Review

From Nothing, Everything

Ontology and World Politics: Void Universalism 1

Sergei Prozorov

Routledge, New York, 2013, xxxiii+192pp., ISBN: 978-0415840248

Theory of the Political Subject: Void Universalism 2

Sergei Prozorov

Routledge, New York, 2013, xxix+160pp., ISBN: 978-0415842457

Contemporary Political Theory (2015) **14**, e32–e36. doi:10.1057/cpt.2015.4;
published online 14 April 2015

International political theory has been enjoying a renaissance over the past 10 years, with a new vanguard leading a charge away from the trenches of the established paradigmatic thought traditions of International Relations (for example, of realism, liberalism and so on.) in favor of an ontological understanding of politics. Leading this charge has been R.B.J. Walker, who sums up the reason behind what would lead to this shift in philosophical perspective:

The problematic character of modern theories of international relations has been widely discussed, especially in relation to the presumed bankruptcy of established intellectual traditions, the untidy proliferation of research strategies, an unseemly dependence on the interests of specific states and cultures, and the hubris of empirical social science (Walker, 1993, p. 6).

The movement within the discourse toward understanding the nature of the international and the essence of politics has been fiercely investigated recently, including by Walker (2010), Bartleson (2009) and myself (Oprisko, 2015). New divergences are being led by Rebecca Adler-Nissen's (2013) appropriation of Bourdieu, and Alexander Wendt's (2015) interest in quantum mechanics. These investigations, however, are not limited to international relations theory and are being shaped by and extending from the philosophies of Nancy (2000), Agamben (1998, 2005), and Badiou (2005, 2009) among others. It is at this intersection of revisionist international political theory and ontological philosophy where Prozorov finds his voice and makes an indelible mark.

Void Universalism is, arguably, Sergei Prozorov's *magnum opus*. Consisting of two volumes, *Ontology and World Politics* (OWP) and *Theory of the Political Subject* (TPS), *Void Universalism* links the individual to the international, the

particular to the universal, and nothing to everything. With this publication, Sergei Prozorov establishes himself as the most innovative contemporary scholar in international political theory, placing himself on equal terms with Badiou, Nancy, and Agamben, with whom his work is in deep conversation. He writes with a precision that exemplifies a command of sophisticated concepts that is unparalleled.

Prozorov's self appointed mission is to clarify what world politics is and how it fits into international relations, because, 'the central concept of the disciplinary discourse frivolously oscillates between being a synonym and antonym of the discipline's very name' (OWP, p. xxii). He believes that an ontological exploration of international politics will actually be moving the debate from the obscure into the accessible because of its connection to 'the utmost facticity of our existence' (OWP, p. xxix).

Prozorov seeks to understand the 'world' of world politics in order to grasp the cosmology of the discipline, which will, 'contextualize our conceptions of community and the other way around' (OWP, p. 5). Beginning with three possibilities: the world as everything, the world as something, and the world as nothing, he begins to whittle away at positivism. Prozorov defends Badiou's set theory as pure ontology, 'because it deals with being qua being and not any particular classes of beings' (OWP, p. 9). The difficulty of the world as everything is that it would necessarily include all things and their negation, including the nonexistence of itself, becoming a power set that is far greater than the original. The premise of self-inclusion fails Cantor's theorem, and introduces the important point that infinity $\neq$ universality as infinities constitute a multiplicity and that there are multiple infinities whereas the universal simply is everything.

Prozorov concludes that the world as everything is impossible because, 'a set of all sets cannot be supposed without contradiction', or citing Badiou, 'The Whole has no being' (OWP, p. 9). The world as something fails because:

A particular world is not *universalizable*. The idea of the international as an actual or potential world of all worlds arises out of an illusory identification of totality and infinity. Since every world is a world of worlds, the international world may of course contain an infinite multiplicity of worlds, but the only thing that this or any other world cannot contain is *everything* (OWP, pp. 20–21).

The difficulty with perceiving the world as something is its particularity; it has a side, a distinction and thus is self delimiting against any aggregation into a universal. This is the nothing more or less than the philosophical manifestation of the Schmittian trap of identitarian pluralism (Prozorov, 2009).

