomenon that can be directed through immigration policies alone. An important issue for us, in relation to the limits of the governability of migration, was that the subjectivity of migrants is not reducible to their role as labor-power, as the economic notion of *homo economicus* would have us believe. And this remains the case: migration cannot be turned on and off like a tap. But what is the consequence of this for critical thinking about migration? It is too simplistic to merely turn the power relations on their head, as has sometimes happened in contributions from the field of research on transnationalism. Perceiving migrant practices as a subversive Other to nation-states, or even to capitalism, is not the answer. Rather than conceptualize every form of migration that is not regulated by the state (especially undocumented migration) as a form of counter-power to national state practices of territorialization, we are concerned with exploring migratory lines of flight as a social movement in the intermediate zones, where migration slips out of the hands of regulative, codifying, and stratifying policies. With lines of flight, here, we address that which literally seeks to escape capitalism: migration as escape routes, migration as living labor. In contrast, the super-exploitation of migrant labor is the opposite of this line of flight; it is its recuperation. The political option lies where this

contradiction comes into play.

3. Integration – Cosmopolitics
A new focus on integration has become the leitmotif of recent policies on immigration almost everywhere in Europe. The subtle changes through which the term "integration" has passed in recent years point towards a structural shift. If the term once had the function of cashing in on both everyday practices of migration and demands that were collectively articulated through social conflicts, converting them into another currency (namely, individual adaptation), another dimension appears to occupy the foreground today. The entry into Europe of numerous countries from which labor-power was once recruited has led to a new understanding as to who counts as not-belonging; in other words, as migrant. Therefore, the question of precisely who is the migrants are, and what constitutes contemporary migration in their respective countries, remains significant for determining those who can be integrable and those who cannot.

A further aspect of the new focus on integration, however, plays a "unifying" role for Europe. The transformation of the entire discourse on migration into a regional discourse is symptomatic; it is testimony to the inversion of a hegemonic project brought into play by notions such as "European cultural identity." A symptom of this is the transformation of the traditional Right everywhere in Europe away from an anti-Semitic and towards an anti-Muslim racism, illustrated by the success of populist right-wing parties who tout themselves as the watchpeople of liberal rights to freedom. This is not only accompanied by a culturalization of the term "integration," but also a mutation of the term itself into a vehicle for the invocation and emergence of a hegemonic project oriented towards a "European people." This project, which is simultaneously a neoliberal one, is made possible through the "Muslim Other," which forms the basis of the new discourse on integration. Liberalism and its meritocratic principles construe the culture of the Occident as radically bourgeois, through which poverty is also increasingly culturalized, seen as a result of individual failure – of having made the wrong choices in one's life – and not as the systematic, necessary (by)product of a commodity-producing economy. However, in the cultures of those regions relegated by global capitalism to the third division, all those who have learned to react to the denial of opportunities – whether due to colonialism or international markets – with strategies of withdrawal, flight, and migration, are now ostracized as illiberal and, in the worst case, as anti-liberal.

Poster for the event and performance "No Integration" at Volksbühne, Berlin and Schauspielhaus, Frankfurt/Main in April and May 2002.

The critique of integration, though, does not call for a renunciation of rights, but rather distinguishes between the demand for rights and the process of "translating" demands through the logic of the state: the "police." Wherever migrants have demanded social and political rights, bringing the nation-state and its social contradictions into disarray, the imperative for integration has served both the symbolic as well as the material reconstitution of the dominant order – which not only requires migrants to be subaltern, but also seeks to obliterate the emancipatory moment of empowerment. The purpose of criticizing the rhetoric of integration and its concern with lifestyle and culture cannot simply seek to *rehabilitate* the everyday practices of migrants that are not integrated into state apparatuses for being a response to global inequality; rather, the critique must also *turn those practices into the point of departure* for another form of citizenship. Notions of citizenship should not be confined to civil rights institutions, but should allow the countless practices that force its reformulation through collective appropriation to challenge and transgress the limited boundaries of the concept. Many of the social conflicts initiated by migrants are, after all, not about becoming citizens, but about insisting that they are citizens already.

