

# The Potential of Democracy as Resonance or Resentment

## *A World of Becoming*

William E. Connolly

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In *A World of Becoming*, William Connolly attempts to weave together the following phenomena into a coherent tapestry, a project he considers crucial for a comprehensive understanding of our contemporary world:

complexity in the natural and human sciences, differential nodes of agency and feeling in the world, connectionism over individualism and holism alike, radical immanence with distinctive modes of transcendence appropriate to it, a world of becoming, two registers of temporal experience, contestable elements of faith in different cosmologies, and the pursuit of new lines of political alliance across multiple modes of creedal difference.<sup>1</sup>

And all in less than 180 pages. Disappointment is likely if the reader expects a fully developed political project by the end. Yet this deficiency does not stem from the diagnoses offered, but the hesitantly extended solutions. Rather, the book is a firm but preliminary clarion call to the faithful. Connolly is asking for a fundamental reconsideration of our notions of the world and our place in it. The strength of his arguments lies in the fact that they do not, and cannot, originate solely from abstract and intellectual realms, but must incorporate a “real world” of agonistic and antagonistic contexts vying with each other. It is ironic then that his soundest and deepest recommendations regard the reformulation of political theory as practices of everyday life rather than as the forming of mass counter tactics. It is this lack that he offers to future analysts as a challenge.

This work is simultaneously solid and preliminary in the sense that it offers a strong basis from which to spark a body of theoretical analyses specifically focused on the expansion of the space of political potential. And it is the “faithful” this book has in mind, specifically those who maintain a committed and parochial belief in one or the other side of the modernist social-nature divide.<sup>2</sup> Connolly is not interested in continuing this division, but in transcending it: to attempt to apprehend the world not as it *is*, here and now, but as a fluidic and holistically interconnected set of multiple “force-fields” which consist themselves of heterogeneous, spatio-temporal systems that impact and contest each other. The spaces and times of those interactions are the moments

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1 Connolly, William, *A World of Becoming*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 42.

2 See Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

“pregnant” with potentiality. This potentiality is not guided by a deterministic, omniscient transcendentalism, nor the extreme contingency of a radical immanence.

Instead, the breach between the exclusivist nature and social camps needs to be illuminated and emphasized as the center of, not marginal to, these sites of potentiality. It is the vitality undergirding an imminently transcendent world, whereby the potential is affected by the past and present, human and non-human actors, the near and far parts that constitute the world, but absent a brittle teleology. The world, rather, becomes. In highlighting this point, Connolly gestures toward the burgeoning field of complexity theory in the physical sciences. But this endeavor remains incomplete without the input not only of the social purely in terms of the human being, but also in “sociality” between human and non-human actors and systems. Ignoring this facet of reality fosters political, cultural, social, and scientific frameworks that are unable to take notice of, let alone accommodate, the growing number of force-fields that originate within this late-modernist gap.

Inviting us to shift our *weltanschauung* necessarily leads us to starkly question our seemingly unquestionable conceptions of agency and possession thereof. One can understand a facet of global warming from the political side, for example, by focusing on the roles of actors in “developed” versus “developing” states, comparative levels of energy consumption, a neoconservative ideology that buttresses and enforces a neoliberal, late-capitalist economic framework that resists efforts to implement enforceable emission caps, finally determining whether global warming can be stopped, limited, or *allowed* to continue. And you can understand it as a purely climatological phenomenon caused by increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere originating in the perpetual drive toward ever more industrialization and consumption, the resulting reduction of overall cloud cover, an increase in ocean acidification, and resultantly more intense storms and more extreme temperature patterns that will in turn *lead* to an increase in the number of resource conflicts among human beings and an increase in the number of animal and plant extinctions. The radicality of Connolly’s proposal lies not in the relatively simple call for ignoring the gap between the two facets for the development of some form of synthesis, but also to understand the multitudes of these constituent parts, materials, and beings as connected actors endowed with varied degrees of agency, willed and unwilled, that vibrate and resonate with each other as fabrics of becoming. Agency conceived in this way is fluidic: it can be distributed, diverted, or contained, frozen, reduced to a trickle or allowed to inundate, but must conform, to some degree, to the contours of its environment. Moments of rupture are cultivated through the varied interactions among force-fields in ways that are not guided by a closed, cogently causal natural system nor an infinitely open contingency that is completely determined through social and political constructions and struggles. For Connolly, in terms of an event like global warming, we continue to ignore our reality’s radical immanence at our own peril.

A part of this peril, lies not in the stars, however, but in ourselves. Lest he be accused of relegating the human being to the margins, Connolly draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Friedrich Nietzsche to underscore the importance of this project for

the individual. The former's phenomenological ethos informs the book's call to incorporate experience as a principal source of apprehending the radically immanent world. Experience necessarily entails a particularist spatiality of the situation, a realization of intersensory dynamics and is in the end, anticipatory, in the sense of providing a field of likely potentialities beforehand that partly constitute the event once it occurs and is apprehended. The subjectivism inherent in experience, populated as it is by "sensory inter-involvements, the half-second delay, resonance, attractors, the complexity of duration, time as becoming, and an uncertain future" can easily lead to charges of nihilism or radical relativism. And for some individuals it does, manifesting as Nietzsche's *ressentiment*, "a resentment of the most fundamental terms of human experience as you yourself understand them."<sup>3</sup> Cultural allegiance, social relations, political frameworks, spiritual and non-spiritual faiths: all are up to individual choice. Contrary to past eras, therefore, Connolly charges the inhabitant of late-modernity with confronting a world for which senses of belonging to and belief in are not automatic or given.

