

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICS GROUNDED IN ONTOGENESIS

Jon Roffe

My title indicates the main problem that Nathan Widder's admirable *Reflections on Time and Politics* seems to me to raise, a problem which, though dramatised with reference to the theme of the untimeliness of time itself, is nothing if not timely. A revival of explicit and directly posed ontological questions is well and truly underway in contemporary thought, and a substantial body of work produced over the past decades oriented by a renewed attention to the question of time already exists. Widder brings these two concerns into relation with a third, that of politics. This connection, of course, has been invoked before, but rarely does it produce the wealth of insights that this book achieves.

In broad terms, Widder's book functions in three ways. First of all, it presents us with a set of reminders. Unlike Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (a book I was perhaps perversely reminded of as I read *Reflections on Time and Politics*), though, these reminders are not in aid of what Wittgenstein elsewhere calls "thoughts that are at peace [...] what someone who philosophises yearns for."¹ Widder's set of reminders are oriented in the opposite direction, and perturb accepted platitudes about (in particular) Deleuze, Lacan, and Foucault. I will mention some points about Deleuze below, but it is refreshing to see Foucault treated at the level that his complex work requires, and to see the proximity between Lacan and Deleuze exhibited in some very fine pages. I mean then that what we are reminded to do is to return to the texture of these works that has been smoothed out through habit.

Secondly, we are presented with a set of what I would call parallel demonstrations, a series of expositions which double the at times gnomic textual references made by Deleuze throughout the course of his work. The impressive and compact discussion of the relations between quantity, quality and the will-to-power in Nietzsche (125-9), for example, goes a long way to supporting the presentation of the same points undertaken by Deleuze in the key chapter of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. As is often the case with Deleuze's treatments of other thinkers, it is only once a detailed and thoughtful analysis of the original texts is engaged in that the surprising accuracy of the commentary becomes apparent – what look like unjustified argumentative steps turn out to be original and faithful glosses of the material they are concerned with, contrary to the initial impression that Deleuze may just be riffing on his own obsessions. Similar helpful passages are to be found on the role of Kleinian psychoanalysis

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICS GROUNDED IN ONTOGENESIS

in *Logic of Sense* (134-9), on the use of the Stoic theory of the incorporeality of sense in the same work (100-7), on the status of the Platonic theory of Forms that underpins a number of key moves in Deleuze (51-6),² not to mention the brief but striking passage in which Widder clarifies the specific nature of Deleuze's *differend* with Hegel. (63-8) In many respects, these directed investigations do more to vindicate Deleuze from charges of sophistry than the attempt to systematise his endeavour, an attempt that has become increasingly dominant in Deleuze scholarship over recent years.

Third, throughout the diverse thinkers and themes the book discusses, a single philosophical claim is expounded and refined, the theme which dominates Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*: that identity must be thought second to difference, that it arises from difference while remaining perpetually engaged with it. Moreover, Widder's project here is to account for the various ways in which important identities (subjective identity, the stable structures of language and social reality) come about on the basis of these differences. In other words, Widder pursues an ontogenetic account of the advent of identity. Like the intense interest in temporal and directly ontological questions, this interest in individuation is also a central feature of contemporary debates in European thought. It is to Widder's credit, however, that he manages to so fully flesh out what we might call the Deleuzian account of this issue, exceeding on a number of fronts a widespread facile pop-Deleuzism.



What conclusion does this triple project lead to, specifically with respect to the connections between time, politics and individuation? I could mention a number of things here, but I would like to confine my attention to three of them: the consequences for any reading of a theory of time in Deleuze, the nature of the connection between individuation and politics (a connection that constitutes the problematic I alluded to earlier), and the status of the individual itself.

Broadly speaking, Deleuze's philosophical treatments of time can be considered as either dyadic or triadic in nature. On the one hand, we find an account in *Logic of Sense* concerned with a pair of temporal concepts, *Aion* and *Chronos*. Likewise, the Bergsonian thread in Deleuze's philosophy, beginning with the essays on Bergson in the 1950's, tend towards the dynamic relation of the pure past and the passing present. On the other hand, a triadic schemata is to be found in *Proust and Signs*, *The Time Image*, and, above all, *Difference and Repetition*.

While it was the case for a significant period that the role of Bergson, and indeed of systematic metaphysics as such, in Deleuze's thought was poorly understood by readers of Deleuze in the English speaking world (due to some extent to the order in which translations of his work appeared), the turn to Bergson led to a somewhat grotesque subordination of Deleuze's philosophy to Bergson's, and in turn to an inflation of the role that the dyadic schema played in readings of Deleuze's philosophy.³ This can be amply seen both in Alain Badiou's infamous *Deleuze*, where he claims that "Deleuze is a marvellous reader of Bergson, who, in my opinion, is his real master,"⁴ but equally in Keith Ansell-Pearson's much more informed and convincing *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, even in the passages in which he defends Deleuze against some of Badiou's critical points.

