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## DU Philosopher: We're In The Century Of The Migrant



BY KAREEM MADDOX  
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Audio: Thomas Nail Speaks With Nathan Heffel



University of Denver Associate Professor of Philosophy Thomas Nail.

(Hart Van Denburg/CPR News)

Forget the presidential candidates. There's another important political figure that few seem to talk about: the migrant. That's what Thomas Nail sets out to discuss in his new book, "The Figure of the Migrant." He's an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Denver and says that the world is full of migrants. With so many ways to become one, more attention should be paid to migration. He spoke with Colorado Matters host Nathan Heffel.

### Introduction

The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant. At the turn of the century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history.<sup>1</sup> Today, there are over 1 billion migrants.<sup>2</sup> Each decade, the percentage of migrants as a share of the total population continues to rise, and in the next twenty-five years, the rate of migration is predicted to be higher than during the last twenty-five years.<sup>3</sup> It has become more necessary for people to migrate because of environmental, economic, and political instability. Climate change, in particular, may cause international migration to double over the next forty years.<sup>4</sup> The percentage

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of total migrants who are non-status or undocumented is increasing, which poses a serious challenge to democracy and political representation.<sup>5</sup>


In other ways, we are all becoming migrants.<sup>6</sup> People today relocate to greater distances more frequently than ever before in human history. While many people may not move across a regional or international border, they tend to change jobs more often, commute longer and farther to work,<sup>7</sup> change their residence repeatedly, and tour internationally more often.<sup>8</sup> Some of these phenomena are directly related to recent events, such as the impoverishment of middle classes in certain rich countries after the financial crisis of 2008, subsequent austerity cuts to social welfare programs, and rising unemployment. The subprime mortgage crisis led to the expulsion of millions of people from their homes worldwide (9 million in the United States alone). Foreign investors and governments have acquired 540 million acres since 2006, resulting in the eviction of millions of small farmers in poor countries, and mining practices have become increasingly destructive around the world—including hydraulic fracturing and tar sands. This general increase in human mobility and expulsion is now widely recognized as a defining feature of the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> “A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration.”<sup>10</sup>

However, not all migrants are alike in their movement.<sup>11</sup> For some, movement offers opportunity, recreation, and profit with only a temporary expulsion. For others, movement is dangerous and constrained, and their social expulsions are much more severe and permanent. Today, most people fall somewhere on this migratory spectrum between the two poles of “inconvenience” and “incapacitation.” But what all migrants on this spectrum share, at some point, is the experience that their *movement* results in a certain degree of expulsion from their territorial, political, juridical, or economic status. Even if the end result of migration is a relative increase in money, power, or enjoyment, the *process of migration itself* almost always involves an insecurity of some kind and duration: the removal of territorial ownership or access, the loss of the political right to vote or to receive social welfare, the loss of legal status to work or drive, or the financial loss associated with transportation or change in residence.

The gains of migration are always a risk, while the process itself is always some kind of loss. This is precisely the sense in which Zygmunt Bauman writes that “tourism and vagrancy are two faces of the same coin” of global migration. Both the “tourist” (the traveling academic, business professional, or vacationer) and the “vagabond” (migrant worker or refugee), as Bauman calls them, are “bound to move” by the same social conditions but result in different kinds and degrees of expulsion from the social order. Businesspeople are compelled to travel around the world in the “global chase of profit,” “consumers must never be allowed to rest” in the chase of new commodities and desires, and the global poor must move from job to job wherever capital calls. For the tourist this social “compulsion, [this] ‘must,’ [this] internalized pressure, [this] impossibility of living one’s life in any other way,” according to Bauman, “reveals itself . . . in the disguise of a free exercise of will.”<sup>12</sup> The vagabond sees it more clearly. The social compulsion to move produces certain expulsions for all migrants. Some migrants may decide to move, but they do not get to decide the social conditions of their movement or the degree to which they may be expelled from certain social orders as a consequence. Migration in this sense is neither entirely free nor forced—the two are part of the same *regime of social motion*. The concept of expulsion simply means the degree to which a migrant is deprived or dispossessed of a certain status in this regime.

The tourist and vagabond are always crossing over into one another, as Bauman writes. “None of the insurance policies of the tourists’ life-style protects against slipping into vagabondage. . . . [M]ost jobs are temporary, shares may go down as well as up, skills, the assets one is proud of and cherishes now become obsolete in no time.”<sup>13</sup> Migration is the spectrum between these two poles, and the figure of the migrant is the one who moves on this spectrum. In this way, migratory figures function as mobile social positions and not fixed identities. One is not born a migrant but becomes one. This book is a philosophical history of the political subject we have become today: *the migrant*. However, there are two central problems to overcome in order to develop such a theory.

