A Roundtable on:

Thomas Nail. *The Figure of the Migrant*.
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Prepared by MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Joining us today are Robin Celikates, Daniella Trimboli, Sandro Mezzadra, Todd May, Ladelle McWhorter, Andrew Dilts, and Adriana Novoa. Welcome and thank you all for participating in this discussion about Thomas Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant*. We have here a diverse set of scholars representing various disciplines within the academy and divergent methodologies. One thing we share in common, though, is the opinion that the migrant needs to occupy a more significant place within our political theory and policy. Thomas's book is one of kinopolitics, that is, a politics of movement. It offers a kind of theory of social motion. Thomas, do you want to offer a few words to get us started?

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks for organizing this Mark and thank you so much to everyone for taking the time to read the book and formulate such thoughtful comments. I started doing the research for this book because I wanted to write about the importance of migration in contemporary politics, but when I started doing the research it seemed that the migrant was always being theorized as a secondary or derivative figure. Across several related disciplines—Anthropology, Geography, Philosophy, and Political Science—the migrant was treated as an exception to the rule of already existing theoretical frameworks. After doing the research I discovered that the opposite was actually the case. What became clear was that, today and in history, the migrant is not the exception, but rather the constitutive political figure of existing societies so far. Right now, I think political theory has this backwards. In my view, migration is historically constant—sedentary societies are the exception to this rule, not the other way around. Societies are constituted by migration and migrants and not the other way around. But by rejecting the foundations of existing political theory and theorizing the migrant along these lines I had to invent my own theoretical framework.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Let's begin by considering Thomas's Introduction and Conclusion, where he claims that "the twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant" (1) and "the migrant is the

political figure of our time” (235). According to Thomas, the book offers a remedy to problems in how the migrant is typically theorized, namely that (a) the migrant is understood as a derivative figure in contrast to the stable denizen and (b) the migrant is discussed through the lens of the state. His remedial maneuver mobilizes the potential to understand the migrant by placing the migrant in the primary position, by offering a political philosophy of the migrant.

ROBIN CELIKATES: It’s an important and engaging contribution to the political theory of migration precisely because it takes these concerns seriously and asks them in the most fundamental sense, following an approach distinct from both the normative liberal paradigm and that of critical migration studies. Accordingly, Thomas takes up the task to provide a new vocabulary to conceptualize the constitutive experience and reality of migration and of movement more generally, a task he seeks to accomplish by integrating philosophical theorizing with divergent literatures spanning an impressive historical arc, from the first creation of social centres around 10,000 BCE to the contemporary US-Mexican border. The most important general lesson of his dense book is that such a political theory requires us to move beyond the dominant understanding of the migrant and of migration from the point of view of *stasis*, of non-movement, and of states who claim the authority, and the capacity, to control and regulate movement. In contrast, what is called for is a positive understanding of the figure of the migrant and the practice of migration that is not primarily determined by lack, anomaly or failure.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: At the same time, to some extent, the migrant has always been among us, been becoming us, been us. What might we say about the migrant in older works such as Locke’s *Two Treatises*, Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, or Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, where little mention is made of the migrant? In other words, what does the absence of the migrant suggest about modern political philosophy and its implications in everyday politics?

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks, Mark. I think posing the question in this way opens up an entirely new way of doing political theory. What at first appears only to be a political lack or absence—the migrant—turns out to be the constitutive element of political life. Just as in the past, so in the present, the disavowal of the migrant is the condition under which societies have rendered a definitively mobile social body subordinate, secondary, or invisible. To speak briefly, Locke, Rousseau, and Hegel are great examples of political thinkers who do precisely this. Locke requires the expulsion of the migrant (as non-landed worker) in the form of a special wage relation, where someone can work without gaining property as a result. Rousseau requires the introduction of the migrant (as alien-lawgiver) to found the good laws and then be expelled afterward. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the stateless migrant is the one person in Hegel’s

whole system who is both socially constitutive but, as stateless, has absolutely no place in universal politics. The systematic marginalization of the migrant in political history continues today when people accuse migrants of depleting social services, in other words, of not contributing and stealing from the real producers of wealth. This is not only empirically false, but the opposite is true. Americans steal from and disavow migrants. Migrants pay taxes, migrants grow food, build houses, clean dishes, and all for sub-average wages and no tax returns and racism. We desperately need to invert this paradigm and see migration as socially constitutive and primary.

DANIELLA TRIMBOLI: Thomas maps out a kinetic framework for migration that challenges the predominant model of studying migrants from the perspective of stasis, “as a secondary or derivative figure with respect to place-bound social membership” (3). His argument is reminiscent of that presented in Nikos Papastergiadis’ work on the turbulence of migration, in particular, the connection Papastergiadis makes in *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* between theorizations of migration and kinetophobia; that is, between migration and the fear of movement. Thomas illustrates how mobility acts as constitutive of social life, rather than, as Papastergiadis writes, “the temporary disruption to the timeless feeling of national belonging” (49). He also argues that histories of states often subsume migrant histories, even though the mobility of migrants has created its own forms of social organization that move across, through and beyond nations/states. He argues that social movement is regulated by various apparatuses of expulsion that take on territorial, political, juridical and economic forms. These forces give form to key migrant figures: the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond and the proletariat.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Just to quickly add to that: “Each [figure of the migrant] emerges under different historical and social conditions of expansion and expulsion,” Thomas writes,

But each also invests a form of kinetic power of its own that poses an alternative to social expulsion. ... The transhumance of the nomad, the brigandry of the barbarian, the defection of the vagabond, and the social movements of the proletariat are all relatively unconstructed forms of social motion compared to those of expansion by expulsion. ... [C]ontinuous social oscillation is the free extensive social movement of peoples to determine and change the conditions of their motion (125, 127).

