

THREE THESES ON NEOLIBERAL MIGRATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

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Today there are more than 1 billion regional and international migrants, and the number continues to rise: within 40 years, it might double because of climate change. While many of these migrants might not cross a regional or international border, people change residences and jobs more often, while commuting longer and farther to work. This increase in human mobility and expulsion affects us all. It should be recognized as a defining feature of our epoch: The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant.

The argument of this paper is that the migrant is also a defining figure of neoliberal social reproduction. This argument is composed of three interlocking theses on what I am calling the “neoliberal migrant.”

Thesis 1: The first thesis argues that the migrant is foremost a socially constitutive figure. That is, we should not think of the migrant as a derivative or socially exceptional figure who merely travels between pre-constituted states. The movement and circulation of migrants has always played an important historical role in the social and kinetic production and reproduction of society itself.¹

Thesis 2: The second thesis therefore argues that social reproduction itself is a fundamentally kinetic or mobile process. The fact that a historically record number of human beings are now migrating and commuting between countries, cities, rural and urban areas, multiple part time precarious jobs, means that humans are now spending a world historical record amount of unpaid labor-time *just moving around*. This mobility is itself a form of social reproduction.

Thesis 3: The third thesis is that neoliberalism functions as a migration regime of social reproduction. Under neoliberalism, the burden of social reproduction has been increasingly displaced from the state to the population itself (health care, child care, transportation, and other traditionally social services). At the same time, workers now have less time than ever before to

do this labor because of increasing reproductive mobility regimes (thesis two). This leads then to a massively expanded global market for surplus reproductive laborers who can mow lawns, clean houses, and care for children so first world laborers can commute longer and more frequently. Neoliberalism completes the cycle by providing a new “surplus reproductive labor army” in the form of displaced migrants from the global South.

We turn now to a defense of these theses.

Thesis 1: The Migrant is Socially Constitutive

This is the case, in short, because societies are themselves defined by a continual movement of circulation, expansion, and expulsion that relies on the mobility of migrants to accommodate its social expansions and contractions.

The migrant is the political figure who is socially expelled or dispossessed, to some degree as a result, or as the cause, of their mobility. We are not all migrants, but most of us are becoming migrants. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there were more regional and international migrants than ever before in recorded history—a fact that political theory has yet to take seriously.²

If we are going to take the figure of the migrant seriously as a constitutive, and not derivative, figure of Western politics, we have to change the starting point of political theory. Instead of starting with a set of pre-existing citizens, we should begin with the flows of migrants and the ways they have circulated or sedimented into citizens and states in the first place—as well as emphasizing how migrants have constituted a counterpower and alternative to state structures.

This requires first of all that we take seriously the constitutive role played by migrants before the 19th century, and give up the arbitrary starting point of the nation-state. In this way we will be able to see how the nation-state itself was not the origin but the *product* of migration and bordering techniques that existed long before it came on the scene.³

Second of all, and based on this, we need to rethink the idea of political inclusion as a fundamentally kinetic process of circulation, not just as a formal legal, economic, or other kind of status. In other words, instead of a formal political distinction between inclusion/exclusion or a formal economic distinction between productive/unproductive, we need a material one of circulation/recirculation showing how social activity is defined by lived cycles of socially reproductive motions.

One way to think about the constitutive role played by migrants is as a kinetic radicalization of Karl Marx's theory of primitive accumulation.

Primitive Accumulation

Marx develops this concept from a passage in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*: "The accumulation of stock must, in the nature of things, be previous to the division of labour."⁴ In other words, before humans can be divided into owners and workers, there must have already been an accumulation such that those in power could enforce the division in the first place. The superior peoples of history naturally accumulate power and stock and then wield it to perpetuate the subordination of their inferiors. For Smith, this process is simply a natural phenomenon: Powerful people always already have accumulated stock, as if from nowhere.

