

On Destroying What Destroys You

An Interview with Thomas Nail

One may see the aims of Hostis and feel a tinge of moral discomfort when it begins to ask questions regarding the status of migrants, of refugees, and of exiles,¹ if only for the very reason that there remains some commitment on our part to the idea that to be content with a politics of recognition and a strategy of representation perpetuates the illusion of emancipation when all that can be achieved is Statist inclusion. In other words, once recognition as political strategy is exhausted, the very people who are indexed by this representation are left wanting. In this same vein, then, we might say that the question of representation, recognition, and the figure of the migrant forces us to go one step further—to say that “the real content of the demand ‘citizenship papers for all!’ could also be formulated as: everyone must have citizenship papers so that we can all burn them.”² How does your concept of “migrant cosmopolitanism” deal with the potential merits and

many shortcomings of this exhaustive and truncated application of Statist inclusion?

Historically, there have been numerous figures of the migrant. For example, the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat are four major kinds of migratory figures. For me, the figure of the migrant is not a class or identity; it is a vector (a position in motion). As such, anyone can move into and out of it as territorial, political, juridical, and economic factors change. This position is one defined by the primacy of movement and can be formulated in the following way: the figure of the migrant is the political figure who is socially expelled or dispossessed as a result, or as the cause, of their mobility. The migrant is the collective name for all the political figures in history who have been territorially, politically, juridically, and economically displaced as a condition of the social expansion of power.

Migrants are the true movers of history and political transformation, but this does not mean their movements are immune from cooptation by states, capital, or other forms of expulsion. In fact, it is their captured motion that is the very condition of social power in the first place (slavery, serfdom, waged labor, and so on). In this sense I think it is too

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simplistic to say that all of their movements are either antistate or reformist, in part because the difference between reformist acts and revolutionary acts is not an essential or formal one, it is a contingent and material one. An act is revolutionary when it results in revolution. Burning passports may or may not be revolutionary; it depends on the collective effects.

However, what is interesting to me about the figure of the migrant is that it has produced some pretty incredible collective effects that are completely outside territorial, statist, juridical, and capitalist circuits of social motion (slave and maroon societies, vagabond collectives, workers communes, and so on). If we want to think seriously about the possibilities of some kind of social organization distinct from the reactionary forces of territorial nation-states and capitalism, then we should start with those historically invented by migrants. Cosmopolitanism is the name often taken by the reactionary forces of states toward “including” migrants. This is not the worst thing that could happen, but it also does not accurately describe the tendency of what I am calling “migrant cosmopolitanism” to create nonexpulsive social structures outside such structures of representation.

Do you see “migrant cosmopolitanism” as something distinct from more reformist and liberal notions of seeking the inclusion of, and the granting of rights to undocumented persons? The occupation of the Saint Bernard church, which you have thought a lot about and which lasted from June 28 to August 23, 1996, strikes one as being something more than a politics of recognition. You also mention the No One Is Illegal migrant justice group based in Toronto as embodying the subversive and more radical aspects of the struggles around immigration, political refugees, and exiles. Obviously the tenacity of these struggles came from their level of self-organization and their ability to gain various forms of popular support, both materially and symbolically. What is it about these examples of migrant struggles that point beyond the shortcomings of a type of liberal approach to piecemeal reformism?

What is so exciting to me about these movements is that they are not just asking for rights, they are demanding the abolition of citizenship altogether in a very specific way: by creating autonomous communities open to anyone regardless of their status. The slogan “Status for All” can be interpreted in two ways: “Everyone who lives here should have legal status within the juridical nation-state” or “If everyone has status, no one has status.” The latter is consistent with No

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One is Illegal's demand for the abolition of nation-states and borders. Universal status undermines the territorial and national aspects of the state, and therefore undermines the state *tout court*. I have written elsewhere about the details of their Solidarity City campaign in Toronto.³ The aim of this campaign is to bypass the state altogether and organize migrants, social service providers, and allies into mutually supportive relations, regardless of status. Another example I have written about in *Returning to Revolution* is the Zapatistas.⁴ The Zapatistas are indigenous people in Mexico expelled from their land. As migrants in their own country, they have decided to not simply demand rights from the state or migrate to the United States, but to build autonomous communes with their own nonexpulsive social structure.

Between 2008-2010 there was some publicity around the notion of migrant struggles taking up the idea of "demanding the right to stay home."⁵ This idea of trying to force a situation on the State where migrants don't have to leave, don't have to live the vicissitudes of migration itself also strikes us as something of interest, primarily for two reasons. First, the demand is situated in terms of an initial refusal to migrate, the demand to not be forced to live the life and fate of migrants moving from the global south to the global north; and second, because

this initial refusal also refuses what capitalism has increasingly gained ahold of, namely, public imagination and a people's way of investing and/or desiring a certain future. As Guattari said, "In my view, this huge factory, this mighty capitalistic machine also produces what happens to us when we dream, when we daydream, when we fantasize, when we fall in love, and so on."⁶ So this initial refusal of being forced into the life of a migrant also acts as a refusal of investing in a future that coincides with whatever capitalism codes and reformulates as a desirable life for everyone—moving to a Western country, living a suburban lifestyle, replicating the heteronormative narratives found in Hollywood/Blockbuster cinema in one's own personal life, or what have you. Simply put, this "demand for the right to stay home" fights at the level of "forms-of-life," and not simply at the level of Statist recognition of certain rights. What, if anything, has your work on these issues helped you clarify for yourself and others regarding this difference between struggling for State inclusion versus struggling for a 'form-of-life'? Or do you perhaps find this distinction unhelpful, outdated, conceptually ineffective, and so on?

