William E. Connolly. *The Fragility of Things. Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Duke University Press 2013. 256 pp. $70.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780822355847).

In *The Fragility of Things* William Connolly contributes to the growing body of 'new materialist' formulations of 'weak ontologies'. Stephen K. White introduced the term 'weak ontologies' to describe recent efforts in political thought to propose conceptualizations about the nature of human existence, the world, and reality, in which one's political and ethical claims can be convincingly grounded (*Sustaining Affirmations*, Princeton University Press, 2000). These formulations are 'weak' because they acknowledge the contingency of any formulation of ontological grounds (White, 2000). Establishing materialist 'cosmologies'—the term Connolly prefers—that are attentive to humanity's entanglements in multiple, overlapping self-organizing systems, Connolly hopes will inform more mindful, ecologically aware political agendas. By drawing attention to similarities between market economies and self-organizing systems like climate patterns, he wants to propose a critical stance that would undermine current hegemonic formulations of neoliberalism and awaken in his readers a new enthusiasm for political activism. By overlooking the 'fragility of things', current forms of neoliberalism enhance the crises and dangers inherent in our existence as social and embodied beings who inhabit an unpredictable and vulnerable environment. To address the multiple crises we face today, Connolly argues, we need to rethink our relationship to our material environment and the ways we act politically.

Intertwining the four chapters of the book with interludes, Connolly highlights the various levels on which human existence is interwoven with complex non-human processes. The first chapter advances his initial analysis of current forms of neoliberalism. In chapter two, Connolly turns to Friedrich Hayek, who he sees as the theorist of a more 'moderate' form of neoliberalism. By expanding on some of Hayek's notions of freedom and creativity, Connolly seeks to criticize Hayek 'from the inside'. Chapter three exposes the 'market like postulates' of Kant's moral theory, which Connolly faults for its stringency, teleological understanding of human development, and lack of creative freedom. In chapter four, he draws on Whitehead's engagement with quantum mechanics and Nietzsche's discussion of Greek philosophy to enhance our understanding of spontaneity and creativity as decisive cosmic forces. The interludes provide us with further insights into humanity's relationship to its 'cosmos'. Engaging with Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* and Charles Taylor's notion of the 'pursuit of fullness', Connolly argues for a position that appreciates the vitality of being while remaining attached to the specificity of human existence. Moreover, Connolly seeks to bolster his vision of cosmic creativity by citing a multiplicity of findings in the natural sciences. Unfortunately, by engaging with a dazzling number of examples from biology, neurology and physics, the book passes over the possible implications self-organization, teleodynamic processes, and complexity theory could have for political thought too quickly to add substantially to Connolly's 'cosmic' vision.

While the connection to the natural sciences at times seems stretched, or is not explored with sufficient care, Connolly is able to offer a clear and highly perceptive analysis of what is distinctive about current forms of neoliberalism. This ideology endows the market with self-regulating, impersonal agency and creativity that somehow finally works out for the best of humanity. While human beings are presented as too limited to effectively control the market, the sovereignty of the human subject is reinstated when the 'rest' of the world is pictured as easily mastered and controlled by human intervention. Despite their avowal to the opposite, however, proponents of current forms

of neoliberalism often do not perceive markets as natural and self-perpetuating. Instead, they are well aware of the need for state intervention to create a favourable economic and social climate for 'free unregulated' markets to grow and unfold their healing powers. This understanding is still clearly expressed by Hayek, who present markets as, at the same time, abstract and timeless and dependent on careful governmental protection and fostering (60). For instance, the state is needed to 'inject market processes into new zones' such as 'academic admissions, schools, prisons, health care'. An expansion in these areas involves an increasing number of the population 'in the vicissitudes of non-state, corporate practices, where the ability to discipline and channel conduct increases' (20). Connolly also comments on the at times counter-intuitive contemporary interrelations between neo-liberalism and a specific brand of conservative Christianity. This relationship, at least in the American context, is an important element of current neoliberal ideology, where the world is pictured as created to supply for human needs. Hayek could not have foreseen this link with religion. He was, however, well aware that the perpetuation of neoliberal market systems relies on the ideological saturation of society. Otherwise voters might push for market regulation and social reform in unavoidable times of socio-economic crises. Neoliberalism, Connolly concludes, 'is a form of biopolitics that seeks to produce a nation of regular individuals, even as its proponents often act as if they are merely describing processes that are automatic and individual behaviour that is free' (59).