For Marx, however, this quote is perfectly emblematic of the historical obfuscation of political economists regarding the violence and expulsion required for those in power to maintain and expand their stock. Instead of acknowledging this violence, political economy mythologizes and naturalizes it just like the citizen-centric nation state does politically. For Marx the concept of primitive accumulation has a material history. It is the precapitalist condition for capitalist production. In particular, Marx identifies this process with the expulsion of peasants and indigenous peoples from their land through enclosure, colonialism, and anti-vagabond laws in sixteenth-century England. Marx's thesis is that the condition of the social expansion of capitalism is the prior expulsion of people from their land and from their legal status under customary law. Without the expulsion of these people, there is no expansion of private property and thus no capitalism.

While some scholars argue that primitive accumulation was merely a single historical event in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, others argue that it plays a recurring logical function within capitalism itself: In order to expand, capitalism today still relies on non-capitalist methods of social expulsion and violence.⁵

The idea of expansion by expulsion broadens the idea of primitive accumulation in two ways. First, the process of dispossessing people of their social status (expulsion) in order to further develop or advance a given form of social motion (expansion) is not at all unique to the capitalist regime of social motion. We see the same social process

in early human societies whose progressive cultivation of land and animals (territorial expansion) with the material technology of fencing also expelled (territorial dispossession) a part of the human population. This includes hunter-gatherers whose territory was transformed into agricultural land, as well as surplus agriculturalists for whom there was no more arable land left to cultivate at a certain point. Thus social expulsion is the condition of social expansion in two ways: It is an internal condition that allows for the removal of part of the population when certain internal limits have been reached (carrying capacity of a given territory, for example) and it is an external condition that allows for the removal of part of the population outside these limits when the territory is able to expand outward into the lands of other groups (hunter gatherers). In this case, territorial expansion was only possible on the condition that part of the population was expelled in the form of migratory nomads, forced into the surrounding mountains and deserts.

We later see the same logic in the ancient world, whose dominant political form, the state, would not have been possible without the material technology of the border wall that both fended off as enemies and held captive as slaves a large body of barbarians (through political dispossession) from the mountains of the Middle East and Mediterranean. The social conditions for the expansion of a growing political order, including warfare, colonialism, and massive public works, were precisely the expulsion of a population of barbarians who had to be walled out and walled in by political power. This technique occurs again and again throughout history, as I have tried to show in my work.

The second difference between previous theories of primitive accumulation and the more expansive one offered here is that this process of prior expulsion or social deprivation Marx noted is not only territorial or juridical, and its expansion is not only economic.⁶ Expulsion does not simply mean forcing people off their land, although in many cases it may include this. It also means depriving people of their political rights by walling off the city, criminalizing types of persons by the cellular techniques of enclosure and incarceration, or restricting their access to work by identification and checkpoint techniques.

Expulsion is the degree to which a political subject is deprived or dispossessed of a certain status in the social order. Accordingly, societies also expand and reproduce their power in several major ways: through territorial accumulation, political power, juridical order, and economic

profit. What is similar between the theory of primitive accumulation and the kinetic theory of expansion by expulsion is that most major expansions of social kinetic power also require a prior or primitive violence of kinetic social expulsion. The border is the material technology and social regime that directly enacts this expulsion. The concept of primitive accumulation is merely one historical instance of a more general kinopolitical logic at work in the emergence and reproduction of previous societies.

Marx even makes several general statements in *Capital* that justify this kind of interpretive extension. For Marx, the social motion of production in general strives to reproduce itself. He calls this “periodicity”: “Just as the heavenly bodies always repeat a certain movement, once they have been flung into it, so also does social production, once it has been flung into this movement of alternate expansion and contraction. Effects become causes in their turn, and the various vicissitudes of the whole process, which always reproduces its own conditions, take on the form of periodicity.”⁷ According to Marx, every society, not just capitalist ones, engages in some form of social production. Like the movements of the planets, society expands and contracts itself according to a certain logic, which strives to reproduce and expand the conditions that brought it about in the first place. Its effects in turn become causes in a feedback loop of social circulation. For Marx, social production is thus fundamentally a social motion of circulation or reproduction.

