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The Politics of the Eternal Return

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Nathan Widder. *Reflections on Time and Politics*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. \$45.00 (hardcover), 216 pp. ISBN: 978-0271033945

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes two aspects of the eternal return. First, the eternal return is a cosmological and physical doctrine that posits a world of pure becoming. The world as we know it has regularities and identities, but these are only the surface effects of a deeper game of difference and repetition. The eternal return invites us to think of a world that emerges from, and always retains elements of, chaos: Chaosmos. The eternal return is also an ethical and selective thought that presses us to affirm a world without solid foundations. We live with beings and forces that resent the transience and injustice of this world and demand retribution, either against themselves (bad conscience) or others (*ressentiment*). The test of the eternal return—“whatever you will, will it in such a way that also wills its eternal return”—expunges reactive forces that demand solidity or vengeance and awakens joy for a world of surging and transient identities. The question becomes, though, how to translate the idea of the eternal return into a democratic, pluralistic politics. That is, how can we advocate the eternal return when we share the planet with theists, secularists, and others who hold that politics *must* have a secure foundation?

In *Reflections on Time and Politics*, Nathan Widder thinks broadly and profoundly about the political prospects opened up by understanding time as the structural ungrounding of movement and chronology. The book’s deceptively simple title illustrates its thesis that identities, though necessary for human life, hide the complex interactions that produce them. For though the book is about time and politics, these topics are nodes in a network that includes ontology, epistemology, mathematics, linguistics, psychology,

discursive formations, disciplinary regimes, ethical practices, micropolitics, the history of philosophy, and the philosophy of history. Widder examines each of these topics by drawing upon an impressive array of philosophers, psychologists, and political theorists, including Adorno, Aristotle, Bergson, Deleuze, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Irigaray, Klein, Lacan, Nietzsche, the Stoics, and Wittgenstein. The book is composed of eighteen “focused components” that explore themes—with the help of one or several authors—that resonate together, and with exterior forces, to change how we think politically. In the introduction, Widder divides the components into three groupings that we may summarize as ontology, genealogy, and politics.

Widder’s first aim in *Reflections in Time and Politics* is to present an ontology of the eternal return and anticipate the politics that it makes possible. Here, Widder follows Deleuze’s lead in combating the Hegelian presuppositions that continue to inform much radical political thought. Widder recovers Deleuze’s 1954 review of Jean Hyppolite’s *Logic and Existence* to show how Deleuze travels partway with his Hegelian teacher. Their shared task is the achievement of a philosophy of immanence, one that surpasses traditional metaphysical binaries such as essence and appearance. The solution, for both, is a logic of sense. A logic of sense retains a distinction between the inside and outside of a thing—between its external sense (its smell, as it were) and its internal core (the sense of the thing)—as two levels on the same plane of immanence. A logic of sense illuminates “the many mutually imbricated layers of reality residing within the empirical but going unnoticed by empirical thinking” (37). How, though, to describe the mutually imbricated layers of reality?

The key difference between Deleuze and Hyppolite—and their respective progenitors Nietzsche and Hegel—is how to interpret the syntheses that compose identities. For Hegel, the glue of being is contradiction. Any thing is only by virtue of not being what it is not. Forces oppose one another, but only in order to reconcile identity and difference in a higher synthesis: the Absolute. For Hegel, the logic of contradiction explains both the movement of history (detailed in the *Phenomenology of Sense*) and the movement of thinking (described in the *Logic*). Deleuze’s first objection to the dialectical method is that its concepts—contradiction, negation, the One, the multiple, and so forth—are “baggy clothes” (Bergson) that do not fit reality. Hegel imposes his logic onto history, and fugitive differences escape that want no part of the master-slave dialectic. The more substantive objection, then, is that Hegelian politics demands that partisans choose one side or the other in a clash of identities. To defeat essentialist politics, we need a viable metaphysical alternative to dialectics.

Deleuze, according to Widder, constructs a non-Hegelian logic of sense that opens a range of possibilities for the pluralist left. Reality, according to Deleuze, emerges from differences combining with differences in heterogeneous formations. Deleuze’s term for this process is “disjunctive synthesis”: *synthesis*, because differences connect in myriad ways into more complex entities, *disjunctive*, because components of each element elude

the yoke that holds them together. For Deleuze, the language of identity may be necessary to give sense to our personal and political lives, but it ultimately remains inadequate to “the ungrounded structure” of a world of becoming (9). Deleuze reworks Nietzsche’s terminology—particularly from the *Genealogy of Morality*—to develop a new political ontology. Identities are never formed in isolation and are always interconnected with others. Any body—individual or political—is composed of forces in tension with each other. Within dialectical thinking, bodies are created through opposition and reconciliation with others. For Deleuze, however, this is true only of reactive forces, *not* active forces that affirm themselves in the first instance before they engage others. Deleuze, in other words, explains the Hegelian perspective as that of a slavish will to power, whereas dialectics cannot explain the Nietzschean perspective of a noble morality that simply bypasses the game of recognition. Deleuze, for instance, takes up the Nietzschean idea of the friend as “someone between ‘I’ and ‘me’ who helps me overcome myself” (74). A friend—rather than an opponent from whom we demand recognition according to a preestablished standard—spurs and encourages us to overcome ourselves in new and surprising ways. The noble affirms himself, his friend, and their competition. The noble does not demand that he become whole through reconciliation; he embraces the condition of being a field of forces with ever-changing elements and contours. The noble, in sum, affirms the ontology of eternal return. What would it mean to democratize this sense of nobility? Here, Widder shifts to the second theme of his study: genealogy.