This is a great example and I deal with it at more length in *The Figure of the Migrant*.⁷ But in short, let me make two points. First, the "right to stay home" is a migrant movement and not the rejection of migration. Most folks involved in this

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movement are people who have already been expelled from their homes at one point or another. “The right to stay home” could just as easily be called “the right to return home” since most are already migrants. Take for example the millions of Mexican migrants in the United States who would much rather be back home in Mexico with their families. Or think of the millions of indigenous people around the world who are being expelled from their land by the capitalist accumulation of agricultural land. Even if they are not yet territorially expelled, they are already juridically, politically, and economically expelled from their social status in order to facilitate their geographical displacement. Even if some people are allowed to stay, what does this mean if everything around them has been destroyed by mining companies, monocrop farms, hydroelectric dams, and so on. One can become a migrant even if it is only the environment that changes.

Second, the idea of a migrant social movement around the right to stay or return home is a very old one. This strategy was the invention of the ancient figure of the migrant: the barbarian. The ancient world (Sumer, Greece, Egypt, Rome) is absolutely filled with slave revolts by captured barbarians, only a fraction of which were recorded

in any detail, unfortunately. The primary demand of almost all of these revolts was the same: to return home or find a new home. In fact, this is the etymological meaning of the word “revolt” in the context of mass slavery: to return home. There is a fascinating reason why this becomes the dominant form of counterpower in the ancient world. For me this is less an issue of “form-of-life” than the “form-of-motion” proper to the migrant.

In Means Without End, Agamben presents the refugee as a figure of the threshold. Agamben's other chosen figures are quite tragic, the most famous being Bartleby and the muselmann of the camp. This is all to say that theoretical takes of the refugee routinely associate them with the power of incapacity. We're curious about why popular media seems all too ready to also characterize them in this way. Most high-profile news events, such as the recent migrant boat disasters in the Mediterranean, depict them as helpless. What is the form of power you find most useful in your analysis?

Ah, yes. Agamben has this great line in his essay “Beyond Human Rights” that is very inspiring to me. He says, “It is even possible that, if we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without

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reservation, 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.”⁸ It’s too bad he never followed up on this claim. I agree with the spirit of his point but I disagree about the content and method of this claim. This quote is one of the reasons I wanted to write *The Figure of the Migrant*. Agamben is on the right track, but he does not see the refugee as only one among many other figures of the migrant as I do, and therefore as part of a much larger philosophical project focusing on political motion and migrant counterpower.

But to your question: The refugee is an ancient figure of the migrant related to the barbarian. The two emerge at roughly the same time in history in the context of widespread slave revolts. Only when there is barbarism and slavery can there be the escaped slave who seeks asylum. The refugee (from the Latin word *fugere*) is the one who flees: first being forced to flee one’s homeland as a captured slave, and then having to flee one’s captor in favor of the *refugium*, or ἄσυλον (*asulon*, asylum). But the political limit of the figure of the refugee is that it does not follow the same imperative

to revolt or “return home” as with barbarians like Spartacus, the Goths, and others who tried to fight their way to freedom. Instead, the refugee remains tied to the *refugium*. In this way the refugee was simply bound to a new master: the god, temple, and priests that managed all the first refugee asylums for escaped slaves in the ancient world.

Of course, I do not want to say that this means all refugees are helpless! My point is simply that the political figure of the refugee has a long genealogy that is still active today and tends to imply in its genealogy someone who is simply looking for a new master, a new nation-state, church, or refuge. Nation-states prefer dealing with this figure and would like to keep this historical meaning. Compare this to the refugee’s historical twin, the barbarian! The barbarian is wild, chaotic, destructive, mobile, active, powerful, and so on: the destroyer of civilization. Historically, the barbarian is to be feared and the refugee is to be pitied by the gods. On this point I am against Agamben and on the side of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Hardt, Negri, and many of the anarchists of the nineteenth century: we need a new barbarism.

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Hostis is quite inspired by migrants' penchant for burning down the detention centers in which they are held captive. High-profile events include riots where inmates have taken over or destroyed large parts of facilities, as in Texas, Australia, and across the EU. Most political commentators have nothing positive to say about these events, though sometimes a litany of abusive practices come to light. Hostis is happy to celebrate these moments as a collective demonstration of the anarchist principle "destroy what destroys you." What do you see in this insistent desire to rebel?

