11-2014

A World of Becoming

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Review

A World of Becoming
William E. Connolly. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 224pp.

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It is difficult to respond in a genre other than philosophical prose when writing about one. Philosophical prose is a very demanding and small club: it is almost like the poetry club of philosophy recognized in and by itself. Few are the specimens of the genre and plenty are those raising hands from within. This is largely because genre-determined writing such as this one is both about style and *Zeitgeist*. And to rise up to the standards of styling the spirit(s) of time is an ordeal of both the heart and the mind even trained thinkers fail to do. With a sleight of hand William E. Connolly's *A World of Becoming* enters the genre with due pump, and transforms it.

Yet some reduction of this writing to a manageable set of propositions is possible, all the more so because *A World of Becoming* is styled as both an academic contribution and a poetic intervention in and from the fabric of *this world*. In this, the book remains closer to the accommodations of a philosophy of social change than to the amenities of supermundane speculation, whence its political urgency looms large.

The entire book, but especially the introductory chapter, speaks to the rise of postmodernism's neo-materialist offshoots today. The political incipience of its political urgency is most notable in chapter 1. Connolly seems apt to inscribe his work in the frameworks of so-called new metaphysics and ontologies and the generalized (re)discovery of bio-culturalism and the nature/culture divide. Throughout the book, he also seems to squint into the darkness of new fields hinted at (such as New Materialisms)

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and some oddly avoided (such as object-oriented ontology). The book's programmatic claim—"[w]e inhabit a world of becoming composed of heterogeneous force-fields" (5)—could be read as the entry of a speculative and prognostic account about the human predicament as made of such force-fields (rather than mere human affairs). This is why the chapter deals with the cross-fertilization of complexity theory and the humanities and distinguishing between temporal registers of thinking the immanent becomings of the world we dwell in. Becoming's theoretical foregrounding is here best expressed by a parallel theorization of complexity and human agency that seeks to curtail the "anthropic exception" (that the human is the singular *metron* of its entire environment); hence the reading of the non-human as something beyond the object, that nature is not a mere victim of human perception.

Chapter 2 delves deeper in the "inter-agential" structure of nature (Jane Bennet). There Connolly advocates a theory of the complexity of perception aided by recent developments in neuroscience and what these entail for today's notion of a human, free will—and the ensuing political immanence of becoming. In order to embrace a world of becoming, one has to develop a sensibility to it (or open to and recognize a prior discipline of the senses [52]), which cannot happen without the cultivation of new affects and attachments to the "outside." One can say this chapter outlines the aesthetic of a world of becoming: as the world comes to its ultimate minoritization due to the "acceleration of pace" (59), a new aesthetic is needed "to find ways to strengthen the connection between the fundamental terms of late-modern existence and positive attachment to life as such" (63). In and of itself, this aesthetic regime of thinking of *being* in terms of becoming needs a sociable superstructure which Connolly seems to call "spirituality."

This is why chapter 3 engages in a detailed and amiable controversy with Charles Taylor's weak secularism. Connolly opts for a distinctive spirituality of radical immanence in a world of becoming, something of a theology of "immanent naturalism with open temporal horizon beyond the human" (70), or really a version of immanent realism which posits (with and against Taylor) an outside of immanence which is unpredictable and inhuman rather than mechanistic and divine (75). Instead of "sources of the self," we have here the "sources of becoming" founded on the shakable ground of spirituality of radical immanence, whose teleology is to "amplify a care" of the world

(79) and cultivate "multidimensional pluralism" in different spaces in the now minoritized world (83).

Chapter 4 appears as the new poetic anthropology in times of becoming. According to Connolly, our human predicament involves *how to negotiate life* (98). One way of doing so is to frame something of a secular theology of becoming and immanence (whether with the work of William James or Catherine Keller). Here, immanent activity takes over substance to curtail the vengeful wrath of the divine; if the world is eternal, it is because it is seen as pure activity which, although ours, although immanent, is bigger than us and thus constitutes a *part* of our humanity. This brings humanity and divinity much closer than in either amplified secularism or anthropic theology, albeit it does not free us from the predicament itself as we are doomed to mortality without full control over nature (108). This is a very simplified version of expressing the political bearing of a dethroned onto-theology, but the idea taken up by Connolly from Keller is to exercise some control over "messianic imperialism." Only by doing so we could overcome Nietzschean resentment in a world of becoming. And to avoid recurring back to such imperialism, humanity needs to recognize that the condition of the human predicament is its allowance of a plurality of expressions of that predicament. This is why the *pluralization* of the world (*after* its *minoritization*) is critical part of it and can never fully avoid bellicosity—such avoidance will instill the congealing of becoming itself.

