

Book Review

Nathan Widder, *Reflections on Time and Politics*
(State College: Penn State University Press, 2008),
208 pp.

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Mired as we are in a global political situation in which the ideals and institutions that have been the proud heritage of the western philosophical tradition seem submerged by the inexorable pressures of global capital, it is not surprising that the inheritors of this tradition have increasingly turned to its most trenchant critics for insight into what possibilities might remain to it. Widder's *Reflections* joins an increasing number of such efforts. Challenging the form of this submergence structured by the temporal distortions of globalization and information technology, Widder looks to Deleuze's ontology of sense, and its virtual and actual allies, for an account of time, change, and identity which could make possible a different ethics and a different politics. In a series of sophisticated readings of traditional and contemporary theorists of the temporal and ontological conditions of ethics and politics, Widder argues convincingly for the advantages of a Deleuzian ontology of sense as a response to the onto-logics characteristic of the political traditions which seem to have failed. Moreover, he specifies the support that Deleuze's work provides for attempts to rethink categories of practice and political identity that escape the gravity of the metaphysical tradition. If, in the final analysis, questions still remain about the adequacy of the resources offered to politics by an account of identity as a simulation, the fault is not Widder's. He offers the reader a challenging, thoughtful work that rewards careful attention.

Widder's work is fitted to its subject matter. The eighteen chapters are a set of punctual meditations on a diverse, if not wholly surprising, set of philosophers and themes. Like many works with an expansive range, Widder's moves quickly, encapsulating sophisticated expositions and contestations in a mere 178 pages. The occasional breathlessness of his discussions is mitigated somewhat by his reliance on Deleuze's more expansive treatment of the philosophers and topics discussed. One obstacle to an appreciation of the sophistication of Widder's discussions is the apparent lack of an overarching interpretive scheme. Though his introduction helpfully articulates the book's ambitions, it does little to prepare the reader for the terrain to follow. Here too, however, the indebtedness of Widder to Deleuze's works, particularly *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, aids the reader in negotiating the

heterogeneity. Though it is not marked explicitly in Widder's text, the often startling shifts from figure to figure and question to question repeat in many instances the development of Deleuze's books. For example, Widder's discussion of Deleuze's treatment of the three syntheses of time in *Difference and Repetition* is preceded by chapters that retrace and expand on Deleuze's analysis of "Difference in Itself." Readers familiar with Deleuze's work can thus discern in Widder's progress an internal, albeit parasitical, logic that would not be readily apparent to a more casual reader.

This discernment is important for an appreciation of Widder's aims. His discussion of the three syntheses serves as a crucial link between the conjunctive subjects of the book. This conjunction is marked for Widder by Deleuze's identification of the three temporal syntheses with Freud's metapsychology, and in particular of the third, ungrounding temporal synthesis with the superego, and thus with the death instinct. The problem for Deleuze, as Widder recounts it, is that Freud thematizes this instinct materially, and thus purely personally, and as a result fails to encounter the full sense of ungrounding in an impersonal death (96). In other words, Freud's analysis remains wedded to an account of identity accomplished in and through opposition. This ultimately requires an account of ethics similarly committed. As readers of Deleuze are well aware, Deleuze himself calls for an ethics that contests this link, demanding in Widder's terms an, "affirmation of a cracked self in a world of multiplicity" (97), and thus an ethics of non-identity. This, suggests Widder, is the significance of Deleuze's famous insistence in *The Logic of Sense* that ethics, to the extent that the term makes any sense, is a call "not to be unworthy of what happens to us" (97). Like many Deleuzians, Widder is at some pains to insist that ethics thus understood is not a form of resignation or solipsism, but rather an acknowledgment that, contrary to the tradition represented here by Freud, "The significance of events is thus that they expose the untimely crack within us that puts us out of joint with ourselves" (98). On this reading, Deleuzian ethics is an affirmation of this untimely crack, which has the effect of depersonalizing the moral subject, of rejecting the refuge of an egoistic reduction of all suffering to my suffering, "...the condition of this ethical affirmation is that the 'I,' the ego, must be taken far less seriously" (99). This condition is pivotal to Widder's project.

