The Swarming of Mimesis. A review of William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming*

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Despite—or rather because of—the cosmic scope of William Connolly’s latest book, *Facing the Planetary* does not propose a reflection on universal, transcendental ideas about what the planetary condition is, or should be. Nor does it encourage readers to advance to “the edge of the universe” (13) in search of alternative, habitable planets. It is rather from within a gravitational pull of immanent forces faithful to planet Earth that Connolly, in his singular and plural voice, invites us to explore “a series of attempts to face the planetary” (9) and to reevaluate the dicey entanglements of political, cultural, and natural processes that are currently giving new speed to the age of the “Anthropocene.”

Adopting the eagle-eyed perspective of a political *theorist* who remains true to the ancient vocation of this term (theory, from *theaomai*, to behold, and *horaô*, to see), Connolly aspires to make us *see* our fragile and beautiful planet from the temporal *distance* the Anthropocene imposes. He does so by plunging, with intellectual courage, theoretical

sophistication, and deeply *felt* appreciation for the human and nonhuman forces that tie human destinies to what he calls “the planetary,” by which he means “a series of temporal force fields, such as climate patterns, drought zones, the ocean conveyor system, species evolution, glacier flows, and hurricanes that exhibit self-organizing capacities to varying degrees and that impinge upon each other and human life in numerous ways” (4).

The task of articulating the plural modalities in which self-organizing planetary processes impinge on human processes of becoming, while humans are simultaneously acting as aggressive geological forces on the planet, calls for an open, experimental, and transversal disciplinary approach. Swimming against mainstream academic tendencies that all too often still confine research to narrow territorial turfs, Connolly establishes much-needed “heterogeneous connections” that straddle the science/humanities divide. In particular, he draws on a “minor tradition of Western philosophy” (from Nietzsche to Whitehead, Foucault to Deleuze) “that resists dominant nature/culture and nonlife/life division” (97), while at the same time engaging with recent developments in the earth sciences, evolutionary biology, and the neurosciences. This cross-disciplinary assemblage allows him, in turn, to face a multitude of entangled (non)human problematics central to the contemporary condition as diverse as climate change, tectonic plates, the ocean-conveyor system, neoliberal capitalism, free will, consciousness, and different spiritual creeds by moving back and forth between macro- and micro-politics. “My aspiration here,” he writes, “is to face the planetary while connecting that face to regional, racial, and urban issues with which it is imbricated” (33).

Connolly’s aspiration rests on a pluralist, materialist, and immanent ontology that will be familiar to readers of his latest books—*Pluralism*, *A World of Becoming*, and *The Fragility of Things*—and that continues to inform *Facing the Planetary* as well. At the most fundamental

level, this political ontology is succinctly articulated in the opening affirmation that this book posits the “primacy of forces over forms” insofar as these human and nonhuman “*forces* . . . both enable and exceed a stability of *forms*” (6). For Connolly, then, there is an excessive, protean, and unpredictable power animating planetary forces that always threatens to disrupt the equilibrium of rational human forms. Creatively convoking advocates of an ontology of becoming to face the specific challenges of rapid human-induced climate change and its devastating effects (global warming, polar ice-cap melting, ocean acidification, rising-sea waters, hurricanes), Connolly posits an unstable world of immanence over a stable world of transcendence; the power of a material world that has been considered ontologically “false” in the past over intelligible ideal “Forms” that are currently proving illusory in the present; horizontal, rhizomatic assemblages over vertical unitary ideas; in short, forces over forms. While the ontological opposition could not be clearer, the agonistic (yet respectful) confrontation could not be more ancient—and contemporary.

It is thus no wonder that Connolly does not open his book by proposing a stabilizing, unifying meta-theory of the planetary. Instead, he steps back to what a longstanding idealist tradition in political philosophy has tended to dismiss as false, namely, myth, in order to reveal the *visionary* power of myth to foresee potential threats that are already present. In particular, in the Prelude, “Myth and the Planetary,” Connolly reframes the Book of Job in the Old Testament by going beyond anthropocentric or theocentric readings, and reminding us that the Nameless One addressing the suffering Job is actually not speaking from peaceful heaven but from a catastrophic “tornado.” This shift of perspective from the Voice of God to the voice of a tornado, in turn, opens up an immanent, a-theological and “cosmic” reading of a myth that sounds strikingly contemporary, for “the Anthropocene,” Connolly writes, “has become the Whirlwind

of today” (7). This mythic scene is thus at least double: it addresses not only Job, or his friends, whose stable image of the cosmos the Voice threatens, but stretches into the present to interpell contemporary climate change denialists who, believe it or not, are still not alarmed by the increasing power of hurricanes enough to “see” and “feel” that “we have now become playthings of planetary forces, forces that a few regimes have agitated but none controls” (7).

