

The Subversive Power of the Migrant

By Claire Gallien

In his 2015 book, *The Figure of the Migrant*, Thomas Nail offers a reverse approach of migration, focusing on the migrant from the perspective of movement. Claire Gallien questions the relevance of Nail's dialectic between the 'kinopolitics' of the state and the 'pedetic force' of migrants.

When hardly a day goes by without the 'problem,' 'issue,' or 'crisis,' of migration being mentioned in the news, Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant* published in 2015 by Stanford University Press cannot appear more timely. More than an urgent reflection on a burning topic, Nail's monograph, intersecting political philosophy, social theory, and migration studies, aims to provide a new conceptual framework to think about migration and migrants in order to reshape the debate.

Indeed, Nail indicates in the very first pages of his book that there are two problems in the ways in which migration and migrants have been understood so far – first, that 'the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of the *stasis*' (3) and second that 'the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of states' (4). Nail then suggests that we urgently need to rethink migration and migrants, not from the perspective of *stasis* but from that of movement, and not from the perspective of the state but from that of the migrant. Once we accept to operate this change of perspective, we may start to view migrants not as 'failed citizens,' but as constitutive agents of society's structure and texture. From these two premises, Nail then develops his own theory of society being operated by the dialectic between what he calls 'kinopolitics,' that is the power of the state to create and regulate movement, and 'pedetic force,' that is the power of the migrant to resist and subvert the power of the state by force of the foot, that is by the force of her/his unpredictability and turbulence.

To start with, it should be outlined that Nail's concept is meant to operate in Western countries and for Western states and societies vis-à-vis their understandings of the phenomenon of migration and their treatments of migrants. And this, regardless of the fact that his monograph belongs to theory and is not an anthropological or a sociological study of migration; regardless of the fact that it deals with categories but very rarely with real people and with on the ground situations, and that it embraces a vast timeline, from 10,000 BCE to present day Mexico. Even if never clearly said, it is evident that Nail's monograph is responding to the ways in which *immigration* and *immigrants* have been treated so far in the West and that his intervention is primarily directed at Western societies, which treat immigration and immigrants as 'crises,' while the real crisis is that of the state in its failure to respond economically, socially, politically, and even ethically, towards immigrants (see the 'Migrations, Refugees, Exile' Autumn Symposium 2016 at the Collège de France in the 'Further Reading' section).

Society as movement

It may seem anathema to those who have actually experienced mass or illegal migration to read at the very beginning of the book that we are all migrants (1) or to pitch the book as 'a philosophical history of the political subject we have become today: *the migrant*' (3). Yet, Nail can make this claim precisely because he is analysing 'the migrant' as a figure, not as a human being and a human body, and because he deploys that figure strategically to revert contemporary conceptualisations. If we rewind and start back to square one, thinking again of us *as* migrants and from the migrant perspective, then we can start to understand society not as stasis but as movement, which, according to Nail, is all there is. Fixity is a delusion. And it is a power delusion engineered by states.

Nothing is stable in society, we all move, at all levels and in all directions. Stasis itself is produced by movement. One illuminating example provided by the author is when he describes the case of an office used every day and that appears very clean every morning when the employee comes back. That appearance is only true because someone, usually a migrant, and usually a woman, comes and goes to take care of it. If we agree as readers on the premise that all is movement, that migration is not an anomaly but is the rule, then indeed, we are all migrants and can all fit in the *figure* of the migrant. Then a shift happens also not only at the level of the reader as individual but also at the level of society as a whole. A form of awareness emerges that migration can no longer be presented as a destabilising factor coming from the exterior. It is never outside. It is inside from the very beginning. It is a factor of change for sure, it reshapes, reframes, redirects but it does not destabilise in the negative sense usually associated with the term. Migration is part of a field of social forces exerted at all levels between the state and the individual, and as such it is part and parcel of a stabilising effort. To imagine a society without migration is to imagine a society that is dead.

In other words, the stable is a metastable, it is a concept hidden behind another concept, behind movement in this case, and Nail's intervention, which is both theoretical and political, is to uncover what has been covered by fixity, by the state, and by the figure of the citizen. Spaces are not stable they are in a constant process of *being stabilised*. Similarly, borders do not exist as such, they are the result of a conscious effort of bordering, a tug and pull between the state that expands and pushes out or keeps in, and the migrant who presses in and moves around.

Nail acknowledges that his understanding of the relation between movement and power is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's theory of territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and reterritorialisation. Yet for a book that partakes of political philosophy and theorizes migration in its relations to power and territory, the absence of a fully-grounded engagement with theory is problematic. This remarks is also true for the links, which are to be drawn between Nail's concept of 'kinopower' and Foucault's definition and use of 'biopower,' as well as Agamben's 'bare life.' The book does not contain a bibliography and neither text nor index make reference to Agamben. There is only one reference to Foucault in the text and one in an endnote. Alain Badiou has one endnote too even if he has worked extensively on the question of migration, refugees and *sans-papiers* from a philosophical perspective, and Deleuze appears more but mostly in endnotes again.