This affirmation conditions Widder's work in at least two ways. First it is this condition which authorizes the development from Widder's recounting of the historical and theoretical underpinnings of Deleuze's treatment of time to the treatment of ethical and political identities as a simulation. Here too, familiarity with Deleuze's work, in this case *The Logic of Sense*, is helpful. Deleuze's insistence on ethics as a call "not to be unworthy," comes as part of his attempt to specify the philosophical contributions of Stoicism, and it is to this contribution that Widder immediately turns. The key, as Widder reads Deleuze, is the Stoic inversion

of Platonism, an inversion that is accomplished as an ontology of surfaces. Freed by Deleuze of the remaining epistemological vestiges of Platonism, this ontology of surfaces becomes an ontology of sense characterized not by contradiction or opposition, but by disjunction and difference. For such an ontology, “identity is no more than a superficial effect” (107). It is a metaphysical illusion which encourages thought to leap into the apparent gap and fill it with unavoidable abstractions. Deleuzian ethics calls us to resist this illusion. Much of Widder’s book is devoted to providing the resources for this resistance.

However, this resistance exhausts neither the ethical demand imposed on us by Deleuze nor Widder’s project. The demand to take the ‘I’ less seriously conditions this project secondly in the form of a question that Widder cannot avoid. If ethics calls us to take these illusory identities less seriously, are we not forced as a result to take ethics, and by extension politics (an extension which is certainly questionable but which Widder barely questions), less seriously? Though clearly an ‘ethics’ or a ‘politics’ submissive to the gravity of metaphysics may be dismissable, Widder insists that this Deleuzian demand is consistent with another ‘ethics’ or ‘politics.’ At this juncture, Widder’s reliance on Deleuze gives way to extended discussions of Foucault and, primarily for his diagnosis of our contemporary political situation, Adorno. This move is anticipated by Widder with a short chapter focused on Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* which seeks to establish the proximity of the dispersion characteristic of discursive formations with the mixed character of Stoic surfaces. As Widder highlights, what is missing, though anticipated, in the analysis of discursive formations is an account of the generative capacities of power revealed in Foucault’s genealogical analyses. Thus, in the final chapters of the book, Widder seeks to correct common misreadings of the significance of these analyses by reading them together with Nietzschean overcoming and Deleuzian micropolitics, thereby establishing the consistency of Foucault’s analysis of power with the temporal and ontological ungrounding of the ethical/political demand. Revealed in this consistency, according to Widder, is a negative answer to the unavoidable question. Widder finds in Foucault’s attempt in Volume One of *The History of Sexuality* to play the game of truth otherwise (184) the possibility of taking ethics and politics seriously by refusing to take the “moral subject” seriously (185-6).

Without denying the legitimacy of Widder’s employment of Foucault to realize the exigencies of a Deleuzian demand for a ‘serious’ ethics and politics that refuses the illusory seriousness of the metaphysics of the subject, one can still wonder what is gained by the effort. In Widder’s analysis, “what emerges is a micropolitical domain of ethical negotiation where what matters is not the ability to construct an identity but rather the capacity for revaluations that move us beyond crude oppositions...[a] positivity of power, discourse, and the self which sustains relationality but

moves it from the negativity of a still abstract opposition toward an immanent multiplicity” (188). On the assumption that such a domain and such a positivity are legitimate, even necessary, political aims, at least two questions still remain. First, does Foucault need Deleuze? That is, what if anything is actually gained by deploying the machinery of the Deleuzian ontology of sense with its refiguring of temporality? If the politics we are left with is thinkable without it, much of the force of Widder’s work, with the exception perhaps of supplementing Deleuze’s philosophy with a desirable politics, is lost. Secondly, is what Foucault offers us enough? Widder himself seems to suggest that even Foucaultians are unconvinced when he complains that they have not taken Foucault’s suggestions seriously (157n1, 187). However, perhaps it is this lack of conviction that Widder is seeking to correct, and in this light, supplementing Foucault with Deleuze may be the best way to appreciate what Widder has accomplished. Regardless, *Reflections on Time and Politics* is a worthy addition to the growing body of work that acknowledges the conceptual and political crisis that we find ourselves in, work which is, without doubt, among the signal tasks of those still committed to philosophy.

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