There are a number of reasons why the triadic schemata deserves to be considered superior to a Bergsonian dyadic structure. For one, it plays an integral role in *Difference and Repetition*, which is certainly the most significant of Deleuze's foundational texts. For another, whenever it appears in Deleuze's work, it is equally integral. The same, I think, cannot be said for the appearance of the *Aion-Chronos* distinction in *Logic of Sense*, nor the opposition between history and becoming that populates some of Deleuze and Guattari's works, particularly *What is Philosophy?*

The significance of Widder's intervention into this set of issues is the way in which he demonstrates Deleuze's own overcoming of Bergson's philosophy of time, and thus his fidelity to a third order of time that surpasses the modality of the virtual past. While the chapter dedicated to one part of this argument is entitled "A Discontinuous Bergsonism", the point is to demonstrate a discontinuity *with* Bergsonism in Deleuze's philosophy. This, I think,

is decisive and already goes a long way to correcting a false image of Deleuze's philosophy of time and his philosophy more generally.

Widder makes a number of points on this front, some that show the critical distance that Deleuze's thought establishes (however implicitly) from Bergson's, and others that demonstrate the power of the third modality of time, not found in Bergson but associated with Nietzsche's eternal return (which is the real subject of this book in many respects). On the one hand, for example, Widder argues that the figure of the irrational cut, which plays an important role in *The Time Image* but is part and parcel with the ungrounding capacity of the eternal return, has no precedent in Bergson's thought. He traces this absence to what he presents as the conflation in Bergson between time and movement: his philosophy "remains parasitically attached to movement" and thus "does not go fully beyond the image of time it criticizes." (48) On the other hand, after mounting a powerful critique of the Heideggerian thesis of being-towards-death, he shows how literal death is nothing other than a specific case of the eternal return, and the sufficient reason for change in all forms: "the eternal return is inseparable from this 'impersonal death' or 'going under' which opens the self to multiplicity." (174)

Adding this recognition of the differential role of the eternal return to earlier points, we can see that it is this modality of time itself that is the operative element in the production of identity on the basis of difference. And here, Widder is nothing if not attentive to the central emphases of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, in which this third disruptive time is called the 'for-itself' of difference.

My second observation arises on the basis of the absolute nature of this connection, in Deleuze and in Widder's broader reconstruction, of the time-individuation relation. As the title indicates, the project of *Reflections on Time and Politics* is to draw consequences of a political nature from this analysis of the role of time in individuation. It is not clear to me, however, despite the richness of Widder's analysis, that this is possible.

The broad thrust of the analysis of this individuation is clearly marked in the Introduction: "the same processes that generate stabilities and identities also serve as the mechanisms by which they are overcome and dissolved." (11) Immediately after stating this, however, Widder writes: "This overcoming is an ethical and political task. Or, perhaps better, it is an ethical task that flows into politics. It is a crucial task insofar as politics and social life continues to privilege fixed markers and identities that are no more than surface projections."

Why is this problematic? If these processes of individuation are both the sufficient reason for the advent of identity and its dissolution in the name of new identities, then it is hard to see why endorsing this dissolution could be conceived politically. If, that is, such a dissolution is inevitable – and this is what the analysis of the eternal return so forcefully shows – in what way can we put it into play in political thought?

In other words, it seems to me that the conclusions that follow from the ontogenetic account of the difference-identity relation can support an immanent ethics (contrary to a widespread if ill-informed belief to the contrary), but it cannot provide a motivation for political action, either in the form of a general orientation or as a guideline for the choice of specific actions. I am reminded of an infamous passage from the close of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, where (after presenting a line of argument that is broadly confluent with Widder's own) Lyotard draws the following conclusion:

We need not leave the place where we are, we need not be ashamed to speak in a "state-funded" university, write, get published, go commercial, love a woman, a man, and live together with them; there is no good place, the "private" universities are like the others, savage publications like civilized ones, and no love can prevail over jealousy [...] What would be interesting would be to stay put, but quietly seize every chance to function as good intensity-conducting bodies.⁵

While Lyotard's claim would initially rankle with anyone of progressive sentiment, it seems like the direct conclusion in the order of subjective action from the ontological position that underpins it. In sum, if the

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICS GROUNDED IN ONTOGENESIS

secondary effect of identity (and its inevitable if local demise) is unavoidable, it seems difficult to suppose that fighting against this in some fully-fledged manner is even possible, let alone politically desirable.

Of course, it might be responded that this series of reminders about figures in the intellectual trajectory that interests Widder are also to be taken as reminders for us in our deliberations about politics that the stakes are contingent and underwritten by the real ontogenesis of political agents themselves. This is a salient point, and a worthwhile thing to be reminded of. Such a reminder, though, is not a politics or a philosophy of politics in any strong sense, and certainly cannot by itself answer to the “crucial task” (11) of developing new ways of living together.