Chapter 5 appears to be the politics of a world of becoming, described by the concept "world resonance machine." This chapter reads as a theory and critique of the dominance of some force-fields over others in global capitalism. By going back to Hegel's "rabble," and its multiplication today, here the task is to expose the conceits of the principle of subjectivity in market-driven cosmologies (where Hegel's *Geist* has teraformed to the Market itself). The thesis is that there is a new "abstract machine" now exceeding the power of markets. To justify both the existence and workings of such a machine, Connolly criticizes "world-systems theory" as transforming capitalism to an entity without any "outside" (its "interstate" character covering all interstices of resistance). This renders neoliberal capitalism a "world totality," disallowing all immanence of revolt and systemic transformation. Of course, this notion devolves around poststructuralist positing of the "lack" and is at odds with a temporalized conception of political becoming. By looking at the "expressive mode" of sovereignty (its immanent potential), Connolly subsumes discipline and control (Foucault and Deleuze) to

"channeling apparatuses" as they focus on aggregates rather than individuals (134). Consequently, such apparatuses, hosted by a theory of the abstract machine, are composed of elements of instability, correlated with self-organization and autopoiesis. The social entity now called an "abstract machine" is thus a communicable species of a force-field. This definition is posited against what he calls "resonance machine of global antagonism," refusing all political becoming as an ethic. In conclusion, the idea is to demonstrate that the expressive mode of sovereignty (if read as an abstract machine) is irrepressible (141) and full of self-organization, ripe of some discrete, non-mechanistic transcendence outside market forces.

Chapter 6 proposes an ethos of thinking in and of the time of/as becoming. With his distinction between a theorist and a seer, Connolly seeks to sift through "moments of suspension" as to slow down the pace of time and acceleration. In short, the affective divide of the theorist today in times of acceleration can be ameliorated by taking the posture of a "seer." "During a time of accelerated disequilibrium" a seer is needed: but for the seer to see in such times, the very world of becoming should be conceived as the very idea of time as a world of becoming. This involves (1) multiple zones of becoming, (2) periodic encounters of two registers of time (organized according to speed), (3) and the uncertainty of pluri-potentiality of the world's agencies, leading to capacity of self-organization. The figure of the seer is there to grasp the processes behind what constitutes political thinking in these times and help slow down the perception of acceleration to affective embracing of becoming. This does not arm the seer with magisterial powers: the figure does not guarantee exit routes for the tragic possibilities and bellicosity of a world prone to complexity and agentic chaos. Rather, the seer guarantees a mode of living at the edge of the marginal and the seeable and posits uncertainty is its condition; the seer is part and parcel of the chaos s/he describes. With the seer defined, "[t]he need is to negotiate a new balance between action-oriented perception and dwelling in fecund moments of temporal disequilibrium" (161).

One significant shortcoming of the book seems to arise from Connolly's previous and continuous engagements with theories of secularism and their bandwidth to multiplicities in a world made of pluralisms. Often the resolutely philosophical or the discretely poetic revelation transforms into a policy-like recommendation, so that a whole chapter is reducible to both a philosophical conclusion and a policy suggestion (see especially 144 and 161). Thus the power of hesitancy, so central to the author, succumbs

to the force of normative prescription, lending primacy to the habitual mindset of political theorization in which Connolly excels. Sure enough, there is no doubt he never comes to justify the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming as merely instrumental; neither Heraclitus' river, nor his becoming are an inarticulate flux (73) accommodating all and any attack on transcendentalism. This seems to be what causes those specific moments of "congealing" becoming to proper political metaphysics and what render the philosophical prose a philosophical "report" of the Lyotard type, easily reducible to something like the grammar of the "rabble."

If becoming is the political *grammar* of an ever self-disclosing political metaphysics of the present, then perhaps what *A World of Becoming* requires us to *do* is to *be* becoming—its concrete instances, its specific workings within an abstract, self-styled machine. And to be always-already a becoming entails that we always become the world to the degree the human predicament allows us to. By inviting us to be and thus become becoming itself, the book enacts what it both requires and describes. Is the human condition aimed at becoming the world, irregularly and irreversibly? It remains to be seen by the multiplication of "seers" and their affective apparati whether the rabble of the world is apt to accommodating becoming in such profound, non-tragic ways