SANDRO MEZZADRA: Right. What is interesting is that Thomas rather insists on the fact that “before there is anything like territory, there is movement.” Movement, he adds, “creates territory,” which is unconceivable without “a process of territorialization” (42). This means that territory itself, usually presented as the epitome of fixity, becomes

mobile, it is traversed and constituted by vectors of movement and by the workings of regimes of mobility control that make it always potentially a field of struggle and not a “given.”

DANIELLA TRIMBOLI: Thomas, I wonder how you conceptualize the relation between temporality and spatiality. At what moment, in what place, if at all, does migration disrupt one’s social matrix?

TODD MAY / LADELLE MCWHORTER: We just finished reading your book together as part of our reading Skype group (which has been going on for about seven years). We really enjoyed it. It’s interesting, original, and provocative. We wondered whether your approach inverted a traditional approach that grounded itself in stasis. It seemed to us that the relation between stasis and movement is not one of foundedness, but is instead more dialectical. What is static is affected by movement, and movement is affected by stasis; for example, the existence of stable state institutions will affect what kinds of movements are possible, which will be different for unstable states.

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks, folks. I am glad the argument about the constitutive power of the migrant is clear in the book. The tricky part, as you all bring up, is that constitutive social power is both the process of producing the regimes of kinetic power that expels people and the process of counter-power that allows them to move differently. The kinetic dilemma of the migrant is precisely how to convert the social circulations that require expulsion into ones that do not. To Daniella’s question specifically, I would say, although I do not have the time to fully defend it here, that social time and social space are products of social movement. Without motion there is neither. It is the process or movement of territorialization or placialization, that makes a territory or place, not the other way around. The processes precede the products. Migrants disrupts a given circulation at a junction or point of bifurcation in the flow. Afterward we can call this junction a point of space or a moment in time, but these are just spatio-temporal divisions *of motion*. To Todd and Ladelle, I agree with you, but I would also add the caveat that stasis is a metastable state produced by continual circulation. So yes, the (meta)stable states of circulation are being transformed by unstable or pedetic motions, but the pedetic motions are also being captured and (meta)stabilized as well. So in this sense, movement is primary, but the *regimes of movement* are mutually transformative or “dialectical,” if you want to call them that.

SANDRO MEZZADRA: Needless to say, migration is not something new. Thomas demonstrates this point, bringing us back to the very beginning of human history in his attempt to forge a political concept of the *figure* of the migrant. Both the development of political and legal formations of power and territory and the structure of economic modes of production

bear the constitutive traces of migration and of the attempts to tame, rule, valorize, and even block it. This is particularly true for modern capitalism. “Without the migration of surplus population to new markets,” Thomas contends, “from the rural country 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*” (88). Nevertheless, there is a need to stress that migration takes on today new characteristics and raises new challenges. This has not merely to do with the increasing percentage of migrants as a share of the total population. Beyond the sheer data of statistics, a set of qualitative transformations of migration over the last decades have turned it—despite or maybe due to the often tragic materiality of specific migratory experiences—into a kind of iconic symbol and seismograph of our global predicament. Both its turbulent geography and pace and the underlying changing patterns of mobility make migration relevant not merely for the plights, pains, and joy of “migrants,” but also for understanding crucial and broader conflicts and transformations that are reshaping labour and culture, politics and society across diverse geographical scales. As far as I am concerned I would stress even more than you do the specificity of the experience of migration under modern capitalism, underscoring and investigating the ways in which what he calls the “elastic force” of capital produces a new assemblage and orchestration of territorial, political, and legal devices that target mobile subjects once they are transformed into “bearers” of the absolutely peculiar commodity called labour power.

THOMAS NAIL: I could not agree more! One of the methodological interventions I have tried to make in the book is to take this thesis so seriously in fact that it becomes the philosophically privileged vantage point from which we might do an “ontology of the present.” That is, the contemporary figure of the migrant becomes the key to reinterpreting the entire Western historical conditions of all social life. It’s hard for me to imagine a higher status than that.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Perhaps later we can talk about an ontology of the present. Andrew, I know you want to comment on usefulness of the nomad as a kind of identity.

ANDREW DILTS: Writing in *Visible Identities*, Linda Alcoff reflects on the concept of a deterritorialized subject as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari and subsequently taken up by Rosi Braidotti. The *nomad* is offered as a model for identity that can resist both assimilationist and essentialist demands that individuals “fix” and stabilize their selves over time and space. Alcoff notes the attraction of such a migratory concept of “nomad subjectivity”: it attends to the mutability of difference, it recognizes a fluidity of the self that moves across borders and boundaries, and it promises liberation through a “refusal to be characterized, described, or classified” (276). She is also, however, deeply skeptical that

an embrace of nomad subjectivity, “evokes ... the figure of the person who resists commitment and obligation [and who] tries to avoid responsibility by having only ‘transitory attachment’” (277). As a positive account of subjectivity, Alcoff argues, to embrace “nomad subjectivity” is also to embrace neoliberal movements of bodies, capital flows, and a “self” that is unmoored not simply from territorial place, but also from community and the grounds of political action in concert with others. Such a “refusal of identity,” she writes, “might be useful for the purposes of the current global market. The project of global capitalism is to transform the whole world into postcolonial consumers and producers of goods in an acultural world commodity market, a Benetton-like vision in which the only visible differences are those that can be commodified and sold” (277).

