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BOOK REVIEW

Untimely Politics

Nathan Widder, *Reflections on Time and Politics*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

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In Reflections on Time and Politics, Widder works toward an understanding of time not as movement but rather structure, as the scaffolding upon which we erect political and politicized identities. Yet such a structure of identity, he argues, nevertheless conceals the differential field of selfhood(s). In effect, we perceive ourselves and each other as coherent totalities when, in effect, we are actually a mass of contradictions.

There are many interlocutors throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with whom to engage when working through the thorny problems of time and politics. From a phenomenological perspective, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Lévinas seem to be the most obvious examples. But if our methodology tends toward the analytic side of contemporary philosophy, then there are perhaps no better thinkers to consider than Henri Bergson, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and their heir apparent Gilles Deleuze.

Inspired or influenced by both William E. Connolly and Jane Bennett, Nathan Widder's text attempts to think through the disruption of synthetic time as a basis for subjectivity and identity, upon which an understanding of politics is predicated. But do not be fooled by the choice of words in the title: *reflection* here is not the kind of mental work that seeks to draw out either phenomenological or hermeneutic truths. Instead, Widder uses a rigorous analytic mode of investigation in an examination of his central thesis that identity, despite a seemingly placid structure, contains within its encipherment a differential field of surface effects. That is, the view that identity is

(ever) stable or solid is misleading. Widder argues that, seen from the proper point of view, identity is but a surface consisting of pure difference. The appropriate means of approaching such a view lies in the oblique subtleties of micropolitics.

The perception that someone remains substantially the same over time errs in its assertion that such sameness endures despite ever-evolving differences arising throughout the person's molecular structure as well as spirit. If, for example, I am to continue to be a loving or sarcastic man, then I most definitely adapt or adjust my love or sarcasm depending upon changes inherent in either my being or environment. My sarcasm, then, stays consistent as an effect—and only as effect—whereas my being shifts and modifies, never staying the same. Such effects allow for a drawing near and thinking through of identity, albeit in a circuitous manner.

For Widder, time serves as the prime ontological structure of identity and the political performances of the self. According to his reading, both Foucault and Deleuze understand the political as a 'destructuring' of the field of identity which is effected through time's disruption of the self. A structural ungrounding of time, Widder argues, undermines the traditional, historical privileging of movement over time, implicating time within the politics and ethics of power relations and resistance. Widder releases time from its heretofore subordination to movement, modelling instead an understanding of movement reliant on time. He comes to understand time, by way of Deleuze, not as change's measure but as its structure, as the unchanging structure of what changes instead of as the movement of change itself.

Widder's formulation views time ambivalently, both as the structure of what moves in time and as time's own movement. This discontinuous asynchrony opens up an understanding of time as that which reveals itself as self-interruption. To put it another way, difference permeates identity. And this notion undergirds the politics and ethics Widder attempts to formulate, putting into question the category of 'subject' in the first place.

Time, as a synthesis of differences, necessitates a final casting off of categories such as ego and identity. We still hold to these categories, thinking them indispensable despite our view that they have become contingent and in flux. Widder's contribution to this argument is that we finally need to jettison and abandon identity altogether if we are ever to attune ourselves properly to the ethics demanded of us.

Time, as it serves as the seemingly continuous medium of the subject (as an agent of change), engenders the new as difference. Continuous change, then, reveals the discontinuity of time's disruption. Only by relying on the appearance and abstraction of unity do we perceive movement as continuous. The continuous arc of my arm waving in the air, for example, is but an overall effect of manifold

contractions and relaxations throughout my body. The unity of disjunctive synthesis reveals itself within its concealment of its own disjunctions.

These hesitant remarks, however, that comprise my attempt to address Widder's overall argument perhaps belie my overall discomfort with this text. What I find most perplexing here is the categorization of such work as 'continental', as if this term referenced a mere thematic instead of a tradition of phenomenological and hermeneutic methodology. Widder is no continental philosopher, not, at least, according to how I understand that distinction. Instead, Widder seems to be working through the problems of time and politics from a fairly conservative, analytic background, relying on linguistic and logical analyses of the work of key theorists on these topics. At this point, I consider it necessary to at least pretend to disqualify myself as a proper critic of such a text. I nevertheless find value in the questions addressed even if I do not share an appreciation of the attempt toward an answer. For a much more engaged and perhaps competent critique of Widder's text, I recommend the review forum in the recent issue of *Parrhesia*.

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Bibliography

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