4. Victims and Perpetrators

Even if one rejects the traditional conception of political subjectivity (as was done with the notion of the autonomy of migration), the division of migrant subjectivity into victims and perpetrators leaves one question unanswered: how should one relate politically to the actual subjectivity of migrants when it asserts itself as a radical self-victimization, seemingly contrary to the thesis of autonomy? Is it enough to expose the political structures that enable such a form of subjectivity, or is another unexplored form of agency concealed behind the facade of powerlessness? The concept of autonomy, like the notion of agency, suggests – and this has often been criticized – a connection to the traditional idea of political subjectivity as an expression of power differentials and instrumentalist rationality. In contrast to this, one could present an understanding of the political as a flight from majoritarian conditions. This would involve working with all those forces that want (in whatever way) to extract themselves from the ordering and imposition of power and domination by means of encounters and collaborations. This would involve an historical investigation of the extent to which migration and racism have placed new questions on the political agenda, and how the struggles of

migration – as well as the struggles of the colonized – have transformed the European Left, even if it does not always want to admit it.
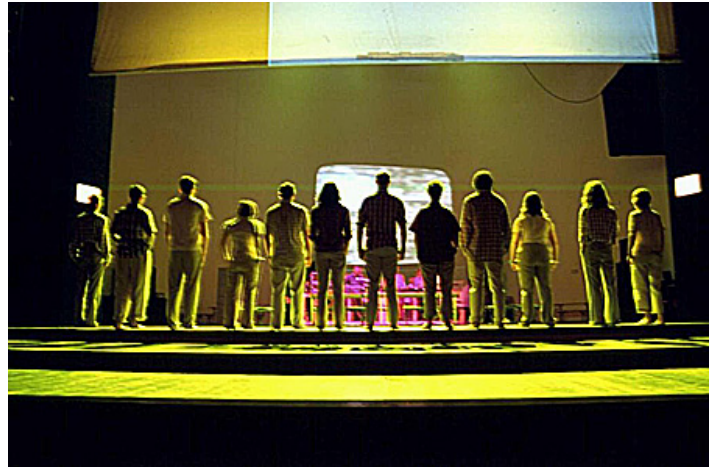
Kanak Attak, Volksbühne, Berlin, 2001.

5. Post-Hybridity

When, in our paper, we criticized the phantasma of "freely accessible identity positions," it was directed at a concept of hybridity claiming to foreclose the identity with which it is coupled. In particular, we argued that radicalized identities are not essential; they are, rather, the modes of processing social contradictions. In order to reject any core essentialist conception of hybridity conceivable only as a potentized or mixed identity, we prioritized the "wager" through which one could access a "temporary departure" from identitarian interpellation. What we implied with the expression "temporary" deserves closer examination. "Hybrid" identities, in large parts of the Western world, are not only less problematic today than they were twenty, thirty, or forty years ago (as only temporary sites of "political deployment," which they remain to a lesser extent today); they have also become a trademark of a reflexive modernity that has taken up the cause of its own heterogeneity and tolerance – and is sometimes prepared to fight for it with bombs and threats. This assumed discrepancy between a liberal, cosmopolitan, and capitalist modernity on the one hand, and a fundamentalist Other that refuses intermixing on the other, is itself a hegemonic gesture that must be rejected. Emancipatory language moves from Left to Right and back again, and finds its application in the governance of populations. In this respect, the current uncertainty in designating the political is connected historically to those movements that have opposed their exclusion and insisted upon their rights; or rather, their representation. Numerous examples demonstrate that the language of rights developed in Black, women's, and migrants'

movements, and in the queer movement, have now entered a right-wing, chauvinistic discourse and are used for the sealing of borders. This language has developed into a military-imperial and anti-migration project. For instance, the discourse legitimizing the Iraq War articulated the need to bomb because of a lack of democracy; in the case of Afghanistan, the lack of women's rights, among other things, were used as justification. Anti-racist discourses have begun to enter the policies of migration controls (for instance, in the campaigns of the International Organization for Migration). Arguments against immigration to Europe are decorated with the pretention of tolerance for "cultural difference." Migrants today are no longer attacked in the name of unifying culture and nation, but rather of emancipation and democracy.