Thomas’s *The Figure of the Migrant* gives us a powerful version of how such fears have indeed come to pass, not simply in the current moment of late capitalist neoliberalism, but as an underlying logic of how territories and political communities have come into being. The nomad is just one instance of this figure, Thomas argues, a relatively archaic one that nevertheless manifests under conditions of forced migration constitutive of territorial consolidation. He argues that the nomad is historically the first figuration of the migrant, a quasi-empirical fugitive from the creation of place through human movement. Other figurations of the migrant follow in his analysis: the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat. Each is produced by social forces of “expansion by expulsion” in distinctive (and overlapping) social movements under the terms of kinopolitics, what he names the “theory and analysis of social motion” (24). If Alcoff asks us to be skeptical of the liberatory possibility of nomad subjectivity, Thomas gives historical depth to these worries: the migrant has always been expelled from community, place, citizenship, membership, and (often if not always) from humanity. The figure of the migrant expresses some of the worst modes of domination, subjugation, abjection, and unfreedom in human history.

That is to say, my concern—the relative lack of bodies, embodiment, and subjectivity—is ultimately political and ethical. If Thomas’s account is right, and if this account lets us identify the counterpowers available to migrants to refuse, resist, negate, escape, overthrow, or otherwise *live* even under the seemingly trans-historical phenomenon of expansion through exclusion, then such political and social acts and ways of thinking ought rightly be articulated by migrants themselves. If a re-figuration of “the migrant” is possible, it will likewise come from within rather than without.

ROBIN CELIKATES: I found that the book’s relation to the ethico-political and epistemological commitment to migrant agency is not always entirely clear. To start on the most general level, taking flows to be the

fundamental kinopolitical unit (24-27) raises at least two important issues when applied to the study of migration: First, if flows are always already structured and mediated, how can their form be abstracted from the mediations and structurations that shape them? Second, speaking of migration in terms of flows—"flows across borders, flows into detention centers, counter flows (strikes), and so on" (26)—triggers associations of a subjectless process, and this seems difficult to reconcile with the stress on the agency of those who are, after all, not only going with the flow but actively deciding—albeit under certain constraints—if, where and in what ways to migrate, and who—in their constitutive as well as disruptive political actuality and potentiality—escape the categorizations imposed on them. If the migrant is "the subject of our time" (4), what happens to this subject when its practice is understood in terms of "flows" and "floods"? At times, you seem to think that the problem with these popular metaphors is simply that they evoke negative reactions whereas what he calls "pedetic force" should not be seen as "normatively 'bad'" (224). My worry, however, is more fundamentally that these are ultimately inadequate, and naturalizing, categories for what is, fundamentally, a social and political practice involving collective and individual agency—an agency that is, to be sure, mediated and structured, but at the same time mediating and structuring.

THOMAS NAIL: Yes, I share both of your concerns deeply. I agree with Andrew and Alcoff that the figure of the migrant exposes a dangerous ambiguity into political movement: and should never be simply valorized as such. This is why I say in the introduction of the book that "movement is not always good, nor is movement always the same... Thus, this book is [not] a valorization of movement" (4). It is also not a theory of subjectivity at all and certainly not with the universal or normative importance of the "nomad subject," you describe. In fact, this problem is partly what motivated the book and one of things I think is original about it. The book is an analysis of the mobility of the migrant, without a simple valorization of it—as one can read elsewhere. This is also why the book is divided into several parts. Part II is an analysis of the dominant regimes of motion (as constituted by the migrant) and Part III is a historical typology of all the alternative regimes of motion migrants have created. I give numerous historical and contemporary examples of anti-state, anti-capitalist migrant movements so I don't think there is any strong necessity of migration to be neoliberal, or anything else for that matter.

In response to Robin's points, I have a similar response: one should never simply valorize a flow as such. There are social processes, yes. But from primary processes come products. Just because social life flows, does not mean that there is no body or agent. It just means that what we call a body, agent, or mind are products of more primary kinetic processes. Movement precedes thinking. Perhaps we differ about the

ontological primacy of epistemology, but in the end I do think we both agree that whatever we mean by knowledge it is both structured by material kinetic conditions but also, in the form of kinetic actions, changes them. I think that thesis is compatible with the book, but you are right to notice that epistemology does not have methodological primacy.

SANDRO MEZZADRA: I think the balance between the take on specific historic experiences, conceptual analysis, and a political pressure to understand the stakes and conflicts of contemporary migration is in general a distinctive feature of the book.

ADRIANA NOVOA: I'm not sure. The history of migrants is analysed through four historical figures described by Thomas as the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletarian. These are considered as historical figures that existed for a specific period of time. I don't have the time right now to analyse each of these cases, but the historical existence of these categories is more complex than what Thomas implies. Vagrancy, for example, has various meanings in Mexico, depending on the regions and times in which it occurred. One of its meanings in Spain and Latin America is connected with the figure of *destierro* (the removal of a person from the land of belonging), and, as such, is a punishment that was not originated by movement, but in the right to remain in place and not to move. The figure of the exile, so important to the political development of Latin American nations to this day, is a continuation of this concept. In its people are punished with displacement, and the abrogation of their right to remain in place.

Another figure that is ignored, in spite of the current role of religion in migrants' lives, is that of the pilgrim, which has historically been an important mode of social movement. In the middle ages, for example, the migrant was also the pilgrim, the person who moved searching for the sacred together with others entering and leaving the spaces of faith within an international and diverse community (think of the "Camino of Santiago," or the pilgrimage to Mecca, for example).

