Chapter 11

On Isabelle Stengers’ ‘Cosmopolitics’: A Speculative Adventure

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“[C]osmopolitics is, of course, a speculative concept, and its effects will first of all affect the way in which we understand ourselves and understand others in contrast to ourselves.” (Stengers 2011b: 356)

If abstractions work to ‘vectorise’ experience, then it seems that the notion of ‘cosmopolitics’ is one that Isabelle Stengers offers to lure us into an adventure of thought in which we entertain the proposition that “what we perceive may be transformed if the way we pay attention changes” (2008a: 5). Steeped in the Whiteheadian position that perception is “the most primitive form of judgment” (1978: 162), her arguments attempt to open up scenes of perception and to invite intrigue about how perceptions arise. In her sights is any power that seeks to impose its Truth, to disqualify others, to “bully” (2005: 1000) the world into its frame. Where that Truth succeeds, it disqualifies the relevance of multiple potential contributions and disqualifies those that speak a different idiom, or that do not speak at all, preventing the emergence of a newly perceived situation. By contrast to such attempts, ‘[c]osmopolitics makes present, helps resonate, the unknown affecting our questions’ (2011b: 355). In order to explore her provocations, this chapter will consider four key aspects of Stengers' argument: presences, propositions, the argument against symmetry and the importance of wonder.

I. Presences

By obliging that their presences be felt, these unknowns--these other worlds and other struggles--contest a simplification that is also a judgment. To cut away complexity is to engage in the distribution of value. Praising Donna Haraway's book *When Species Meet*, Stengers has written:

When writing about Cayenne [Haraway’s dog] and about what she has learned with her, Haraway is exposing herself to her colleagues’ derision, and knowingly so, but she is making present, vivid and mattering, the imbroglio, perplexity and messiness of a worldly world, a world where we, our ideas and power relations, are not alone, were never alone, will never be alone. As she recalls with joy and wonder, human genomes can be found in only about 10% of the cells that live in what we call our body, the rest of the cells being filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such (2011a: 371).

For Stengers, Haraway's attention to this “imbroglio’ is able to complicate our understanding, connecting it with many struggles “against what simplifies away our worlds in terms of idealist judgments about what would ultimately matter and what does not” (2011a: 371).

Among the first things to insist upon in relation to discussions of speculation, therefore, is the necessity that it be accompanied by a concern for multiplicity, where multiplicity becomes the prompt and the justification that prevents the ‘mere’ forever accompanying the practice. In order to be something more than ‘mere speculation,’ from which nothing follows, speculation involves an opening toward other presences heretofore ignored, un-consulted or otherwise rendered irrelevant to the scene in hand. It is not the ruminative practice that takes place in contemplative comfort, but that which follows an interruption and a consequent re-orientation. For Isabelle Stengers, that re-orientation results when self-assurance falters (2005: 996). When actors are faced with an indeterminacy concerning how to proceed following an intervention, be that a shout, a murmur or a newly imposed constraint (we will return to this idea), they are forced to consider how to ‘sign’ that event, how to *inherit* from it. For this reason--that there is a hesitation that will not be resolved through the presentation of argument--the question of the cosmopolitical is precisely ‘speculative’ (2011b: 356).

In Stengers’ “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” the re- or even dis-orientating scene is described as one that calls upon the participants within it to consider their habits and ways of “busying” themselves in the light of a newly felt presence. It is not that these “others” have in fact newly emerged, but that their relevance is newly recognized, and in such a way that the recognition reverberates. She writes of the ways of speaking heard in laboratories where experiments are performed on animals, ways of speaking that, she suggests, do the work of protecting the human workers. These “grand tales about the advancement of knowledge, rationality defined against sentimentality, and the necessities of method” (2005: 997) mask the habitual evasion that has become the laboratory’s ethos. The legitimacy of the experimentation is not a decision that is usually taken “in the presence of” those that will potentially be the victims of that decision. What would happen if they were? Might these self-protective modes of continuing be challenged (or, to put it somewhat differently, newly constrained)? Might the shadows cast by those that “do not have, cannot have or do not want to have a political voice” (2004: 996) send a chill which insists upon a problem? Such a chill amounts to a sense of exposure, registered in and as the disoriented moment. It is not that the existence of others is a complication of our lives, Stengers writes, but the existence of others retains the potential to “force … us to recognize that complication” (2011: 351).

