Review

Facing the planetary: Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming

William E. Connolly

Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017, 232 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0822363415

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S141–S144. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-0204-9>; published online 8 March 2018

At least since Aristotle defined humans as uniquely ‘political animals,’ politics in the Western tradition has largely been conceived as a distinctly human endeavor: a circumscribed realm insulated from non-human nature. The borders between the political and the natural were, like borders between states, always more porous than those who sought to police those borders imagined. But the impacts of *homo sapiens*’ rapidly growing technological power are increasingly visible. So much so, in fact, that earth scientists now speak of the Anthropocene: the geological epoch in which humans have become a (if not *the*) dominant geological force. Conceiving of politics as separate from nature is an increasingly difficult (if not misguided or dangerous) enterprise. Hence the title – at first perhaps somewhat bewildering – of William Connolly’s book. Facing the planetary means taking responsibility for the implications of the world that we are creating.

The book resists easy summary. It does not advance an analytical argument step by step to a logical conclusion; it describes, or rather unveils a particular theoretical perspective. In the first four chapters, Connolly provides us with an impressive intellectual synthesis. Even if we restrict ourselves to political theory and philosophy, the breadth of thinkers that Connolly engages with here is dazzling: Nietzsche, Rousseau, Marx, and Deleuze, but also Hayek, Berlin, and Marcuse, among many others. And these diverse political theorists are put into conversations with numerous contemporary earth and biological scientists.

In these engagements, Connolly positions himself against both natural scientific and socio-centric reductionism. Too much of a focus on biological determinism underestimates the plasticity of human nature and the impacts of society and culture on human thought and behavior. Social constructionism, conversely, underestimates the force that non-human nature exerts on us, even in the Anthropocene. In rejecting these determinisms, Connolly emphasizes freedom and agency, albeit a freedom that is ‘both real and risky’ (p. 67). Connolly’s engagement with the biological sciences emphasizes ‘teleo-searching processes

[that] are endemic to life' (p. 43). Importantly, these teleo-searching processes do not have a *telos* (they are 'without ontological finalism' (p. 67)), which makes them creative and open-ended. A world of teleo-searching organisms opens possibilities for agency, 'a world of becoming without a lot of eternal banisters' (p. 86). And, like Jane Bennett (2010), Connolly here goes beyond 'organisms' and the life sciences, to wonder whether these teleo-searching processes can also be seen to arise in inorganic systems.

The point of bringing natural scientific and socio-cultural analyses into conversation with each other is not to settle questions in an ontological mode, but rather to bring out the possibility of a politics that is capable of worming through the human–nature border from both sides: an 'entangled humanism.' It is not only to critique science as socially situated, but also to critique the presumption of a hard and clear distinction between human and non-human beings, which 'still informs much of cultural theory' (p. 100). The ontological question of where agency can be found remains unresolved – Connolly offers no more than a guess, 'suspecting that internality and teleo-dynamism are *emergent* at some bumpy juncture' (p. 105; emphasis in original). But no matter. It is enough to make the point that 'the earth and cultural sciences need each other, that the boundaries between them are better construed as porous membranes' (p. 107).

The point, in short, is political, not ontological. In the last two chapters, Connolly turns more explicitly to the political upshot of these disciplinary border-crossing theorizations. The conversation is enlarged once again as Connolly brings in a wide variety of 'eco-activists' (p. 12) and postcolonial thinkers. The book here makes a further shift, from the exchange between natural science and socio-cultural theory, to 'a three-way... exchange' between the natural (environmental) sciences, Euro-American environmentalism, and postcolonial ecostudies (p. 157). Echoing Rob Nixon, Connolly argues for a need to address the missed encounter between postcolonialism and environmentalism (p. 150). One small disappointment, although it seems churlish given the intellectual breadth already on display, is that here the lines between postcolonial thinking and entangled humanism are only gestured at.