In short, the material-kinetic conditions for the expansion of societies requires the use of borders (fences, walls, cells, checkpoints) to produce a system of marginalized territorial, political, legal, and economic migrants that can be more easily recirculated elsewhere as needed. Just as the vagabond migrant is dispossessed by enclosures and transformed into the economic proletariat, so each dominant social system has its own structure of expansion by expulsion and reproduction as well.

Expansion by Expulsion

Expulsion is therefore a social movement that drives out and entails a deprivation of social status.⁸ Social expulsion is not simply the deprivation of territorial status (i.e., removal from the land); it includes three other major types of social deprivation: political, juridical, and economic. This is not a spatial or temporal concept but a fundamentally kinetic concept insofar as we understand movement extensively *and* intensively, that is, quantitatively

and qualitatively. Social expulsion is the qualitative transformation of deprivation in status, resulting in or as a result of extensive movement in spacetime.

The social expulsion of migrants, for example, is not always free or forced. In certain cases, some migrants may decide to move, but they are not free to determine the social or qualitative conditions of their movement or the degree to which they may be expelled from certain social orders. Therefore, even in this case, expulsion is still a driving-out insofar as its conditions are not freely or individually chosen but socially instituted and compelled. Expulsion is a fundamentally social and collective process because it is the loss of a socially determined status, even if only temporarily and to a small degree.⁹

Expansion, on the other hand, is the process of opening up that allows something to pass through. This opening-up also entails a simultaneous extension or spreading out. Expansion is thus an enlargement or extension through a selective opening. Like the process of social expulsion, the process of social expansion is not strictly territorial or primarily spatial; it is also an intensive or qualitative growth in territorial, political, juridical, and economic kinopower. It is both an intensive and extensive increase in the conjunction of new social flows and a broadening of social circulation. Colonialism is a good example of an expansion which is clearly territorial as well as political, juridical, and economic.

Kinopower is thus defined by a constitutive circulation, but this circulation functions according to a dual logic of reproduction. At one end, social circulation is a motion that drives flows outside its circulatory system: expulsion. This is accomplished by redirecting and driving out certain flows through exile, slavery, criminalization, or unemployment. At the other end of circulation there is an opening out and passing in of newly conjoined flows through a growth of territorial, political, juridical, and economic power. Expansion by expulsion is the social logic by which some members of society are dispossessed of their status as migrants so that social power can be expanded elsewhere. Power is not only a question of repression; it is a question of mobilization and kinetic reproduction.

For circulation to open up to more flows and become more powerful than it was, it has historically relied on the disjunction or expulsion of migrant flows. In other words, the expansion of power has historically relied on a socially constitutive migrant population.

Thesis 2: Mobility is a form of Social Reproduction

People today continually move greater distances more frequently than ever before in human history. Even when people are not moving across a regional or international border, they tend to have more jobs, change jobs more often, commute longer and farther to their places of work,¹⁰ change their residences repeatedly, and tour internationally more often.¹¹

Some of these phenomena are directly related to recent events, such as the impoverishment of middle classes in certain rich countries after the financial crisis of 2008, neoliberal austerity cuts to social-welfare programs, and rising unemployment. The subprime-mortgage crisis, for example, led to the expulsion of millions of people from their homes worldwide (9 million in the United States alone). Globally, 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.

In 2006, the world crossed a monumental historical threshold, with more than half of the world's population living in urban centers, compared with just fifteen percent a hundred years ago. This number is now expected to rise above seventy-five percent by 2050, with more than two billion more people moving to cities.¹² The term “global urbanization,” as Saskia Sassen rightly observes, is only another way of politely describing large-scale human migration and displacement from rural areas, often caused by corporate land grabs.¹³ What this means is not only that more people are migrating to cities but now within cities and between suburban and urban areas for work. This general increase in human mobility and expulsion is now widely recognized as a defining feature of the twenty-first century so far.¹⁴

Accordingly, this situation is having and will continue to have major social consequences for social relations in the twenty-first century. It therefore demands the attention of critical theory. In particular, it should call our attention to the fact that this epic increase in human mobility and migration around the world is not just a minor or one-time “inconvenience” or “economic risk” that migrants make and then join the ranks of other “settled” urban workers. It is a continuous, ongoing, and nearly universal massive extraction of unpaid reproductive labor.