The example of the scientist at the animal experimentation laboratory clarifies, better perhaps than her evocation of Cromwell’s cry “by the bowels of Christ, I beseech you, bethink you may be mistaken!” Or indeed her citing of Bartleby’s “idiotic” stance (“I prefer not to”), the sense of disquiet that differentiates Stengers’ call for (speculative) thought from a liberal democratic model of debate. To be exposed, to be obliged to hesitate and to attempt to decide “in the presence of” those that may turn out to be the victims of that decision, is to put at risk the ethos of one’s way of being. It is to allow the truths by which one lives to be suspended. Furthermore, that this approach concerns a response to presences that are not necessarily human, which are present but are un- or under-articulated, is clear in this example. It is for this wider multiplicity, the multiplicity by which a common world is invented, that Stengers employs the term “cosmos.”

Such hesitation and such wondering require the faculty of the imagination, but it is not fanciful. Prompted by the real world, concerned and engaged with it without being straightforwardly answered there, the questions that arise in the hesitation are not necessarily accompanied by representatives or translators who will explain the contributions or objections of these “others.” Indeed, it is foolhardy to set out to require the multiplicity to debate proposals or to express its various objections. Yet Stengers suggests that all that constitutes the *oikos*, the habitat or “environment,” *may* somehow make propositions and may even *demand* that perceptions and habits change. Without being able to articulate that change, and without allowing the transcendence of the present arrangements of things, Stengers suggests the cosmos might be able to effect a change in the ethos allowing “[t]he common world” the freedom to “emerge” (2005: 999) from and in its multiplicity. How can the propositions of the *oikos* be made?

II. Propositions

Clearly, this freedom to emerge cannot be understood within those models of politics based on notions of speech and representation, which rely upon the agonistic articulation of disagreement. The cosmopolitical question forces an interruption or at least a *ritando* that conveys an expansion beyond such models. Into this widening, it asks:

by which artifacts, which procedures, can we slow down political ecology, bestow efficacy on the murmurings of the idiot, the “there is something more important” which is so easy to forget because it cannot be “taken into account.” because the idiot neither objects nor proposes anything that “counts.” The question is “etho-ecological”. (Stengers 2004: 1001)[[1]](#endnote-1)

Different aspects of the world will require different apparatuses, artifices or scenes within which to appear and make contributions. The “slowing” mentioned above is required in order to wonder about these other protagonists. Our first questions need to be about how to effect their appearance. Under what conditions will they appear? What do they require in order to contribute to the gathering and its decisions? In this sense cosmopolitics has regard for the *mode* *of presence* of different types of protagonists and becomes a technical issue (rather than one driven by a desire to achieve the “re-enchantment of the world”). Stengers advocates an “ecology of practices” (2011: 367) as an endeavor that would allow for the “coexistence of disparate technical practices corresponding to distinct forms of reciprocal capture, characterized by different logical constraints and different syntaxes” (2011: 359).

Stengers emphasizes the need for artifice, like the apparatus that scientific experimentation uses in order to persuade and convince those gathered about them of the significance of a proposition. Thus Galileo’s experimental apparatuses of inclined planes for rolling balls had the capacity to produce an event, in Deleuze’s (1993)sense (). Such artifices become reliable witnesses that testify to the persuasiveness of the proposition, compelling those gathered to take note, if they are inter-ested enough to do so. And it follows that where the artifice is able to repeatedly ‘prove’ a proposition or show a correlation, or simply the relevance of its enquiry, it confers a power on the experimenter to speak in the name of that proposition, and to challenge those who maintain otherwise. But by the same token, the artifice is also described by Stengers in terms of its potential to become a place to complicate and to welcome, even incite, doubts and objections (2010: 27) in a gathering that becomes potentially a transformational event. Yet what must one do to sense the propositions that might emerge within the 'art of the event'?

New relations in new environments may require a new disposition, and a new vulnerability, since what one has accepted in prior contexts may be newly challenged. If the artifice of a scientific experiment, to continue with her example, must cut away certain factors from its scene, then as soon as its propositions leave their originary or “native environment” they may well leave behind their relevance and/or reliability. To accept this, is to attend to this new environment and those for whom it is “a matter of an active concern” (2012). In the weave of new relations, one remains at the ‘meso’ level, thinking with and through the milieu. Stengers notes that one is obliged to stay and think “with the surroundings” since no theory gives one the power to disentangle something from its particular surroundings, that is, to pass beyond the particular appearances that emerge in a specific situation (on ‘mesopolitics’, see Stengers 2008c).

Elsewhere, Stengers takes inspiration from 18th century chemistry. She writes of the art of chemistry: “chemical ‘actants’ are defined as ‘active’ without their activity being able to be attributed to them; it depends on circumstances and it is up to the chemists’ art to create the type of circumstances in which they become capable of producing what the chemist wants: art of catalysis, activation, moderation” (2005: 1000). The ‘etho-ecological art of the manipulative chemist’, is one where manipulation is understood as a positive quality, drawing out the “propensity of things” (the term Stengers adopts from François Jullien (1999).

