

William E. Connolly

A World of Becoming

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William Connolly's latest book, *A World of Becoming* is an ambitious and far-ranging piece of political philosophy. In it, Connolly explores the growing complexity of the world as it relates to themes of temporality, causality, belief, and human agency. He also charts potential political responses to the existential resentment and antagonism that such complexity can engender. For those with an awareness of Connolly's work, some of these themes may seem familiar, touched upon in earlier work such as *Pluralism*, *Neuropolitics*, and *Identity/Difference*. However, this is no mere 'rehash', as Connolly maps out with greater specificity here themes which receive only cursory attention in prior writings. Though for reasons I shall explain below Connolly's work largely comes up short as a work of 'public philosophy', he has nevertheless offered a sensitive and timely statement regarding the role of theory in an increasingly complex world. Connolly's provocative and engaging style will leave his readers with much to ponder and debate.

Connolly does not present a linear narrative here; in fact, one of his broader arguments is against linearity in argument and explanation as such. His work is one of themes interwoven, insights and intellectual developments subtly imbricated in one another. This can make for challenging reading at times, yet to do otherwise would likely go against the philosophical grain of what Connolly is arguing. Connolly opens by bringing recent developments in chaos theory and complexity theory into conversation with past philosophers whose work anticipates them. Complexity theory's overarching point is that complex systems defy classical causal explanation and prediction—we cannot know or predict in advance what will come. Nevertheless, careful attention to underlying patterns can help us comprehend and deal with the messy business of living in the world. He then maps out what these developments mean for the complexity of contemporary understandings of agency and time. In short, notions of self-driven, autonomous human mastery or chronological, linear time no longer seem adequate to depict the world in which we reside, a *world of becoming*.

Connolly moves on to address these notions of imbalance and disequilibrium politically, examining the modes of cynical resentment or depoliticization they might foster among those too strongly wedded to certainty and human mastery. These broader trends of imbalance and disequilibrium occur at precisely the moment which Connolly calls the 'minoritization of the world', where 'experience is pervaded by close encounters, engagements, negotiation, and rivalry between diverse creeds' (60). From Chapter 3 onward, Connolly examines how we might cultivate belief and even affirmation of a world

of becoming, expanding upon earlier themes of agonistic respect, and how we might negotiate deep pluralism. For Connolly, positive affirmation and relations of agonistic respect mean a 'care for the world and a presumptive respect for established principles to moments when we are divided against ourselves...[where we] cultivate sensitivity to new circumstances and social movements that suggest the possible need to change entrenched habits' (80).

Yet the struggle to engage alternative creeds, faiths, and belief structures in the agonistic manner outlined above is not merely an intra-societal struggle. In the contemporary world of becoming, this is a condition which plays itself out globally, in what Connolly deems the 'resonance machine of global antagonism' (138). This is not merely Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations'. As Connolly notes, he is referring to 'practices which exceed those civilizational boundaries and of estranged minorities within them' (139). Thus, Connolly is dealing not merely with primordial 'ancient hatreds' but with the confluence of volatile global markets, amplified political and cultural animosities, and escalating militarism and violence. The risk in such a system is that competing actors descend into a form of existential resentment, one which nurtures the 'drive to take revenge on the visibility of other faiths that exacerbates the vague sense of uncertainty you feel about your own creed' (140). Thus, the ability to respond to alternative modes of being with presumptive generosity and a sense of contestability in one's own beliefs is both a societal and global imperative.

Lastly, Connolly turns to the task of the *theorist* in a world of becoming. It should be noted here that Connolly openly guards against the mischaracterization that such a world is in constant flux, absent points of stabilization. Rather, what we see are long periods of stability with periodic disturbances and ruptures, the latter being precisely what global humanity and non-humanity finds itself within at the moment. He writes,

[T]here may be long chrono-periods of relative stabilization in several zones that matter to human participants, but during a time of accelerated disequilibrium the ethico-politics of judgment through extrapolation from the recent past to the medium or distant future becomes rattled or breaks down. It is now time to modify old extrapolations of possibility and desirability (150).

In short, we cannot simply base our theorization on points of stability and stabilization. Rather, we must think creatively in these moments of rupture and disequilibrium. We must think beyond the ordered universe and theorize the rupture, the disturbance. In addition, we must resist the temptation to fall back into the conceptual categorizations which earlier periods of stability foster: notions of classical causality; of linear and chronological time; of unproblematic, undivided conceptions of human autonomy and agency. Instead we should consider *emergent* notions of causality, divided and complex conceptions of human (and non-human) agency, non-linear and non-chronological notions

of time and temporality. These are, Connolly argues, the terms of political and philosophical explanation appropriate for a world of becoming.

Though a compelling statement of the contemporary human predicament, and a provocative thesis regarding the role of political philosophy in attempting to come to terms with it, *A World of Becoming* does fall somewhat flat as a public philosophy. By ‘public philosophy’ I mean a sophisticated yet *accessible* framework which can provide guidance and shed light upon actual political controversies and debates. Admittedly, this is a critique which would not hold water if Connolly himself did not himself aspire to provide such a framework. However, at numerous points, he seems to move in this direction. These aspects of the book are often weak and quite vague. This is seemingly at odds with the radical nature of his philosophical suggestions elsewhere. For instance, in articulating what a ‘counter-resonance machine’ might look like, Connolly writes,

[I]f you are in the middle class, buy a Prius or a Volt and explain to your neighbors why you did; write in a blog, attend a pivotal rally; ride your bike to work more often; consider solar panels; introduce new topics at your church. And as you do these things, you may note how an array of hesitant beliefs and desires now becomes more solid and how other tendencies begin to melt away (91).

This is not to say that any of these practices are *at odds* with a more progressive and less resentful politics. It is merely to say that such interventions seem relatively anemic counter-strategies in light of the discords and divisions which Connolly artfully diagnoses.

A final point of critique is that at various junctures Connolly falls short of the agonistic, self-reflective orientation which he has so carefully laid out for the past twenty years. In reading his critical examination of ‘existential resentment’, defined as a ‘resentment of the most fundamental terms of existence’, one might be tempted to think that this a condition only found among the political right. Stinging indictments of the militarism of past American presidential administrations, the short-sighted greed of global corporate interests, or the insidious manner in which Fox News ‘infiltrates the tonalities of political perception’ (54) may have a place in an avowedly polemical political tract. Yet in a work of political philosophy seeking to cultivate a fallible, self-critical, agonistic orientation towards ideological difference, such denouncements are at odds with the larger purpose. This is a problem Connolly acknowledges when he states that such critiques ‘run the risk of replicating the very stances you resist’ (90). However, I fear that ultimately, what Connolly advances is less of a ‘counter-resonance machine’ and more an *amplification* of the divisive qualities of the existing antagonistic resonance machine, which is the very object of his critique.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *A World of Becoming* is a remarkably rich and rewarding work, and Connolly a thinker whose claims demand serious reflection and thought. His work does not shy away from the vexing philosophical and political questions of our time. Such thoroughgoing examination of the concrete challenges humanity currently faces is admirable. Furthermore, he offers a strong foundation upon which we might begin to build a practical orientation for affirming political life in a world of disequilibrium and disorder.

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