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## William Connolly's *The Fragility of Things*

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[The Fragility of Things: Self-organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism](#)

by [William E. Connolly](#)

Duke University Press, 2013, 256 pages.

In *The Fragility of Things: Self-organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (2013), political theorist William Connolly delivers us into a chaotic world: “a world of becoming in which multiple force fields set on different tiers of chronotime periodically collide or coalesce to foment a new danger, risk, or possibility” (138). This is a volatile world that is constantly in motion, a world that gives a leading role to mystery and creative possibility, and thus a world where complete explanation is never fully attainable. Connolly’s cosmos is inspired by complexity theory in the biological and earth sciences, a Sophoclean sense of cosmic sensitivity, and thinkers who dwell upon a “multitiered cosmos of becoming” (29). Connolly engages these ideas, as well as several other well-known voices in the Western philosophical canon, in order to paint a picture of our cosmos and develop a set of principles by

which to live and take action in it. In his estimation this is a timely endeavor, both because of recent advances in our understanding of self-organizing systems that underlie complexity theory, and because of the “hegemony of neoliberalism” (7), which belies the complexity and fragility of our world. *The Fragility of Things* ultimately offers us a new theory of political economy: one that firmly dislodges the market as the leading mechanism of historical explanation and, simultaneously, illuminates possibilities for political activists to realize different future trajectories.

This is a tall order, and in just under 200 pages, Connolly accomplishes it. By organizing his text into a series of chapters and post-chapter commentaries, *The Fragility of Things* is “structured” in a way that mirrors the author’s own thoughts on the relationship between control and creativity, and the messy reality of moving assemblages. But the book is not as rhizomatic as you may hope (or fear), and each section adds to and reinforces Connolly’s position. Throughout the book, he moves back and forth across several emotional and intellectual spectra so fluidly, you will wonder how it is that long lists of tragedy after impending tragedy can be followed by a real sense of hope and possibility. Or how the evolutionary adaptations of paramecia are put in conversation with the increasing inequities in the financial market system. This book is modest (remember, “Perfect answers are suspect,” (182)), with the occasional quip aptly inserted for much needed moments of relief (e.g., “The audacity of Kantian hope” (114), after an extended battle with moral law). And though Connolly draws extensively on complexity theory, incorporating work by neuroscientists and leading extended discussions on teleodynamic self-organizing systems, this text is anything but dry. You feel culminating moments in every chapter, surges of affect following intricate dissection of the forces moving this world. In the end, Connolly seems to accomplish an impossible feat: a book that is both wide-ranging and neatly tied together—or as neatly as can be, considering its metaphysical foundations.

Chapter 1 lays out Connolly’s critique of neoliberalism, which fills a gap between those scholars who reflect upon a dynamic, multitiered cosmos, and those who settle their gaze on the ecology of late capitalism and its faults (30). Connolly’s contribution is to point out that economic markets constitute just one kind of self-organizing system in our cosmos; they *do* have self-organizing power, but so do other human and nonhuman processes. “Such a combination changes everything” (25), encouraging a new political economy that gives significant standing to these other processes and their interactions (27). The first interlude tackles a seemingly tangential issue in a revealing way, apparently motivated by a remark Richard Dennett made at a conference asserting the non-necessity of spirituality (47). Connolly searches for a different understanding, carving out a place for a nontheist spirituality that admits a world “in which

humanity matters immensely” (50).

In the second chapter Connolly engages with Friedrich Hayek’s work. He outlines Hayek’s moderate neoliberalism, one that saw the market as fragile and in need of a self-conscious ideology to ensure its functioning—not one serving as “merely a camera that takes a snapshot of processes humming along without it” (59). He then “explodes [it] from the inside” (70) by developing Hayek’s conception of freedom further. Drawing attention especially to Hayek’s appreciation of creativity in freedom, Connolly expands this to sites that, once admitted, remove all possibility of an “uninterrupted” market operating without failure. The second interlude is an extended explanation of self-organizing systems. Using the alliance between American evangelicalism and neoliberalism as one example (further examined in his *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, to which this book is a companion), Connolly shows reason for optimism by revealing how vulnerable this complex actually is. This was not preordained fate—gambling is offered as an example of a point of tension that became placated with time (93)—and the larger message is that the economy should not be viewed as such a thing either. Rather, Connolly urges us to “dramatize fragilities and positive potentialities folded into the teleodynamics of the current regime” (97).

In Chapter 3 Connolly takes up Kant, arguing provocatively that Kantian morality is secured only by the adoption of market-like postulates that assert civilizational progress although the empirical record cannot prove them (115). Having shaken Kant’s apodictic starting points and illuminated their dramatization, Connolly then proceeds with his own dramatization of an alternative set of starting points. These are elaborated in his “maxims of practical wisdom” (124-37) which assert the will as an “emergent biocultural formation” (127) and call for an “ethic of cultivation” (132) that rejects a universal morality and invites presumptive responsibility, periodic hesitation, and a timely militancy in its worldly engagement. The third interlude briefly engages Charles Taylor’s idea of the “pursuit of fullness,” rejecting it in favor of an appreciation of the vitality of being. This vitality is interdefined with the creativity and freedom that Connolly explores in Chapter 2 and gives more precision and palpability to our attachment to humanity explored in the first interlude.

In Chapter 4 Connolly exchanges notes with both Whitehead and Nietzsche to further clarify creativity’s role in our cosmos. Separate influences (quantum mechanics and ancient Greek thought) led these thinkers to identify creativity as an irreducible “ultimate term” (156) or “ultimate property of the universe” (167). This resonates with Connolly’s view and, while it renders full explanation impossible, also rescues “cultural theory from the closures pushed upon it by the most reductive versions of biology, neuroscience, and social science” (161). Finally, in

the postlude, Connolly elaborates his call to arms. He acknowledges the dilemma of electoral politics but begs us not to disengage, advocating instead large-scale role experimentation as a direct means of disruption and potential catalyst for political movements (184). This enables Connolly's dual goal of *slowing down* and *speeding up* (10, 39, 136, 172): that is, slowing or shifting the practices that bring several force fields in our cosmos into dangerous proximity, and speeding up changes at the level of individuals (identity, role performance) and higher-order social formations (market regulation, state policy).

Ultimately, Connolly gives us not only a way of seeing the world, but also a way of feeling for it and engaging in it. His own personal search for these answers is evident beginning from the first interlude, and I am sympathetic to the "existential gratitude" (181) he formulates that wards off complacency but does not suffer from naiveté. The elements of mystery and spontaneity he builds into his world indeed seem irreducible, and these offer hope as much as danger for our historical possibilities. Of course they also raise a critical challenge for the human sciences, and one area found lacking is a more explicit model or guideline by which we can understand these processes if explanation is an unrealizable goal. If a second critique can be made, it is that the experimental activism Connolly advocates likely needs more explicit formulation in order to spread and be realized—although I acknowledge these desires for formulations are in some degree of conflict with the very cosmos Connolly describes. This book will appeal to a wide range of academic and activist audiences, and it is an opportune time to be reading it. Because as Connolly notes, while "cosmic issues have never been absent" and the question of humanity's place in the cosmos has waxed and waned over time, "we are living through a global time when it waxes in a distinctive way" (171).

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