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KINOPOLITICS AND THE FIGURE OF THE MIGRANT: AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS NAIL

By **Thomas Nail & Zachary Thomas Settle**

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In his recent book, *The Figure of the Migrant*, philosopher Thomas Nail highlights the migrant—the figure expelled from his or her home country—as the political figure of our time. In his insistence that these figures should reframe our entire understanding of political theory, Nail's work is both pressing and revelatory. In this interview, he discusses his recent work, speaking about the role of the migrant in the contemporary political landscape, the implications of that figure on our methods of theorization, and the ways in which migrants are constructively disruptive within our North American context.

The Other Journal (TOJ): In your recent book, *The Figure of the Migrant*, you argue that the figure of the migrant is the political figure of our time. You go on to analyze and question the foundational principles of the contemporary moment that gives rise to the migrant, and you speak of the migrant as a broader category of migratory figures, each of which are expelled from the dominant social order. This expulsion grounds, you argue, the figure of the migrant as the true motive force of social history.¹ Will you elaborate for us on your use of the term *figure of the migrant*? What characterizes such a figure, and what are the different ways in which you see that figure being employed in the global situation?

Thomas Nail (TN): The migrant is the political figure who is socially expelled or dispossessed, to some degree as a result, or as the cause, of their mobility. We are not all migrants, but we are

becoming migrants. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history. Today, there are over one billion migrants, and each decade the global percentage of migrants and refugees grows. Political theory has yet to take this phenomenon seriously. In *The Figure of the Migrant*, I argue that doing so requires political theory to alter its foundational presuppositions.

Unfortunately, to go through an analysis of the four major figures of the migrant in the current global situation is too big of question to answer here, but I have written on it recently in *Public Affairs Quarterly*, the Stanford University Press blog, and the History News Network.² In the book, I narrow this down to a case study of US-Mexico migration. The nomad is the name of the migrant expelled from the territory, the barbarian is the name of the migrant expelled from political status or citizenship, the vagabond is the name of the migrant expelled from the juridical order, and the proletariat is the name of the migrant expelled from the control over the economic process. Each has its moment of historical emergence, and each continues to coexist in the present and gives us a helpful framework for understanding contemporary migration.

TOJ: In the introduction to your book, you argue that developing a political theory of the migrant that refuses to consider the figure as a failed citizen requires analyzing the figure according to its own defining feature: movement. This notion grounds your broader methodology and framework of kinopolitics, as you define the history of the migrant as one of social motion.³ Will you elaborate for us on your understanding and employment of this notion of movement and how that relates to your broader investigation of kinopolitics?

TN: Kinopolitics is the politics of movement, from the Greek word *kino*, meaning movement. If we are going to take the figure of the migrant seriously as a constitutive, and not derivative, figure of Western politics, we have to change the starting point of political theory. Instead of starting with a set of preexisting citizens, kinopolitics begins with the flows of migrants and the ways they have circulated or sedimented into citizens and states—as well as emphasizing how migrants have constituted a counter-power and alternative to state structures. In short, kinopolitics is the reinvention of political theory from the primacy of social motion instead of the state.

It is because of the way that migrants move or don't move that they pose such difficulty for political theory and sedentary societies. In my book, I took this so-called exceptional attribute of motion and flipped the existing frameworks on their heads, interpreting motion as the primary feature of social life. Instead of looking at fixed subjects and objects, the book looks at “flows and junctions”; instead of looking at states and institutions, the book looks at “regimes of circulation.” As it turns out, societies themselves are not, as they are often treated, static entities of fixed members but continuous circulations of metastable social flows. So I started with the migrant and

ended up needing to build a new political theory to fit it. I think this method has produced some interesting and original conclusions.

TOJ: In the second part of *The Figure of the Migrant*, after sketching out your theory of the migrant, you employ a radicalization of Karl Marx's notion of primitive accumulation, originally found in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.⁴ This notion, which you describe as "expansion by expulsion," serves to highlight the conditions through which the migrant is produced. You write that social expansion, as an exclusionary movement grounded in depriving one of social status, "is not simply the deprivation of territorial status (i.e., removal from the land); it includes three other major types of social deprivation: political, juridical, and economic."⁵ Will you expand on that notion a bit, reflecting on your understanding of expansion by expulsion as it includes these different forms of social deprivation?