## Two Problems



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The first problem is that the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *stasis* and perceived as a secondary or derivative figure with respect to place-bound social membership. Place-bound membership in a society is assumed as primary; secondary is the movement back and forth between social points. The “emigrant” is the name given to the migrant as the former member or citizen, and the “immigrant” as the would-be member or citizen. In both cases, a static place and membership are theorized first, and the migrant is the one who lacks both. Thus, more than any other political figure (citizen, foreigner, sovereign, etc.), the migrant is the one least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement: by its *movement*.

If we want to develop a political theory of the migrant itself and not the migrant *as a failed citizen*, we need to reinterpret the migrant first and foremost according to its own defining feature: its movement. Thus, this book develops a theoretical framework that begins with movement instead of stasis.<sup>14</sup> However, beginning from the theoretical primacy of movement does not mean that one should uncritically celebrate it. Movement is not always good, nor is movement always the same. Movement is always distributed in different concrete social formations or types of circulation.<sup>15</sup> It is not a metaphor. Thus, this book is neither a valorization of movement, or an ontology of movement in general. It is a kinetic and philosophical history of the subject of our time: *the migrant*. It seeks to understand the material, social, and historical conditions under which something like the migrant has come to exist for us today. It is a philosophical history of the present.

In this way, it is not only a theory of the migrant but also a theory of the social motions by which migration takes place. Society is always in motion. From border security and city traffic controls to personal technologies and work schedules, human movement is socially directed. Societies are not static places with fixed characteristics and persons.<sup>16</sup> Societies are dynamic processes engaged in continuously directing and circulating social life. In a movement-oriented philosophy there is no social stasis, only regimes of social circulation. Thus, if we want to understand the figure of the migrant, whose defining social feature is its movement, we must also understand *society itself* according to movement. This, therefore, is the guiding interpretive framework of this book.<sup>17</sup>

The second problem is that the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *states*.<sup>18</sup> Since the state has all too often written history, the migrant has been understood as a figure without its own history and social force. “In world history,” as Hegel says, “we are concerned only with those peoples that have formed states [because] all the value that human beings possess, all of their spiritual reality, they have through the State alone.”<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that migrants are always stateless but that the history of migrant social organizations has tended to be subsumed or eradicated by state histories. Often, the most dispossessed migrants have created some of the most interesting non-state social organizations.

In response to this problem, this book offers a counter-history of several important migrant social organizations that have been marginalized by states. The migrant is not only a figure whose movement results in a certain degree of social expulsion. The migrant also has its own type of movement that is quite different from the types that define its expulsion. Accordingly, migrants have created very different forms of social organization that can clearly be seen in the “minor history” of the raids, revolts, rebellions, and resistances of some of the most socially marginalized migrants. This is a challenging history to write because many of these social organizations produced no written documents, or if they did, they were systematically destroyed by those in power. It is not a natural fact that the history of migrants has become ahistorical, as Hegel argues—it is the violence of states that has rendered the migrant ahistorical. This book does not try to render a complete account of this (a)history but rather to provide a *social kinetic interpretation* of several important migrant social formations in Western history that have been buried by the history of states and citizens.

#### The Consequences

There are three important consequences of developing a political theory of the migrant in this way. First, it allows us to *conceptualize the emergence of the historical conditions* that gave rise

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to the types of social expulsion that define the migrant. The major forms of kinetic social expulsion that define the twenty-first century did not emerge out of nowhere. They emerged historically. At different points in history, migratory movement was the result of different types and degrees of social expulsion: territorial, political, juridical, and economic. New forms of social organization rose to dominance through history. As states triumphed over villages, and markets triumphed over feudalism, we begin to see an explosion in new techniques for expelling migrants from their previous status. Once these new techniques emerge historically, they tend to persist. Today, we find the contemporary migrant at the intersection of all four major forms of historical social expulsion. However, this book is not a universal history of the migrant that shows the vast intertwining of all the previous forms of social expulsion at every historical point and to every degree for every social figure.<sup>20</sup> This is too large a task. It is also not able to be sensitive to all of the changes that certain key terms like “territory” have undergone over thousands of years of history.<sup>21</sup>

The aim of this book is more modest: to provide an analysis of four major techniques for expelling migrants during their period of historical dominance and to provide a conceptual, movement-based definition of the migratory figures associated with these expulsions.<sup>22</sup> The present study does not provide a history of the relative deprivations of tourists, diplomats, business travelers, explorers, and state functionaries, although such a history would also be interesting. Instead, it focuses on the more marginalized figures of historical migration (nomads, barbarians, vagabonds, and the proletariat) for three reasons. First, because it is primarily their history that has been decimated and is in the most need of recovery and reinterpretation. Second, because it is in their history that the emergence of each new form of social expulsion (of which the tourist experiences only the smallest degree) is most sharply visible. Third, and most important, because it is their history that more closely resembles the situation of most of the people we call migrants today.