6. History

The question of "integration" in the writing of history is also at stake here. The simple recognition of the reality that we live in a Europe of immigration opens a space and simultaneously provokes the question: how can a migrant population, or migration, become an aspect of both national as well as European historiography? Thus, a trend that significantly alters the categories of collective being in the world: the debates around the transformations in our understanding of belonging often lead to bitter, identity-based conflicts over demands made on the past in order to make claims about the present. "Who belongs to the nation?"; or, with reference to Étienne Balibar's well known book, are "We, the People of Europe?"[2] Is it surprising that these questions appear at a moment when there is more uncertainty than ever with regard to both what remains of nations, as well as what Europe is to become?

Migration has contributed to the Europeanization of the continent. For this reason, in our "Ten Theses," we demanded an alternative understanding of history. The struggles of migration are themselves constitutive of the transformation of history. Migration is implicated in different struggles. It compels the reorganization of institutions, cultures, languages, ideological frameworks, and so forth, the transformation of their design, the modification of their objectives, a variation in their arguments, a change in their objects. Migration exists only within these conflicts, out of which arise new historical conjunctures, along with new regimes of migration, new ideological constructions of race, new concepts of citizenship, and so on. These historical conjunctures become compacted in national predicaments; different origins come into

contact with one another in today's Europe and develop new configurations. To speak about the movement of migration and its autonomy is not to think of this as separated or even displaced from the social relations of society. Far more, migration exists as concrete practices entangled within relations of power and domination. However, this does not mean that migrants are forever condemned to reproducing these relations in the same way. In this context, thinking materially means giving up the idea that one can define migration as a variable, as dependent, for example, on poverty, methods of production, or coyotes, which obscure the concrete social and political projects pursued by people through migration.

There is a tension between the possibility of inscribing migrants in a national or European history – defined genealogically as well as geographically (and in this sense, through blood and soil) – and the reality that this "group" of migrants is simultaneously separated in such different ways, by history and geography, from the places and times that they come from. In other words, migration is so complexly composed in space and time that neither the attempt to reduce it to questions of ethnicity and origin, nor to simply duplicate its histories in order to sidestep a determination, can be carried out successfully. It is, then, neither a case of presuming authenticity (based on tradition and rehabilitation), nor one of instrumentalizing authenticity (based on aspects of voluntarism and victimization), both of which would only speak in the name of an imaginary subject – "the migrants."

Moreover, the tension becomes more apparent when we find an opportunity, precisely in the case of migration, which itself embodies the contradiction: we are dealing with the history of a non-unifiable subject; and thus, more that of a movement – the movement of migration. It is an opportunity that must first of all be recognized, that subsumes and revitalizes the contradictions, and can have the effect of countering the heroification and romanticization of migrants. In doing so, we bring closer the historical contingency of subjectivation within this process, and, therefore, the temporality of subjectivity.

7. Resources of Subjectivation

As a result of its location at the limits of social citizenship, migration forms a movement in ways diametrically opposed to those of the classical workers' movement. The resources (of political subjectivity), we argued, are located in the collective forms by which people not only organize their lives and their everyday existences, but also attempt to hold their ground

against exclusion and repression. The new underclass of migrant labor, for instance, transforms itself into a "toehold" for migration in a situation in which there are constraints on possibilities for immigration. A transformation is taking place today – particularly in those European countries that experienced intensive immigration since the Second World War – that is of particular importance to this. In conjunction with neoliberalism, the discourse around migration has led to an interlacing of the discourse of culture and the discourse around the social question: poverty and exclusion are, effectively, the product of cultural failure if individuals or entire groups are not able to subject themselves to the imperatives of education, disciplinarity, learning, and flexibility. This interface enables a quasi "rational" exclusion of underperformance or non-participation as *unwillingness* to perform, and allows for those belonging to the majority to identify as a collective of high performers. Thus, once one examines the integration and culture debate from the perspective of interlacing, and observes that this is not only contingent, but articulated and organized by social groups, then it becomes clear that alternative approaches need to connect to a new social movement of migrants. Such a movement must open a twofold possibility: firstly, it must consider the social question anew, and in doing so problematize the economic and political *conditions* of democracy; secondly, it must make it equally possible for both migrants and non-migrants to transform and emancipate themselves from their current ascriptions and identities.