This quasi-absence of a dialogue with what has been published before and even in his own field is perplexing, especially when Nail is manifestly aware of the literature. For instance, it would have been very fruitful to position his theory of movement as going beyond linearity with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadism as expounded in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Similarly, when Nail claims that his book is 'neither a valorization of movement, nor an ontology of movement in general' (4) he seems to suggest that some critics have considered it as such before, and that he is not interested with a facile glorification of migration. Yet, the book would have gained in naming the culprits and confronting their theories for what stands out as dangerous and limited in their own positions. If Nail is thinking of postcolonial theory, it would have been essential then to tell his readers which branch of postcolonial studies he is writing against. Indeed, there is a risk to simplify Homi Bhabha's conception of hybridity and misread Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*.

To Said and to most of postcolonial critics, the issue is not to dream into existence mobile, fluid lives, nor is it to fantasise about hybrid identities. Neither it is to turn a blind eye on people's attachment to origins and on the power of national imaginaries. Rather, it is about participating in the creation of the conditions for mobility to be shared equally amongst all people. It is also about understanding what are the political, economic, social forces feeding national imaginaries, driving people out of their homes, or pulling them in, behind walls. Nail's argument would have gained in strength had it been better articulated with the theories from which it borrows or which it opposes.

Kinopolitics and the pedetic force of the migrant

The book is articulated in four parts. Part I conveys Nail's innovative conceptualisation of social movement. Part II historicises movement into four ages of humanity. To each age corresponds a specific aspect of kinetic power. Part III isolates four figures of the migrant and conveniently articulates each one of them to one specific age and one type of kinetic power. Finally, Part IV is a case study of migration at the Mexican/US border. This last part is conspicuous for its sociological approach to the question of migration. Yet, Nail is tackling this case study from a particular and, I would argue, constricting perspective, in that his theoretical frame is applied from top down. I develop this point later on but I think this is one instance of a more general problem that I find with the book which is that it claims to rethink migration from the perspective of movement but in order to do so, superimposes a theoretical frame that is fixed and becomes rigid as it is reapplied for every cases that come under inspection.

Part I conceptualises the term used in the rest of the book, starting with 'kinopolitics,' or the movements as regulated by power. Key to his conception of kinopolitics are the notions of 'flow' and 'junction' defined as 'the redirection of a flow back onto itself in a loop or fold' (27). The junction is the point where the flow is yoked back onto itself. Junctions are crucial in state apparatus because they are a stable point of reference while the rest is all motion. It is dependent on motion but it never sees motion. The rest of part I and part II proposes a very broad historicization of kinopolitics, arguing that humanity can be divided into four main kinopolitical stages (sedentarisation, territorial, juridical, economic) and that if each stage is organised by one main regime of kinopolitical force (centripetal, centrifugal, tensional, elastic)

The figures of the migrant corresponding to each of the historical phases of kinopolitics (namely the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat) are analysed in part III of the book. These figures are joined together under the umbrella term of the migrant by the 'pedetic force' they deploy, namely the 'irregular,' 'unpredictable,' and 'turbulent' alternatives they present to the social expulsion of kinopower. Nail convincingly underscores that turbulence is not chaos and the unpredictability of pedetic force is not random. It only appears as such from the perspective of those in power. Pedetic is strategically organised in 'constant oscillation,' 'undivided waves,' and 'pressure,' which challenges and resists kinopower and invents its new forms of social motion.

Finally, in Part IV, Nail uses his preceding kinetic and pedetic social theory to understand what he describes as 'one of the most significant migratory phenomena in the contemporary world' and the 'birthplace or laboratory of neoliberalism,' namely 'Mexico-US migration.' Nail revisits the history of Mexico-US migration in light of the four phases (centripetal, centrifugal, tensional, and elastic) of kinetic power theorised earlier on in the monograph, but he also argues that in the case of contemporary Mexico-US migration the four

phases may also appear as four types of power used conjointly to enslave a cheap labour force. One problematic aspect in this section of the book is that Nail argues that Mexican migrants and solidarity groups not only react to domination but also create alternatives, and yet fails to explain how.

A problematic approach

Nail positions his book at the crossroads between various social sciences but by doing so fails to fully commit himself to a thorough engagement with what has already been produced in each of the disciplinary fields he refers to. *The Figure of the Migrant* is primarily pitched as a work of political philosophy but the author never quite sufficiently engages with other theories of migration emerging from the field (I noted earlier on the absence of discussion of his position towards Badiou, Adorno, Agamben, and many others). Similarly, his dismissal of geographical studies of migration as strictly focusing on territorial questions seems vastly reductive of contemporary contributions (see Doreen Massey for instance). Nail also presents his study as historical but does not work on archives, as Foucault for instance had done, and as sociological, but bodies, subjectivities, on the ground experience of migration, are absent from the book. For instance, not once are the sectional issues of race, gender, and age addressed, whereas they vastly complexify migrant's relation to power.