Urban workers have become increasingly unsettled and mobile. The world *average* commuting time is now 40 minutes, *one-way*.¹⁵ This unpaid transport

time is not a form of simply unproductive or unpaid labor. It is actually the material and kinetic conditions for the reproduction of the worker herself to arrive at work ready for labor. Not only this, but unpaid transport labor also continuously reproduces the spatial architecture of capitalist urban centers and suburban peripheries.¹⁶ The increasing neoliberal privatization of roadway construction and tollways is yet another way in which unpaid transport labor is not “unproductive” at all but rather continues to reproduce a massive new private transport market. This goes hand in hand with the neoliberal decline of affordable public transportation, especially in the US.

Unfortunately, transport mobility has not traditionally been considered a form of social reproductive activity, but as global commute times and traffic increase, it is now becoming extremely obvious how important and constitutive this migratory labor actually is to the functioning of capital. If we define social reproduction as including all the conditions for the worker to arrive at work, then surely mobility is one of these necessary conditions. Perhaps one of the reasons it has not been recognized as such is because transport is an activity that looks least like an activity, since the worker is typically just sitting in a vehicle. Or perhaps the historical identification of vehicles and migration as sites of freedom (especially in America) has covered over the oppressive and increasingly obligatory unpaid labor time they often entail.

The consequences of this new situation appeared at first as merely temporal inconveniences for first-world commuters or what we might call BMWs (bourgeois migrant workers). This burden initially fell and still falls disproportionately on women who are called on to make up for the lost reproductive labor of their traveling spouses (even if they themselves also commute). Increasingly, however, as more women have begun to commute farther and more often this apparently or merely reproductive neoliberal transport labor has actually produced a growing new market demand for a “surplus reproductive labor army” to take up these domestic and care labors. This brings us to our third thesis.

Thesis: 3: Neoliberal Migration is a Regime of Social Reproduction

The third thesis is that neoliberalism functions as a migration regime of social reproduction. This is the case insofar as neoliberalism *expands* itself in the form of a newly enlarged reproductive labor market, accomplished through the relative expulsion of the workers from their homes (and into

vehicles) and the absolute expulsion of a migrant labor force from the global south to fill this new market.

Migration therefore has and continues to function as a constitutive form of social reproduction (thesis one). This is a crucial thesis because it stresses the active role migrants play in the production and reproduction of society, but it is not a new phenomenon. Marx was of course one of the first to identify this process with respect to the capitalist mode of production. The proletariat is always already a *migrant* proletariat. At any moment an employed worker could be unemployed and forced to relocate according to the demands of capitalist valorization. In fact, the worker's mobility is the condition of modern industry's whole form of motion. Without the migration of a surplus population to new markets, from the rural to the city, from city to city, from country to country (what Marx calls the "floating population") capitalist accumulation would not be possible at all. "Modern industry's whole form of motion," Marx claims, "therefore depends on the constant transformation of a part of the working population into unemployed or semi-employed 'hands.'"¹⁷ As capitalist markets expand, contract, and multiply "by fits and starts," Marx says, capital requires the possibility of suddenly adding and subtracting "great masses of men into decisive areas without doing any damage to the scale of production. The surplus population supplies these masses."¹⁸

What is historically new about the neoliberal migration regime is not merely that it simply expels a portion of the population in order to put it into waged labor elsewhere. What is new is that late-capitalist neoliberalism has now expelled one portion of the workers from a portion of their own *un-waged reproductive activity* in order to open up a new market for the *waged activity* of an as yet unexploited productive population of migrants from the global South. In other words *reproductive labor itself has become a site of capitalist expansion*. Wherever objects and activities have not yet been commodified, there we will find the next frontier of capitalist valorization.

