

Luigi Pellizzoni

Ontological Politics in a Disposable World: The New Mastery of Nature

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By inviting the reader to consider our catastrophic times, this book provides an invitation to debate the political implications of the so-called ontological turn in social sciences. By analysing a set of intellectual perspectives particularly relevant in social theory – such as actor network theory, feminist new materialism, Marxist political ecology, multinaturalism, speculative realism and Virno's philosophy of the human – the author underlines the limits of the ontological turn which does 'not offer grounds for a critique robust enough, laying itself open to capture by the powers from which it aims to set free' (p. 189).

By adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach that allows ideas to be connected to their historical and epistemic determinations, Pellizzoni investigates the intellectual contacts and historical connections between conceptions of nature and matter. The indeterminacy of matter and the on-going tension between ontology and epistemology are seen as two decisive theoretical premises capable of showing a 'subterranean complicity' of contemporary social theory with neoliberalism. If the indeterminacy of matter offers to post-constructivism an understanding of the world's material constitution in which agencies and powers are distributed beyond human control, the lack of distinction between information and matter is what makes the world entirely disposable to practices of accounting whose reality is absorbed by its commodity status. A clear example is provided by an analysis of carbon markets, in which environmental risks are translated into investment opportunities through 'weather derivatives'. In the age of neoliberalism, (natural) limits become resources for the financialisation of nature: the indeterminacy of matter is becoming a strategic resource for the (new) mastery of nature, in which the acknowledgement of nature's capacity to act facilitates its exploitation within a capitalist system. Therefore the praise of the contingency and fluidity of post-constructivism is not enough to overcome a form of environmental management conceived precisely as a biopolitics of nature that revolves around the notion of instability.

How can we think differently in neoliberal times in which capital appears to be central to politics? This political problem prompts Pellizzoni to reject the ‘ontological turn’. In Chapters 4 and 5, Pellizzoni combines three authors to offer his theoretical proposal. Heidegger, with whom Pellizzoni proposes a ‘return’ to a ‘critical humanism’ oriented toward the acknowledgement of the persistence of a gap in the relationship between humans and non-humans, provides a necessary distance capable of cultivating mystery and an authentic respect for the poiesis of nature. Adorno, with his conception of the ‘negative’ as a force capable of immanent critique and determinate negations, is employed as a reminder that the role of critique is to illustrate ‘what the thing is not’, rather than offering premature alternatives to the state of things. Finally Agamben’s acknowledgement – mediated by Foucault – of the productive semantics of power suggests a (counter) strategy founded on the deactivation of the paradigm of operationalism. Like Melville’s *Bartleby*, Agamben proposed an understanding of the emersion of singularity as an outcome of a style of existence in which we are stripped of any factual or juridical property. If neoliberalism’s interpellation can be understood as an on-going demand for self-valorisation, Pellizzoni suggests that we ‘regain connection with our potential of not doing, that is with a non-destructive, non-dominative relationship with ourselves, the others, the world’ (p. 215).

The indeterminacy of matter and neoliberalism are described in the book as necessarily stemming from the same epistemic determination. This encounter, though, can be thought as a matter of historical contingency, rather than as a necessity; its nature is, as Althusser would say, aleatory. Neoliberalism is the product, also, of the attempt to contain global waves of struggles – antiracist, feminist, ecological and social – that emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s. The demand for autonomy – and the collective experiments that these movements manifested – has been translated in the culture of (human, social and ecological) capital thanks to the prevalence of individualisation. The thought of indeterminacy is often connected to an experimental attitude oriented to highlighting the emersion of alternative ontologies and forms of life. This attitude can meet (again) everyday practices and socio-ecological movements that are trying to make material differences in the ways in which different human and more than human entities relate to each other. In post-constructivist authors – for example Haraway, Stengers, Strathern, Viveiros De Castro and Papadopoulos – who are marginally treated

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in this book, there are valuable tools for making unthinkable the culture of the self and for experimenting with alternative forms of existence.

This is an exciting book, thick, dense, supported by solid arguments and political passion. It is particularly useful for those engaging with the semiotics of the ontological turn. It can hopefully contribute to fostering a necessary debate on the explicit and implicit relationships between the politics of the ontological turn and neoliberalism.

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