The second consequence is that developing a theory of the migrant will allow us to *analyze contemporary migration* because the history of migration is not a linear or progressive history of distinct “ages.” Rather, it is a history of coexisting and overlapping social forces of expulsion. The same techniques of territorial, political, juridical, and economic expulsion of the migrants that have emerged and repeated themselves in history are still at work today. For example, territorial expulsion, the dispossession of land,<sup>23</sup> does not occur only once against the nomadic peoples in the Neolithic period but gets taken up again and mobilized in various ways throughout history—up to the present. The invention of territorial social expulsion created *historical* nomadic peoples, but it also invented a *social* type of migrant subjectivity characterized by territorial expulsion that also continues to define other territorially displaced peoples. This is the sense in which migrants may be “nomadic” without being exactly the same as historical nomads.

As an example, in the ancient world, migrants were expelled from their territories by war and kidnapping; in the medieval world, they were expelled by enclosure and the removal of customary laws that bound them to the land; and in the modern world, they have been expelled by the capitalist accumulation of private property. Although each dispossession of land is historically unique, each shares a common social kinetic function. Contemporary migration is part of this legacy.<sup>24</sup> Today, migrant farmworkers are expelled by industrial agriculture; indigenous peoples are expelled from their native lands by war and forced into the mountains, forests, or “waste lands”; and island peoples are expelled from their territory by the rising tides of climate change. There is a certain truth in the fact that the popular press often refers to all these people as “nomads,” even though they are not literally the same as early historical nomads. However, what all these migrants share is a specific social kinetic form of territorial expulsion that first rose to prominence in early historical nomadism.<sup>25</sup>

The analysis of contemporary migration presented here is not one of total causal explanation: of push-pull factors, psychological volunteerism, neoclassical or structural economism, and so on. Instead, it offers an original kinetic analysis. The aim of this book is not to explain the causes of all migration but to offer better descriptions of the conditions, forces, and trajectories of its historical emergence and contemporary hybridity.

The third consequence of developing a theory of the migrant is that it allows us to *diagnose the*

*capacity of the migrant to create an alternative* to social expulsion. The figure of the migrant is not merely an effect of different regimes of social expulsion. It also has its own forms of social motion in riots, revolts, rebellions, and resistances. Just as the analysis of the historical techniques for the expulsion of the migrant can be used to understand contemporary migration, so too can the historical techniques of migrant social organizations be used to diagnose the capacity of contemporary migrants to pose an alternative to the present social logic of expulsion that continues to dominate our world.

Today, the figure of the migrant exposes an important truth: social expansion has always been predicated on the social expulsion of migrants. The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant not only because of the record number of migrants today but also because this is the century in which all the previous forms of social expulsion and migratory resistance have reemerged and become more active than ever before. This contemporary situation allows us to render apparent what had previously been obscured: that the figure of the migrant has always been the true motive force of social history. Only now are we in a position to recognize this.

The argument of this book is developed in four parts. Part 1 defines and lays out the logical structure of social motion. Part 2 argues that the migrant is defined not only by movement in general but by several specific historical conditions and techniques of social expulsion. Part 3 shows how several major migrant figures propose an alternative to this logic, and Part 4 shows how the concepts developed in Parts 2 and 3 help us to better understand the complex dynamics of contemporary migration in US-Mexico politics.

