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## Review

# Climate machines, fascist drives and truth

William E. Connolly,

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Before we open William Connolly's *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives and Truth*, most of us have probably considered some form of the problem at the heart of this book. In an era of reactionary governments and corporations not taking heed of the science of climate change, 'we' in the humanities have to confront the brutal reality of climate suffering while also attending to the epistemological pluralism and critique that is central to what we do. Well before Connolly's intervention there has been a series of theoretical, social science, and popular objections to postmodernism's perceived destruction of truth. One might think of all the new materialisms and vitalisms that set themselves against the supposed linguistic paradigm of deconstruction, along with eco-critical work that asks theory to look beyond human social forms to think of nature and life as bearing all the agential capacities that had once been located within the polity. Connolly's work is at once squarely located within this turn to a vital materialism at the same time as it seeks to negotiate the critical problem of the formation of truth.

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari in its rhetoric and conceptual arsenal – hence the title of climate 'machines' – the book's clearest account of its theoretical stakes is chapter three's imagined dialogue between Michel Foucault and A.N. Whitehead. The personae of the dialogue allow Connolly to pursue two approaches to the problem of truth. On the one hand, truth is a thing of this world, there are 'regimes' of truth, and it makes no sense to seek what is *really* true, as if the world were 'reliably predisposed to human aspirations and interests' (p. 81). On the other hand, truth 'pulls adventurers beyond the contours of an installed regime' (p. 87). Connolly's book concludes with his dramatic personae recognizing what the previous chapters had been arguing in Connolly's own voice. Whether you are of the Whitehead persuasion – confident that the world offers itself and demands to be expressed in all its force – or are more Foucaultian in your attention to the formations that generate what truths are sayable, Connolly forges a specific sense of what *another* Foucault would have referred to as the outside.

One of the concepts that runs through this book is that of remains, including both philosophical possibilities of the canon we may have failed to explore and potentials for truths that are left aside as we pursue one branch of enquiry. One of



the delights of this book are the many examples of the latter, ‘turning down one fork rather than another.’ To name just one, Connolly notes the current respectability of epigenesis, a Lamarckian idea that was once dismissed in favor of Darwinism. Just as it behooves science to look deeper into the forces that appear as truths, so it is philosophy’s task to address counter-traditions – such as the tragic line of thought that runs from Sophocles to Mary Shelley. This counter-tradition appears far more cognizant of the inhuman forces that compose us. For Connolly the political task is one of subjectivity for us humans, who can now recognize the multiple and complex subjectivities of others. We are not alone, and we are not in control.

The book’s cutting edge is perhaps laid out in the chapters prior to the concluding dialogue where Connolly outlines the problem that this dialogue will solve. It is a problem recognized by Sophocles, whose tragedy is punctuated by ‘claps of thunder,’ and Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* was aware of the climactic volatility evidenced in 1815, the year without a summer. Connolly seems wistful in imagining a more informed Mary Shelley, who came so close to knowing what we know now. Shelley is at once admirably prescient, and yet – sadly – too late: ‘We must valorize, above all, those rapid breaks and transitions between extremes of heat and cold, level ground and rocky terrain, desert and ocean, ice flows and river currents, highlands and lowlands that punctuate her story ... It would not take much more – if the new earth sciences had arrived in time – to convince the poetic author that deep, sometimes rapid temporal shifts occur in the ocean conveyor system, glacier fields, climate processes, ocean levels, degrees of ocean acidification, drought zones, monsoon configurations, storm patterns, atmospheric carbon and oxygen levels, and turns in species evolution’ (p. 37). If only she had known ... if only those sciences had arrived in time, then we would have more scientific stuff in the novel to valorize.

Connolly correctly notes that the tendency has been to read the thunderclaps of literature symbolically, where nature is merely there to figure a solely human world. His own reading of the tradition of ‘tragic thinkers’ who do not assume that the earth is ‘well disposed to our highest aims’ focuses on ‘concatenations of chancy events’ (p. 18). His *Frankenstein* is not the framed text, replete with quotations from Milton, and Shelley’s fellow poets, where Victor Frankenstein’s insistent forays into the forces of life are contrasted with his fellow student Clerval’s more contemplative regard, and narrated from the point of view of a fearful and captivated Walton. For Connolly what matters is the novel’s content, and Mary Shelley’s *almost* planetary insight into life as such. Connolly places Mary Shelley in a tragic tradition that emphasizes the nonhuman, and sets this against human exceptionalism. Is this an exclusive disjunction? Do we need to decide between a relation to the world in which natural forces confront us with an immediacy that demands a new form of subjectivity attendant to what modern science discloses versus a literary sense that the world is always mediated, always



