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Provocations in Consideration of Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant*

Abstract

I am delighted to be part of the conversation surrounding this important work. Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant* is one of those rare works that is at once timely and timeless. It is timely in the sense that the figure of the migrant has become a ubiquitous and undeniable reality of our time. As I write this at the end of spring 2016, the number of Syrian citizens displaced by civil war since 2011 has climbed to roughly 13.5 million; the United States is in the middle of its most racially charged presidential election of my lifetime (with one of the top party candidates running on a popular platform of draconian deportation of undocumented laborers and the severe restriction of immigration); the populations of Central Pacific island nations are being displaced in record numbers due to the effects of global climate change; and within the past week, several small boats carrying refugees from Libya have capsized off the coast of Italy, resulting in over one thousand deaths. These are but a few examples. As Nail notes, "At the turn of the century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history. Today, there are over 1 billion migrants. (*excerpt*)"

Keywords

Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, movement, migration

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An und für sich



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I am delighted to be part of the conversation surrounding this important work. Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant* is one of those rare works that is at once timely and timeless. It is timely in the sense that the figure of the migrant has become a ubiquitous and undeniable reality of our time. As I write this at the end of spring 2016, the number of Syrian citizens displaced by civil war since 2011 has climbed to roughly 13.5 million; the United States is in the middle of its most racially charged presidential election of my lifetime (with one of the top party candidates running on a popular platform of draconian deportation of undocumented laborers and the severe restriction of immigration); the populations of Central Pacific island nations are being displaced in record numbers due to the effects of global climate change; and within the past week, several small boats carrying refugees from Libya have capsized off the coast of Italy, resulting in over one thousand deaths.^[1] These are but a few examples. As Nail notes, "At the turn of the century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history. Today, there are over 1 billion migrants" (1).

But the work is also timeless in the sense that Nail attempts to rigorously formulate nothing less than a social and political ontology, one that is comprehensive and that takes *movement* as its basis and point of departure. Rather than starting from the presupposition of social order and stasis, and conceptualizing movement as a secondary passage between different pre-existing social orders, Nail attempts to formulate a political concept of movement as primary, a “kinopolitics,” as he calls it. This is not for the sake of cleverness, but rather because to do otherwise—to think the figure of the migrant from the perspective of citizenship, as one who is no longer a citizen—is, in fact, to miss the figure of the migrant. If the “essence” of the migrant lies in its movement, then it must be thought on the basis of movement, and movement must be thought *in itself*. But once we venture down the path of conceptualizing movement on its own terms (and not as a deficiency or lack of stasis), it radically alters our conceptions of stasis as well. As Bergson recognized, and as Nail cites, “If movement is not everything, it is nothing” (13).^[2] The social order, then, *every* social order, on Nail’s account, is reconceptualized on the basis of three primary kinopolitical concepts—flows, junctions, and circulations.

Flows are fluxes, processes, and continua, all the way down. Despite its etymological relations to “stasis,” the “state” is not the stoppage of flows, but rather, the agency of their harnessing and redirection. There are flows of oceans and rivers, climate and culture, vegetation and animals, populations and sicknesses, “food, money, blood, and air” (25). The purpose of the social order, then, is to bring these flows into vortical self-relations, to loop them back onto themselves and in so doing, to augment and intensify them. These loopings of “relative stability” are what Nail refers to as “junctions” (28), the loci of “perceived stasis” (27) in the sea of continuous flows. The house, for example, is a territorial junction that organizes the familial flows of a particular group of people. These junctions are further organized and mobilized by their connectedness within the “circulation,” the network of junctions (29). A particular neighborhood, for example, can be conceived as a circulation that brings into relation the familial flows of individual households. Nail writes that the “city is a political junction” (28), but if I understand him correctly, the city is also a circulation, one that relates together the house junction with the educational junction with the religious institutional junction with the industrial junction with the police junction and so on. And in their own way, each of these junctions might in turn be thought of as a circulation (the factory, for instance, relates production with distribution; production relates different junctions of departments and different stages, etc.)

The final concept of Nail’s ontology that I will briefly address is the concept of “expansion by expulsion,” the “social logic by which some members of society are dispossessed of their status so that social power can be expanded elsewhere” (37). A given circulation consists of what he calls “limit” and “non-limit” junctions. Limit junctions are those that are either points of entry into or exit out of the circulation. A circulation initially expands by drawing in more forces and flows, entering more into circulation. But eventually, this expansion by incorporation will reach its tipping point, the limit at which it can no longer sustain its own growth. When this point is reached, expansion can only continue by expelling surplus resources. For example, a factory provides a particular commodity to the market; as the demand for that commodity grows, the factory’s production grows as well, and the factory hires more laborers to meet the demand. Eventually, the market is saturated with this particular commodity, at which point the continued expansion of the factory’s profits relies upon the laying off of laborers. By paying fewer workers for the same amount of work, (along with the attendant reductions in insurance and social

security expenditures), the company continues to increase its profits, even after the market is saturated with its commodities. (Nail provides numerous illuminating analyses of unemployment in his work). The factory thus expands by expelling. Likewise, a given political order grows its economy by the use of a vast, mobile body of underpaid and mistreated laborers, who become expendable the moment that particular mode of economic growth has reached its limit.