Connolly's take on neoliberalism is framed and guided by his appreciation of the cosmos as 'replete with self-organizing, spatiotemporal systems flowing at different speeds, levels of sophistication, and degrees of self-sustaining power', where each is entangled to various degrees with several other systems (81). Humans, he argues, should develop an awareness of these non-human force fields, in which we are imbricated and which, at times, overmatch human mastery (7). Connolly describes self-organization as a process where an organism is shaken out of its resting point by an unexpected event and then seeks to establish a new point of equilibrium. At times, he asserts, this may 'help to bring something new into the world' (8). Being aware of the importance of such self-organizing processes, on both a microscopic level and a global level, is supposed to make human beings more receptive to the limitations to human mastery. This in turn would allow us to question notions of 'a predesign of being' and the idea that the 'nonhuman world were predisposed to us' which Connolly detects in some religious world-views, neoliberalism and Kantian thought. As Connolly stresses, 'human and nonhuman systems regularly infuse and impinge upon one another—both at the microscopic level within human bodies and at the macroscopic level between disparate systems' (35). Taking these interrelations seriously allows us to question the idea of human uniqueness '*either* in itself *or* as the only being created in the image of God' (48). Connolly prefers understanding humanity as 'distinctive'—a notion that gives more room to appreciate the continuum between different forms of agency and creativity exercised by humans and non-human forces.

It is from this picture of a vital, creative cosmos in which humans play a small part that Connolly criticises neoliberal ideology. Connolly thus values Hayek's understanding of markets that emphasizes the 'periodic significance of spontaneity, uncertainty, creativity, self-organization, and self-balancing powers in the world' (62). His criticism is directed against Hayek's unwillingness to expand these concepts in a world beyond the market. Connolly thus faults neoliberalism for overlooking the fact that economic markets are only one among many imperfectly self-regulating systems. He argues that it is 'partly because economic markets operate in a larger world of multiple, self-organizing systems that they are much more volatile than the advocates of neoliberalism pretend' (25). Thus in Connolly's view we might well be unable to control markets, but we should be aware

that this is the case, because we are unable to truly control most other aspects of our environments as well. One might find oneself asking, however, whether much critical insight is gained from this apparent assertion of a seamless continuum between humanly created economic and political systems and self-organizing processes humans might interact with, but which are not created by human actors. At times, Connolly's enthusiasm for ways various organisms can display 'teleodynamic, self-organizing capacities' appears to overlook the fact that social and economic systems are not organisms, or any other kind of 'naturally' occurring phenomena at all. This detracts attention from important issues of historicity, power relations and intentionality that play very different roles in the workings of neoliberal markets and governmental institutions than they do in the creation of biofilms or in the gene-transfers of bacteria.

One of the main goals of the book is to free a broader spectrum of the American public from the paralyzing grasp of neoliberal ideology, which on the one hand presents the current economic system as without alternative and on the other hand successfully fosters cynicism towards institutional politics, thus rendering people apolitical. However, Connolly's discussion of activism appears at times too broad and too unconcerned with persisting issues of power, inequality and violence to provide new incentives. His indistinct portrait of multi-layered activism encompasses personal consumption habits, a critical analysis of neoliberalism, and a broad alliance between movements or groups, both nontheistic and religious, that might be able to influence electoral politics. Calling for new shopping habits and for overcoming our mistrust towards political institutions, however, might not be enough to address the deeply engrained neoliberal agenda that has proven its flexibility in co-opting various 'grass-roots' political movements and 'environmentalist' trends. In the end, despite allusions to a 'general strike' that would bring about a more climate-friendly economy, which are not further explored, what seems to be proposed is not a radical departure from neoliberal market-economy. Instead, by seeking to temper or slow down its worst outgrowths Connolly hopes that liberal market-economies could be made more responsive to environmental and social needs.

Rosine Kelz, Independent Scholar