

# The Political Centrality of the Migrant

Written by Thomas Nail

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THOMAS NAIL, AUG 17 2018

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Political theory from Plato to Rawls has largely treated the migrant as a secondary or derived political figure of relatively little importance. Political theory has tended to privilege citizens and states over migrants and their circulations. This chapter, however, shows for the first time that within this dominant history is also a subterranean or minor history of political theory that grants the figure of the migrant a certain degree of centrality or importance. If we want to rethink migration in the twenty-first century, we must be able to rethink the basic assumptions that we have inherited from a certain dominant history of political theory. One of the best ways to do this is to begin with the subterranean history that has been buried below it from Marx to Badiou. Any future theory of the migrant must begin from the previous attempts to think about the nature of its centrality and importance in political theory. Since this history has nowhere else been elaborated, this chapter presents it here for others to build on.

### The Age of Mass Migration

The modern philosophical history of the thesis of the centrality of the migrant begins alongside what is commonly referred to as the 'age of mass migration' that took place between 1840 and 1914 (Hatton and Williamson 1998).

*Karl Marx*

The first historical expression of the centrality of the migrant occurs in *Capital Vol. I* published in 1867 by a migrant in exile, Karl Marx. This is perhaps the first work of philosophy to explicitly valorise the revolutionary potential and political-economic centrality of the figure of the migrant, or what Marx calls the 'relative surplus population' (Marx 1976, 781). Marx (1976, 784) goes as far as to say that the relative surplus population is:

the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bread it at its own cost.

As capitalist markets expand, contract, and multiply 'by fits and starts', Marx says, capital requires the possibility of suddenly adding and subtracting 'great masses of men into decisive areas without doing any damage to the scale of production. The surplus population supplies these masses' (Marx 1976, 785). If there were 100% employment in all markets then where would a new and expanding market get its labour? If there was total employment, then workers would not be easily replaced and their strikes would have substantial force over production.

Capitalist production thus requires a mass of workers which is superfluous to its requirements for two reasons: 1) so that when expansion or multiplication of markets occurs there will be a surplus of workers ready at hand and 2) so that this surplus of unemployed workers will make the current workers highly replaceable and thus over-workable, thus requiring less active workers (thus increasing surplus population further), and making active workers available at a cheaper wage. 'Modern industry's whole form of motion,' Marx claims, 'therefore depends on the constant transformation of a part of the working population into unemployed or semi-employed "hands"' (Marx 1976, 786).

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The proletariat is always already a migrant proletariat. At any moment an employed worker could be unemployed and forced to relocate according to the demands of capitalist valorisation. In fact, its mobility is *the condition of modern industry's whole form of motion*. Without the migration of surplus population to new markets, from the rural to the city, from city to city, from country to country (what Marx calls the 'floating population') capitalist accumulation would *not be possible at all*. As the most mobile and deterritorialised part of the proletariat, however, the surplus population also has the greatest potential for revolutionary transformation. Unemployed workers have the least to lose and the most to gain from revolution. They also have more time to educate, organise, and motivate others. Also, as the most mobile, the surplus population is always on the brink of deterritorialising capitalism itself insofar as it is capitalism that relies on their existence. In this way the strikes of the unemployed might be more powerful than the strikes of the actively employed. Or, said in another way, the surplus population is also the lever which allows for the success of an active workers' strike. Without the solidarity of their potential replacements, the striking workers cannot win: they will be replaced by the mobile surplus population. Thus, as the most mobile figure of Marx's thought, the surplus population is both the conditions of mobility for modern industry and the conditions of the proletariat's emancipation from the bonds of territorial immobility.

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

The second major work of philosophy during this time to valorise the transformative power and centrality of the migrant is *The Gay Science* published in 1882 by the stateless migrant, Friedrich Nietzsche. Eighteen years after *Capital Vol. 1* was published, 1882 was the highest year of annual migration in Europe in the entire age of mass migration (Hatton and Williamson 1998). In aphorism 377, titled 'We who are homeless', Nietzsche writes as a migrant to migrants as the 'children of the future' (Nietzsche 1974, 338). Here, there is a dual sense of subject and temporality in his address. Nietzsche addresses the present and empirical migrants of his time, who are moving around Europe and the world by the millions, but does so by addressing them in the future and collective unifying sense of an 'untimely we'. 'We' are both now-here and nowhere. 'We' are a people which is here but whose time is also yet to come. The use of the word 'we' and the amount of political content gives this relatively long aphorism a strong political tone even as Nietzsche clearly rejects traditional political categories.