8. No Capitalism without the Control of Mobility

In our "Ten Theses," we argued that, because the legal and social situation in which migrants live and work is particularly exploitable and precarious, many see (mainly illegal) migration as the vanguard of a new, ultra-flexible service-industry proletariat. Such a perspective obscures the history of the territorialization of living labor, since the opposition between a sedentary and a mobile working population is itself a product of social compromises at the level of the nation-state.

The first proletarians in Europe were mobile workers. They were people who had fled the feudal mode of production to work in the cities, and were chased across Europe as vagabonds, crooks, and the poor. Against this mass movement, the political fears of the rulers allied themselves with the economic fears of the guilds.

Seen historically, the "dangerous classes," the "mob" (an expression that, revealingly,

derives from the Latin word for movement), everything that one today calls the "working class," stood outside the state. With the integration of these groups and their "nationalization," all characteristics that had been ascribed to them were transferred to the borders of the nation-state. Structurally, this was stabilized through the wage-form and the commodity-form of labor-power, which transformed the labor market into a terrain of struggle: the "dirty competition" of women and children was driven out of the labor market. "Foreigners" also belonged to this category of dirty competition – which is why it is no coincidence that trade unions have historically taken a position against migration. Unless they are able to transform themselves, the trade unions will become the guilds of our time.

Even if undocumented migration appears to be the only possibility for immigrating to Europe due to a lack of other legal possibilities, the European Union is beginning to deal with the "benefits of migration," for example, with the idea that future immigration should be oriented towards the so-called needs of the labor market. For such a project to take place on the European level, a unified migration policy is obviously essential, which, even if not implemented as a quasi state-socialist vision, would nevertheless presume a relatively static image of society. The notion of being able to organize circular migration in this respect reflects the flexibility and mobility that labor-power already displays. Europe appears to want to accommodate this tendency, but also bring it under control.

9. Citizenship

Through this organization of migration, civil rights are also differentiated and regulated into different, stratified spaces. This trend has rightly been dubbed apartheid, and it occurs in the context of what is simplistically called globalization, but should be defined more precisely as European postcolonial conditions. The clear distinction between metropole and colony is blurring, and a new spatial dimension emerges, one that is variously described as "differential inclusion" and "exclusion." Through the mobility of labor-power, the transformed function of citizenship, and the creation of transnational spaces, a new segregation is installed, composed of both national as well as international spaces.

This contrasts with other, older racist formulations. Whereas racisms in the period of biologically formulated racism – which still appeared distinct, such as anti-Semitism and colonial racism – could be united theoretically, as if they were rooted in a hierarchical and spatially organized model of different cultures, a

linear conception of progress, a privileging of unity over hybridity, and so on, things have recently become more complicated, with differential or neo-racism being formulated on a cultural basis. This is a development that leads to what has been described as a "European apartheid."

In order to address these issues together, critical efforts must be directed towards developing the institutions and practices of citizenship that are not tied to the nation-state, while simultaneously minimizing hierarchies arising through the new differentiation of jurisdictions. In this respect, an opportunity emerges: the demand for rights and justice must move beyond the guarantee of citizenship. Accordingly, classifications of citizenship and statelessness need to be overcome. Aspects of citizenship that are connected to the permeability of borders, and already underlie their deterritorialization, should be considered in terms of the limits within the concept of citizenship itself. In other words, migrants without papers should not only be thought of as objects of exclusion; rather, their appropriation of citizenship (for example, the ability to organize education and accommodation, medical care and work, despite their lack of recognized status) should be understood as challenges and redefinitions of the very limits of our understanding of citizenship. This would render obsolete any successive or progressive issuing of rights over time, over generations of settlement, as some understandings of integration suggest to do.

