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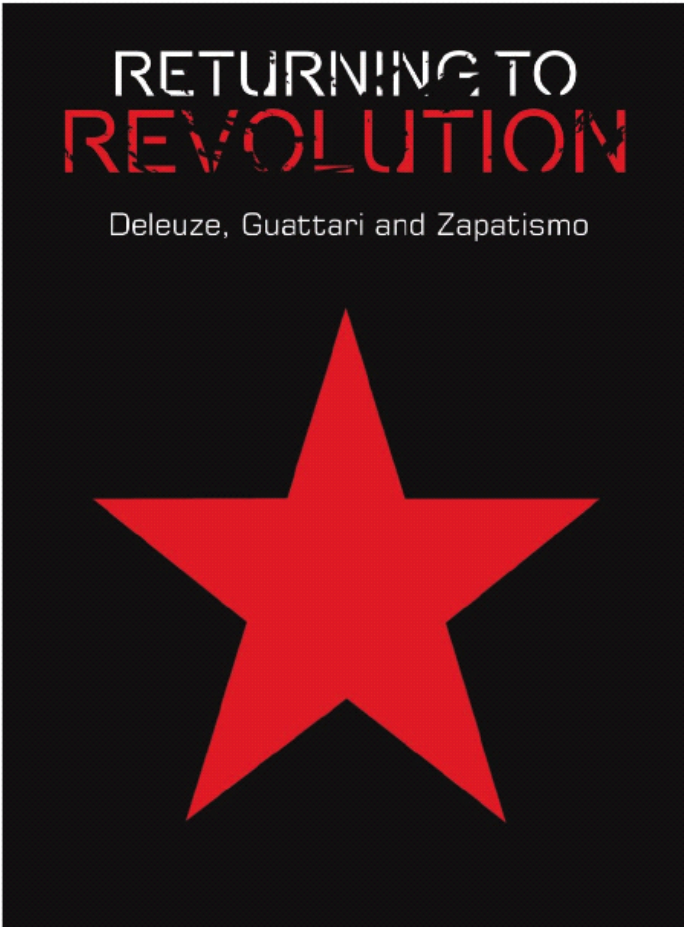
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On Deleuze and Zapatismo: An Interview with Thomas Nail

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Thomas Nail is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Denver. His most recent book is “[Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo](#)” from Edinburgh University Press. You can read the first fifty pages of that book [here](#).

Professor Nail spoke with Critical-Theory.com to discuss his recent book and the role of academics today.



CT: You title your book “Returning to Revolution.” What did you mean by this, and why should we discuss Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo together?

TN: The meaning of the word revolution is already “to return.” From one perspective political revolutions come and go, succeed or fail. From another perspective however, the appearance of each revolution marks only part of a continual process or sequence of historical transformation. Revolutions, to take an image from Deleuze, are like chains of volcanic islands. On the surface they appear as discontinuous and spontaneous, but deep underwater they are part of the same volcanic “hot spot.” The series of islands produced by this “hot spot” are simply the effect of the movement of a tectonic plate floating across the surface. Each eruption is the return of the “hot spot,” but it is not a repetition of the same because the top plate has shifted. Each island is singular. Each islands creates something new (a new earth, if you will). In this same way, revolution is a differential return

Zapatismo is the volcanic “hot spot” of our time. It is the source of a new revolutionary chain of islands that began in the mid 90s. Or rather, it is the first island in the chain that reveals to us the defining features of this new volcanic flow. The intersectional analysis of power, prefiguration, participatory politics, and horizontalism are four of the most defining characteristics of revolutionary struggles of the last 20 years. The appearance of these tactics in the Alter-Globalization Movement, the World Social Forum, the *Indignados*, the Occupy Movement, and much of contemporary radical organizing, can all be traced back to the influence and inspiration of the Zapatistas in the early 90s (as I have argued in a recent essay, “[Zapatismo and the Global Origins of Occupy](#)”). Of course, the Zapatistas were not the first to use these strategies, as Nathan Jun points out in [his review](#) of [Returning to Revolution](#) at NDPR. Anarchists have used them in some form or another since the 19th century. The important difference, however, is that until the mid to late 90s, these tactics have never been the predominant tactics of global revolutionary struggle (as David Graeber argues in “[The New Anarchists](#)”). Today they are, *grâce à* Zapatismo.