THOMAS NAIL: Sandro, I am glad to hear the desired balance was achieved. It took me way outside philosophy to pull it off—and that was good—thank you. Adriana, on the hybridity of historical figures: I agree. As I say in the book, "These figures of the migrant also produce their own dominant and hybrid types (historically and recently) according to the four kinopolitical conditions" (238). My thesis is that the figures of the migrant did not just exist for "a specific period of time" or even a specific place. My argument is that they have always existed to one degree or another, but only emerge as dominant figures during the periods of study. But as I say in the conclusion, this decision to study only those periods was just convention for what can be done in a single book. So I am open to folks finding these figures all over the place and in interesting hybrid

combinations. I do not see this as a fault of the book, but an opportunity for future work. The same is true of the pilgrim. The same historical regime of motion exists for the pilgrim even if we it is not included directly in this study. The pilgrim is not the only figure left out. As I say in the Introduction:

The present study does not provide a history of the relative deprivations of tourists, diplomats, business travelers, explorers, [pilgrims,] and state functionaries, although such a history would also be interesting. Instead, it focuses on the more marginalized figures of historical migration (nomads, barbarians, vagabonds, and the proletariat) for three reasons. First, because it is primarily their history that has been decimated and is in the most need of recovery and reinterpretation. Second, because it is in their history that the emergence of each new form of social expulsion (of which the tourist experiences only the smallest degree) is most sharply visible. Third, and most important, because it is their history that more closely resembles the situation of most of the people we call migrants today (5-6).

DANIELLA TRIMBOLI: Right now there is an important figure. Today's most undesired mover is undoubtedly the asylum seeker, referred to in many Western countries as an "illegal immigrant." Thomas traces the emergence of the "illegal" migrant to the period between the fifth and fifteenth centuries, where it surfaced as the figure of the vagabond. The vagabond differed from its former counterparts—the nomad and the barbarian—however, due to the kinopolitics in play, it was not a completely new subject. Rather, the vagabond encapsulated the undesirable movers of earlier periods. Similarly, the nomad and the barbarian of former historical periods did not disappear but persisted in new forms, ultimately becoming refigured as the criminalized subject, or vagabond (65).

In a similar way, we can see the vagabond of the fifteen, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflected in today's asylum seeker. The vagabond was first demarcated in response to a perceived threat from serfs or slaves who were developing a sense of ownership over their labour, and beginning to recognize "the arbitrariness of feudal power relations" (68). If these vagabonds were not expelled for demanding some entitlement of their labour, they were expelled via privatization of land, which forced them into a position of displacement and further roaming. Vagabond laws expanded accordingly, isolating wandering workers, beggars and people with illnesses or belief systems that were deemed to be a threat to the working "health" of the state. Often these vagabonds were expelled to external outposts (71), such as working camps, sick camps or prisons. The act of expelling these people legitimated the reasons for their initial expulsion—for example, once someone was in a sick camp she was likely

to become much sicker, thereby justifying her ejection (72). This strategy plays out in the contemporary West: the asylum seeker of the twenty-first century is first expelled from her home country, and then expelled from her destination or transit country to a refugee camp or, in Australia, an offshore detention centre. This asylum seeker is frequently associated with disease, animalism and revolt (where revolt equates to a “terror attack”). The conditions within detention centres are incredibly poor, causing sickness and often compelling strikes and riots. The image of the ill, protesting asylum seeker helps to legitimate the figure of the asylum seeker as a violent threat to the Australian state, thereby “justifying” the offshore expulsion. When further asylum seekers arrive, they are, to borrow from Sara Ahmed, recognized as being “already out-of-place,” because to recognize is to “know again” (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 22).

THOMAS NAIL: Thank you. Those are exactly the kind of historical dots I hoped folks would connect.

ROBIN CELIKATES: When Thomas claims that “we are all becoming migrants” (1) and one page later adds that “not all migrants are alike” (2), it seems that a political theory of migration would need historically and sociologically sharpened theoretical tools to explore the space opened up by these two claims. Claiming that all migrants are “part of the same regime of social motion” (3) stands in danger of either being an almost trivial statement, invoking an abstract regime that can be seen as applying to everyone, or of disregarding the fact that this “regime” is not one precisely because it is massively stratified along the lines of class, race and gender and operates under the long-lasting and ongoing effects of imperialism and colonization and current regimes of irregularization. These fracture the space of migration in ways that seem difficult to homogenize into one regime. Especially Part IV of the book, in which Thomas shifts gears and turns to an exceedingly illuminating analysis of migration at the US-Mexican border, furnishes the required historical and sociological specificity that a “hybrid theory of migration” (179) calls for, but a more dialectical approach might have suggested a return to the theoretical building blocks introduced at the beginning, reconstructing them in view of the concrete contextualizations and mediations introduced later in the argument. Taking the latter into account can teach us that the claim that “we” have all become migrants (235) not only help us see certain things, but also obscures others.

ADRIANA NOVOA: Right, Thomas claims that the 21st century “will be the century of the migrant. At the turn of the century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history” (1). This might be true in absolute terms, but when the proportion of migrants is compared with the proportion of the total population on the move in various historical epochs, our century is not that different. We are not all becoming migrants, humans have always been migrants. But for a

long time our culture has erased the understanding of migrations as part of our human condition, which has led to the belief that the migrant is a social aberration in a civilized society. This contradicts, for instance, the fact that the formation of Modern Europe is the result of centuries of movement across the continent, the cumulative consequences of which are manifest in the very bodies of those who live there today. I suggest that Thomas's argument might have been stronger if he had related his kinopolitics to biological evidence about the extent to which genetic structures of humans have changed in relation to mass migration.

Thomas affirms that kinopolitics is the "politics of movement. Instead of analyzing societies as primarily static, spatial or temporal," this idea allows us to understand societies "primarily as "regimes of motion." This is needed because "societies are always in motion: directing people and objects, reproducing their social conditions (periodicity), and striving to expand their territorial, political, juridical, and economic power through diverse forms of expulsion (24)." I could not agree more with Thomas on this description, but he avoids theorizing the biological power of movement in social and human development. Humans exist through migrations, but, as the book shows, the emergence of closed groups, and the defence of their interests, cloud the role of migrants in human development, and the biological power of movement in human survival. This is particularly relevant, since it contradicts the narrative of the modern nation that affirms that only through its institutions can human develop themselves.