And so, the attentive reader might wonder: is this a divine Voice bellowing through a major catastrophic force outside of us? Or is this rather a minor human voice that, with different intensities and tonalities, is already speaking from within us? Connolly does not advocate between these alternative positions, and for at least two reasons that orient the whole book. First because from the immanent, materialist, and non-anthropocentric perspective he adopts, humans and nature are “made of the same stuff” (8). Hence, new interdisciplinary collaborations between the human sciences and the hard sciences—what he calls “entangled humanism”—are needed to think across reified binaries such as nature/culture, mind/body, center/periphery, sacred/secular, etc. And second, in an invitational pluralist gesture dramatized by the stylistic register of his narrative voice, Connolly encourages different, often competing, yet potentially complementary constituencies to join forces at both the micro- and macropolitical levels in order to unite in a “new pluralist assemblage organized by multiple minorities from different regions, classes, creeds, age cohorts, sexualities, and states” (9)—what he calls the “politics of swarming.” *Facing the Planetary* is the singular-plural voice that, from these two entangled currents, cautions us that “we are playing with a wildfire and it is playing with us” (161).

In recent years, several studies in the burgeoning fields of environmental studies, ecocriticism, political theory, and continental philosophy—that is, fields in which Connolly has been one of the most active and influential players over the past fifty years—have been

emphasizing the precarity and fragility of our condition. *Facing the Planetary* stands out for its interdisciplinary scope, political engagement, and life-affirming power. The planetary challenge Connolly urges us to face is specific. It does not simply “emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” characteristic of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 17), but also stresses that planetary forces—tectonic plates, glacier flows, the ocean conveyor system, among others—operate as “agentic,” “self-organizing” processes that can enter into “fateful conjunctions with capitalism, socialism, democracy, and freedom” (30). This is a crucial point that gives a specific timbre of urgency to the voice addressing us. Contrary to, say, advocates of deep ecology who believe that “if we lift the human footprint nature will settle down into patterns that are benign for us” (20), Connolly draws on post-1980s developments in the new earth sciences (oceanography, geology, climatology, evolutionary biology) that reframe the doctrine of “gradualism”—the idea that prior to the Great Acceleration in the 1950s the environment changed *gradually*—in light of new and compelling evidence that the environment was punctuated by *rapid* changes well before entering the Anthropocene. Thus, in an untimely echo of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God at the twilight of the nineteenth century, Connolly’s poignantly renews the prophetic call at the dawn of the twenty-first century as he asks elsewhere: “Haven’t you heard? Gradualism is dead!” (Connolly and Lawtoo).

This temporal shift of perspectives does not leave humans off the hook. Quite the contrary. As Connolly shows in detail in Chapter 4, “Distributed Agency and Bumpy Temporality,” self-organizing process like the ocean-conveyor system operate on a temporality that is not linear and gradual but “bumpy” (106) and unpredictable instead. In fact, if a tipping point is reached, such processes can serve as “amplifiers” (104) that will accelerate human-induced climate change even further, with unexpected, catastrophic, and potentially irreversible

consequences. For instance, in *Facing the Planetary* we learn that a growing number of oceanographers are now convinced that “If [the ocean conveyor system] were to close down, ... a rapid, extreme cooling period would settle into Europe and northeastern America, though climate warming would probably continue elsewhere” (103). The general *political* lesson Connolly draws from the latest research in the earth sciences is as simple as it is fundamental: “be wary of accounts in the human sciences on the Right, Center, or Left that revolve around themes of sociocentrism” (92), that is, accounts that explain “social process by reference to other social processes alone,” thereby treating nature as a stable background or a “deposit of resources to use and master” (16), rather than a force with an agentic power of its own.