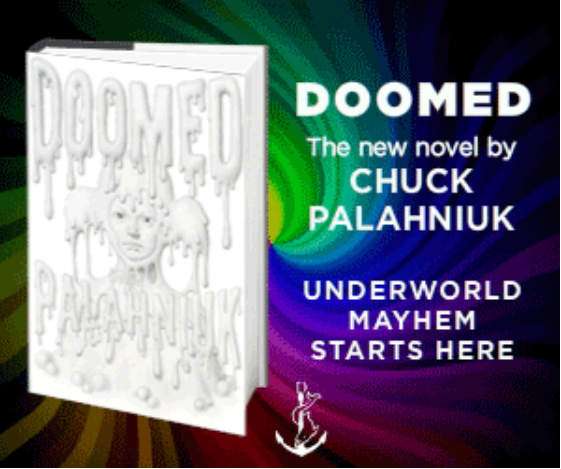
Deleuze and Guattari were two of the first philosophers to theorize the emergence of this sequence. While Subcomandante Marcos was organizing indigenous peasants in the jungles of Chiapas in 1983, Deleuze and Guattari had just published [A Thousand Plateaus](#) in France in 1980. Without directly influencing one another, Deleuze, Guattari, and Marcos were part of the same prefigurative volcanic process. Slavoj Žižek, for example, argues that “Deleuze more and more serves as the theoretical foundation of today’s anti-global Left” ([Organs Without Bodies](#): xi). Although, for Žižek, this is a bad thing, his observation is correct. If we want to understand the theory behind these four political strategies that I argue define the current revolutionary sequence, Deleuze and Guattari’s work is one of the most important places to look. Again, they are not the first to theorize these sort strategies, but they are perhaps the single most influential for the current sequence leading up to people like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose best-selling trilogy (*Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*) is undoubtedly, to quote Žižek again, “the communist manifesto for the 21st century.”

CT: What is Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of revolution?

TN: Just as Zapatismo developed the four practical strategies I mentioned above (the intersectional analysis of power, prefiguration, participatory politics, and horizontalism), so Deleuze and Guattari developed four theoretical strategies that define the current revolutionary process. Since the definition and analysis of these four practical and theoretical strategies are basically the four main chapters of the book, I will try to be brief.

For Deleuze and Guattari, this new revolutionary sequence is no longer defined by the traditional definitions of revolution: the capture of the state, the political representation of the party, the centrality of the proletariat, or the leadership of the vanguard. The central question for Deleuze and Guattari is different. The question is how to establish revolutionary institutions which are neither spontaneist nor bureaucratic, but “constructivist.” By “constructivism,” Deleuze and Guattari do not mean what is traditionally understood as “social constructivism” in sociology and philosophy, namely, that revolutions are by-products or “social constructs” produced by human minds, language, institutions, historical contexts, cultural values and so on. Such theories presuppose what needs to be explained in the first place: mind, society, culture and history themselves.

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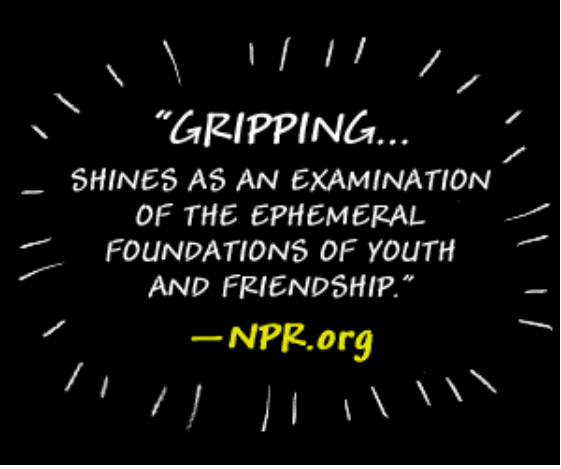


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Rather, a constructivist theory of revolution simply means a theory of revolution that is neither pre-constructed in the form of the party or state nor de-constructed in the form of some vague affirmation of ontological difference. In their theory, a revolutionary institution is something that moves beyond “local and occasional struggles,” but at the same time does not end up reproducing the bureaucracy, hierarchy, and authoritarianism of the classical party organization or the state. Deleuze and Guattari set out to create the political concepts needed to understand a political body that is more lasting and organized than an ephemeral riot or protest movement, but not as organized as a political party or state. In the book I isolate the four main concepts that I think really crystallize this theory: historical topology, deterritorialization, consistency, and nomadism.

In each chapter these concepts are contrasted with the two main theoretical enemies of the book: the politics of difference and the politics of representation. In other words: spontaneity and the state. One could even connect this same problem up with the historical debate between anarchists and Marxists, or today, between Deleuzians and Badiouians. Thus, another way to read *Returning to Revolution* would be as a full-length defense of a constructivist Deleuze against those who admire or disdain him for his supposed political affirmation of pure difference. I have also applied this “third way” elsewhere to understanding the Occupy movement: “[Deleuze, Occupy, and the Actuality of Revolution](#).”