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks, Robin. I think we have a misunderstanding. And I think it is my fault. Sorry for the confusion. Here is the full quote from page three: "Migration in this sense is neither entirely free nor forced—the two are part of the same *regime of social motion*." The phrase "in this sense" was supposed to refer only to the example of the neoliberal regime of elastic motion before the quote. What I meant was that free motion and forced motion are both motions, and in a given instance (neoliberal elasticity, let's say) both free motion and force motion would part of that same regime. I realize this is confusing because I later divide the book up into different "regimes of motion." I definitely want to be clear on this: not everyone is a migrant, and certainly not in the same way and degree.

Adriana, there may be some confusion on this point as well. And again, it may be partly my fault. When I mentioned the increase of proportion of migrants I was referring the cited statistic. I did not say "each decade since forever" since the statistic only goes back so far. Unfortunately, accurate world demographic records are not available beyond a certain point, so I am afraid neither of us can make demographic claims about global migration quantities before a certain period. But quantity, as Sandro mentioned, is not the only issue here. On the question of becoming migrants, I think we agree. I hope this was not too confusing

for folks, but I chose the word “becoming” vs “being” because becoming is a process which was happening and is still happening—not started and stopped. So people were becoming Neolithic nomads then and are becoming asylum seekers now. The kinopolitical analysis of genetics would be very interesting indeed. But again, the lack thereof is not a critique of this project, it is an opportunity for a further extension of my kinetic theoretical framework to that domain.

ADRIANA NOVOA: Consider also how important climate change is for our contemporary time. You develop your theory in terms of the political, but in many recent migrations, politics have been determined by natural events and not only by human agency or by the dynamics of capital accumulation. In terms of a political theory for the migrant of our era, we need to consider the possibility that current and future migrations will be determined by climate change, which according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “is projected to increase displacement of people (medium evidence, high agreement). Populations that lack the resources for planned migration experience higher exposure to extreme weather events, particularly in developing countries with low income. Climate change can indirectly increase risks of violent conflicts by amplifying well-documented drivers of these conflicts such as poverty and economic shocks.” It is true that such claims, and with them the category of environmental migrants, have been under dispute, but according to one study described by Jean-François Maystadt and Valerie Mueller, in Africa alone under “moderate scenarios, in terms of both climate and population changes, future climate changes could lead to an additional displacement of 5 to 24 million people every year by the end of the 21st century.” I believe that any theory of the migrant dealing with contemporary society needs to deal with this relationship between nature and human movement.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: In terms of natural disasters, it is not the case that they are all without a political dimension. Take, Hurricane Katrina for example. The Louisiana coastline has considerably receded in the last several decades due to the rerouting of waterways. Basically, for mercantile interests, rivers that once snaked through the state were straightened out in order to make shipping more efficient. Consequently, sediment—dirt and debris—were no longer buttressing the coastline and it receded. This in turn made the hurricane strike much closer to New Orleans than it would have if the hurricane had happened, say, a century ago. Moreover, the city infrastructure collapsed not only from the hurricane but from poor management or upkeep. So, my point is really that Katrina was not merely a natural disaster. It had a human component.

THOMAS NAIL: I absolutely agree, Mark. I think this is a very important issue, which is why I cite it in the Introduction. “Naturally” forced migrations have occurred through history, yes, and none are without their

political dimensions, but again for practical purposes, this book cannot do everything. One could quite easily use the kinopolitical framework I have developed to study the social movements of migrants around natural disasters. The framework I develop is not opposed to someone doing this kind of work. My hypothesis, however, not having done this work, would be a) that the dominant regimes of world migration have occurred largely within the context of the dominant human social structures I analyse, and b) that the social-historical response to natural disasters will reveal a mixture of the same kinetic regimes of expulsion and four kinds of migrant figures I outlined. Again, I do not see it as a fault of my book, but an opportunity for it to make sense of this issue in a new movement-oriented way.

ROBIN CELIKATES: Thomas, one of the most convincing features of your account is its professed aim to conceptualize the “capacity of the migrant to create an alternative to social expulsion” (7). However, this conceptualization seems, from the very beginning, limited in that it is primarily negative, or at least reactive, namely in terms of “riots, revolts, rebellions, and resistances” (7). Did migrant forms of sociality and practice not also create subjectivities and communities that provide—at least in part self-standing—alternatives beyond reactive or confrontational encounters, forms of sociality and practice, that is, that would also manifest the “socially constitutive power...that allows society to move and change” (13)? Of these, apart from communes and other scattered historical examples, Thomas tells us relatively little. In this respect, a more sustained engagement with the critical migration studies literature—and especially with those approaches that highlight the agency, experience, and subjectivity of migrants—could have proven productive. Thomas, is the capacity and power of the migrant not also at work in the “right to escape” whose actualization in the practice of migration politicizes borders and territories as zones of conflict and negotiation but also of cooperation and solidarity; in the singularity and individuality of each act of migration which implies the epistemological lesson that knowledge about migration is first and foremost produced by those engaged in it; and in the autonomy of migration (briefly referred to in an interesting discussion of the right *not* to migrate (228) and in some endnotes) that is excessive with regard to all governmental technologies of control and regulation?