## Notes

1. In total number (1 billion: one in seven) and as percentage of total population (about 14 percent) according to the International Organization on Migration, "The Future of Migration: Building Capacities for Change," *World Migration Report 2010*, presentation at Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, [http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/Newsrelease/docs/WM2010\\_FINAL\\_23\\_11\\_2010.pdf](http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/Newsrelease/docs/WM2010_FINAL_23_11_2010.pdf); and The World Health Organization, "Migrant Health," 2015, [http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/health\\_of\\_migrants/en/](http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/health_of_migrants/en/).
2. As of 2010, there were 215 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants according to the United Nations Human Development Report, *Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development*, 2009, [http://oppenheimer.mcgill.ca/IMG/pdf/HDR\\_2009\\_EN\\_Complete.pdf](http://oppenheimer.mcgill.ca/IMG/pdf/HDR_2009_EN_Complete.pdf), 21.
3. Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008), <http://esa.un.org/migration>; and The US National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds," December 2012, <http://globaltrends2030.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/global-trends-2030-november2012.pdf>, 24. On the theoretical implications of this phenomenon for liberalism, see Phillip Cole, *Philosophies of Exclusion: Liberal Political Theory and Immigration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
4. Future forecasts vary from 25 million to 1 billion environmental migrants by 2050, moving either within their countries or across borders on a permanent or temporary basis, with 200 million the most widely cited estimate. This figure equals the current estimate of international migrants worldwide. See International Organization for Migration, "Migration, Climate Change and the Environment," accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/what-we-do/migration-and-climate-change/a-complex-nexus.html>.
5. International Council on Human Rights Policy, "Irregular Migration, Migrant Smuggling and Human Rights: Towards Coherence," 2010, [http://www.ichrp.org/files/summaries/41/122\\_pb\\_en.pdf](http://www.ichrp.org/files/summaries/41/122_pb_en.pdf), estimates that the approximate number of global irregular migrants has grown to 30–40 million persons.
6. With the rise of home foreclosure and unemployment people today are beginning to have

much more in common with migrants than with certain notions of citizenship (grounded in certain social, legal, and political rights). "All people may now be wanderers": Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 87. "Migration must be understood in a broad sense": Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 2.

7. World Bank's World Development Indicators 2005: Section 3 Environment, Table 3.11, <http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=141>.

8. International annual tourist arrivals exceeded 1 billion globally for the first time in history in 2012. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), "World Tourism Barometer," vol. 11, 2013, [http://dtxtq4w6oxqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto\\_barom13\\_01\\_ja\\_n\\_excerpt\\_o.pdf](http://dtxtq4w6oxqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_barom13_01_ja_n_excerpt_o.pdf).

9. I use the word "expulsion" here in the same sense in which Saskia Sassen uses it to indicate a general dispossession or deprivation of social status. See *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 1–2. Many scholars have noted a similar trend. For an excellent review of the "mobilities" literature on migration, see Alison Blunt, "Cultural Geographies of Migration: Mobility, Transnationality and Diaspora," *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007): 684–94.

10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 213.

11. Bauman, *Globalization*.

12. Ibid., 96, 85, 78, 83, 84.

13. Ibid., 97.

14. For an excellent introduction to the tradition of thinkers who have granted theoretical primacy to movement and flow, see Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012). See also Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Paul and William S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics* (Manchester, UK: Clinamen Press, 2000); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2008); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2012).

15. See Merriman, *Mobility, Space, and Culture*, 1–20, for a review of the criticisms against the philosophy of movement.

16. John Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000).

17. In this sense, this book can also be placed in the context of what is now being called the "new mobilities paradigm" or "mobility turn" in the social sciences. See Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, "Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–22; Cresswell, *On the Move*; Vincent Kaufmann, *Re-thinking Mobility: Contemporary Sociology* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2002); John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007); Tanu Uteng and Tim Cresswell, *Gendered Mobilities* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008); Jørgen Bærenholdt and Kirsten Simonsen, *Space Odysseys: Spatiality and Social Relations in the 21st Century* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Nigel Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (London: Sage, 1996).



18. This argument, and the idea of a “sedentary metaphysics,” is well supported by Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (February 1992): 24–44; and Cresswell, *On the Move*.

19. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (New York: Hackett, 1988), 41–42.

20. This is not a strictly empirical study. For an empirical world history of migration, see Patrick Manning and Tiffany Trimmer, *Migration in World History* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

21. For an example of this sort of historical work on the concept of territory, see Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

22. Stephen Castles has also argued that the figure of the migrant needs to be defined in relation to its other overlapping historical figures, such as indentured laborer, refugee, and exile. See *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1992).

23. Here I am using the word “territory” simply to mean “delimited land” (following the *OED*) and not in a strictly historical way since, as Stuart Elden argues in *The Birth of Territory*, 322–30, the usage of the word “territory” varies significantly throughout history and cannot be used in a univocal way.

24. According to Tim Cresswell, “We cannot understand new mobilities, without understanding old mobilities.” “Towards a Politics of Mobility,” *Environment and Planning D, Society & Space*, 28, no. 1 (2010): 17–31.

25. To be clear, I am not arguing that contemporary migrants are *exactly* the same as the first historical nomads. For a good example of a *philosophical concept* of “nomadism” *derived* from history, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 351–423.

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