CT: What is so Deleuzian about the Zapatistas?

TN: One might just as easily ask “what is so Zapatista about Deleuze and Guattari?” I do not want to argue that we should use Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy to interpret, explain or understand the Zapatistas, as some scholars have done, any more than I want to argue that we should use the Zapatista uprising to legitimate, ground or justify Deleuze and Guattari’s political philosophy. This approach not only presupposes a privileged foundationalism of theory over practice, or practice over theory, but also risks perpetuating a long legacy of Eurocentrism and theoretical imperialism. My aim in writing this book was not to use one to interpret the other, but to set up a parallel series between two sequences, which were neither influenced by one another nor of the same type. My aim was to show that theory and practice equally lay the foundations for a new revolutionary sequence. I draw a parallel (not an equivalence or interpretation) between the practical and theoretical aspects of four key strategies that define this new sequence. Speaking schematically, in the political field the Zapatistas develop the practical strategies of 1) an intersectional analysis of power, 2) prefiguration, 3) participatory politics, and 4) horizontalism. In the philosophical field Deleuze and Guattari develop the theoretical strategies of 1) historical topology, 2) deterritorialization, 3) consistency, and 4) nomadism. Again, these are not equivalences. Theory and practice are two different sides of the same four strategies.

CT: In your book, you outline 3 criticisms of Deleuze: Political ambivalence, virtual hierarchy, and subjective paralysis. Can you briefly describe those? Do you find any of those criticism compelling or conversely, utterly wrong?

TN: One way to keep revolutions from turning into bureaucratic parties or new states is to redefine revolution as the process of “transformation as such.” In other words, to ontologize it in something like an “[affirmation of] Difference in the state of permanent revolution,’ as Deleuze says in [Difference and Repetition](#) (75/53). The problem however, is that if we define revolution as pure transformation or pure potentiality, as many Deleuzian’s have, such transformations may provide a new non-representational space of liberty, or they may just as easily create a sort of power vacuum that allows for even harsher state policies or new capitalist market forces. This is the criticism put forward by theorists like Badiou, Zizek, Bruno Bosteels, and Peter Hallward. And I think it is partially right. Or it is at least right to critique what Éric Alliez calls the “clichéd-reading of Deleuze limited to a spontaneist apology for ‘deterritorialisation’” (“Deleuzian Politics,” 185.)

I must admit, I find the concept of deterritorialization put forward by Deleuze (before *A Thousand Plateaus*) to be politically insufficient. This is why most of the textual support for this criticism, and the other two as well (from Badiou, *et al*), all come from Deleuze’s pre-*A Thousand Plateaus* writings. In *A Thousand Plateaus* however, four different types of political change (deterritorialization) are distinguished that are quite important: (1) “relative negative” processes that change a political situation in order to maintain and reproduce an established situation; (2) “relative positive” processes that do not reproduce an established situation, but do not yet contribute to or create a new situation; they are ambiguous; (3) “absolute negative” processes that do not support any political situation, but undermine them all; and (4) “absolute positive” processes that do not reproduce an established political situation, but instead create a new one. The concept of deterritorialization is probably the most under-treated and misused concept in Deleuze’s whole political philosophy. Thus, one of the original contributions of *Returning to Revolution* is that it spends an entire chapter treating these four types of deterritorialization and their political consequences—without falling prey to the critiques of Badiou and company.

The other two criticisms follow the first. Badiou and Hallward both argue that by valorizing “pure virtual transformation,” that actual beings are devalorized in favor of other worldly potentialities (virtual hierarchy). This is one possible reading of Deleuze’s early works, but does not hold up for his work as a whole. The third criticism is that if Deleuze’s theory of subjectivity is defined only by its potential for transformation, it is stuck in a kind of paralysis of endless potential change no less disempowering than subjective stasis. Or, as Hallward says: Deleuze ‘abandons the decisive subject in favour of our more immediate subjection to the imperative of creative life or thought’ (2006: 163). I think this is true “if” Deleuze’s theory of the subject is nothing but pure fluctuation without any consistency. But it’s not. I develop a reading of “third person political subjectivity” in *Returning to Revolution* drawn from Deleuze and Guattari’s writings in [What is Philosophy?](#) and from the Zapatistas use of masks. I have written a short piece on the “[Political Theory of the Mask](#)” elsewhere as well. To conclude, all three criticisms, for me, are important for identifying some “bad” readings of Deleuze—even if the original intent of Badiou, et al. was to condemn Deleuze himself.

