

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Connolly, William E. *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 247 pp., \$22.95 paper (9780822355847)

In *The Fragility of Things*, William Connolly makes an important and thought-provoking contribution to transdisciplinary critiques of neoliberalism. Through deconstructing neoliberalism's flawed logic and revealing its rippling consequences on both life and non-life systems, this book removes any doubt as to the destructive nature of a neoliberal economic and geopolitical order and presses the urgency with which we must act in reconsidering it. Moving beyond critique, Connolly then productively provides an alternative pathway to be achieved through the cultivation of an ethos oriented around an awareness of the fragility of things, the plurality of life, the importance of democratic activism, and—most unique to this book—an appreciation for the presence of non-market self-organizing processes. Writing through a wide lens, with relevance to literatures and topics ranging from sustainable development, social and ecological justice movements, moral philosophy, identity politics, and neoliberal capitalism to climate change, geology, and biology, Connolly brings social insights to those interested in the biological and earth sciences, and visa versa. He engages with the challenging economic, political, ecological, and ethical climate at hand, moving beyond identifying the crises incipient in each sphere to illuminate the linkages between all. He urges us through his argument to press organisations of all sorts “to act in concerted ways to defeat neoliberalism, to curtail climate change, to reduce inequality, and to instill a vibrant pluralist spirituality into democratic machines that have lost too much of their vitality” (195).

To make this argument, in Chapter 1: “Steps Towards an Ecology of Late Capitalism”, Connolly deconstructs the interdependencies of this ecology, identifying the pervasiveness and rippling of neoliberal logic throughout the organisations and institutions that are constitutive of social and political realities and revealing the corrosive consequences of this logic on processes of democratic governance, as well as on the vitality of non-human life systems. Chapter 2: “Hayek, Neoliberalism, Freedom”, outlines the economic history underpinning the shape of moder-

ate neoliberal theory. Chapter 3: “Shock Therapy, Dramatization, and Practical Wisdom”, then, focuses on the Kantian moral mode of practical reason, conducting a genealogy of reason and challenging the Kantian system of morality with “an alternative ethicopolitical vision” enhanced with contestability, resiliency, and adaptability (99). To conclude, in Chapter 4: “Process Philosophy and Planetary Politics”, Connolly describes the need to add a cosmic dimension to contemporary politics, uniting those minorities with “commitments to the planet” in a way that folds an appreciation for the interdependencies of life and non-life systems into democratic activism (178).

The book begins with a discussion of existential affect, effects, and interconnections that Connolly conceptualises as constitutive of what it is to be human, part of a contemporary society that is inextricably woven into and reliant upon oscillating, transforming, vital—yet fragile—non human systems, which include those systems impacted upon by climate change (5-10). In his critique of the neoliberal logic of market self-rationality, the author demonstrates how the self-organization that neoliberals tend to limit to markets is, in fact, not unique; rather, self-organization is always incipiently present in the spontaneous interactions occurring between human and non-human systems (Chapter 1). From here, Connolly identifies how the exploitative and extractive extremes of neoliberalism create ecological fragilities; fragilities that in turn diminish the capacities of self-organizing life systems to resist, organise and creatively cope with systemic challenges through collective agency (Chapter 2).

Drawing selectively from thinkers including Nietzsche, Whitehead, Hayek, Taylor, Deleuze, and, most of all, Kant, Connolly creates an assemblage of theoretical assumptions and predispositions to construct his transdisciplinary perspective for engaging with contemporary forces giving shape to lived human and non-human experiences. Uniting Kantianism and Neo-Kantianism in unique ways, he disrupts the Kantian notion of “unbroken progress” (130) and rejects, with some adjustments, Kant’s conceptions of practical and instrumental reason (125). In this way, Connolly invites us to rethink our universalist, linear assumptions, proceeding into a cosmic “world of becoming” in which outcomes are up for grabs and impacts and moral sensibilities are constantly occurring.

Invested in this “world of becoming,” the subjective positioning of the author and the framing of key contemporary issues transcend the spectatorial divide between optimism and pessimism (41) and the fragmentation of knowledge by academic disciplines to engage with experiential, transnational, and planetary challenges in a productive and transdisciplinary way. Connolly, therefore, writes from a place of deep empathy and humanity with a wide and diverse knowledge base. He dis-

misses critiques made by cynics of “presumptive generosity” by decoupling existential gratitude and historical optimism, embodying his urging towards an ethos of genuine concern and empathetic care for lived, empirical circumstances of suffering (181). This care, though not universal in nature, is framed as necessary and indispensable when trying to engage with the exploitive impacts and trajectories of neoliberal economic and geopolitical policies and when trying to unite the differing sensibilities, entrenched identities, and moral orientations of those involved in maintaining or disrupting that trajectory.

Connolly therefore assigns an “ethic of cultivation” to take the place of a “morality of universal law” (130-134) that has become too rigid to bend without breaking in a fragile and plural ethical world; a world constantly being produced, reproduced, and negotiated by the momentary manifestations of intent, agency, and creativity occurring among self-organizing life systems with individual, yet interdependent, cares in this world. In considering the complexities underlying the delicate interaction between vitality, existential vulnerability, and existential gratitude, and by exploring agency, creativity, and freedom as interdefined (145), Connolly opens up space for an appreciation of being that extends beyond oneself and one’s group affiliations (Chapter 1). He states, “an ethos exuding existential gratitude, amid the vitality and vulnerabilities that mark life, can help render us alert to the fragility of things as we also allow the sweetness of existence to sink into our pores” (181).

Engaging with contemporary issues ranging from climate change, sectarian conflict, and electoral politics, to criminal justice systems, food deserts, and consumerism, Connolly manages to address the significance of each with ease and clarity, making linkages between contemporary forms of marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. He does this while emphasizing the need for self-organized transnational citizenship and role experimentation to challenge the daily, momentary practices of authority and habituated institutional power to reveal cracks in “the system” through which creative opportunities for change can flow (186-194).

Connolly’s writing could be criticized as being inaccessible and pretentious at times, hindering the ability of those whom Connolly’s argument implicates—citizens—to comprehend or engage with its urgings. However, the obscurity Connolly writes with may be necessary to do justice to the complexities he is exploring between the human and non-human systems this book is trying to cultivate an appreciation for.

To conclude, *The Fragility of Things* illuminates the power and delicacy of interconnections and self-organization in a way that seeks to “extend our political and cosmic sensibilities” (9). Connolly describes

vividly how the “plurality of life” and the transdisciplinary intersection of human and non-human systems are deeply and constantly embedded into our everyday, lived experiences. He then uses the richness of that plurality to cultivate an appreciation for how an assemblage of these pluralities, alongside an “ethic of cultivation”, role experimentation, and care for the fragility of our connections to both human and non-human systems may indeed be the way forward towards a more vital, inclusive, sustainable, and democratic future. This is an essential read for anyone with an interest in a changing world filled with democratic potentiality.

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