Expansion by expulsion provides the logic that undergirds the phenomenon of migratory movement. Nail then articulates the specific movements and forces of this logic, before articulating four specific figures of the migrant, against the backdrops of four specific modes of social order—the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat. Finally, Nail applies his rigorous taxonomy to migration in its contemporary form, more specifically to the issue of Mexico-United States relations, “the single largest flow of migrants in the contemporary world” (180). Nail’s work is therefore, in proper Foucauldian spirit, “a philosophical history of the present,” just as he claims (4). But it is more than this. If the figure of the migrant is the figure of movement, and if movement is the basic condition of social order, then *The Figure of the Migrant* attempts an insightful and indispensable ontology of social order as such.

What I offer are thus not criticisms, so much as they are provocations to further thinking—two, to be precise—intended as invitations to discussion. Each of these provocations extends beyond the limits of Nail’s work specifically, and as such, he is by no means obliged to respond to any of them.

1. I hope that Nail will forgive me for this question, as he is no doubt tired of addressing it. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari write, “In short, the general theory of society is a generalized theory of flows; it is in terms of the latter that one must consider the relationship of social production to desiring-production, the variations of this relationship in each case, and the limits of this relationship in the capitalist system.”^[3] To my lights, no contemporary political philosophers have done more to conceptualize the political and economic spheres on the basis of flows as have Deleuze and Guattari. In reading Nail’s work, I was struck by the rigor and originality with which he formulated a complex taxonomy on the basis of what I perceived to be the inspiration of this Deleuzian-Guattarian insight. This is not to say that I read Nail’s work as simply Deleuzian-Guattarian anymore than it makes sense to say that Deleuze’s thought is simply Nietzschean, or Lucretian, or Bergsonian, or Humean, or Spinozist. Nail clearly formulates his own ontology, founded on his own set of questions and concerns, illuminated by a set of problems and concerns that were likely nowhere near as salient in 1970s France as they are globally today. All the same, Nail’s work seemed to bear the indelible marks of Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of society as flow.

I was thus surprised to read Nail’s observation, in an interview with *Critical Theory*, that Deleuze and Guattari “wrongly follow the typical definition of the migrant as a figure that simply moves between two pre-established fixed points.”^[4] In one way, Nail is undoubtedly correct, in that Deleuze and Guattari *do* explicitly write, “The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized.”^[5] But it seems there is more to say about the matter; and I wonder if Nail’s dispute might come down, after all, to a difference of semantics, or if there is indeed a deeper philosophical difference. For instance, elsewhere in *A Thousand*

Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari speak of migration as synonymous with movement (as does Nail), as when they write of Spinoza, “The modes are everything that come to pass: waves and vibrations, migrations, thresholds and gradients”[6] and there are numerous other examples where “migration” for Deleuze and Guattari is synonymous with movement and becoming, and “a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first.”[7] Might it be possible, then, that when Deleuze and Guattari speak of the “migrant” as distinct from the “nomad,” they are simply using the term in a different technical sense than is Nail—distinguishing “one who moves from one territory to another” from “one who is characterized as such *by* movement”? Is Nail’s a terminological rejection, or a philosophical one?

2: The name of Giorgio Agamben is conspicuously absent from Nail’s account. Unless I am mistaken, Agamben’s name appears only once, in endnote #4 of Chapter 6, a citation of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. I am interested, however, in the intersections of Nail’s work with Agamben’s 1995 work, *Homo Sacer*. The conspicuousness of Agamben’s absence derives from the fact that both Agamben and Nail offer broad characterizations of the political figure of modernity. For Agamben, it is “the camp,” while for Nail, it is the figure of the migrant.

Agamben’s analysis is rooted in what he calls, following a lead from Carl Schmitt, the “paradox of sovereignty,” which “consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.”[8] The sovereign is, *by law*, able to suspend the rule of law whenever circumstances are extreme enough to demand it. The sovereign adjudicates on the state of exception, an exclusion maintained in relationship to the juridical order *as* the excluded. When the state of exception becomes no longer the exception, but the order of the day, Agamben argues, the camp emerges, as a potentially indefinite zone of indeterminacy. As Agamben argues, if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created”[9] and given the massive surge of the migrant in the past century, “the bare life that more and more can no longer be inscribed in that order [the juridical order of the nation-state],”[10] the camp “is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet.”[11]

There are, therefore, numerous thematic intersections between Agamben’s work and Nail’s, and I wonder if Nail has given any thought to these intersections. My own initial impression is that, by Nail’s account, Agamben’s analysis would remain mired in what Deleuze and Guattari would call the “molar” conceptions of the sovereign and the nation-state. The modern entrenchment of the camp, after all, is rooted in the growing rupture, (on Agamben’s account), between bare life and the nation-state. This would seem to suggest a primacy of the social order, and a secondariness of the migrant—the very logical order that Nail’s analysis attempts to reverse. Indeed, on Nail’s account while it is no doubt the case that the figure of the migrant is the figure of political modernity, it is also true “that the figure of the migrant has always been the true motive force of social history” (7). Is it possible then that Nail’s account amounts to an inversion of Agamben’s?

[1] “More Than 1,000 Migrants Feared Dead at Sea in Past Week,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2016, accessed May 31, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/united-nations-says-880-killed-in-mediterranean-over-last-week-1464693559>.

[2] This quote is from Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007), 121.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 262.

[4] “The Figure of the Migrant: An Interview with Thomas Nail,” *Critical Theory*, December 1, 2015, accessed May 31, 2016, <http://www.critical-theory.com/the-figure-of-the-migrant-an-interview-with-thomas-nail/>.

[5] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 380.

[6] *Ibid.*, 153.

[7] *Ibid.*, 238.

[8] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

[9] *Ibid.*, 174.

[10] *Ibid.*, 175.

[11] *Ibid.*, 176.

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