CT: In your book you note that the standard definition of the Greek *nomos* changed. That is, it went from “I distribute” or “I arrange” towards *nomos* as “law” or “division.” How are these definitions different?

TN: Deleuze and Guattari define the word *nomos* according to its etymological origins, as elaborated at length in the work of French historian Emmanuel Laroche in *Histoire de la racine nem- en grec ancien* (1949). There, Laroche argues that the Greek origins of the root ‘νεμ’ signified a ‘mode of distribution’ [*moyen de distribution*], not an allocation of parcelled-out or delimited land [*partage*]. ‘The idea [that *nomos* meant] law is a product of fifth and sixth-century Greek thought’ that breaks from the ‘original Homeric root νεμω meaning “I distribute” or “I arrange”’ (1949: 255 [my translation]). Even “the [retroactively] proposed translations ‘cut-up earth, plot of land, piece’ are not suitable in all cases to the Homeric poems and assume an ancient νεμω ‘I divide’ that we should reject. The pasture in archaic times is generally an unlimited space [espace illimité]; this can be a forest, meadow, rivers, a mountain side” (1949: 116 [my translation]).

This is also quite clear from the Proto-Indo-European root **nem-*, meaning, to assign, or allot. The nomadic steppe is thus first of all an occupied space, but one without division, segmentation, or fencing. On the steppe, space is continually re-alloted and re-assigned according to weather and grazing patterns, not by the fences of territorial societies. The meaning of *nomos* as “law” or “division” is a political invention of the Greeks that stems from their imperialist law, territorial divisions, and enslavement of the nomads and barbarians of the Mediterranean world. I think Laroche is right on here and Deleuze and Guattari are right to locate the roots of political anarchism in nomadism

CT: You argue that the global solidarity with and from the Zapatistas is “not a matter of charity.” How can Americans engage in solidaristic action without reproducing colonial power relations?

TN: One of the most interesting things about Zapatismo as an indigenous struggle is its universalism. They insist that anyone can be a Zapatista. Marcos, for example, says he ‘is gay in San Francisco, a black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel . . . Marcos is every untolerated, oppressed, exploited minority that is resisting and saying “Enough!”’ ([Our Word Is Our Weapon](#), 101–6). While the Zapatistas in Chiapas certainly benefit from the Fair Trade sale of coffee, boots, honey, textiles, and revolutionary tourism, they advise those in solidarity to make Zapatismo where they are at. That will look different from Chiapas. Marcos and the Caracoles are not the central command of the revolution. They are a point of resonance or inspiration for others elsewhere. They are a starting point for a kind of differential repetition. This is precisely why you see people still wearing Zapatista style ski masks at almost every global justice summit protest and Occupy rally around the world. They are doing what they can to make Zapatismo where they are at—even if they have never been to Chiapas. Again, the mask plays an interesting role in making the universality and collective subjectivity of Zapatismo possible. The mask allows for a shared anonymous universality which avoids all sorts of vanguardism and authoritarianism. Is this masked person someone from Chiapas, Marcos, Ramona, etc? Yes and no. The mask is not without its dangers, but universality is certainly one of its strengths.

CT: You talk at length about the Zapatista encuentro. What is the encuentro, and why is it Deleuzian?

TN: The Zapatista Encuentros were the first global anti-neoliberal gatherings and inspired the alter-globalization movement and World Social Forum. The purpose of the Intercontinental Encuentros was not to provide a revolutionary program or be a central command of the revolution. The goal was simply to provide a “bridge” or network across which all the world’s struggles against neoliberalism could connect with one another and take collective action.

I would not say that the Encuentro was Deleuzian or that Deleuze was a Zapatista. However, I would say that the Encuentro is the practical expression of the same strategy Deleuze and Guattari write about in theory. That is, both are strategies to achieve a certain form of universality without political representation or hierarchy. The Encuentro’s were part of a practical strategy of horizontalism: an anti-authoritarian network of struggles communicating and acting together in global solidarity. We can see this today in the organization of the alter-globalization movement and in the Occupy movement, for example. Who was in charge of the Occupy movement? Everyone. This was the largest occupation movement in history and it had no leader. It was horizontalist.

In theory, Deleuze and Guattari also propose a form of universality without political representation or hierarchy. They call it, among other names, nomadism: the form of undivided social distribution and solidarity. Nomadism, in contrast to the state, is a form of social distribution that is not aimed at political representation or hierarchy. Rather than dividing the people by nation-states, political status, etc. it sees the world as an undivided distribution of actual and possible solidarities. The Encuentro and other sites of solidarity for Deleuze are not sites of command or representation, but sites where an event is reinvigorated and redeployed. Annual gatherings, as Deleuze says, “do not add a second and a third time to the first, they carry the first time to the “nth” power” (1994: 8/1).