figural? There is, to draw upon Deleuze and Guattari, a way beyond this exclusive disjunction, and that is an inclusive disjunction. Life is *both* tragically other than our all too human senses of ‘nature’ *and* always already figural. Connolly sees a philosophical tradition split between hubris and tragic humility, favoring the latter’s sense of the force of the inhuman and the demands it places on us. This in turn generates the concluding dialogue, where ‘W’ accepts that the world may be more resistant to truthful representation than we might imagine, while ‘F’ accepts that regimes of truth can be placed under positive and productive pressure. The upshot is a call for new connections and new subjectivities that would combat neoliberalism and neofascism. Connolly refers to this as entangled humanism.

The Deleuze–Guattarian strand in this book is evidenced in Connolly’s account of life, *not* as the backdrop to human history but as a complex force in its own right, with the Anthropocene best thought of as an ‘abstract machine.’ Countering fascism and neoliberalism amounts to attending to these multiple nonhuman forces in ways that further human life. By contrast, both Mary Shelley and Deleuze and Guattari are aware not just of human entanglement, but also of uneven layers and registers of inscription that are positively destructive of what has come to think of itself as ‘the human.’ In *A Thousand Plateaus* this ‘becoming-imperceptible’ takes the form, not of a dialogue in which two voices arrive at agreement regarding one domain of entangled life, but of competing, divergent, and impossible registers. Life is a refrain (a variability of rhythms), life is becoming-imperceptible (relations in which one is nothing more than a transformation induced by one’s milieu), life is a rhizome ... Connolly’s targeted fascism is one of enclosure, a deafness to the nonhuman forces that compose our entangled humanity, and it is this sense of fascism that he sees as close to neoliberalism – both assuming that the world is simply there to be fashioned, not that we are effects of a broader complex of forces. Both fascism and neoliberalism pay little heed to the force of the nonhuman, a force that Connolly finds in the tragic tradition.

As I have already suggested, there is something other than the fascist/entangled humanist disjunction, and definitely something that remains in Shelley, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari that is counter-tragic. Rather than forms of subjectivity that reach out to the nonhuman, and rather than an entangled humanism, there is a way of reading Foucault, Shelley, and Deleuze and Guattari that refuses the problem of new forms of subjectivity, refuses humanism however entangled, and thinks of a radical exteriority that would exceed the planetary. When Foucault argued that life did not exist until the eighteenth century, he was suggesting that knowledge and truth operate through an interior and exterior, creating a space of knowledge, with each truth regime generating its own outside. If ancient arts of the self-focused on living well, the turn to *life* enabled biopolitical normalization, such that truth is now the hidden force we can plumb to find the truth of our being. Deleuze and Guattari may well be responsible for the turn to the molecular, but their molecular unconscious is not a ground of life that can provide a foundation for



knowledge, precisely because their becoming-molecular goes beyond the planetary to the cosmos. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley depicts the possibility of an orphaned and disentangled consciousness, where the monster's first perceptions are of light, dark, color, and difference. It is only after the monster reads *Paradise Lost* that he is humanized and Oedipalized, demanding recognition from his father/creator and a female counterpart. That this prospect fills Victor with horror suggests that Victor's problem is not so much his Promethean overreaching as it is his timidity when faced with proliferating nonhuman life.

Connolly recognizes that the question for the twenty-first century is about climate truth, not just about the truth of climate change; truth takes the form of multiple complex, dynamic, and bumpy planetary processes. In an era of climate change, how do we negotiate the fundamentalism of a neoliberal regime that borders on fascism when it denies the planetary? Connolly's response is collective and connective, expanding the world to include the planet. In his transformation of Sophocles, Shelley, Deleuze and Guattari, Whitehead, and Foucault, what he sets aside, because it is not a form of human entanglement, is the cosmic. Sophocles' contemplation that there is no prima facie value in being born – 'Not to be born at all/Is best' – allows us to think of the tradition of tragic thinkers as not believing in this world, even in its expanded planetary form.

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Claire Colebrook  
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA  
cmc30@psu.edu