When Stengers celebrates manipulation as a kind of speculative art, if you will, she does so to applaud the ability to gather, to be open to new combinations and to prepare the stage for new emergences. She envisages multiple “actants” gathered together with no compulsion to “represent” or “argue” their interests since, in contrast to reigning models of democracy, the “world order is ... not an argument” (2005: 1001). This she likens, in another extended metaphor, to what she understands of the process in a palaver, where the participants gather to share—without having to *own—*their opinions. That is, they are each recognized as knowing something about the world Order, but are called together precisely because none has sufficient knowledge of how it relates to the issue at hand. Thus, in their gathering no one challenges or refutes another, but collectively and “in the presence of world Order” something emerges that is understood to be consonant with it (2005: 1001). Stengers evokes the de-personalization strategies of feminist practice (“the personal is political”) and the summoning of the goddess at gatherings of contemporary neo-pagan witches (2010: 27) as resonating with this practice. This is not a struggle wherein one actant or group of actants attempts to persuade or convince others. The scene is one in which there is a gathering without victors or hierarchical imposition of an order. So, not an “application” of a vision of “world order,” but rather the order plays a role”

comparable to the acid solution (the “menstrue”) that dissolves and enables the chemical actants to enter into proximity, or to the fire that activates them. In short, it can be characterized in terms of efficacy: it compels everyone to produce, to “artefactualize” themselves, *in a mode that gives the issue around which they are all gathered the power to activate thinking*, a thinking that belongs to no one, in which no one is right. (2005: 1001, emphasis added)

The notion of cosmopolitics, it seems, is not necessarily about ‘us’ asking *more* things to engage, therefore--although this does also seem to often be the case in her examples--but about new modes of attention, allowing new stagings to re-arrange multiple relevancies whose practices may engage in very different ways with the issue in new arrangements of consultation. At such gatherings, Stengers insists we must de-throne the fact-value distinction from which it has been assumed that procedure must flow from the presentation of a matter “factually” before “value-laden” opinions are invited. Instead, for Stengers, this is about the creation of a political ecology in which all for whom or for which the issue or situation is a matter of active concern, are able to participate.

Stengers' “cosmopolitics” envisages what she admits is a kind of utopia in which the issue at stake has the ability to attract participants who will force the consideration of the world via “other questions” (2005: 998) that may transform the situation. This, she notes, is “what Greenpeace understood when it contrasted ‘stakeholders’ with what it called ‘shareholders’” (2005: 999); even if that term had unfortunate connotations, it meant to expand the issue to include those for whom an issue *mattered*. The aim is to oblige any decision – or presumably any way of “carrying on” – to face up to its repercussions, meaning especially the challenges and difficulties it entails for others, be they other actors (human others and other-than-humans), other struggles or other worlds.

“Elaborating and experimenting with artifices,” involves working out from the milieu at the “meso” level (see 2010: 27). This is a level that Stengers notes is most under threat within contemporary neo-liberal capitalism, yet she does not understand this political ecology as subversive. Rather, her envisaged political ecology is composed with multiple participants and potentialities, and hence as political in a minoritarian key. The guiding hope here is that such gatherings might be places to discuss *objections* (Stengers and Whatmore 2015) that potentially “trigger,” “catalyze” or “convoke.” Stengers uses all three terms to suggest an event that transforms each protagonist’s relations not with a newly emergent Other, but with his or her “*own* knowledge, hopes, fears and memories” (2005: 1002). Collectively, moreover, the hope is that the gathering might be able “to generate what each one would have been unable to produce separately” (2005: 1002). In other words, it produces a change in the *oikos* as the presence of other modes of existence returns participants to an altered configuration of their (same) present.