TN: The kinetic theory of expansion by expulsion is this: all hitherto existing societies have been able to expand—territorially, politically, juridically, economically—only on the condition of some kind and degree of prior social expulsion. The migrant is the figure of this expulsion. Marx was the first to identify this phenomenon with respect to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but my thesis is not limited to this instance alone. Every major social formation has done something kinetically similar. The process of dispossessing migrants of their social status (i.e., expulsion) in order to further develop or advance a given form of social motion (i.e., expansion) is not unique to the capitalist regime of social motion. I can't go into all four historical figures of the migrant here, so I will give just two short examples of the nomad and the barbarian.

We see this process of expansion by expulsion at work in early Neolithic societies whose progressive cultivation of land and animals (i.e., territorial expansion) would not have been possible without the expulsion (or territorial dispossession) of a part of the human population: hunter-gatherers, whose territory was transformed into agricultural land and who were themselves transformed into surplus agriculturalists for whom there was no more arable land left to cultivate at a certain point. Thus, social expulsion is the condition of social expansion in two ways: an internal condition that allows for the removal of part of the population when certain internal limits have been reached (the carrying capacity of a given territory, for example) and an external condition that allows for the removal of part of the population outside these limits when the territory is able to expand outward into the lands of other groups (e.g., the hunter-gatherers). In this case territorial expansion was possible only on the condition that part of the population be expelled in the form of migratory nomads who were forced into the surrounding mountains and deserts.

Later, we see the same logic in the ancient world, whose dominant political form (i.e., the state)

would not have been possible without the expulsion (i.e., political dispossession) of a large body of barbarian slaves kidnapped from the mountains of the Middle East and Mediterranean and used as workers, soldiers, and servants so that a growing ruling class could live in luxury. The social conditions for the expansion of a growing political order (including warfare, colonialism, and massive public works) were precisely the expulsion of a population of barbarians who had to be depoliticized at the same time. This occurs again and again throughout history. Each time, the regime of motion changes as does the figure of the migrant.

TOJ: I'm really intrigued by your understanding of the center—for example, the territory, state, or law—and its complicity in maintaining conditions by which the figure of the migrant is not only made possible but is also determined as the new norm. You point to Guy Geltner's work on the topic, in which he argues that the expansion of the juridical sphere required the management and capture of vagabonds in the early formation of the modern state.⁶ Will you reflect for a bit on the ways in which the development of contemporary structures of law, state, border/territory, or free-market were developed in conjunction with the maintenance of migrants?

TN: This is a fascinating history that reveals the circular dictum of all juridical regimes: more laws produce more crime, and more crime requires more laws. Starting around the thirteenth century, peasants across continental Europe and Britain were expelled from their land through the abolition of customary laws, land tenure, and the introduction of land rent. Later, in sixteenth-century Britain, the privatization of peasant land for sheep grazing displaced tens of thousands of people. Throughout the West, the problem of migratory vagabonds or so-called "masterless men" was an enormous security threat. In order to deal with it, all kinds of new laws, officers, institutions, and so on were "needed" to lock people up, force them to work, transport them back and forth, and so on. An entire administrative apparatus began to emerge at this time that we call the early modern state. There is a long and interesting story here, but the conclusion is that the origins of the early modern state are tied directly to the expulsion of migrant vagabonds from their land. Without this expulsion, the prison apparatus and its proto-state correlates would have been entirely superfluous to the level of criminal mobility.

Something similar is still happening today in the West. The stricter the immigration laws, the more migrants are in violation of them; thus, criminal statistics reveal the "need" for harsher laws because of the "increase" in immigration violations. Migrants are a constitutive part of a juridical feedback mechanism that requires for its expansion the legal expulsion of a migrant population. I am not saying this is the conscious plot of some evil politicians—well, maybe Trump, but I hesitate to call him a politician—it's structural. It is part of the fundamental kinetic structure of juridical power.

TOJ: In your analysis of certain forms of migrancy, you argue that within pedetic motion—the motion of the foot defined by autonomy and self-motivation—lies the possibility for new forms of kinetic power that pose alternatives to social expulsion.⁷ Your analysis revolves around the movement of the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat. What are the possibilities for social transformation made available in these alternative forms of movement, and how are they modeled in these varying forms of migrancy?