THOMAS NAIL: I see your point. Yes, the figure of the migrant is constitutive. But what this means is that it is both the movement that produces and sustains the dominant regime, but also produces alternatives. Since the migrant is the constitutive movement of both, there is no negation. There is instead a bifurcation. In Part II I show how migrants are constitutive of the dominant regimes (as slaves, barbarian migrants built the ancient empires, as criminals, vagabond migrants justified the prison

system that formed the administrative beginnings of the early modern state, as workers, proletarian migrants sell their labour anywhere it is needed without accumulating property from it). Then in Part III I show the distinctly positive types of alternative motion they create. Just because “it seems like” a barricade in the French Revolution is “reactionary” because it is fighting against something does not mean that it did not *also* create its own autonomous motions as well. My focus is on the pedetic motions of the latter: the migrant communities built in the midst of struggle.

ANDREW DILTS: I’d like to jump in and switch directions. In short, my concern is that there are not enough *bodies* in this book. There are too few *voices* of those who occupy the position of the migrant. To be sure, there are many examples of migrants throughout the book, drawn primarily from historical accounts, and the extended case study of Mexico-United States migration, which Robin just mentioned, helpfully *illustrates* the theory of kinopolitics, social motion, and the four paradigmatic figures mapped out in the bulk of the book’s pages. However, there is a troubling distance between Thomas’s theorizing and historical description and those who do in fact occupy the positions of nomad, barbarian, vagabond, and proletariat—and above all, between Thomas’s account of counterpowers and insurgent migrant themselves.

SANDRO MEZZADRA: What characterizes the figure of the migrant is, to pick up again Thomas’s words, an “abstract social relation” that connects the action of specific devices of domination and exploitation to specific forms of movement and “unruly” mobile subjects (16). Stressing the link between the figure of the migrant and these devices of domination and exploitation, which take particularly violent forms in the present, does not imply to exclude from any consideration and investigation experiences of more privileged mobility and even migration. But it brings me to give epistemic as well as political primacy to those migrants whose movements and struggles are part and parcel of the complex, conflict-ridden and torn formation of the figure of the proletariat at the global level.

DANIELLA TRIMBOLI: Playing off of what Andrew said, the contemporary figure of the illegal migrant undoubtedly bears the baggage of racialization, though this is not addressed within the scope of the book. Nonetheless, Thomas stresses the multitude of forces at play in the production of the figure of the migrant and points to the compounding aspect of race at various historical moments.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Let’s shift the discussion toward the issue of race. While we may not all agree on how best to understand the relation between race and class, I think we all agree that capitalism and racism have been intimately linked in the modern era. Capitalism, we were told by Marx, began with the hunting of bodies with the epidermal hue of

blackness. Can we explore this constellation of capital, migration, and race?

DANIELLA TRIMBOLI: A crossover with Foucault's work on biopower is evident here. Thomas argues that the seventeenth century is the period in which the colonizing imperative takes shape, an imperative that coincides with what Foucault, in *Society Must Be Defended*, traces as the emergence of race. Foucault argues that the implicit power of the sovereign was questioned for the first time during this period. The sovereign was no longer seen to be established by a return to the natural place of power but rather consequential of its ability to control another, disparate group. Power analysis thus came to be about the struggle for rights and justice between these two groups—or races. Over time, this binary rift was re-interpreted in the Marxist framework as a binary of class that separated the bourgeois and the proletariat. At the end of the nineteenth century, this turn to class struggle (via Marxism) threatened to take over all claims to state truth and power, consequently threatening to usurp the sovereignty of the state.

Emerging simultaneously with this threat of class struggle was a new scientific discourse operating in the West that classified all objects and beings in the world biologically. This scientific discourse became a tool that the state was able to deploy as a new counterhistory: a “biologico-medical perspective” that ultimately led to “the appearance of what will become actual racism” (Foucault 80). With the aid of science, the state was able to deploy a discourse of race that classified human beings as more or less human. In this manner, the state recoded “the old counterhistory not in terms of class, but in terms of races—races in the biological and medical sense of that term,” consequently turning the race struggle weapon “against those who had forged it” (80-81). State racism became a tactic for the sovereign to continue claiming its legitimacy as the holder of the right to life and death and in order to pursue the colonial project. Thus, “race struggle” for Foucault stems from something much older than the modern, scientifically-founded understanding of race and is linked to the creation of the state at large.

Foucault's work on biopower is not intended to be a historical account of race, but it inevitably leads to a re-contextualization of racism. Similarly, Thomas's book provides new ways of thinking about how processes like racialization are mobile and occur in relation to other historical modes of mobile power. While various forms of expansion and expulsion are materially consequential and relegate some figures as more or less human, these forces are always on the move and accumulative. Somewhat paradoxically, it is here that the entry point for new political possibilities also surfaces. The third section of the book explores how migrant figures have accepted the mobile charge of migration, deliberately keeping it alive in order to thwart expansion by expulsion. He argues that

each figure deploys movement as a type of pedetic force. Unlike other mobile forces, which expand by social expulsion, pedetic force expands by “inclusive social transformation” (125). Thomas explains:

Pedetic social force coexists in an undivided social distribution alongside other forms of motion in a confluence—like a drop of ink diffuses into a glass of water—not a conjunction. The ink does not divide the water as something else expanding it or expelling it around kinetic social centers or series but diffuses and becomes ink-water (125).

We can use this idea to reconsider the material manifestation of today’s illegal migrant. The illegal migrant is constituted and shaped by various social regimes; however, due to the kinetic turbulence of these regimes, this reshaping is continuous, and it becomes impossible to remove discrete parts of this figure-in-motion. Further, the power relations that shape the asylum seeker can become the same forces that (re)shape this abject figure. An example given by Ahmed in her work on willful bodies called *Willful Subjects* helps to elucidate this point. Ahmed notes that the arm of the slave is shaped by the toil of slavery, but the *doing* of slavery creates a new type of arm. Like the ink-water, the arm of the slave that works for the Master cannot be separated from the arm of the slave that (through its work) becomes strong. The arm that is weak and the arm that is strong become the same arm. Thus, the strength of the disciplined and shaped arm might be redirected, willed into the arm of resistance, as the arm that “smashes the dialect.”