CT: Marcos and the EZLN said Marxism was inadequate for dealing with indigenous population of Mexico. Is that to say that Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is inadequate for revolution?

TN: There is a quote attributed to Marcos that goes like this: “We are not a proletariat, our land is not your means of production and we don’t want to work in a tractor factory. All we want is to be listened to, and for you big-city smart-arses to stop telling us how to live. As for your dialectic – you can keep it. You never know when it might come in handy” (*One No, Many Yeses*, 29).

I do not think this is a rejection of Marxism *tout court*, but rather a rejection of a certain kind of Marxism which viewed, and perhaps still views, indigenous struggles as backward and undeveloped. Indigenous peoples, the story goes, have not yet gone through the historical dialectical movement into industrial production and thus are not prepared for revolutionary communism. Indigenous peoples are still tied to a kind of primitive communism based on all sorts of backward notions of property and social organization.

I do not think it follows from this that Deleuze and Guattari’s theories are necessarily more adequate as whole. Or maybe it depends on what we mean be adequate. If adequate means “accurate theory of,” then I would say “no,” but if it means “parallel expression of the the same strategy” then “yes.” At least with respect to this particular problem, Deleuze and Guattari’s Marxism is vastly more compatible with indigenous struggles like Zapatismo than with any kind of developmentalist, vanguardist, or dialectical Marxism.

CT: What is an academic’s role in the revolution then? If Deleuze and Guattari are a parallel expression of a revolutionary strategy, how can Deleuzian scholars approach politics?

TN: Theory and practice are heterogenous actions. One is not reducible to the other. On the one hand theorists should avoid “grounding” practice in theory and thus reducing practice to a mere exemplification or representation of theory. On the other hand theorists should also avoid offering mere critiques aimed at showing the “ungrounded” nature of all politics. I find the latter especially fruitless.

For Deleuze and Guattari the relation between theory and action is like a relay between parallel series. Theory proceeds but its concepts can become rigidified into a dead ends (structuralism), practice can then intervene, pick up the baton, and move forward (May 1968) and *vice versa*. Theory does not cause praxis, nor does praxis cause theory: both are heterogeneous components constitutive of revolutionary *strategy*. The political analysis of revolutionary movements is thus never a question of representation or ‘speaking for others’, but one of finding concepts that can be used like helpful little machines in the strategic assemblage.

Thus, intellectuals do not simply stand at the front and off to the side of revolutionary struggles as its representatives. They stand alongside revolutions armed with their own kinds of weapons: political concepts. As Deleuze says, “It’s not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons” (*Negotiations*, 242/178). Sometimes the best weapons are new ideas and other times they are novel actions, but more often the best weapons are combinations of both. I think that the [Book Bloc](#) is an interesting way to express the weapon like character of ideas. Protestors make large cardboard shields with the covers and titles of books from Foucault, Fannon, Beckett, Marcuse, Subcomandante Marcos, etc. and use them to battle police in the streets.




Theorists can be involved in political struggles in all sorts of ways. Foucault and Deleuze were active in the Groupe d’information de prisons in all sorts of ways that were not strictly theoretical (signing petitions, handing out surveys outside the jails, etc.). But the task of theory strictly speaking is to create concepts which will be useful or transformative for those engaged in political struggle. *Returning to Revolution* elucidates the strategic assemblage created by Deleuze, Guattari, and Zapatismo in hopes that it might be useful or transformative for today’s struggles against neoliberalism.

About Thomas Nail

Thomas Nail is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Denver. He is the author of *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012) and is currently preparing a monograph on the political philosophy of migration entitled, *The Figure of the Migrant* (under contract with Stanford University Press). His work has appeared in *Theory & Event*, *Philosophy Today*, *Parrhesia*, *Deleuze Studies*, *Foucault Studies*, and elsewhere. He is currently editing several works on the relationship between Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault with Daniel Smith and Nicolae Morar: a book entitled *Between Deleuze and Foucault*; a special issue of *Foucault Studies* entitled “Foucault and Deleuze: Ethics, Politics, Psychoanalysis,” and a transcription/translation of Deleuze’s *Lectures de Cours sur Michel Foucault 1985-1986*. His publications, can be downloaded [here](#).

Check out his book on Amazon [here](#).

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Redefine revolution as “transformation as such”... hm, funny that sounds like the definition of capitalism according to twentieth century economic philosophers (hayek, schumpeter, etc.).