

## REVIEW

**Thomas Nail, *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatismo* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-748-65586-1**

Thomas Nail's book contends that we are witnessing the return of revolutionary theory and practice, but in forms no longer tied to a politics of representation and the goal of capturing the state. It is thus a return to revolution, but a return or repetition with a difference. This new revolutionary force, he holds, potentially offers the kind of pluralist, heterogeneous, and continually transforming politics needed to resist the global dominance of neoliberalism. It is not merely an oppositional or antagonistic politics that either recreates or finds itself absorbed into the structure of power relations it challenges, nor is it a nebulous and ultimately apolitical celebration of difference lacking concrete goals, solidarity, and direction. Instead, this politics concerns "the *constructive* ways revolutionary action takes on a consistency, a commitment and an organisation, and what forms of antagonism and relation it produces in a specific struggle" (19). At the level of both theory and practice, then, new strategies are emerging, and if philosophy were to follow its usual route of waiting "until a new political form of revolution had already come and gone, it would be useless in the formation of the revolutionary process itself" (1-2). Nail wants to avoid that, and so he aims to articulate the present in a way that can aid in the creation of admirable futures, advising his readers: "if you want to struggle, here are some strategies to do so" (181).

To make good on this offer, Nail proposes to analyze the sources inspiring this "new revolutionary sequence": the collaborative works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which, filtered through the best-selling works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, have become the theoretical foundation for the anti-global Left; and the strategies of the first mass anti-neoliberal movement, the Zapatistas, whose influence can be seen in the Alter-Globalization Movement and the recent Occupy movements. While no direct connection exists between Deleuze and Guattari's writings and the Zapatistas' politics, neither one seeming to have influenced the other, they can nevertheless be read in parallel in a way reflective of Deleuze and Foucault's view of the theory/practice relation, whereby "a practical action will clarify, strengthen or specify how to take theory in a new direction, and vice versa" (7). This reading also demonstrates the parallel fates Deleuze, Guattari, and the Zapatistas have suffered inasmuch as interpreters have failed to recognize each one's "constructivist" turn, through which they move beyond vague promises of a better world and develop concrete alternatives to realize it. For the Zapatistas, this appears particularly from period after 2003, which is often "misunderstood as 'years of silence' and under-theorised" (29), while for Deleuze and Guat-

tari it is found in the later works, *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?*, which have been largely ignored by critics and supporters alike. Constructivism, Nail holds, offers a method for “the creative diagnosis and assembly of heterogeneous elements into a plane of consistency” (21). Whereas the later Deleuze and Guattari provide “the philosophical elaboration of these concepts,” this articulation is inadequate without “their common but parallel development in the realm of political practice, specifically with Zapatismo” (22-23).

The book proceeds to elaborate four revolutionary strategies developed in parallel by Nail’s subjects. The first is the use of a complex and non-linear political history as a diagnostic of both the dominance of global neoliberalism’s statist and representational politics, and the dangers that can lead resistance and revolutionary politics back towards political representation. Deleuze and Guattari offer concepts and analyses of the coding, overcoding, and axiomatization that characterize both past and present representational political forms, while the Zapatistas offer a similar analyses of complex power relations that preclude any single front of political struggle and respond creatively to the juridical, statist, and market forces that continually seek to appropriate their movement. The second strategy is a “prefigurative” one of political transformation, which aims to build concrete political alternatives in the present rather than consign them to a vague future. This takes the form of a “future anterior [an “it will have been”] that functions as a new present moment within and alongside the other processes of political and temporal representation” (89). Deleuze and Guattari offer four concepts of political change as “deterritorializations” that can be either positive or negative and either relative or absolute, with the last concept, absolute positive deterritorialization, breaking apart the elements of representation and rearranging them on a new plane of consistency. The Zapatistas, in turn, enact analogous deterritorializations in the practical political sphere, with their absolute positive deterritorialization being the creation of *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Councils of Good Government). While Deleuze and Guattari theorize a new participatory and non-representational body politic (the third strategy) through the concept of a “concrete machinic assemblage” and the idea of a “conceptual persona” operating as a revolutionary subject, the Zapatistas establish autonomous municipalities and the revolutionary subject of the *compa* (partner/comrade) who leads by obeying. Finally, in relation to the fourth strategy of building global solidarity across diverse struggles, Deleuze and Guattari offer a concept of nomadism as a political relation that distributes and connects differences transversally rather than hierarchically, while the Zapatistas offer the practice of the *Encuentro Intercontinental* that has been a model for subsequent anti-neoliberal gatherings from the Alter-Globalization Movement onwards.