It is worth noting that these concerns aren’t relevant to Widder’s philosophy alone. The attempt to parlay an immanent ethics into a politics of difference is characteristic of a great deal of post-Deleuzian European thought. Widder’s *Reflections on Time and Politics* easily stands head and shoulders above the bulk of such attempts, thanks to his *tour de force* reconstructions of the elementary theoretical machinery required to develop an adequate account of true individuation with respect to the decisive consequences of a meaningful philosophy of time. However, the gap between ontogenesis and politics remains, it seems to me, as wide as before. A final discontinuity thus remains to be thought, on the basis of these new and immensely satisfying philosophical investigations: the possible discontinuity between ontogenesis and politics itself.

My final point concerns the status of the individual and identity in Widder’s account. I think that the central thread of Widder’s analyses – the primacy of individuation as a process subordinated to temporal diremption – is both a good reading of Deleuze and a convincing ontogenetic account. However, the danger in such a reading is that identity is cast as entirely insubstantial.

Despite the fact that he indicates at the start of the work that “to hold that identities are semblances of stability is not to suggest that they are unimportant or dispensable,” (p. x)⁶ Widder sometimes⁷ seems to flirt with just such a position at a number of points.

For example, of the project of an ontology of sense, Widder writes (at 107):

In this ontology, the generation of surface sense is accompanied by illusions of identity, which metaphysical philosophy has always considered the sense of being but which has always remained abstract and inadequate to the task. Exceeding the sense given by metaphysics and identity, however, is another sense structured by concrete difference, in which identity is no more than a superficial effect.

In reducing identity to *no more* than a superficial effect, Widder runs the risk of evacuating reality from the product in trying to place it on the side of the productive mechanism, thereby rendering the regime of identity not just secondary but inconsequential. Ironically, this brings Widder close at points to endorsing the reading of Deleuze proposed by Alain Badiou, which would make of the actual, the individual, the regime of identity nothing but epiphenomenal flares on the surface of virtual One, an irony that is particularly striking given Widder’s powerful rebuttal of Badiou’s *The Clamor of Being*.⁸ It is only by (correctly, I would maintain) asserting the significance of both ‘halves’ of Deleuze’s ontology that we can avoid both Badiou’s Scylla (the posit of the irreality of the actual and the individual) and Peter Hallward’s Charbydis (the posit of the elusive status of the virtual).

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But one of Widder’s achievements in this book is to present with such force the disjunctive connector that interrelates these two, namely time itself, grasped not as a continual flow but as a formal structure that subjects both movement and stasis to implacable change. To my mind, it is by keeping the temporal element of such an ontogenetic philosophy of identity front and centre⁹ that the kind of ungrounded dualist consequences that

follow from such an ontology can be avoided. It is also by maintaining this emphasis that the ontological turn in contemporary thought can avoid becoming a new scholasticism.

Jon Roffe is a member of the editorial board of *Parrhesia*.

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A POLITICS GROUNDED IN ONTOGENESIS

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. GH von Wright and Heiklin Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 43c.
2. Widder's articulation of Lacanian thought in relation to the structure of Platonism in this regard is particularly impressive, even if I am not sure that the homology between the Law of the Father and regime of the Forms entirely goes through.
3. Correlatively, given that the revival of interest in Bergson's philosophy was – as Widder notes on the first page of his book – significantly inspired by Deleuze, there was a tendency to read Bergson as a kind of proto-Deleuze, without noting the entirely peculiar qualities of the reading we find in *Bergsonism* and the other essays from the 1950's.
4. (DCB 39/62)
5. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Athlone, 1993), 262.
6. In introducing the concept of micropolitics, Widder writes that “Despite their fictitiousness, identity and opposition do structure a certain level of political and social life,” (177) though this sentiment seems to me somewhat undermined by the following claim later on the same page: “despite the efficacy of identity in these domains [normality and deviancy with respect to social life], this level is the most superficial one. Its standards are *false* standards, whose stability and seemingly clear boundaries are *merely* simulated ...” (177, emphases added) It is this gap between acknowledging the produced nature of identity and the standard pertaining to it, and their lack of purchase on reality that concerns me.
7. By no means is this a foundational commitment for Widder. For example, writing of Foucault, he says “Microscopic and macroscopic are neither simply external to one another nor internal and identical. They are immanent to each other and reciprocally determining.” (161) Here, however, we might be confronting a disjunct between the broader Deleuzian framework of *Reflections on Time and Politics* and this Foucauldian trope, since Deleuze's use of the theme of reciprocal determination remains internal to his account of the virtual, and is never used by him to describe the relations between the virtual and the actual, differential structure and identity.
8. See Nathan Widder, “The Rights of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Univocity of Being,” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (4), 437-53.
9. There is a question, of course, whether this element is indeed consistently front and centre for Deleuze himself. As always, questions about the unity of Deleuze's philosophy remain problematic.