For Nietzsche, these migratory children of the future occupy a special place in *The Gay Science*. Not because they appear often, but because it is to them 'especially' that Nietzsche 'commends [his] secret wisdom and', the book's title, the '*gaya sciensza*' (Nietzsche 1974, 338). The number of such unequivocally valorised figures in Nietzsche's works are few (i.e. the Übermensch, barbarians, etc.). To these figures we should add another: the homeless migrants of Europe. According to Nietzsche, it is migrants who have pushed the farthest by rejecting all the 'ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition' (Nietzsche 1974, 338). It is they who 'constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin "realities"'. 'We homeless', Nietzsche says, reject both conservatism, liberalism, 'progress,' as well as a 'return to any past periods' (Nietzsche 1974, 338). 'We homeless' migrants, Nietzsche says, are fleeing capitalism just as much as the humanist notions of 'equal rights,' and 'a free society' which mask their weakness with virtue. 'We homeless,' Nietzsche continues, are too 'well travelled' and too 'racially mixed' to fall prey to 'the European system of a lot of petty states' (Nietzsche 1974, 340).

In these rapid sentences Nietzsche identifies and clearly valorises a figure of the migrant who abandons or was perhaps abandoned by the political parties of left and right, historical progress, humanism, nostalgia, nationalism, racism, capitalism, socialism, and religion. The migrants' being out-of-place and out-of-time, is not only the conditions for their marginalisation but the conditions under which their movement can create a new place and a new time.

For Nietzsche, this new migrant figure expresses a radical exodus from all the diseases of its age. But in the final lines of this aphorism the figure of the homeless migrant also offers the possibility of a new world. 'The hidden Yes in you is stronger than all Nos and Maybes that afflict you and your age like a disease; and when you have to embark on the sea, you emigrants, you, too, are compelled to this by – a faith!' (Nietzsche 1974, 340) Despite Nietzsche's emphasis on all the migrants are leaving behind, there is also an even more powerful capacity to create something new that they can say yes to. But the hope in such a new world is already a kind of faith. It is a strange faith: the faith of the faithless.

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## The Age of Displacement

Migration, displacement, and statelessness during the period of 1914 to 1970 easily rivals 'the age of mass migration' at more than 60 million displaced people.

*Hannah Arendt*

In 1951, another exiled migrant philosopher, Hannah Arendt, wrote one of the most well-known articulations of the philosophical dilemma posed by these events. 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the Ends of the Rights of Man', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* describes this group of European migrants, refugees and stateless people as 'the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics' (Arendt 1951, 277). This is the case because they expose the internal paradox of the modern nation-state and the idea of natural rights. 'Only with a completely organized humanity', she writes, 'could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether' (Arendt 1951, 297). Only when the entire world has been divided into nation-states that define the rights of man as the rights of the citizen, do we see the truly exclusionary nature of nation-states. Political rights exist only when protected by a political community. It is thus with the emergence of stateless migrants, a people who are truly in-between places, without a legal origin or destination, that the universal pretensions of the supposedly 'inalienable' human rights show themselves to be false.

According to Arendt, the stateless migrant was not suffering the 'loss of any specific rights, but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever': the loss of the 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1951, 297). Arendt writes,

No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as 'inalienable' those human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves (Arendt 1951, 297).

Thus, the centrality of the figure of the displaced migrant lies in two things for Arendt: 1) the displaced migrant demonstrates a division internal to the dominant political philosophy of the time, between the citizen and the human; and 2) if societies are going to change, they must begin by including this increasingly large number of displaced migrants who have been pushed outside public life (the sphere of equality) into private life (the sphere of difference), which is undermining public, political life. For Arendt, displaced migrants are 'the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics', not because they are the most numerous or powerful, but because their displacement most reveals to us the condition of modern politics and its future: not right, but the right to have rights.