ADRIANA NOVOA: I know this has been mentioned twice now, but I’d like to pursue it some more. In regards to Mexico, Thomas writes under the assumption that all the migrants originating from this country have the same relationship with movement, but by failing to consider the existence of human diversity in movement, the book simplifies motivations and imposes a mechanistic social meaning. Thomas’s theoretical effort does not help us to understand the inequality of humans and its connection with kinetic power. In modern Latin American nations, the dynamics of human movement were shaped, and continue to be shaped, by racial divisions, for example.

My point is that over the 19th and 20th centuries race became an essential and ideological category that attributed meaning to different physical traits. Meanwhile, the fact that racial types can only exist, and continue to exist, as long as certain fluid exchanges remain confined within closed groups, was ignored. Race can only exist through an intended organic exchange, but it is not itself merely organic; it is representational and ideological. Those committed to race act to preserve an identity that cannot exist without their efforts to realize it. So, in order to preserve race, movement has to be restricted and regulated. In order for

this fantasy to take hold in reality migrants must be obscured to hide the fact that we became humans, and persist as a species, as migrants engaged in open and indiscriminate migrations. It is for this reason that the absence of race in the analysis of the Mexican-American border in the book is quite surprising. We can imagine that all bodies have kinetic power, and at the level of species this is the case; but if we ignore how over the last two centuries the mobility of bodies has been restricted according to their external characteristics, we cannot expect to explain the dynamics of the border, or the nature of movement in the region.

THOMAS NAIL: Ok, Race, discourse, and epistemology. There is a lot going on here. I am afraid I will not be able to fully respond to all of this in a satisfying way. I will say however, that there is *nothing but bodies in motion* in *The Figure of the Migrant*. There are speaking bodies, yes, but discourse itself is *not a body*. In this sense, I am offering a thoroughly materialist project. However, I don't think the framework I offer is incompatible with drawing on autobiographical discourses, I just don't in the book, because they are not necessary for describing the material kinetic regimes of migration, nor would they change them. On the topic of race, it's true this is not a primary pivot of analysis in this book. This goes back to an earlier response I gave to Adriana. I do not discuss race for couple reasons. The first, is that there is not one or even two kinds of racism. There are different historical regimes of racism that change in time and geography. There is no such thing as a single ahistorical racism. Racism was not born in the 18th century. The practice of social division based on race is very old and cannot be separated from other material conditions and biological markers that socially divide people. Skin colour is a very limited scope of how racialization has historically worked. All the figures of the migrant are racialized, but in different ways and describe different social mobilities. This is why Mexican migrants, like all migrants, are a mixture of different types of motions and social expulsions. I most certainly do not assume that all migrants from Mexico have the same relationship to movement. That is why I give a typology. The second reason for not including race more is that I have had to distinguish between two related kinopolitical projects. *The Figure of the Migrant* is only the first volume and focuses on political figures and the regimes of expulsion, the second volume, *Theory of the Border* (forthcoming this year with Oxford University Press) focuses on the material kinotechnics of social division, which includes the techniques of racialization.

MARK WILLIAM WESTMORELAND: Could you tell us a little more about this other research project?

THOMAS NAIL: In *Theory of the Border* I do a lot more to trace the material kinetic conditions of bodily marking or kinographics (of which racism is a subset). As I was saying earlier, the process of racialization is

defined by different historical kinetic regimes of material marking and circulation. So I am afraid I have to make a promissory note on this point and defer to the larger issue of corporeal kinographics developed in volume two.

In general, *Theory of the Border* extends the kinopolitical framework put forward in *The Figure of the Migrant* and uses it to analyse the political history of social division. The method and structure the book follows roughly that of the first book, including a final section of the book that offers a close study of the kinopolitics of the US-Mexico border. Just as *The Figure of the Migrant* presents a kinopolitics of the political subject, *Theory of the Border* presents a kinopolitics of the political object: the material and technical apparatuses that direct social circulation. Therefore, *Theory of the Border* also performs a similar kinopolitical inversion. Instead of looking at borders as the products of societies and states, it looks at states and societies as the products of the mobile processes of bordering. This second volume will be a crucial addition to the political vision put forward in *The Figure of the Migrant*.

TODD MAY / LADELLE MCWHORTER: Thanks, Thomas. That sounds fascinating. The idea of historically different dominant figures is interesting and reflects a historically informed approach. However, it would seem that with the appearance of new social arrangements, not only would there appear new figures but also the old figures would appear differently. You often write as though the old figures stand alongside the new ones. But it seems to us that they would be transformed. For instance, the centrifugal movement of expulsion might be dominated in a neoliberal period by the elasticity contemporary economics requires.

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks for the chance to respond to this question. I completely agree, but I realized that if I wanted to do the work to show all that, the book would be way too big. So, and maybe this was not as clear as I wanted it to be in the book, I do think that old figures appear in a new way. For example, 19th century Parisians called urban migrant worker's nomads, barbarians, vagabonds, and proletariat. What is interesting is how each name was associated with a certain kinetic attribute of that figure, but for the most part the most dominant regime motion of urban migration in this case was elastic and economic, so these other figures are minor mixtures within the proletariat migrant. So I think there is both a persistence of older figures, and a transformation of those figures into new ones. A contemporary example, that has been all over the news in Europe, is calling economic migrants "barbarians." The usage of this name describes a mixture of the perceived "danger" of the barbarian revolt, the apolitical status of the migrant, and the economic necessity of an elastic surplus motion of proletarian migrants that sustains Europe. The European immigrant is a mixture of both motions, but I think the economic motion of elasticity is dominant, in part because capitalism is the dominant mode

of social motion in this case, and in most cases today, and not the state. In any case, it's never all or nothing, there is always a mixture of the regimes of motion.

