

2-10-2015

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

McCormack, Brian. "The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism by William E. Connolly." *The Goose*, vol. 13, no. 2, article 19, 2015, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/19>.

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***The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* by WILLIAM E. CONNOLLY**

Duke UP, 2013 \$22.95

Reviewed by **BRIAN MCCORMACK**

William Connolly's latest book places neoliberal ideology within a cosmos informed by a philosophy of becoming. This vast ontological setting allows Connolly to carry out a novel critical account of neoliberalism's limitations and blind spots, while exploring alternatives to some of its most harmful practices. Connolly's premise is that, while capitalist markets may partially resemble the self-organizing systems they are purported to be, they are not characterized by impersonal rationality, and they exist alongside affective, biological, geological, atmospheric, and many other self-regulating systems. His text draws out some of the implications of this expanded view.

Connolly argues that, although many contemporary social theorists take the idea of self-organizing systems seriously, they do not sufficiently theorize capitalism alongside them. Others, who take political economy seriously, do so without regard for these larger self-organizing systems. Although environmentalist critiques of capitalism are certainly nothing new, Connolly's philosophy of becoming may offer new conceptual resources for this ongoing effort.

The first chapter looks at how neoliberal ideology is entangled with cultural life; particularly in how it resonates with other cultural forces such as conservative Christianity, nationalism, and a hegemonic and increasingly normalized population purposely positioned in conflict

with marginalized minorities. Neoliberalism asserts that markets are unique, self-regulating, and tied to personal freedom, but in need of constant state intervention and protection. As one of many self-regulating systems, however, markets are fragile in another way: they are embroiled in complex relations with other forces, many of them nonhuman and beyond human mastery. These other forces intermittently affect and transform our lives, often severely and without warning. To myopically adopt a neoliberal ideology claiming a unique status for markets is therefore to remain blind to these other forces, exposing capitalist societies to ever-greater risk.

Connolly begins his second chapter with an analysis of Hayek, who might be considered a proponent of a moderate neoliberal ideology in today's climate. Hayek argues that markets are characterized by impersonal rationality, spontaneous innovation, self-regulation, and balance that would be unachievable by way of central government planning. Hayek is an interesting figure for Connolly, because the form of capitalism he outlined decades ago has transformed to the point where it would be difficult for Hayek himself to maintain his theses. Neoliberal ideology has been bent and twisted into extremes because of the great tension between a stubborn adherence to its own internal logic, and the forces that impinge on it from the actual world in which it operates. Examples of the fragility that plague a society under the thrall of neoliberalism are legion. They include tensions largely within the human sphere, such as those growing among the intersections of global capital, inequality, religious extremism, and terrorism. They also include the many exacerbating, self-perpetuating spirals of

destruction and risk between humanity and nonhuman systems, such as the push to drill for oil in increasingly dangerous locales. Connolly compares neoliberal ideology to a dinosaur unable to fathom the asteroid about to crush it. A philosophy of becoming provides a more complex and sensitive frame for economic organization.

Connolly engages with Kant in the third chapter. He argues that, despite the undeniable brilliance of Kant's thought, his strict divisions of reason must be challenged in order to open up new creative experiments in thought and practice. Connolly questions the claim that morality takes the form of a law, for example, in order to open thought up more fully to the possibility of a world that is neither built for nor entirely masterable by humans. In contrast to Kant, Augustine, and the Christian cosmos, he discusses the mysterious and fragile worlds of Hesiod and Sophocles. He employs Nietzsche and Whitehead in the fourth chapter to build on the notion that an ethic of cultivation, sensitivity, and adaptation is necessary to counter hubristic and resentful attitudes.

A philosophy of becoming favours cultivation over law-like moral certainty, emergence over timelessness, an element of mystery to temper the drive to masterability, concern for the Earth and life over transcendence, and adaptability to periodic shifts over an image of linear progress. With figures like Hayek and Kant, Connolly is able to draw out some of the elements of a philosophy of becoming implicit in their thought. These figures occasionally evoke a contingent world that demands an ethos of cultivation and adaptation to the unforeseeable. These tendencies get downplayed by the drive to mastery and law-like seamlessness, even as they continually threaten to break the

surface.

In addition to the four main chapters, Connolly includes three interludes, a prelude, and a postlude. He describes these as either dramatizations meant to illustrate a point he makes in the main text, or else to introduce concepts or pertinent points that he does not have adequate space to explore fully. The book hangs together, Connolly claims, in a way that mirrors how economic and political subsystems sit within and articulate asymmetrically with larger planetary assemblages.

Connolly is able to put forward a nuanced and inclusive account of ecologically aware democratic activism that seeks to galvanize affinities across religious and other institutional divides. The most crucial point of a philosophy of becoming, as outlined in this book, is that humans can neither create nor master the world. Any ontology that offers a seamless account of the cosmos and human life closes off the necessity of remaining open and adaptable to the mysterious, unknowable, and emergent character of existence.

I want to make two critical observations. First, too much of the text is consumed by the elaboration of an ontology of becoming that remains vague in this context. These excursions into Kant, Nietzsche, and Whitehead draw us too far out of the focus on contemporary struggles with neoliberal ideology, they do not make enough use of contemporary scholarship on philosophies of becoming, and they need more elaboration than can be provided in a text that has other related but distinct analyses to undertake. There are at least two interesting texts here: one is an analysis of the genealogy of a philosophy of becoming that is shown to occupy a minoritarian position relative to a

dominant, overwhelmingly humanist trajectory. The other text is a nuanced analysis of contemporary neoliberal ideology critiqued by and juxtaposed with a philosophy of becoming infused with a positive ethos of cultivation. Together in one volume, they feel incomplete.

The second critical point I want to make concerns Connolly's characterization of posthumanist thought. Connolly too often conflates posthumanist thought with anti-humanism and insists on a form of human exceptionalism that is unwarranted. Connolly tries to walk a path between what he terms exclusive humanism and what he sees as the anti-humanism of posthumanist thought. The problem is that he does not stake out a middle ground. His thought is humanist without reservation. His primary concern with exclusive humanism is that, via a myopic focus on human social systems, it fails to contemplate how the non-

discursive forces of the Earth impact *humans*. Any position that does not see the human as both arbiter and prime shareholder of value is labelled anti-human. This kind of humanism is not the result of his elaboration of a philosophy of becoming—it is an *a priori* commitment that undermines his theoretical precision. Why, after doing so much work to place humanity within a cosmos characterized by entangled self-regulating systems with no special regard for the human, does value always seem to come from a transcendent realm, settle in the human, and barely trickle out into the rest of the world?

BRIAN MCCORMACK is a PhD candidate in the Humanities Department at York University. He is writing a dissertation on posthumanism, meaning, and the influence of Jakob von Uexküll.