III. Against Symmetry

As we have seen from the above arguments, Stengers' cosmopolitics is decidedly not about attempting to think *from* the place of the other. She comments: “I try not to think in the place of others … [since] I look to a future where they will take *their* place” (2010). We get a sense of the stance Stengers wants to argue against with her disdain for the development of what she terms “symmetrical anthropology.” This relates also to her phase “the curse of tolerance,” a notion she uses to expose a “pride barely hidden” whenever we “believe” the alternative epistemologies of Others, a stance she characterizes thus: “We are ‘adults,’ we are capable of confronting a world stripped of its guarantees and enchantments” (2011b: 303), so that the West tolerates other beliefs of others elsewhere, but maintains they are illusory. She critiques Georges Devereux’s ‘ethnopsychiatry’ on this count, for ultimately resting on a proposition that the therapist-researcher can maintain a position in which she can not only remain a psychoanalyst even if from the Indian patient’s point of view she is a healer, but also that her analytic practice can understand what a healer means to the Indian: “She can understand the other, but the other cannot understand her” (2011b: 323). This “poison/curse” operates through a process whereby the “‘others’ who ethnopsychiatry makes exist as humans are themselves at the service of [its] science” (2011b: 323). Symmetrical anthropology seems to think the task is that “we” do more symmetricizing in order to allow or foster a cosmopolitical view. But this display or stance risks becoming merely a requirement for the constitution of the science of anthropology. Indeed, the task of cosmopolitics risks failure wherever we convince ourselves of a solution that we imagine will improve and change us (e.g., into good cosmopolitans) while setting a requirement that others become like us (imagined in that new version). What is forgotten in the imposition of such solutions is their own artifices, so failing to allow new gatherings to generate new thought.

IV. Wonder

“This pragmatism, which I take from William James, from his more speculative dimensions (meaning the concern for consequences, in terms of invention, of speculation on consequences), this is what pragmatism, in its common usage (which is an insult), passes over in silence. We don’t know how these things can matter. But we can learn to examine situations from the point of view of their possibilities, from that which they communicate with and that which they poison. *Pragmatism is the care of the possible.*” (Stengers 2010)

Rather than imposing “cosmopolitics” as a solution, Stengers offers her speculative notion in order to propose attending differently in order to allow different perceptions and thus different possibilities. As such, she wishes that it be understood as both pragmatic, insofar as it is concerned with what is possible, and as a tale that is full of wonder. Indeed, Stengers suggests that cosmopolitics requires the creation of *obstacles that allow wonder*. Such obstacles presumably promote a requisite interruption, the slowing down Stengers insists is needed in order that we wonder about conditions that may arrive from elsewhere, the instigators of which she suggests we will not know before they put ‘us’ at risk. Of course she states that these obstacles are not solutions in themselves and are without guarantees, since we cannot assume that we ourselves are capable of the requisite understanding or sharing that these other protagonists might require before exchange becomes possible. (Nor do we even know that they would want it to enter exchange.) Yet despite this problem, “our” problem as Stengers calls it, it seems that an obstacle or artifice that provokes wonder in this sense may aid those who may wish to bring her cosmopolitical proposal to fruition.

In this respect Stengers has an ally in the recent work of William Connolly. In his recent *The Fragility of Things* (2013) Connolly writes of the fragility of the human estate as “entangled by a thousand threads and resonances to a cosmos of multiple force fields, most of which are not first and foremost predisposed to our welfare … The issue of how to respond to [this world] is unsettled.” (2013: 172). He notes that one mode of response has been the rejection of this entanglement, those “bellicose political movements of denial and deferral” of which he cites several, from the virulent attacks on scientists of climate change, to creationists, new atheists, and evangelical defenders of the neo-liberal machine. This multiplication of Nietzsche’s figure of *ressentiment*, understood as a response to uncertainty and the refusal to articulate it, may be an “overdoing” of beliefs newly challenged (2013: 173). In the face of such denial and *ressentiment*, Connolly sounds something like a call for more wonder about our entangled situation, influenced in part, like Stengers, by Whitehead’s process philosophy. We engage life, he argues “from the middle of things,” and in this “world of becoming” his hope is that the multiple struggles that are taking and will take place at multiple sites, will develop an enhanced sensitivity, attuning to what he terms the “noise” (2013: 13; 2013: 192). For Connolly wants to argue that creativity, including political creativity, arises from dissonances within the entangled world. “Uncanny drafts of creative energy” drawn from “this or that incipience” may fan new directions. Amongst other things, he lists endeavors such as films, music and spiritual exercises as enabling and encouraging the energy of critical movements:

They sometimes encourage new thoughts to surge forward as if from nowhere and to become infused into critical action. Who will be the musicians whose performative experiments do for our day what, say, the Weavers, Joan Baez and Bob Marley did for several constituencies during another time? Who will be the film directors? The bloggers? (2013: 192).