Prozorov argues instead for the World as nothing, a void set that represents absolute potentiality. The void set is the only one shared by all possible sets, which satisfies Badiou's ontology. This argument is seductively intuitive. The void represents the space in which stuff can and does exist, the void is where existence can manifest. The void and its relationship to the universal runs throughout

Prozorov's *oeuvre*. In *Foucault, Freedom, and Sovereignty* (Prozorov, 2007), he argues that freedom is a universal axiom (he adds community and equality in *Void Universalism*); it is an affirmation of:

transcendence within immanence, the rupture of every self-enclosed system by the recuperation of the pure negativity form which it emerges and which continues to haunt it ... The significance of the outside for the affirmation of freedom lies precisely in its function of demonstrating that *the diagram is not all there is*, that it can never attain the self-immanence that it attests to (2007, pp. 38–39).

Prozorov's nihilism is extraordinarily optimistic.

Having set the stage of what constitutes a World, Prozorov moves to framing and illuminating a politics of the World. He argues that it is, 'a practice of *bringing the World into the world* by producing its positive intra-worldly *effects*' (OWP, p. 47). He employs Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction as a sovereign act of carving a positive world out of the void of the World and Rancière's understanding of equality as a 'condition of possibility of any relation ... an equal capacity for *language as such*.' One of the most intriguing elements of Prozorov's argument is that sovereignty is an act of failed or pseudo-transcendence that arrives at the universal axioms of the World by suppressing them for all others. Sovereign acts carve a positive world by limiting community, freedom, and equality. Moving beyond sovereignty, being-in-common, is a generic, universal vitalism, which must happen in particular worlds.

As Prozorov shifts from *Ontology and World Politics* to *Theory of the Political Subject*, he shifts from an ontological inquiry to a phenomenological one in which he explores relations within the world(s) we occupy. This volume begins to find its footing in Chapter 3 'Politics and Evil' when Prozorov presents a dual definition of evil, which is both '*the negation of the World* in a world through the betrayal of the political axioms,' and, '*the negation of the world* in the name of the World through the nihilistic drive to attain the infinite end of politics in a finite act' (TPS, pp. 40–41). Both are reflections of evil as 'an inherent obstacle to the unfolding of political affirmation' (TPS, p. 40) Evil emerges not as a moral absolute for Prozorov, but is rather an interruption in the balanced tension between the universal and particular. It is 'the potentiality of the negation of the existence of the World in the world,' a great leveler of the universal axioms that bind the appearance and effects of community, freedom, and equality (TPS, p. 46).

The final chapters explore whether or not there are ethical, epistemic, and functional limitations to politics. He concludes 'that neither philosophical nor scientific knowledge may ever serve as a limit to political praxis ... Just as the problems of evil, destruction and violence, cannot post an ethical limit to the activity of the political subject.' Prozorov does argue that a functional limitation to political praxis exists within the subject who decides to intervene or not in the world (TPS, pp. 118–119).

This intervention, a decision to act upon a perceived wrong to right, suggests a form of sovereignty that is only available to the exception, which the Prozorovian subject is. Thus in a world that contains a multitude, all of which may find themselves to be a subject at any given moment depending upon the situation in time and space and perspective, we finally gain a vision of the infinite worlds within every world that occupies the World. Each moment of judgment is made by a subject, who occupies (at least one) world, which overlaps, interpenetrates, and permeates other worlds. This is the most important lesson that Prozorov provides, that external imposition of ethical and epistemic limits are impotent against the political subject. The plight of the political subject (all of us everywhere and every when) is a treacherous one to which we are *equally* exposed, which we share in common, and which represents our *freedom*, Prozorov's universal axioms (TPS, p. 128).

Void Universalism's wonderful insights may remain hidden to some by the relentless rigor of Prozorov's sophistication and precision in his conceptual artistry. The steep learning curve that rises as one moves through the texts suggests that the apology he wrote in 'Generic Universalism and World Politics' would be a welcome reminder to readers:

The reader is kindly asked to bear with the unusually heavy use of specialized jargon in the following pages, since any attempt to translate the concepts under consideration into 'ordinary language' would efface all that is extra-ordinary about them (2009, p. 229).

Void Universalism is a journey, one that is filled with difficult terrain, but the artistry and the subject matter are well worth the effort. There is a beautiful simplicity to Prozorov's conclusion, and he kindly places it at the very beginning of each volume, within his preface. The work's point of departure is its concluding affirmation, 'that universality exists, that "there is" a "for all",' or, $\exists \forall$ (OWP, p. xix; TPS, p. xix).

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