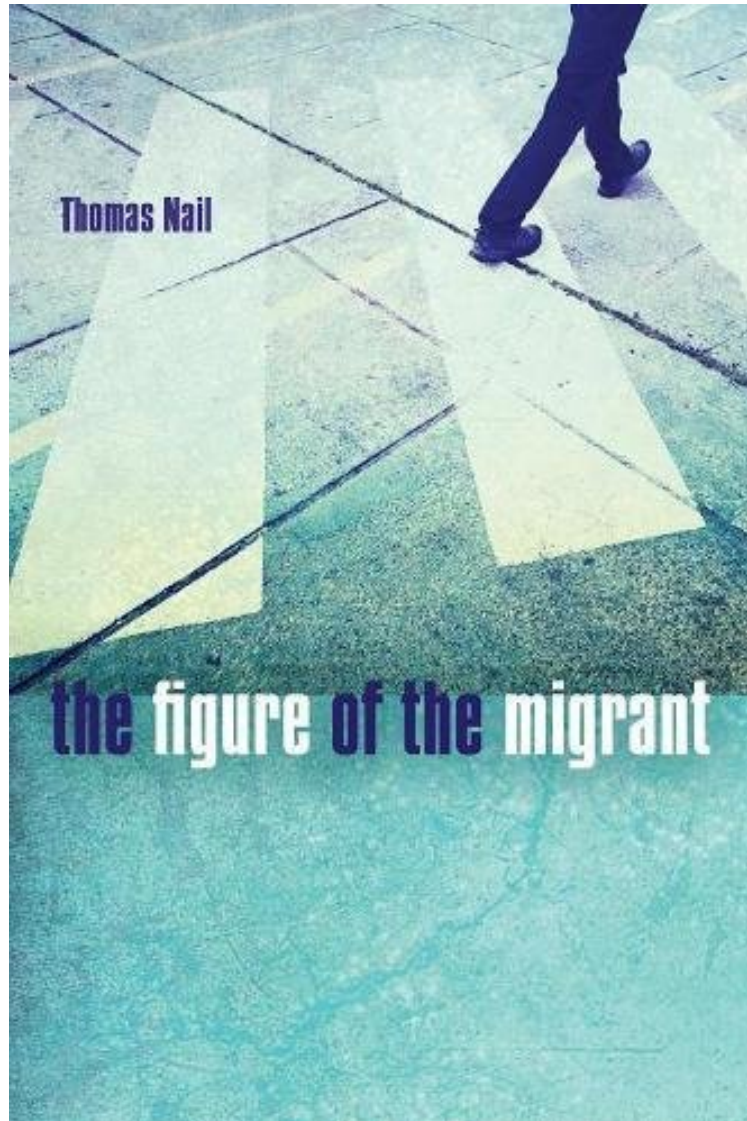


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## The Figure of the Migrant

*Thomas Nail*

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**Thomas Nail : The Figure of the Migrant** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Figure of the Migrant:

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. The History of all Hitherto Existing Society is the History of the Expulsion of Migrants By Etienne RPI In Remnants of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben borrows from Primo Levi the figure of the Msselmann the starving, exhausted, inert captive of the Nazi concentration camps and expands it to the whole of humanity: The Msselmann is the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins when dignity ends. Similarly, Thomas Nail uses the figure of the migrant to delineate a new form of politics that starts