## The Age of Globalisation

Today, with currently over 214 million international migrants world-wide, the contemporary age of migration ('the second wave') is the largest yet, with no signs of decreasing.[1]

*Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari*

Directly following Virilio's insight five years later (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 65)[2], French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari place the figure of the nomad (defined by speed) at the heart of their political philosophy of revolution in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1982/1987). 'If the nomad', Deleuze and Guattari say, 'can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence, it is precisely because there is no reterritorialisation afterward as with the migrant, or upon something else as with the sedentary (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 381). Thus, it is not the nomad who is a type of proletariat, as defined by Marx, Virilio, and others, but rather the 'proletariat [who is] the heir to the nomad' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 558 fn 61).

However, Deleuze and Guattari also introduce three novel distinctions into the history of the philosophy of the migrant with their concept of the nomad. First, they distinguish between three types of speed which Virilio conflates: '1)

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speeds of nomadic, or revolutionary, tendency (riot, guerrilla warfare); 2) speeds that are regulated, converted, appropriated by the State apparatus (management of the public ways); and 3) speeds that are reinstated by a worldwide organisation of total way, or planetary over-armament' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, fn 65). Second, they distinguish between speed, which is intensive, and movement, which is extensive. 'Movement designates the relative character of a body considered as "one" and which goes from point to point; speed, on the contrary...can spring up at any point' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 381). Third, they distinguish between the migrant, which they define by the extensive movement from one point to another and the nomad, defined by the 'path that is between two points', whose stopping points are only relays or consequences of the nomad's principle trajectory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380).

The first distinction Deleuze and Guattari make between different types of speed is crucial. Part II of the present chapter develops this in more depth. The second distinction is significant, but only insofar as one understands movement and speed (extensive and intensive) as absolutely coexistent in every situation. They are absolutely distinct and yet every movement has a degree of speed, and every speed has a degree of movement: like a cartography with 'a latitude and a longitude', as Deleuze and Guattari say elsewhere.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, the migrant and the nomad coexist in the same figure. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari define both migrant and nomad in exactly the same way: 'as the movement between points' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380). The two even 'mix and form a common aggregate', they say (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380). The difference is that the migrant is defined by the fact that it will settle permanently and the nomad will move on.

However, there are thus three ways in which a migrant is also a nomad. The first is practical: the majority of empirical migrants move multiple times in their life, even if it is within the same country. 'Settlement' is thus not an adequate way to describe their 'arrival', since this arrival is almost always a partial one (partial status, precarity, possible deportation, etc.). The second way is conceptual: there are already two words that define the migrant by its departure from a settlement or its arrival and resettlement: the emigrant and the immigrant. The word 'migrant' is literally the one in-between, intermezzo, in-transit: not defined by settlement. If one defines the migrant by settlement, then one is merely duplicating the definition of emigrant or immigrant. The third way is etymological: the French and English word migration comes from the Latin word *migrātiō*, which means 'a change of abode, move' (Oxford Latin Dictionary 1982). This word, and the similar Greek one, μέτοικος (*métōikos*), from *metá*, indicating change, and *oîkos* 'dwelling', both come from the proto-Indo-European root *Mei*, meaning 'change'. There is nothing in the etymology of the word migrant that indicates *permanent* settlement.

Thus the real distinction that should be upheld is between the migrant-nomad on one side and the emigrant-immigrant on the other. The first is defined by change and movement (in-between), the second is defined by settlement (departure from, or arrival to).

*Alain Badiou*

Two years after the book *A Thousand Plateaus* was published (1980), French philosopher Alain Badiou published *Theory of the Subject*, where he too granted the migrant a central role in his political philosophy. With respect to politics, Badiou argues that 'the immigrated workers are at the centre of the current process of political subjectivity' (Badiou 2009, 263). Since, for Badiou, 'our society – imperialist society – is defined as a whole by the declaration that immigrant workers are not of this society, that it is impossible that they ever be', then 'the immigrant proletarians are the inexistent proper to the national totality' (Badiou 2009, 263). The 'immigrated proletarians' are those whose marginalisation and (inclusive) exclusion is required for France to identify itself as a unity, which excludes some and includes others. Thus,

a protest struggle in which the immigrants, represented as a particular social force, demand the same political rights as the French, forces the inexistent whose national multiplicity determines its closure as imperialist, that is, it forces the immanent popular internationalism (Badiou 2009, 263–264).

For Badiou, proletarian migrants are central to the current process of political subjectivity for two reasons: 1) through their marginalisation and exclusion they provide the condition for the unity of national identity. Without the internal

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exclusion of the migrant, the national totality would lose its identity, and; 2) the demand for the political unity of nationals and immigrants is thus the key point for the transformation of the whole of politics and a new form of international revolutionary subjectivity.