The ethical, political, and ontological consequences of this central realization are drawn from the “case studies” that constitute the book. Thus, in Chapter 1, “Sociocentrism, the Anthropocene, and the Planetary,” Connolly steps back before the onset of the Anthropocene to classical figures in political philosophy as diverse as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and, more recently, Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich Hayek who, despite their diversity, shared a sociocentric notion of human “belonging” that is all too human insofar as it fails to consider the agentic—albeit not necessarily conscious, or intentional—power of the nonhuman. Extending his conception of entangled humanism, first articulated in *The Fragility of Things*, Connolly sets out to agonistically and respectfully “challenge human exceptionalism by coming to terms with bumpy processes of planetary self-organization that interact with each other and with human cultures” (33).

And yet, critique is not the main focus of this book; it is rather the first step necessary to propose positive and affirmative alternatives. Thus, in Chapter 2, “Species Evolution and Cultural Creativity,” Connolly folds “sociocentric” cultural concerns with freedom,

consciousness, responsibility, and creativity within the broader dynamic of species evolution out of which humans emerged. What makes us culturally distinctive, he argues, cannot be dissociated from “evolutionary accounts of how the most complex capacities arose” (40); and conversely, theories of evolution cannot be dissociated from the cultures from which such theories emerged. Deftly avoiding the Scylla of “reductionism” and the Charybdis of “sociocentrism,” this chapter establishes a bridge between new biological research on dynamic evolution and philosophers of the “open cosmos” (Nietzsche and Whitehead, Deleuze and Bennett) in order to propose a view of creative (“teleodynamic”) drives that “projects differential degrees of agency into multiple, heterogeneous, interacting systems” generating vibrant assemblages that resemble an open rhizome rather than a closed organism (44). Such rhizomatic connections, in turn, open up conceptions of “freedom,” “consciousness,” and “creativity” that foster what Connolly, echoing Nietzsche again, calls an “ethic of cultivation” (57)—that is, an ethic in which the evolution of a thought, a self, a relation, or a political assemblage is not driven by a solipsistic ego, let alone a reductionist genome, but rather, as Nietzsche puts it, ““grows up in us like fungus,”” thereby leading the creative thinker to be ““the gardener ... of the plants that grow in him”” (qtd. in Connolly 57).

This ethics of cultivation is further expanded in Chapter 3, “Creativity and the Scars of Being,” which operates a shift of perspective from the creative evolution that roots humans in nature to specific intersubjective relations that bring us back in touch with the body. The main connection forged in this chapter is one between current research on “mirror neurons” in the neurosciences and the “tactics of the self” that operate on unconscious that responds viscerally to fluxes of affective contagion that operate on bodies and minds. Tapping into a conception of the unconscious that is “not organized by repression” (72) but rather, as Giacomo Rizzolatti and

his team have shown, has mirroring bodily reflexes (or mimesis) as an empirical manifestation, Connolly zeroes in on what a minor, and often marginalized Nietzschean tradition in critical theory considered the *via regia* to a *mimetic* unconscious: namely, mirroring “embodied responses to nonhuman and human agencies that usually fall below the threshold of awareness” (71). The chapter subsequently sets out to establish heterogeneous connections between Alfred North Whitehead’s non-agentic conception of “creativity” (65), Herbert Marcuse’s notion of “instinct” as “socially encoded” (70), and Gilles Deleuze’s diagnostic of the “power of the false” as an unrealized “*affect-imbued thought*” (79). The political tactic here is to encourage citizens to work actively on the habitual register of cultural life in order to “augment perception of nonhuman beings” (73) and, in the process, “better appreciate how the nexus between creativity, freedom, and presumptive generosity is crucial to critical theory and collective action” (77).