Though Nail holds theory and practice to have equal importance, he spends the majority of his efforts on the theory side, with his most detailed engagements being with Deleuze and Guattari’s texts and a range of their interpreters. But many of the work’s most disappointing features are also found here, and these impact on Nail’s overarching aims. With respect to Deleuze’s earlier solo works and his first collaborative effort with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, Nail simply accepts the readings given by Alain Badiou, Peter Hallward, and Slavoj Žižek, who together portray a Deleuze and Guattari who celebrate the “pure potentiality” of contingent change divorced from any attempt to enact concrete political organization (40), who uncritically valorize lines of flight without providing any positive account of how new consistencies are

constructed (22), who undermine any basis for political subjectivity by “diffusing the self into an endless multiplicity of impersonal drives” (15), and who define revolution as radical only when it abandons actual relations and contexts (83-84). On the basis of these readings, Nail holds that Deleuze’s early ontological works, *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, are “not unhelpful or ‘pre-political’ but wholly inadequate for retrieving a concept of revolutionary intervention based on the future anterior” (87), that *Difference and Repetition* itself “cannot offer a theory of concrete political typology” (108, note 1), and that *Anti-Oedipus*’s conception of revolution is “radically insufficient” (42). These characterizations of the early texts appear repeatedly throughout Nail’s book as he positions *A Thousand Plateaus* as the work that escapes them. But for many scholars in the field, Badiou, Hallward, and Žižek’s readings are not so much harsh and critical engagements with Deleuze’s earlier work as wildly inaccurate and seemingly willful misrepresentations. And there have been numerous powerful responses to them. Even Nail at times cannot bring himself fully to endorse their readings, but this does not stop him from using them to outline the dangers of political ambivalence, virtual hierarchy, and subjective paralysis that he says pervade both Deleuze and Guattari’s earlier work and the work of scholars influenced by those texts. Yet he does very little to support these controversial readings, offering no substantive reading of his own of the earlier writings and instead inferring those failings from brief engagements with the interpretations offered by various Deleuze scholars, such as Paul Patton, Daniel Smith, Brad Evans, and Jason Read, who themselves, I suspect, would in many instances probably feel Nail has misread them. A revealing moment comes when Nail highlights Antonio Negri’s view that Deleuze was unable to translate his ontological theory into a concrete politics. He writes: “Whether Negri’s criticisms are fair to Deleuze or not, his concerns articulate well the aim and challenge of the present work” (117). One can discern a similar lack of concern at many other points in Nail’s text over whether these other critical portrayals of the earlier work, and, by extension, his own portrayal of *A Thousand Plateaus* as some sort of corrective to them, are fair to Deleuze and Guattari or not.

This perhaps would not be a problem if Nail were able to maintain, as he explicitly intends, “a strictly political interpretation” (21) of Deleuze and Guattari’s constructivism. That might allow him to isolate *A Thousand Plateaus* from the ontological, ethical, and aesthetic concepts that arguably play a greater role than any political concepts in Deleuze’s earlier works. But that move assumes that revolution can be treated in such limited terms as a strictly political phenomenon, which arguably flies in the face not only of a great deal of revolutionary theory and reality, but of Deleuze and Guattari’s own constructivist text. Ironically, while admitting that he must construct their theory of revolution from fragments because “Deleuze and Guattari never wrote a book, or more than a couple of focused pages at a time, on the concept of political revolution” (2), Nail ignores many of their most important discussions. He has shockingly little to say about Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire and the role it plays for them in revolutionary politics, and basically nothing on their views of the event of May 1968 that inspired their collaboration. Attending to these would have opened up numerous fronts directly related to the problem of political revolution, including ethical and aesthetic questions concerning how we must change not only our society but also ourselves, and ontological questions about how we understand novelty and about how connections across heterogeneous

differences are actualized. Where Nail does touch on these ethical, aesthetic, and ontological issues, he finds himself cut off from the very resources that could help him. When identifying the danger of microfascism, for example, he says nothing of where it comes from or how it can be avoided, yet those issues are precisely what led Foucault to declare not only that *Anti-Oedipus* is a book about ethics, but that it is about *political* ethics (for the militant who thinks he must be sad because what he is fighting is abominable). When addressing the question of how heterogeneous differences connect, he contends that there can be a “singular-universal solidarity” that “is never a complete unity [but] only a *degree of identity*” (159), even though such a distinction between sameness and similarity, as *Difference and Repetition* shows, is essentially meaningless from the point of view of moving beyond representation. And when considering the quandary that “one cannot have a revolutionary subjectivity without a revolution, but one cannot have a revolution without subjects that bring it about” (131), he simply asserts that for Deleuze and Guattari these come into being simultaneously, which is not only as inadequate an answer to this chicken-and-egg problem as it would be to any other, but also not in fact what Deleuze and Guattari argue.

Taking these “extra-political” dimensions of revolution seriously would have allowed Nail to address these problems more adequately, and would also have put theory and practice into a proper relation of productive tension. Despite his claim to have done that, Nail’s book never uses Deleuze and Guattari’s theory to interrogate critically the Zapatistas’ practices, nor vice versa. And this very much limits the contribution his work can offer. By identifying recent revolutionary strategies in theory and practice, we are simply left with the theory and practice we already have, although a contribution has certainly been made by expounding them. Instead of saying, “if you want to struggle, here are some strategies to do so,” Nail perhaps should have said, “here are some strategies that have been used in struggle, now go invent your own.” That statement would, in keeping with Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault’s political spirit, not only offer support to the current revolutionary sequence, but to a “becoming revolutionary” needed to sustain it.

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