where citizenship and sovereignty end. According to the young American philosopher, the twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant. Today, there are over 1 billion migrants and each decade the global percentage of migrants and refugees grows. Moving from one place to another has become an experience familiar to tourists as well as contract laborers, to expats as well as refugees. What these very different categories share together is a temporary deprivation of the rights that territory entails: the need to declare and document their identity, the inability to exert their rights as citizens in their place of relocation, the limited access to work and social benefits. We are all, in a way, migrants. Political theory is ill-equipped to account for the figure of the migrant. It treats individuals and societies from the perspective of fixed points: the household, the settlement, the city, the state. Its key concepts—territory, sovereignty, citizenship, democracy—always presupposes a static situation, when people can be pinned down to one place. Seen from this perspective, the migrant is always perceived as a secondary or derivative figure with respect to place-bound social membership. The migrant is the person who moves from one place to another, from point A to point B, but who is still defined by his or her state of origin and country of destination. Hence the dichotomy between emigrants—seen from their point of departure—and immigrants—defined by their point of destination. The problem with this definition is that it doesn't apply to modern migrants. Their point of origin is confused by failed states, shifting borders, and contested identities. And the end of their journey is forever deferred. Migrants dwell in the in-between, and generate liminal spaces that are forever in flux: refugee camps, retention centers, shanty towns and temporary shelters. In a way, the problem is philosophical. Western philosophy starts from the premises of the stability of concepts, the fixity of meaning, and the unmovable nature of truth. In Greek antiquity, Zeno of Elea believed reality was an uncreated and indestructible immobile whole. He formulated his famous paradox to present mobility as an impossibility. A spatial trajectory can always be divided at infinitum, making it impossible for an arrow to reach its target. But what Zeno's paradox shows is that movement cannot be segmented without destroying it. Movement always predates immobility. According to Bergson, movement is reality itself. Bergson is one of the few philosophers that help Thomas Nail conceptualize society as something forever in flux. His other references include Lucretius, who described life as movement; Karl Marx, whose materialist dialectics puts history forever on the move; and Deleuze, with his theory of the movement-image. But these are only distant sources of inspiration: the *Figure of the Migrant* is a work of political theory, not of abstract philosophy. The major thesis of the book is that the migrant has become the political figure of our time. The migrant is not defined by place, but by movement. Thus, if we want to understand the figure of the migrant without pinning it down to a nation-state or a location, we must also understand society itself according to movement. Societies are not static places with fixed characteristics and persons: societies are always in motion. To describe societies on the move and people without mooring or attachment, old categories of political philosophy are not adequate: we need a whole new theory of social motion. To use an analogy with physics, we need to move social analysis from the description of solid states and concrete particles, as in solid mechanics, to the formalization of continuous flows and liquid states, as with the physics of fluids. We need a new language that starts with movement and that explains fixed points and static categories as the result of flows and motions. This is a complete departure from earlier theories, a scientific revolution akin to the invention of differential calculus—the mathematics of flows. This is what the author attempts to provide, by introducing a flurry of new concepts and ideas. Nail starts his theory from a clean slate, and builds his science of society in motion from the ground up. He shows how social motion is constitutive of the various social categories that arbitrarily relativize motion into territorial, political, juridical, and economic orders or regimes. We need to consider these categories as processes of territorial accumulation, political control, juridical ordering, and economic profit. These processes are themselves the result of four social forces: centripetal, centrifugal, tensional, and elastic. Territory, for example, is not a fixed thing: it is a continual process shaped by a number of different material flows that move inward, centripetally, toward a center and disperse at the periphery, creating the conditions of a territorial hierarchy. In the last instance, everything that looks static and solid can be reduced to flows, junctions, circuits and circulation. One is here reminded of Marx's famous quote: All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. Or to take a less quoted sentence, Just as the heavenly bodies always repeat a certain movement, so also does social production. Thomas Nail takes from Marx not just metaphors, but a whole way to conceptualize history. The notion of expansion by expulsion that stands at the core of his reasoning is a radicalization of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation and social periodicity. The development of a given social regime (expansion) has always been predicated on the deprivation of the social status of certain categories of people (expulsion). Expulsion does not simply mean forcing people off their land (although in many cases it may include this). It also means depriving people of their political rights through slavery, criminalizing types of persons through vagabondage, or restricting their access to work through unemployment. Expansion and expulsion are two faces of the same coin: without the expulsion of the people, there is no expansion of private property, no primitive accumulation of capital and thus no capitalism. But expansion by expulsion is not limited to capitalism: we see it at work throughout history, from the Neolithic to the present. To paraphrase Marx, Nail shows that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the expulsion of migrants. The expulsion from territory that starts with the invention of agriculture generates the figure of the nomad, the pastoralist or the hunter-gatherer: people are pushed away from