Badiou was so committed to the centrality of this figure that he founded a political action group with Natacha Michel and Sylvain Lazarus called *L'Organisation Politique*, which was particularly committed to helping organise and support undocumented migrants (*les sans-papiers*). The group (active 1985–2007) often worked with migrants staying in French hostels and aided their demonstrations for equal rights.

Despite the group's dissolution, Badiou remains committed to the thesis of the centrality of the migrant. This is evidenced in his more recent book, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (2008). In this book Badiou claims that 'the intimate link between politics and the question of foreigners is . . . absolutely central today' (Badiou 2008, 69). And further, that 'the concrete articulation of [the demands of thousands of foreigners in our countries] defines what is most important in politics today' (Badiou 2008, 68–69).

## Giorgio Agamben

Closer to the turn of the century, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues a radical version of this thesis in his essay 'Beyond Human Rights', published in a short collection of essays titled *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (1996/2000). It is important to note that while he frames his argument in terms of the refugee, which is a type of migrant, much of what he says is equally applicable to non-refugee migrants as well. Before expanding on this point it is worth quoting him at length:

The refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today – at least until the process of dissolution of the Nation-State and its sovereignty has achieved full completion – the forms and limits of a coming political community. It is even possible that, if we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reserve, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee (Agamben 2000, 16).

Taking Arendt as the historical point of reference for this thesis, Agamben argues that what is new in our time is that unprecedented numbers of people are no longer representable inside the nation-state (Agamben 2000, 21–22). Industrialised countries today face 'a permanently resident mass of noncitizens who do not want to be and cannot be either naturalized or repatriated. These noncitizens often have nationalities of origin, but, inasmuch as they prefer not to benefit from their own states' protection, they find themselves, as refugees, in a condition of *de facto* statelessness' (Agamben 2000, 23). Insofar as the refugee, according to Agamben, is the figure who unhinges the universality promised by the nation-state-territory, 'it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history' (Agamben 2000, 21–22).

This is an important philosophical continuation of the thesis of the centrality of the migrant in the following sense: If the novel issue of our time, according to Agamben, is truly the 'permanently resident mass of noncitizens' living inside industrial countries and threatening the unity and universality of the nation-state-territory trinity, then it does not follow that the refugee *alone* is the central figure of our political history. Refugees alone are only about 7% of these global non-citizen masses. Among non-citizen masses 15.4 million are refugees and 214 million are international migrants (25–32 million of whom are undocumented). Agamben's thesis is important, and thus should be expanded accordingly. Thus, this chapter follows Agamben in arguing that we must build our political philosophy anew, not only from the limited figure of the refugee, but the larger figure of the migrant.

## Étienne Balibar

At the turn of the century, French philosopher Étienne Balibar wrote two short articles succinctly articulating the centrality of the migrant (the non-status migrant, in particular) for political philosophy: 'Le droit de cité ou l'apartheid?'

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[The Right to the City or Apartheid], published in *Sans-Papiers: l'archaïsme fatal* [Undocumented: the Fatal Archaism] (1999) and a modified version of the last section of this text titled 'What We Owe to the Sans-Papiers', published in 2000. In these texts, Balibar names three central contributions of the *sans-papiers*: 1) They have rejected their 'illegality' by daring to make themselves seen and heard as real people 'with their particularities and the universality of their condition as modern proletarians'. 'As a result, we understand better what democracy is: an institution of collective debate, the conditions of which are never handed down from above', but must be fought for and demanded from below; 2) 'They have also brought to light one of the principle mechanisms of the extension of institutional racism, which tends toward a sort of European apartheid by associating the legislation of "exceptions" with the diffusion of discriminatory ideologies'; and 3) 'Finally, we owe them for having (among others – like those of the strike of December 1995, recreated citizenship among us, in as much as it is not an institution or a statute but a collective practice'. Through their activism 'they have given political activity the transnational dimension which we so greatly require in order to open up perspectives of social transformation and of civility in the era of globalization' (Balibar 2000, 42–43).