Apropos this is a more encompassing consideration of the human predicament, stemming from the human being's straddling of the divide between perceiving the world through clock-time (the length of a life; the time it takes for light from the Sun to reach Earth) and duration-time (those transitory periods when two force-fields, each with their own internal clock-time, reverberate with each other, fostering a number of potentialities). As mortal beings, humans cannot simply ignore the apprehension of existence through seconds, minutes, and hours. But we are simultaneously aware of that time which transcends, imposing hesitations and minor disruptions in the lived experience of unthinking clock-time. The simultaneous consideration of both is what is critical, yet seems impossible. However, it is faith in the moment, pregnant with the potentiality for accidents and ruptures, that Connolly, following Nietzsche's lead, invokes to resist *ressentiment*. The role of transcendent faith enters here, shedding any invocation to the universal or exclusive. Further, this faith is self-conceptualized as particular and historical force-fields that must necessarily and agonistically engage one another so as to realize a deep and multiple pluralism that can act as the lens through which we are able to apprehend becoming and act as an anchor for belief in the world. Particularist forms of transcendence then, do exist, divided among various faiths and creeds. However, belief in a world of becoming is not adequate on its own: it must also be affirmed. This affirmation or cultivation must stem from a sense of care about the world as it already exists and that allows this sense to expand, shift, and morph as necessary.

Existential resentment arises, however, in those who reject the difference and potentiality inherent in a world of becoming. If this resentment is widespread enough, it can transform into a force-field Connolly terms a "resonance machine." Today's world, imbued with resentment at a universe it cannot apprehend, is one in which "the hubris, resentments, tensions, and injustices accumulated from multiple sources condense into a global machine of revenge and counter-revenge."<sup>4</sup> To counter a machine of such

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3 Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 58-61.

4 Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 138.

proportions, he offers relatively tame suggestions, echoing Michel De Certeau's tactics of everyday life:<sup>5</sup> "write in a blog, ride your bike to work more often, consider solar panels."<sup>6</sup> These actions, he claims, will resonate with similar actions, increasing the likelihood of the formation of a force-field.

His suggestions for the political theorist are much more substantive, much more promising. He acknowledges the place of clock-time as the temporal framework most appropriate to apprehending the majority of political events as they resonate in real time. However, caution is called for when the theorist takes a long period of durational time, a "period of reflective equilibrium" as he puts it, periods when the interactions between various force-fields are relatively stable, and uses it as a static base from which to propound universal and eternal laws. Instead, the political theorist attuned to a world of becoming is more akin to a seer in the form of *Antigone's* Tiresias. She is one who is sensitive to the pregnant moments of force-field contact, attempting to account for relevant social and natural bodies of experience and knowledge and their effects on each other. She has the ability to sense the world beyond that which is given, the potentials for future moments. The challenge is for the seer to successfully negotiate between the two time frames, between apprehending action-oriented events, ideas, and movements and dwelling within the "fecund moments of temporal disequilibrium."<sup>7</sup> He ends the book on a high note, offering four deeply challenging suggestions for the theorist/seer: to amplify the feeling of attachment to the character of her existence as she perceives it, to develop the ability to dwell within momentous, pregnant moments, to continually attempt to manifest new concepts "that show promise of negotiating unexpected situation," and to periodically return to these concepts to ensure that they pose less danger than those concepts they wishes to replace.<sup>8</sup>

The potentiality of his suggestions for the theorist/seer are more up to the task of resisting the magnitude of a force like the "global machine of revenge and counter-revenge," at least within academia, than those on offer for the layperson. As mentioned before, the latter seem to closely resemble the practice of tactics of everyday life as outlined by De Certeau with one vital difference: Connolly's tactics need to be consciously adopted and understood as just one set among a multitude of varied and contesting sets of tactics arising from both human beings and non-human, inanimate objects, whereas De Certeau perceives them as for the most part unconscious, matters of daily habit. It is not that these tactics are completely toothless; indeed, they are able to assist the individual in existing as one subsumed within any number of repressive frameworks. I see these suggestions as more suitable to countering the potential for *ressentiment* in the individual. Further, if enough individuals consciously engage in similar tactics, the likelihood of societal *ressentiment* is similarly reduced. Yet I would conjecture that they are inadequate, at least on their own, in cultivating a large enough and forceful enough political countermovement to *ressentiment* existing in other force-fields.

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5 See De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

6 Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 91.

7 Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 161.

8 Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 165.

I read this work, then, as a call to the theorist-seer to engage this horizon of potentiality. For example, if democratic theory was reformulated so as to conceive of “democracy” itself (whether its practice or one’s belief in it) as a force-field, one would necessarily need to oscillate between the everyday and the “profound engagement with the vicissitudes of time” to effectively apprehend it.<sup>9</sup> I do not think it entirely out of the realm of possibility to state that for Connolly, what inhibits the political theorist from inducing shifts of perception not only in policy, but in the general political thought of the layperson, is directly tied to the theorist’s current inability (perhaps anxiety is a more appropriate term) to apprehend the holistic nature of today’s world. If the political theorist is brave enough to plumb the depths of the hazardous nature-social gap as well as her own well of doubts and convictions regarding her belief in and affirmation of a world of becoming, she will stand a much better chance of influencing the larger polity. In the end, then, faith in one’s own existence is just as critical as faith in the world and the transcendent.

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<sup>9</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 104.