The eternal return is a difficult thought. We tend to think of time in a line connecting past, present, and future in measured increments. Sometimes, we think of habit as forming our perception of time or of the past enduring in the present and setting the condition of possibility of future events. Yet it is challenging to think that linear time, habit and memory rest upon the churning ungrounding of the eternal return. In other words, it is hard to believe that our world of apparent unities and identities emerges from “a microscopic network of convergences, divergences, and disjunctions” (119). It is tempting to ignore the eternal return and retreat to the position that we—and our designated opponents—have solid boundaries or can reconcile in the Absolute. To undermine this self-confidence, Widder employs genealogy to show that our identities arise from a combination of disparate elements held together loosely and contingently. As we may expect, Nietzsche and Foucault are invaluable allies in this project.

Consider, for example, Foucault’s famous exposé on the workings of the prison—and the institutions it modeled (the school, the army, the factory, etc.)—in *Discipline and Punish*. Many critical theorists applaud Foucault’s investigation of disciplinary power but argue that he does not have the resources to sustain the normative critique that his rhetoric suggests. On this reading, Foucault holds that the proper way to understand power relations is between contending identities: the identity that power wants to install, and the identity of the forces that resist. Widder shows, however, that this interpretation links “the analytic of power to the will to truth Foucault contests by making identity central to the truths and meanings constructed by power” (157–58). In other words, critical theorists

hold Foucault to a Hegelian standard that his Nietzschean genealogy seeks to overcome. For Foucault, we need to think power without assuming a clash between solid or reconcilable identities.

Widder re-interprets *Discipline and Punish* to show how genealogy dissolves old mental habits, in this case about the surface and structure of politics. Foucault's readers often assume that power seeks to normalize individuals for the purpose of modern liberal capitalism. Yes and no. Disciplinary power constitutes individuals, including delinquents, to serve the ends of social and economic efficiency; yet disciplinary power does not produce, or even need, "normal" or "docile" subjects who fit a cookie-cutter model. Analogously, modern liberal capitalism penetrates numerous domains of social life; but there are always "built-in inefficiencies" that render capitalism wobbly and incapable of capturing all social lines of flight (158–59). For a mechanistic ontology, society might be described as a well-oiled machine that leaves no room for escape. For an ontology based upon the idea of the eternal return, supposedly solid entities are always plied by difference — without negating the effect that economic and political institutions have in entrapping or liberating us (163–64). What ethical and political options are available, however, to resist disciplinary power?

Widder's third aim in *Reflections on Time and Politics* is to envision a politics that exploits the creative and revolutionary possibilities unearthed by the eternal return. Widder concedes that identity remains necessary to structure many aspects of our life. Yet the driving force of Widder's book — and the insight behind many of its finest passages¹ — is that our identities are in perpetual flux even as they cohere in formations of relative solidity and slowness. Granted that identity is an illusion, the question becomes how to open others and ourselves to chaos in life-affirming ways. Here, political theorists and philosophers must abandon the belief that argument is sufficient to bring about radical change. For our surface thoughts arise from heterogeneous elements conjoining beneath the layer of consciousness. For Widder, political transformation requires artistry on many levels of the self, not just the cognitive.

At the end of the book, Widder enlists Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari to consider how care of the self and micropolitics can shift the hidden dynamics that constitute our personal and political bodies. Widder mines Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* for an account of the self that makes possible a post-identitarian ethics. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, the self was plural and open — a composite of material, social, and visceral elements. Because the self does not have a center, or an ontologically higher nature, ethical practices are experimental and subtle: "we" cultivate or weed out the parts of our selves that we wish to elevate or suppress. This nuanced account of the self was buried by the Christian account of the self as divided between its higher (divine) nature and its lower (sensual) nature. Even modern moralists such as Kant retain a dualistic account of human nature that retains the places, if not the terms, of Christian morality. Widder, like Foucault, does not call for a simple return to the golden age of Greek or Roman ethics.

Rather, Widder appreciates the classical concern with tactics by which a nebulous self can creatively overcome its fears, habits, illusions, and resentments. Ethical practices of the self, in short, can prepare us to embrace the enchanting possibilities opened up by the idea of the eternal return. Yet Foucault's language of the self might suggest that ethics is a matter of one or several people. Deleuze and Guattari's account of micropolitics emphasizes the plural nature of the forces that compose our identities. Deleuze and Guattari's term of art for the side of our bodies—individual and collective—that assemble disparate elements the Body without Organs (BwO). Though our macropolitical ideas and institutions demand coherent thoughts and actors, the micropolitical realm of the BwO synthesizes the “material, linguistic, human, animal, and visceral” in patchwork combinations (182). The payoff to this analysis is that political transformation can be initiated on any of these levels. The politics of the eternal return is always risky—because reactive forces seek scapegoats for the lack of cosmic guarantees—and hopeful—because time (or the being of becoming) breaks the containers we impose on it.