Moreover, the practices of mobility point towards the reality that citizenship today clearly needs to transcend national borders. When we talk about a democratization of the border, the issue at stake becomes the transversal spaces occupied by those within hierarchical regimes of work and rights. A social and political organization beyond borders also implies an unrelenting effort to understand and translate different languages, and concepts expressed in the struggle for rights. To engage in these processes would be to open the possibility of articulating subjectivity differently in the future – beyond the nation-state.

10. Autonomy

Autonomy emerges in social conflicts in which new forms of cooperation and communication, new forms of life, are constituted. The concept of the autonomy of migration connects to the persistence of migrant movements and the drive towards mobility on the basis of social networks. In the process of migration, migrants divest themselves of existing forms of sociality. However, there is a dialectic to every aspect of

the autonomy of migration. For instance, to the extent that capitalism is based on the mobility of labor-power, mobility is the source of exploitation; simultaneously, migration is the symptom of flight *from* relations of exploitation and oppression. Migration is neither free from existing forms of sociality, nor can it be considered purely as an extension. The processes of migration install new forms of sociality. They can lead to certain structures in households, political organization, and economic modes of production that stretch from precarious working conditions to capitalist enterprises. Social networks can construct tightly regulated communities with fixed identities. As such, autonomy and heteronomy are never completely separate – and it is common for autonomy to be introduced into situations that ultimately contribute to its destruction.

Kanak Attak, Action in Frankfurt/Main, 2002. It shows the slogan of the "Gesellschaft für Legalisierung [Society for Legalisation]" which says "Wir sind unter euch [We are amongst you]".

Diverse historical conditions determine the development of migration struggles. Which level of organization – that of the political, of trade-unions, or of everyday life – is characteristic among those who resist racism and stand for an end to repressive migration policies? How developed and established is the understanding of anti-racism in society? How can such traits even be comprehended under the new conditions of global interdependence and established societies experiencing the effects of immigration? The traces of autonomy that remain in such conflicts – the resources that temporarily become available just before they disappear – must always be reassessed.

×
Translated from the German by Ben Trott

Manuela Bojadzijev is Associate Professor at the
Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt
University of Berlin and taught at the Department of
Sociology in Goldsmiths, University of London,
publications include *Die windige Internationale.
Rassismus und Kämpfe der Migration*, 2009,
Konjunkturen des Rassismus with Alex Demirovic,
2002. Together they published *Turbulente Ränder.
Neue Perspektiven auf Migration an den Grenzen
Europas* (Bielefeld 2007) as members of the research
group TRANSIT MIGRATION. She is also a member of
the Sound Art Group Ultra-red.

Serhat Karakayalı teaches at the University of Halle,
and in 2007 published *Empire und die biopolitische
Wende* (Empire and the Biopolitical Watershed), an
analysis of modern capitalism jointly edited with
Marianne Pieper, Vassilis Tsianos, and Thomas Atzert.
It was followed in 2008 by *Gespenster der Migration*
(The Ghosts of Migration), his dissertation on the
history of illegal immigration in Germany. His next
book will be an introduction to the Greek-French
political scientist Nicos Poulantzas.

09/09

1
Manuela Bojadžijev and Serhat
Karakayal?, "Autonomie der
Migration: 10 Thesen zu einer
Methode," in *TurbulenteRänder:
Neue Perspektiven auf Migration
an den Grenzen Europas*, ed.
Forschungsgruppe TRANSIT
MIGRATION (Bielefeld:
Transcript, 2007), 203–209. See
the original text: http://v.e-
flux.com/j/17/Boj
adzijev_Karakayali_10_Thesen
.pdf; the TRANSIT MIGRATION
website:
http://www.transitmigration.
org; and the Kanak Attak
website: http://www.kanak-
attak.de.

2
Étienne Balibar, *We, the People
of Europe?: Reflections on
Transnational Citizenship*, trans.
James Swenson (Princeton:
Princeton University Press,
2004).

09.17.12 / 20:46:56 EDT