The problem is not with the argument of the book, the problem lies in the fact that it showcases itself as a work partaking of theory, of history, and of sociology and thus creates expectations in its readers which are not and cannot be fulfilled all at the same time. Similarly, it produces problematic intersections between disciplines, which ultimately undermine the scientific cogency of the book. Indeed, as philosophical endeavour, *The Figure of the Migrant* devises new conceptual tools to think about migration, namely, kinetic power, peditic force. It arranges them in relation to one another, articulates them with different phases of history and with different figures of the migrant. One major issue with this approach is that while claiming to offer a reverse perspective on the question of migration, i.e. from the perspective of movement and not of stasis, Nail's typology ends up rigidifying it to the extreme when he systematically re-deploys the concepts across ages and terrains. It is quite significant that the case-study which Nail chooses to develop is that of the US/Mexican border which is the less fluid and most regulated border there is. Even the illegal activities going on around the border and through it are perfectly well chartered and located.

Furthermore, Nail's work risks repeating the blanket approach of the state with regards its object of study, namely migration. Indeed, by systematically applying concepts from above to reality on the ground, and by reusing the same concepts and dynamics across the board, Nail's

theory lacks the specificity required for the topic treated. The risk is to reproduce the kinds of disembodiment and disenfranchisement to which immigrants are subjected to by the workings of kinopower. Other ground-up approaches developed over the past years in the fields of history and sociology are possible (see the link to the 'Multilingualism' Project in the 'Further Reading' section) and they permit a theory of migration from the perspective of movement and of the migrant to emerge. Instead, Nail's theory produces a towering perspective, which places us in the uncomfortable position of failing to grasp the human dimensions implied in migration.

Nail's problematic position with regards kinopower both clearly condemning it in the realm of politics but dangerously flirting with it in the realm of theory has repercussions on the ways in which he treats migrants and their pedetic force. One of the very strong point made in the book is that pedetic force should not be understood as simply counter-oppositional but also as creative. It shapes kinopower as much as it is shaped by it. Quite tellingly, this essential aspect underlined by Nail at the beginning, is never properly addressed even at the very end of the book when Nail studies the pedetic force of Mexican migrant workers in the USA. Nail's migrants are never quite as pro-active as his theory would like them to be precisely because, I would argue, bodies and experiences have been largely evacuated in the analysis.

Also, one problematic point in Nail's analysis of the dialectics between kinopower and pedetic force is that it stipulates that influence and counter-influence may be placed on an equal footing and that the state and the migrant are equally shaped and reshaped in the equation. While Nail never says of course that both are exerted with equal force, he nevertheless never rigorously unpacks the power differentials between the two. To give just one example, Palestinian students and migrant workers have to cross Israeli checkpoints on a daily basis in order to go to university or go to work and then back home at night. Israel regulates movements at the checkpoint, controls the pace of the flow, which gravely delays and sometimes even prevents Palestinians from circulating and attending to their daily activities. While they have devised means to escape constrictions with the use of mobile phones for instance, it is clear that subversion is never complete and that their daily routine is affected by and has to adjust to the Israeli checkpoint, not the opposite. In this the impact is much worse for the Palestinian, who does not choose, than for the Israeli state which implements the policy.

Given the topic addressed in the book and also the political position which the author endorses, closer attention to the asymmetrical power relationship at play here would have been helpful. Greater attention to the entanglement between climate change, resource scarcity, war, and the movement of population should also have been paid. This, of course, is a vast topic in and of itself but its absence from a theory that aims to provide new tools to reshape our understanding of contemporary migration politics and flows is problematic. Mentions of nature in the book only appear fleetingly when the author talks about the aggregation of resources by the central state or about the movement of the nomads in search of water and food supplies.

Nail has published in 2016 a third monograph entitled *Border Thinking* which he presented as a sequel to *The Figure of the Migrant*, proposing to scrutinise the material and the

technological conditions according to which migration takes place. Border thinking is a theme which has been considerably discussed in postcolonial theory and reconceptualised in decolonial studies, especially in the works of Walter D. Mignolo, but also analysed of course in sociology and migration studies. It would be interesting then to see how Nail intervenes in the field and whether he addresses in the sequel some of the shortcomings identified in *The Figure of the Migrant*.

Further Reading:

- Apprendre à s'exiler. À propos de : E. Saïd, *Réflexions sur l'exil*, Actes Sud, par Leyla Dakhli. <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Apprendre-a-s-exiler.html>

- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

- Massey, Doreen. "A Global Sense of Place." *Marxism Today*, June 1991, 24–29.

———. "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place." In *Mapping the Futures. Local Cultures, Global Change*, edited by John Bird et al, 59–69. London: Routledge, 1993.

———. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994.

- On the 'Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies' Project at SOAS <https://www.soas.ac.uk/cclps/research/multilingual-locals-and-significant-geographies/>

- Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

- Eyal Weizman, Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline*, Steidl, 2015.

- Programme and Videos of the 'Migrations, Refugees, Exile' Autumn Symposium 2016 organised with the support of the Collège de France's Hugot Foundation. https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/en-symposium-2016/p1675254353854300_content.htm