Thus while Connolly wishes to retain an important role for active humans who engage in “strategic role experimentation” and maintain pressure on the numerous institutions in which they are located (2013: 192), he also includes much more, including creative productions such as theatre, music and--it seems especially--film that seem to act as something like “objects of wonder,”

In an ‘interlude’ to his theoretical argument, Connolly discusses Lars von Trier’s film *Melancholia* (2011). Here, Connolly presents an argument against “exclusive humanism,” arguing that more attention is needed to the ways “other dimensions of being are infused into us and help us to constitute what we are, extending the radius of care from the human estate narrowly defined to encompass a large variety of entities and processes with which it is entangled” (2013: 47). In its dramatic telling of the end of the earth as a strange emergent entity, another previously unknown planet-- Melancholia--approaches and eventually collides with it, Connolly argues the film “peels away issues of responsibility and existential revenge,” i.e., the modes of blaming and desire for revenge that human experiences of suffering tend to promote among ourselves. Instead the film is able to gradually “allow the experience of *attachment to the world* to soak into our pores” (2013: 46). Faced with its end, the importance of ourselves and human relations cannot be all that matters on earth (or to us); we love and wish to protect the Earth.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Yet Connolly’s concern is not the demonstration of entanglement and unacknowledged dependencies; his concern remains to a large extent as it has been in his earlier works, where Foucault has taken a guiding role, with the *ethical* dimensions of this extended ‘radius of care’. He employs his reading of the film to emphasize the different temporalities our ethical attitudes can cultivate. Certainly, if we immerse ourselves in daily routines, we neglect to take the planetary perspective in to account. Yet Claire’s character in *Melancholia* indicates that the obverse--a total immersion in the future--is also problematic since it can lead one to “neglect daily duties.” To substitute “long term” relations over the short cannot be the solution.

Nor, despite his thorough critique of “exclusive humanism” and species provincialism, is Connolly drawn to post-humanism or anti-humanism insofar as these “too readily” give the impression of “not exuding care for humanity at all” and neglecting therefore the *ethical connections* to “that which is unlike us or a strange part of us, or more encompassing than us” (2013: 50). Maybe he too is worried about promoting a form of attachment that subsumes all subjectivity within objectivity, that like Justine in the film, can no longer see discrete entities at all, and so embraces and surrenders in the path of the oncoming planet.[[3]](#endnote-3) Indeed, there is even precisely a sense of melancholy here for the theoretical humanities, which are being asked to risk the surrender of their focus; a hesitation that glances back because it senses an unknown opening up before it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

V. Concluding Remarks

The whole weight of Stengers’ intervention is to promote such a hesitation, to advise that its interruption is crucial to a process of re-orienting our attentions. But it is right that, since the question of which approach the humanities and social sciences should adopt is at stake, these scholars speak their concerns. Moreover, it is consistent with the perspective explored here that one ponders also the risk that one is on the cusp of surrendering to someone else’s definition of the problem. Yet this just *is* the conundrum of attempting to engage a speculative political ecology, where we seek to imagine ourselves entangled with entities and energies that do not necessarily speak to our concerns with them, and where “we” have no privileged part in the ecology, in the *oikos*. Our arts, artifices and manipulations are re-imagined. Here, although we are not necessarily in a new place, we are in new relations, and in a new mode of attentiveness. “Our” questions can still be asked, but with an attentiveness now to how they may curtail, sometimes brutally, the possibilities for other modes of appearance and for their renderings of the problem. Knowing when these limitations on what emerges are acceptable and when they are not becomes a task that, still, I would want to name “ethical,” but that in the senses explored here, is also practical, technical and speculative.

Endnotes

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1. Ecology must always be etho-ecology, since no thing appears without the relevance of the surroundings of its appearance remaining relevant: ‘there can be no relevant ecology without a correlate ethology, and … there is no ethology independent of a particular ecology’ (ref) MISSING REF. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Here there is a resonance with the arguments of Paul Gilroy’s *Between Camps*, where he used a contemporary reflection on Fanon and Adorno to call for a “planetary humanism”; we are, after all, just the third stone from the sun (2000: 327). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the film, Justine lies naked bathed in the glow of the planet Melancholia as it approaches to destroy the earth. The overture to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* plays; its theme famously that of *liebestod*, or love/death. See the reading of Melancholia as romantic art by Curtis White (2012) at ‘*Liebestod* is Wagner’s version of the romantic project to resolve or harmonize the opposition of the subjective and objective … For Wagner this question becomes “how does the subjectivity of love resolve its opposition to the denial of love that is grim nature, social convention, and, ultimately, the explicitness of death (the finite)?” For Schelling this was *the* question of philosophy. He writes, “…the whole of theoretical philosophy has this problem only to solve, namely how the restriction becomes ideal….” Put in Wagnerian terms, the fundamental question of philosophy is how death (restriction) becomes love (the ideal).’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also my ‘Declining Performativity, or Ecologies of Concern: Elaborations on a Concept’ (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)