Widder offers a concrete example of how his study enables us to perceive politics in a new light. We sometimes think of police officers as representatives of law and order. This may be partly true on a macroscopic level, but once we examine the ground on which police officers stand, as it were, we see that it is constantly moving. Police authority arises from a conjunction of numerous variables, including the criminal code, the economy, the distribution of power within a community, the appearance of the officer, the person under surveillance, the discursive formations that shape how we talk about police officers, and so forth. Police power is real, but it is also contingent and reversible, at least to some degree. Take the power of a well-placed question. In the United States, we may problematize an officer's status by asking “who do you think you are?” whereas in a more status-oriented country we might gamble by asking “do you know who you are talking to?” With a well-placed word, we have the potential to “disrupt, even if only briefly, microscopic hierarchies” (161–62).

Here, though, I wish to raise a question about a word that Widder uses in his discussion of police power: “choice.” According to Widder, a police officer *chooses* whether or not to exercise his power (162). Widder immediately qualifies this observation by stating that this choice takes place in a linguistic, social, and disciplinary context that permeates the officer as surely as the potential arrestee. We can understand Widder's concern with the term choice: it suggests that there is a part of our selves that transcends the realm of immanence to make a choice. A main theme of Widder's study is precisely that we need to let go of the transcendental subject as a fiction dissolved, for instance, in Hume's, Bergson's, and Nietzsche's accounts of the three syntheses of time (88). If we retain the word “I,” Widder explains, we should only use it ironically to denote “a multiplicity of subjects living different temporalities within the same, not so unified being” (95). If that is the case, however, *what* chooses? How can we retain the word choice if we believe that thoughts and volitions come *to* us rather than *from* us?²

The word “choice,” in other words, brings Widder into contact with a shadowy presence in his study who nonetheless appears at key intervals: Kant. Kant’s appeal for contemporary political theorists and philosophers is that he offers a compelling narrative of how freedom is possible in a law-governed universe. Time, Kant explains in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is “merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition...and in itself, outside the subject, is nothing.”³ We finitely constituted beings experience objects in space and time, but we cannot know what things are in themselves, or, more strongly, we know that they *cannot* exist spatio-temporally. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant explains the practical stakes of the doctrine of transcendental idealism. Everything that we perceive in time—including our own volitions and desires—is determined according to universal laws of nature.

Phenomenally, freedom does not exist; if we had all of the relevant empirical data, we could as confidently predict someone’s conduct as we anticipate a lunar eclipse.⁴ Fortunately, for Kant, we can also view ourselves as intelligible beings who stand outside of the flow of time. As noumenal selves, we are both free *from* external determinations of our principles or conduct and free *to* give rational laws to ourselves. “So considered, a rational being can now rightfully say of every unlawful action he performed that he could have omitted it even though as appearance it is sufficiently determined in the past and, so far, is inevitably necessary.”⁵ Kant’s importance for contemporary political theory, particularly for certain variants of liberalism, is that he offers an account of freedom compatible with Newtonian science.

Is it possible to retain a concept of freedom that does not depend upon Kant’s transcendental idealism or Newtonian science? At the end of the book, Widder considers Foucault’s account of *excess* as a potential explanation of freedom. On the one hand, Foucault’s genealogies show that we are profoundly constituted by games of truth and power relations. The positing of a noumenal self, on this account, may simply be a discursive formation that educates us to enact a certain role in liberal democratic societies (159). On the other hand, because power/knowledge regimes emerge from a synthesis of differences, there is always an excess of difference that traverses the regime and us. Since “power relations are relations of disjunction, dispersion, and strife,” the “micropolitical realm is as much a realm of self-creation, self-stylization, and self-experimentation as it is a realm of self-discipline and training” (185). This makes sense, but what within us chooses to go the gym or the bar? How do we determine the artistic practices that we perform, individually and collectively, to give style to the beings we want to become?

In the Renaissance, palace edges were built with staggered bricks in case the owners decided, at a later time, to expand their estate. This image comes to mind when reading *Reflections on Time and Politics* because the book, dense with insights about an astonishing range of topics, could be expanded indefinitely. How can we think more profoundly of a world of pure becoming? Where else does genealogy need to dissolve claims to solid identities? How should we think about politics when many of the old

categories are problematic? In thinking through the political possibilities opened up by Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return, Widder has begun an exciting project.

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Notes

- 1.** On the apparent regularities of language, Widder observes: "Like the pattern of bubbles and surface folds that form where two water currents meet, a discursive formation carries with it never fully stable shapes or images—its subjects, its objects, etc.—that persist over time, arising from the interaction of converging flows" (117).
- 2.** Widder cites Nietzsche's aphorism that "a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish" (92).
- 3.** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 181 [A35/B51].
- 4.** Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason" In *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 219 [5:99].
- 5.** *Ibid.*, p. 218 [5:98]

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