ROBIN CELIKATES: Against the background of these discussions, I would be curious to learn more about how you conceive of the epistemological basis of this theoretical project—and especially of the role the four different historical figures of the migrant play: the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletarian, to whom you devote highly informative chapters. How are these figures related to the—necessarily multiple and heterogeneous—self-understandings of “actually existing” migrants?

ANDREW DILTS: To quickly add to that: this strikes me as both the virtue and the vice of *The Figure of the Migrant*: it gives us both a framework for understanding the movement of peoples, of the sticky (and fluid) formations that emerge through those movements, and yet at the same time by not prioritizing the action and self-understandings of those very people, it risks freezing them into the same stasis which the book seeks to resist.

ROBIN CELIKATES: Redeploying the four historic figures of the migrant and projecting them onto contemporary migration surely leads to many insightful results, but how theoretically and politically productive is it, for example, to describe Mexican migrants as being engaged in raids, crossing the border “to gather resources and hopefully return home” (225), or to describe as “barbarian” migrants and migrant justice groups that struggle for political status and against social expulsion? Does it matter—theoretically, politically—that many migrants and many of those who see themselves as struggling in solidarity with them, will not understand themselves in these terms and would resist such analogical descriptions?

Thomas is surely right: the migrant is the political figure of our time. It seems to me, however, that the radical implications of this claim might only fully come to light if we understand our theoretical work as part of what the young Marx called “the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age,” a struggle in which migrants are indeed speaking “for themselves and in their own name.” *The Figure of the Migrant* is the rare case of a book in political theory that confronts even those who are not fully convinced by its answers with an inescapable question: What would a political theory look like that started with the social and political practice of migration in all its complexity, one that would be based in migrants’ “experiences and their own skills” as expressed in their own struggles?

TODD MAY / LADELLE MCWHORTER: Sometimes it seems as though you were shoehorning your examples, particularly in the last section. You are trying to show that the older historical figures are still active in

contemporary societies. For instance, the idea of migrant workers as crossing borders to raid (225), just like the prehistoric figure of the nomad, seems a stretch—the analogy is a bit strained. This also refers to our first point. The overlay of later social arrangements makes it difficult to discuss earlier ones in the contemporary period as though they were straightforwardly analogous. You discuss hybridization in the conclusion, but it doesn't appear in your analyses.

ANDREW DILTS: What, I wonder, would *The Figure of the Migrant* look like if it were written in reverse, that is, from the ground up beginning with migrants themselves?

THOMAS NAIL: Thanks for the feedback folks. It has taken us a while to get here, but I think one of the main sticking points in this conversation is a methodological difference. Our conversation has been really helpful for clarifying some things for me, so thank you. I am glad I have the chance to say a bit about the methodological motivations at the end here, even if it turns out we all disagree about which one is best. So it seems like we all agree (or are at least sympathetic to) the idea of beginning with the migrant as a basis for doing political theory. Now what is the appropriate method for starting with the migrant? My methodological thesis is that if we are going to start with the migrant, and not just treat it as another object of existing theories, but as the very foundation of a theory itself, we should start with what the migrant *is*. My argument is that the migrant is above all defined by movement (and not just quantitative movement). The philosophical category of movement has been historically marginalized and treated as derived throughout Western history. Almost no one has adopted it as a conceptually or methodologically *primary* category. This is not a coincidence. The figure of the migrant, defined by motion, has suffered the same twin-fate. *The Figure of the Migrant* is simultaneously an emphasis on the primacy of movement and on the political figure defined most by its movement, namely, the migrant. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this book is kinopolitical. This is one of the things I hope is original about my book: its new conceptual framework. What this framework offers that others don't is that it is the only one that *starts* with the definitional being of the migrant itself. By granting methodological primacy to discourse, epistemology, ideologies, and so on we are not starting with what the migrant *is*: the political figure defined by motion. We are starting with something else (discourse analysis, stand-point epistemology, symbolic forms) and *applying* it to migrants. Again the migrant and its motion become derived categories. Now, I do not think this means that language, thought, ideology, and so on are irrelevant or unaccountable if we start with the primacy of motion—but they do need to be explained. After reading *The Figure of the Migrant*, it is completely understandable for the reader to wonder how their preferred theoretical framework fits in because I do not provide a kinetic theory of language,

epistemology, and symbolic representation here—which would demonstrate the primacy of motion in those domains. This is a big task and an important part of my larger project. For the present book, however, the methodological decision is a political one: one either begins with the migrant and movement or does not. So again I am afraid I am going to have to defer to a future volume, already in the works, that deals with these philosophical issues more directly, not by critique, but by accounting for them in purely kinetic terms.

What *The Figure of the Migrant* offers instead is a kinopolitically descriptive theory. As a description of social motion it is not essentially incompatible with what people say, what they think, or their symbolic representations, but neither is the historical description of the kinetic regime fundamentally changed by them. For example, the pedetic movement of the nomadic raid is both a rhetorical description and an epistemological experience of Neolithic farmers and certain American nationalists who describe this type of migrant as a “raiding nomad.” I am not shoehorning the rhetorical example; people actually said this. But regardless of what they said or thought, the pattern of motion (crossing over a border, taking supplies, and leaving) is what they *did*. I am not endorsing the rhetoric or anything else, but am simply describing a common kinopolitical regime of the raid, which emerged in the Neolithic and is repeated today. There is no analogy, the type of movement *is* the same. There is obviously a lot more to be said on these topics so I look forward to further discussion in the future. Thank you everyone for your time.

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