As the book becomes more explicitly political in its latter chapters, Connolly seeks to conjure, invoke, or amplify 'a variety of forces [that] is converging creatively today toward distinctive images of activism, ecology, and freedom... an extended "we" may be in the works' (p. 121). The mode of politics is described as 'swarming,' modeled on the behavior of honeybees: 'You multiply sites and scales of political action through swarming movements, moving back and forth between creative role experimentations in churches, worksites, consumption localities, investment, universities, research, teaching.... Not all scouts engage in all these things all the time – just as no honeybee visits all possible hive sites – but resonances between them nonetheless begin to crystallize' (p. 125). Perhaps not

surprisingly, the politics here is a sort of mirror image of the evangelical–capitalist resonance machine from Connolly’s earlier work.

Ultimately, the goal of this swarming is to set the stage for ‘cross-regional general strikes,’ perhaps the most provocative point of the book. Despite his ‘post-’ theoretical commitments, Connolly – born in mid-twentieth century Michigan (p. 152) – returns to this concept which might be the very epitome of an older left tradition. ‘This old vision [of the general strike] needs to be updated and recrafted to fit an era in which climate is an overarching issue’ (p. 130). A few pages later, the idea of a ‘climate strike’ emerges: ‘The hope is to forge a militant, cross-regional pluralist assemblage in which the next disturbing event encourages large minorities in a variety of subject positions to organize cross-regional strikes’ (p. 144). A workers’ strike involves the withdrawal of labor from a site of employment, a capital strike involves the withdrawal of investment from a jurisdiction. What is withdrawn in a climate strike? ‘[W]ithdrawal from work and travel joined to mass reductions of consumption above the levels needed for subsistence’ (p. 144). Drawing from Gandhi, Connolly argues for the ‘need to cultivate an ethos of positive material austerity’ (p. 132).

It is a tantalizing vision, but one that leaves much to be unpacked or explored. Some of this is raised by Connolly himself. On the point about ‘positive material austerity,’ he notes that ‘there remains the huge question of how to reconstitute the collective infrastructure of consumption and the collective ethos of consumption’ (p. 137). But there are other questions, as well. Environmental political theorists for some time have questioned the presumed necessity or form of a ‘disturbing event’ to displace unsustainable modes of living. Relatedly, how are ‘levels needed for subsistence’ determined, particularly in societies (and presumably a movement) highly dependent on advanced technological mediation? And how is ‘militancy’ maintained along with ‘pluralism,’ and in a collective subject (‘we’) that Connolly emphasizes repeatedly is ‘invitational’? Of course, the fact that Connolly has not provided a blueprint for the revolution is not intended as a criticism, but only to point out that such a movement – which surely is desperately needed – has its work cut out for it.

Connolly admits that cross-regional general strikes (climate or other) are ‘improbable.’ But ‘the most pertinent question... is whether they can become live *possibilities* that speak to urgent *needs* of this time.’ (pp. 146–147; emphases in original). The book’s ‘postlude’ is an interview, conducted by Bradley MacDonald, that surveys Connolly’s career and uncovers some of the intellectual trajectory that brought Connolly to this point in his work. Sheldon Wolin is mentioned in the final paragraph as ‘a very important inspiration’ (p. 197). Connolly’s invocation of the cross-regional general strike, through an engagement with political theory, can be seen as very much in line with Wolin’s understanding of the ‘vocation of political theory’ (1969).

Re-reading the book's opening pages, this intellectual lineage is more apparent. Despite the novelty of the Anthropocene, the book begins with an old tale: the biblical story of Job. Among other things, Connolly sees in that story 'a familiar response to crisis, when live alternatives to the system in which it occurs are in short supply,' comparing the response of Job's interlocutors to responses to contemporary economic and climatic crises (pp. 2–3). The role of the political theorist in relation to crisis is just what Wolin was concerned to elucidate and protect. As Connolly puts it, there is a 'need to stretch political theory... into new intellectual domains today, doing so to render more of us worthy of the events we encounter' (p. 13). In the Anthropocene event looms the possibility of an existential crisis for Western (increasingly global) modernity, if not for the human species and our various non-human entanglements. Becoming worthy of such an event is surely an urgent task for thought.

References

- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wolin, S. S. (1969). Political theory as a vocation. *American Political Science Review*, 63(4), 1062–1082.

Andrew Biro
Acadia University, Wolfville, NS B4P 2R6, Canada
andrew.biro@acadiau.ca