The *sans-papiers*, 'the excluded among the excluded', reveal to us the universal condition of the modern proletariat, the racism inherent in national exclusion, and a new form of transnational political subjectivity unrestricted by national citizenship. But it is not their battle to fight alone. Balibar thus concludes these contributions with a final call to action, to 'commit ourselves ever more numerous at their side, until right and justice are repaid them' (Balibar 2000, 43). Aiming to make good on this claim, both Balibar and Badiou became members of the *Collectif Malgré Tout* [Despite it all Collective], an anti-capitalist political organisation dedicated to, among other causes, the struggle for the rights of migrants in France.

*Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri*

The final text I would like to flag in the history of this thesis is also from 2000 and also places the figure of the migrant at the heart of political philosophy: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* (2000). In an 'Intermezzo' entitled 'Counter-Empire', they introduce the figure of the migrant as the source of a coming communist revolution against capitalist empire. 'A specter haunts the world', they say, 'and it is the specter of migration' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 213). Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri quite clearly (and rightly) identify the concept of nomadism with migration. It is worth quoting them at length:

Whereas in the disciplinary era sabotage was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be desertion. Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct and/or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being-against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the places of power (Hardt and Negri 2000, 212).

Rather than arguing that the mobility of the worker follows the accumulation of capital, Hardt and Negri argue that it is capital that follows the workers desire for resistance and exodus. 'Mobility and mass worker nomadism', they say, 'always express a refusal and a search for liberation: the resistance against the horrible conditions of exploitation and the search for freedom and new conditions of life' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 212). Thus, desertion and exodus are the new forces of anti-capitalist resistance in post-modernity (Hardt and Negri 2000, 213). Their desertion is out-of-place and thus is the condition for the creation of something new.

Hardt and Negri draw on the two ancestors of this thesis: Marx and Nietzsche. Following Nietzsche, Hardt and Negri equate this vast and mobile group of revolutionary migrants to 'New Barbarians' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 214). Quoting Nietzsche, they ask 'where are the barbarians of the twentieth century? Obviously they will come into view and consolidate themselves only after tremendous socialist crises' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 213). But this 'barbarian' force is not merely a force of destruction or exodus, it is also the capacity to create an alternative, as we read in *The Gay Science*. 'The counter-Empire', Hardt and Negri say, 'must also be a new global vision, a new way of living in the world' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 214). A further expansion of this thesis, they say, would be 'to write a general history of the modes of production from the standpoint of the workers' desire for mobility' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 212). That is, a philosophical history of the power of mobility from the standpoint of the proletarian migrant. This is

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precisely what this chapter offers: the next step in the political philosophy of migration and the defence of the political centrality of the migrant.

## Conclusion

The history of the political theory of migration reveals the existence of a common figure defined by movement – what we can call the figure of the migrant. Now that we have a theoretical history of this common figure defined by political movement, we are prepared to move forward with the consequences and political history of this figure for the twenty-first century. The above theories of the migrant are only the beginning. Today we need a whole new theory and history that inverts the political primacy of the citizen in favour of the figure of the migrant.

This means developing new theories of citizenship, sovereignty, borders, rights and nations – all from the perspective of the migrant. This means returning to political history and identifying all the old figures of the migrant and regimes of expulsion like the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond and the proletariat that remain continuous with and inform the present. The present is still defined by the history of these techniques.

This is the century of the migrant because the return of all the old techniques of expulsion now make it clear for the first time that the migrant has always been a constitutive social figure. In other words, migrants are not marginal or exceptional figures, as they have so often been treated, but rather the essential lever by which all hitherto existing societies have sustained and expanded their social form. Territorial societies, states, juridical systems and economies all required the social expulsion of migrants in order to expand. The recent explosion in migrant mobility is only a provocation to finally see what has always been happening – and do something about it.

Political theory in the twenty-first century is at an interesting crossroads where migration has reached such a critical threshold that what seemed to be an exception has now become the rule. The question now is how to understand the rules of this game in a much more adequate way.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Notes

[1] As of 2010, there were 215 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants according to the United Nations Human Development Report (2009, 21).

[2] 'Virilio's texts are of great importance and originality in every respect' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 fn 65).

[3] Deleuze and Guattari make this clear when they say, 'On the plane of consistency, a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude). Nothing but affects and local movements, differential speeds. The credit goes to Spinoza for calling attention to these two dimensions of the Body (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 260).

[4] For the beginning of such a theoretical effort see: Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, 2015) and Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

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