TN: That's a big question that takes up the whole third part of the book. In my work, I try both to do an analysis of the dominant forms of power in the West but also to study the forms of counter-power that emerge alongside them. The latter is decisively more difficult because history is so often written by the victors. The history of slave societies, maroon societies, communes, worker organizations, and other counter-powers has been systematically destroyed and rewritten, which makes it all the more important to gather and reinterpret what remains and to preserve what is currently being produced. So many times in my research I hit dead ends because of a lack of any primary documents or even secondary work on the topic of migrant counter-power—especially older forms of slave revolts and maroon societies that the Greeks and Romans systematically wrote out of history. Studying counter-power is hard. With the dominant forms of power, the problem is too much material to cover; with counter-power it's the opposite. And one reason we lack a good philosophical response to this problem is that philosophers tend to privilege written texts and achievements over material histories—and therefore, we unwittingly accept the bias of the victors. Philosophers write critiques of the dominant systems, but we lack a robust history of resistance.

In the book, I have tried to highlight these counter-powers, tracing some of the kinetic connections between non-state societies and the kind of dominant social motions that characterize them. These motions are, roughly, continuous oscillations, waves, and pressure. They are kinetic phenomena that are defined primarily by their pedetic motions. In social history, each figure of the migrant uses all three motions but also invents its own dominant counter-power tactic. Briefly, the nomad is associated with the development of the raid; the barbarian, the revolt; the vagabond, the rebellion; and the proletariat, resistance. Each type of tactic says something about the dominant type of kinopower it confronts and about the types of empirical alternatives created.

TOJ: In the fourth part of your book, you sketch out a theory of contemporary migration. You begin by explaining that migration has become increasingly complex and nuanced in the twentieth century and that the factors motivating these varied forms of movement range from economic deregulation and neoliberal development to technological transportation and communication. You argue that these social changes have given rise to a new form of hybridity in global migration, such that no singular theory will be sufficient in itself.⁸ By redeploying the historical forms of social

expansion by expulsion articulated earlier in the book (i.e., centripetal, centrifugal, tensional, and elastic forces), you diagnose historical, alternative forms of kinopolitical counter-power in contemporary migration. Will you discuss this theory of contemporary migration a bit for us?

TN: That was a pretty good summary. The process of expansion by expulsion and the figures of the migrant today are not new. They are a mixture of the processes and figures that have emerged historically and now mix together in new combinations. One consequence of this is that the study of migration in political theory needs to have a better grasp of the historical formations that constitute it. The empirical points may change, but the relations or forms of social motion repeat.

Most scholars write about migration as if it were a new area of study. Even when they talk about global migration, their studies usually only go back to the nineteenth century and they tend to focus on 1970s ideas of globalization, as if migration had never been global before that. This again may have to do with an overprivileging of written materials, texts, and statistics. Before the nineteenth century, there were far fewer statistics about migration; there were fewer books about migration; and there was almost no “scholarship” about migration. It is much easier to do scholarship that relies on other scholars in your area than to put together a synthetic history based on archeological, anthropological, and historical documents prior to the scholarly standardization of texts that emerges in the nineteenth century, and therefore, there is a real amnesia in the academy on the role of migrants in shaping our current and historical sociopolitical culture.

1. Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1 and 7. ↩
2. See Nail, “Migrant Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 187–99, https://www.academia.edu/11784019/Migrant_Cosmopolitanism; Nail, “The Barbarism of the Migrant: Mexican Immigrants to the United States Face a Stigma that Stretches Back to Ancient Civilization,” *Stanford University Press Blog*, September 2015, adapted from *The Figure of the Migrant*, <http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2015/09/the-barbarism-of-the-migrant.html>; and Nail, “The Hordes Are Banging on the Gates of Europe?” *History News Network*, October 25, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/17427414/The_Hordes_Are_Banging_on_the_Gates_of_Europe. ↩
3. Nail, *Figure of the Migrant*, 3 and 21. ↩
4. Ibid., 24. ↩
5. Ibid., 35. ↩

6. Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). ↩
7. Nail, *Figure of the Migrant*, 125. ↩
8. Ibid., 179. ↩

About the Authors

Thomas Nail

Thomas Nail is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Denver. He is the author of *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo* (2012), *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015), and *Theory of the Border* (2016). His work has appeared in *Angelaki*, *Theory and Event*, *Philosophy Today*, *Parrhesia*, *Deleuze Studies*, *Foucault Studies*, and elsewhere. His publications can be downloaded at <http://du.academia.edu/thomasnail>.

Zachary Thomas Settle

Zachary Thomas Settle currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he is a PhD student working in political theology in the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt. He is also the editor, alongside Taylor Worley, of a forthcoming volume on theology, phenomenology, and film: *Dreams, Doubt and Dread: The Spiritual in Film*.

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