This brings us to another figure of the migrant: the vagabond. The masterless men and women of the Middle Ages (serfs, peasants, beggars, witches, rogues, and so on) significantly developed the migrant art of rebellion in its strictly etymological sense: turning back in direct violence. Since barbarians are kidnapped from their home, their counterpower is related to their desire to return home. All violence is a means to the ends of escape. While barbarian slaves could potentially escape the limits of their empires, by the Middle Ages there were fewer and fewer places left to flee outside the jurisdiction of some lord or another. Thus, vagabonds increasingly began to directly confront authority from within, by rebelling. This is not to say that there were

not also raids or revolts of some kind, or that direct violence was missing from raids and revolts in previous ages, but simply that during the Middle Ages the primary goal of most migrant counterpower was less about supplies (raiding) or radical escape (revolt) than about direct assassination, political murder, burning, revenge, and desecration from within society without the goal of leaving it. Today the figure of the vagabond persists in migrant attacks on detention centers, the burning of passports, squatting, theft of electricity, property destruction, violent battles with police, and so on.

To hazard a deceptively straightforward postcolonial question: what does the migrant tell us about ourselves?

Well, for one, we are all becoming migrants.⁹ People today relocate to greater distances more frequently than ever before in human history. While many people may not move across a regional or international border, they tend to change jobs more often, commute longer and farther to work,¹⁰ change their residence repeatedly, and tour internationally more often.¹¹ Some of these phenomena are directly related to recent events, such as the impoverishment of middle

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classes in certain rich countries after the financial crisis of 2008, subsequent austerity cuts to social welfare programs, and rising unemployment. The subprime mortgage crisis led to the expulsion of millions of people from their homes worldwide, 9 million in the United States alone. Foreign investors and governments have acquired 540 million acres since 2006, resulting in the eviction of millions of small farmers in poor countries; and mining practices have become increasingly destructive around the world, including hydraulic fracturing and tar sands. This general increase in human mobility and expulsion is now widely recognized as a defining feature of the twenty-first century.¹² “A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration.”¹³

However, not all migrants are alike in their movement.¹⁴ For some, movement offers opportunity, recreation, and profit with only a temporary expulsion. For others, movement is dangerous and constrained, and their social expulsions are much more severe and permanent. Today most people fall somewhere on this migratory spectrum between the two poles of “inconvenience” and “incapacitation.” But what all migrants on this spectrum share, at some point, is the experience that their movement results in a certain degree of expulsion from their territorial,

political, juridical, or economic status. Even if the end result of migration is a relative increase in money, power, or enjoyment, the process of migration itself almost always involves an insecurity of some kind and duration: the removal of territorial ownership or access, the loss of the political right to vote or to receive social welfare, the loss of legal status to work or drive, or the financial loss associated with transportation or change in residence. For all these reasons, the migrant is becoming the political figure of our time.

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Hostis is a journal of negation. Fed up with the search for a social solution to the present crisis, it aspires to be attacked wildly and painted as utterly black without a single virtue. *Hostis Issue 1: Cruelty* is available from Little Black Cart. It is

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currently accepting submissions on the topic of “Beyond Recognition.” More information can be found at incivility.org.

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¹ For instance, in the CFP for issue 2 we begin by asserting the following: “Seeking recognition is always servile. We have little interest in visibility, consciousness raising, or populist pandering.”

² Tiqqun, *Untitled Notes on Immigration*

³ Thomas Nail, “Building Sanctuary City: No One is Illegal—Toronto on Non-Status Migrant Justice Organizing,” *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action* no. 11 (2010): 149–162.

⁴ Thomas Nail, *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari, and Zapatismo* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

⁵ See David Bacon’s 2008 article ‘Immigration and the Right to Stay Home’ (http://www.alternet.org/story/92639/immigration_and_the_right_to_stay_home) & his 2010 piece ‘All Over the World, Migrants Demand the Right to Stay Home’ (http://inthesetimes.com/article/15793/all_over_the_world_migrants_demand_the_right_to_stay_at_home)

⁶ Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolutions in Brazil*

⁷ Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights” in *Means Without Ends* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

⁹ With the rise of home foreclosure and unemployment people

today are beginning to have much more in common with migrants than with certain notions of citizenship (grounded in certain social, legal, and political rights). “All people may now be wanderers”: Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 87. “Migration must be understood in a broad sense”: Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁰ World Bank’s World Development Indicators 2005: Section 3 Environment, Table 3.11, <http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=141>.

¹¹ International annual tourist arrivals exceeded 1 billion globally for the first time in history in 2012. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), “World Tourism Barometer,” vol. 11, 2013, http://dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_brom13_01_jan_excerpt_0.pdf.

¹² I use the word “expulsion” here in the same sense in which Saskia Sassen uses it to indicate a general dispossession or deprivation of social status. See *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 1–2. Many scholars have noted a similar trend. For an excellent review of the “mobilities” literature on migration, see Alison Blunt, “Cultural Geographies of Migration:

Mobility, Transnationality and Diaspora,” *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007): 684–94.

¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 213.

¹⁴ Bauman, *Globalization*.