arable land into surrounding mountains and deserts. Expulsion from the city, by depriving people of their political rights, generates the barbarian, the slave, the outcast. Expulsion from the juridical order creates the vagabond, the brigand, the outlaw. Expulsion from economic profit, the proletarian. These four figures of the migrant—the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, the working class—each embody a particular stage of history, characterized by a certain regime of circulation. They combine today in the figure of the modern migrant in the migrant crisis that is now creating a moral panic throughout Europe. The migrant is not only an empirical figure but also heralds a new model of political membership still in its early stages. People on the move invite us to rethink the fundamentals of social theory and political philosophy. They shed a new light on the human nature under conditions of neoliberalism and precariousness. Migrants are not deprived of a certain form of agency described as pedetic, linked with their ability to move with their feet. Migrants make history: individually or collectively, they give rise to new forms of mobilizations and protests that poses an alternative to social expulsion. This pedetic force is itself linked with specific forms of movement—continuous oscillation, waves, pressure—that drive a wedge in the mechanics of social circulation. These forms of kinopolitics—the politics of social motion—are not always progressive: Genghis Khan, the nomad-barbarian, went on record to expose his program as Kill them all and destroy their homes. But on the whole, social movements generated by migrant figures throughout history stand on the side of social progress. This is why the current migrant crisis is particularly disturbing. Illegal immigrants note that in liberal law, only an act can be qualified as illegal, and not a person—seen as a menace to the social order. They are considered as racially inferior, culturally unassimilable, and politically dangerous. The metaphors used to describe them—the flood, the invasion, the assault—deny their condition as individuals and directly refer to the history of the fall of the Roman empire, as in the expression barbarians at the gates. In the United States and in Europe, as in the ancient empires, large military-style walls are built and guarded to control the movement of undesirable foreigners into the community. Another characteristic of the ancient barbarian still active today is political disenfranchisement. Today's migrants are expelled from political life, they do not have the right to vote and they are not represented politically. Thomas Nail reminds us that Rome didn't fall because of the assault of the barbarians: it fell because it refused to give shelter to the Germanic tribes that were pushed away by the Huns invasion of Europe. When these Mongolian warriors rampaged through northern Europe, they drove many Germanic tribes to the borders of the Roman Empire. The Romans grudgingly allowed members of the Visigoth tribe to cross south of the Danube and into the safety of Roman territory, but they treated them with extreme cruelty. According to the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, Roman officials even forced the starving Goths to trade their children into slavery in exchange for dog meat. In brutalizing the Goths, the Romans created a dangerous enemy within their own borders. When the oppression became too much to bear, the Goths rose up in revolt and eventually routed a Roman army and killed the Eastern Emperor Valens during the Battle of Adrianople in A.D. 378. Their treatment stands in sharp contrast with earlier periods, when Rome had provided asylum and security to peoples at its borders. May we learn from the grandeur that was Rome, and meditate the reasons why Rome fell.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A great book and excellent new theorization of the migrant in ...

By Reader and Student

A great book and excellent new theorization of the migrant in relation to the state. However, in articulating this theory Nail reiterates some of the primary ideas about how migrations systems work that scholars have worked diligently to (correctly, in my opinion) debunk as faulty. The reliance on push-pull structural theories of migration was particularly disappointing to see here, especially because neither Nail's discussion of kinopolitics nor its link to global requires the inclusion of push/pull ideas. Worth a read just the same.

This book offers a much-needed new political theory of an old phenomenon. The last decade alone has marked the highest number of migrations in recorded history. Constrained by environmental, economic, and political instability, scores of people are on the move. But other sorts of changes—from global tourism to undocumented labor—have led to the fact that to some extent, we are all becoming migrants. The migrant has become the political figure of our time. Rather than viewing migration as the exception to the rule of political fixity and citizenship, Thomas Nail reinterprets the history of political power from the perspective of the movement that defines the migrant in the first place. Applying his "kinopolitics" to several major historical conditions (territorial, political, juridical, and economic) and figures of migration (the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat), he provides fresh tools for the analysis of contemporary migration.

"In this powerful book, Thomas Nail forces us to think migration from the perspective of movement and so builds both a theoretical argument and a political intervention. A bold and provocative engagement with one of the world's most pressing contemporary issues." (Stuart Elden University of Warwick)

"Nail provides an innovative conceptual framework that disaggregates and contextualises social motions and movements throughout Western history. Beyond the originality of the kinopolitic theory, the real contribution is the focus on migrant's conditions that are too often neglected in the field of migration studies." (Betty Rouland Geopolitics)

"Hardly a day goes by without some reference in the media to the "problem" of migration. In offering a theoretical account of the figure of the migrant throughout history, Thomas Nail's book thus performs an important service for the interdisciplinary study of one of the most

important subjects of our century. Carefully argued, well informed, hugely ambitious, and analytically precise, it will become a standard reference for years to come." (Tim Cresswell Northeastern University)"Nail focuses on numerous ways that social and political developments can be viewed as a history of migrants . . . Nail concludes that migration is not derivative within a static framework but is primary to a history of society. Nail's book is a novel approach to history and political theory." (E.R. Gill CHOICE)About the AuthorThomas Nail is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Denver.