While Chapter 4 sharpens our understanding of the systemic implications of the distributive agency at play in nonhuman amplifiers already mentioned, Chapter 5, “The Politics of Swarming and the General Strike,” most clearly and forcefully advocates for collective political action. Given the book at hand, it should come as no surprise that Connolly does not find an effective tactic for facing the Anthropocene in an ethnocentric vision of *anthropos* that is literally at the center of the problem. Rather, he finds a mimetic source of inspiration for micropolitics in nonhuman assemblages that constitute what he calls a “swarm.” Honeybees in particular function as the paradigmatic *exemplum* for people, if not to passively mimic, at least to actively and creatively capture. Although Connolly does not rely on etymologies to support this heterogeneous connection, it is interesting to note that *ethnos* in Greek originally meant “people” but also “throng” or “swarm of bees.” The connection might not only be linguistic and symbolic but material and biological. Anyway, when honeybees relocate to a new hive they do not

immediately swarm in unison. Rather, they send out specialized female “scouts” that explore possible locations and return to assemble other bees, in a progressive expansion predicated on a “decision-making assemblage without central coordinator” (124). Transpose this decentered, yet specialized process of communication from nonhuman to human forms of collaboration, and a “politics of swarming” could potentially emerge in which citizens draw on their specific knowledge in order to generate “pluralist assemblages” at the level of not only the family, schools, and neighborhoods, but also factories, churches, and hospitals. Connolly is here productively reworking Michel Foucault’s conception of the “specific intellectual” by expanding its scope beyond the walls of academia to include all “*specific citizens*” who can rely on their “expertise and strategic position to call into question rules of normalization” (126). Specific citizens who respond to the everyday challenges of micropolitics might, if assembled, not only “become part of a rhizomatic complex with considerable growth potential” (128); they could also trigger “cross-regional general strikes”—a nonviolent tactic that could effectively spread, by mimetic contagion, across national boundaries and help us, if not to avoid completely, perhaps at least to contain tragic and violent possibilities that loom large on the horizon.

Is the emergence of a general strike realistic? Connolly does not claim that it is. He speaks of an “improbable necessity” instead, and stresses that in view of the acceleration of climate change, “it is wise to scale back utopian images of human perfection while simultaneously upping the ante of militancy against extractive capitalism and the world order it promulgates” (122). True, given the radical individualism endemic to neoliberal capitalism, which already turned culturally embedded instincts of consumption into second nature, *Homo sapiens* might have a long way to go to come anywhere near honeybees’ collaborative swarming, a model that, while fully immanent, seems at times to occupy the position of an ideal, albeit

rhizomatic form of cooperation. And yet, since humans are, *nolens volens*, mimetic animals driven by mirroring and plastic drives, our instincts are potentially open to creative rewirings shaped by the models that surrounds us. Animal models of swarming could, in principle, open up lines of flight on which the politics of swarming gathers speed, intensity, and momentum.

There is, however, a second, more insidious danger nested in the model of the swarm, a mimetic danger which should be faced in a network society in which scouting is predicated on human, all too human political models that are far from exemplary but whose power of impression is amplified via all kinds of new media endowed with infective potentialities. In fact, while relying on molecular/mimetic modes of communication that include affect, contagion, and mirror neurons, members of a *swarm* behavior have the potential to turn into its negative, nihilistic, and destructive counterpart—that is, a *crowd* behavior driven by irrational, exclusionary, violent, and potentially catastrophic actions that spread contagiously across the body politic, generating resentful movements that are not decentered by informed citizens but centered on dangerously misinformed new fascist leaders. And it is precisely at this decisive turning point that we should pause, and hesitate—before a pluralist politics of swarming tips into its negative double: namely, the swarming of fascist mimesis.

This hesitation is internal to the philosophical tradition Connolly convokes. As a careful reader of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who took it upon himself to further their reflections about a pluralist, deterritorializing “cosmos” that is not immune to the territorial danger of “fascism,” Connolly is fully aware that there are at least two sides to the politics of swarming. As Deleuze and Guattari put it in *A Thousand Plateaus* (arguably the major source of inspiration for *Facing the Planetary*): Observe a “swarm (*essaim*) of bees: here they come as a rumble of soccer players in striped jerseys” (34). Or consider a “swarm (*meute*) of mosquitos: . . . Sometimes it is

a specific animal that occupies the borderline, as leader of the pack (*meute*)” (271). The lesson, for Deleuze and Guattari is double: “The rhizome [like the swarm] includes the best and the worst” (8). In the process of becoming animal, then, human swarms or packs can indeed be attracted to mimetic leaders that serve as models for the best and for the worst. Perhaps, then, the pluralism of swarming indicates that Elias Canetti’s influential distinction between crowd and pack (or swarm), on which Deleuze and Guattari draw, might not be as stable as it appears to be—if only because the micropolitics of swarming, characterized by what Canetti calls “men in a state of excitement whose fiercest wish is to be more” (93), can, in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and endlessly rhizomatic new media, potentially gather in the “great number” of the fascist crowd, a mimetic crowd characterized by a “state of absolute equality,” which, as Canetti puts it (echoing a long tradition in crowd psychology), is willing to “accept *any* goal” (29).¹