The consequence of this is a dramatic double expulsion. On the one hand, the bourgeois migrant worker is expelled from her home in the form of unpaid reproductive transport labor so that on the other hand the proletarian migrant worker can be expelled from her home as an international migrant and then expelled from her home again as a commuting worker to do someone else's reproductive activity. The burden of social reproduction then falls disproportionately on

the last link in the chain: the unpaid reproductive labor that sustains the domestic and social life of the migrant family. This is what must be ultimately expelled to expand the market of social reproduction at another level. This expulsion falls disproportionately on migrant women from the global south who must somehow reproduce their family's social conditions, commute, and then reproduce someone else's family's conditions well.¹⁹

Neoliberalism thus works on both fronts at the same time. On one side it increasingly withdraws and/or privatizes state social services that aid in social reproductive activities (child care, health care, public transit, and so on) while at the same increasing transport and commute times making a portion of those activities increasingly difficult for workers. On the other side it introduces the same structural adjustment policies (curtailed state and increased privatization) into the global South with the effect of mass economic migration to Northern countries where migrants can become waged producers in what was previously an "unproductive" (with respect to capital) sector of human activity: social reproduction itself.

Conclusion

This is the sense in which migrants play a constitutive role in the kinopolitics of social reproduction and neoliberal expansion. In other words, neoliberal migration has made possible a new level of commodification of social reproduction itself. Waged domestic labor is not new, of course, but what is new is the newly expanded nature of this sector of labor and its entanglement with a global regime of neoliberal expulsion and forced migration.

One of the features that defines the uniquely neoliberal form of social reproduction today is the degree to which capitalism has relied directly on economically liberal trade policies and politically liberal international governments in order to redistribute record-breaking numbers of "surplus migrant reproductive labor" into Western countries. Global migration is therefore not the side-effect of neoliberal globalization; it is the *main effect*. Neoliberalism should thus be understood as a migration regime for expanding Western power through the expulsion and accumulation of migrant reproductive labor.

NOTES

- 1 See Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- 2 Thomas Nail, "Migrant Cosmopolitanism," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 29 (2), 187–199 and Thomas Nail, "A tale of two crises: migration and terrorism after the Paris attacks," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16 (1), 158–167.
- 3 On the mobility of social borders see Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 4 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; repr.; Lawrence: Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), Book II, introduction, 162.
- 5 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Saskia Sassen, "A Savage Sorting of Winners and Losers: Contemporary Versions of Primitive Accumulation," *Globalizations* 7, no. 1–2 (2010): 23–50; Fredy Perlman, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1985); Massimo De Angelis, "Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital 'Enclosures,'" *The Commoner*, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf>. Accessed 4/10/15.
- 6 For a full theory of expansion by expulsion, see: Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) and Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 1:786.
- 8 Saskia Sassen offers a similar definition of expulsion: "people, enterprises, and places expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time." *Expulsions*, 1.
- 9 There are even "quite a few things the tourist could complain about." Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 98.
- 10 World Bank's World Development Indicators 2005: Section 3 Environment, Table 3.11: <http://worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=141>.
- 11 International tourist arrivals exceeded 1 billion annual tourists 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_barom13_or_jan_excerpt_o.pdf.
- 12 Geoffrey West, *Scale: The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, Sustainability, and the Pace of Life in Organisms, Cities, Economies, and Companies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 9.
- 13 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/landgrabs-central-america_us_586bfa6e4boeb58648abeif
- 14 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 Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: The 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*, Vol. 31, 2007, 684–94.
- 15 World Bank's World Development Indicators 2005: Section 3 Environment, Table 3.11: http://www.worldmapper.org/posters/worldmapper_map141_ver5.pdf
- 16 Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space, and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

- 17 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 786.
- 18 Ibid., 785.
- 19 Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed-Books 2000).