Now, in *Facing the Planetary* Connolly is primarily concerned with the liberating, life-affirmative and revolutionary dimension of the politics of swarming. The emphasis is thus on promoting a horizontal micropolitics of resistance rather than on denouncing the danger of a vertical macropolitics of oppression, on stressing the importance of differentiation of roles rather than on diagnosing the mimetic equality of contagious affects, on promoting active dissent rather than condemning passive submissions. And yet, if we read closely, we see that from the distance characteristic of the specific citizen Connolly senses the disconcerting mimetic efficacy of the pathos of political leaders like Donald Trump to trigger a state of pathological excitement into crowds aspiring to be part of a (new) fascist movement. Writing before the 2016 US presidential election, when few took this possibility seriously, Connolly states, for instance: “today we face the risk of neofascistic reactions to the perils of climate change” (131), adding crucially that the working class “respond viscerally together to the body language, thinly veiled threats, and

aggressions of Donald Trump at a campaign rally” (73). The lesson internal to this (un)timely diagnostic is as ancient as it is fundamental. Mimetic behavior, just like the mythic tales that incite it, cuts both ways, depending on the model we mirror: if it can potentially turn a specific citizen into a model of resistance at a *distance* from power, it can also turn a democratic assemblage into a neofascist crowd under the hypnotic power of a leader’s *pathos*. Hence the need for what Nietzsche called a “*pathos of distance*” (12) to diagnose the spiraling loops generated by the swarming of mimesis.

In a sense, then, what we see at play in the politics of swarming brings us back to the mythic insights with which *Facing the Planetary* starts. Just as ancient myths can be convoked to challenge the modern myth of sociocentric progress, a politics of swarming can effectively be assembled to counter the politics of fascist crowds. As what used to be considered an exemplary democracy is now led backwards to reproduce nationalist, racist, sexist, territorial, militarist, and anti-environmental myths (or lies)—while at the same time becoming increasingly vulnerable to the swirl of catastrophic hurricanes of unprecedented magnitude—cross-regional strikes perhaps have the potential to turn from an “improbable necessity” into a necessary probability. “Situations,” Connolly foresees, “can arise when radical modes of opposition to prevailing practices become imperative” (58). We are now inevitably entangled in such human and nonhuman situations that give speed, substance, and power to the Whirlwind of the Anthropocene. In the wake of Donald Trump’s election and his subsequent rapid withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement, we can also sense that a minor swarm in favor of environmental forces can be slowed down by mimetic crowds subjected to a politically dominant anti-environmental ideology. Either way, we’d better face it: we are all *nolens volens*, entangled

in the catastrophic forces induced by rapid anthropogenic climate change that casts such a long shadow on the Anthropocene.

If the voice speaking from *Facing the Planetary* tactically emphasizes the revolutionary power of the politics of swarming, readers of Connolly's protean work should have no reason to fear a univocal diagnostic. Quite the contrary. In a deft inversion of perspective that furthers tragic possibilities already incipient in *Facing the Planetary*, Connolly's new book, *Aspirational Fascism*—which appeared with the speed of a lightning bolt—already provides a timely and illuminating diagnostic of the swarming of mimetic, all too mimetic forces that now cast a shadow on democratic ideals. It is also an invitation to assemble a plurality of voices to counter new forms of fascism—and side with The Planet.

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¹ I have argued elsewhere that, prior to Canetti, a marginalized mimetic tradition that includes fields as diverse as crowd psychology (Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde), continental philosophy (Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille), literature (Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence), and psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Trigant Burrow) had insightfully diagnosed the propensity of crowds to capitulate to the hypnotic will-to-power of fascist leaders. See Lawtoo, *Phantom*.

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