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**Pluralizing Methods: Contingency, Ethics, and Critical  
Explanation**

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## Pluralizing Methods: Contingency, Ethics, and Critical Explanation

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### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is not so much to criticise or evaluate William Connolly's pluralization of methods in political science, but to draw upon his conceptual resources, especially his notions of contingency, contestability, and ontopolitical interpretation, to further reflect about questions of method and critical explanation in political analysis from a poststructuralist perspective. Developing themes presented in a recent book - *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political theory* (which was co-written with Jason Glynos) - I begin by accepting Connolly's view that we bring various ethical and normative commitments to our interpretations of problematized phenomena, thus endorsing Nietzsche's perspectivism, but I then add a little more to Nietzsche's 'perspective seeing' by outlining three logics – social, political and fantasmatic - which I argue are indispensable in helping us to explain, criticize and evaluate. On the way, I contrast Connolly's commitment to a Spinozist/Deleuzian philosophy of immanence, with a more Derridean and Heideggerian inspired philosophy of weak transcendence.

## Introduction

In a typically generous and illuminating essay on Critical Theory, William Connolly acknowledges that ‘every contemporary social theorist must eventually confront the thought of Jürgen Habermas’ (Connolly 1987: 52). Surely the same must now be said about Connolly’s thought, as his work not only problematizes the leading currents of contemporary theory, but also tackles issues that are actively forgotten or deferred by mainstream perspectives? Not only do his writings persistently engage with the new challenges that punctuate the discourse of political theory, rather than pretending or hoping that these marginal murmurings were simply not there, but he refuses to be confined to any one available idiom or style of reasoning. Instead, he joyously relays between different camps, straddling the so-called analytical and continental divide, or the division between scientists, normativists and interpretivists, where he is happy to converse with thinkers in contiguous fields of thought, even those that are seemingly uncongenial for critical political theory.

At first glance, the sheer vitality and scope of Connolly’s work seems to defy meaningful engagement within the space of a single essay. But this worry is not fatal, as there are numerous arcs and trajectories in his writings and these lines of affinity are brimming with ‘surplus energies’ (Connolly 2004a: 342). One such line of flight is his ongoing encounter with the philosophy of natural and social science, especially with respect to questions of explanation and critique. Stretching back to his initial engagement with the ‘problem of ideology’ in mainstream American political science in the mid-1960s, right up to the publication of *Pluralism* in 2005, Connolly has consistently grappled with the scientific ideals embedded in political theorising, where he has sought to carve out a legitimate alternative to lawlike, teleological, and ideographic forms of explanation.<sup>1</sup>

This essay builds upon Connolly’s project of harnessing theoretical reflection on ethics and normative evaluation to a particular *way of doing* political theory. This is pursued by articulating key aspects of his work into a general strategy of critical explanation that foregrounds the particular role of logics. Two immediate theoretical problems present themselves. How is it possible to have explanations that employ general theoretical logics and concepts, yet respect the specificity and singularity of particular cases? How is something like *critical* explanation possible and how can it be conceptualized and practiced? The deeper question is whether or not it is possible to develop an approach to critical explanation that respects, without fully endorsing, certain intuitions in both naturalism and contextualism, whilst establishing a workable connection between explanation and critique.

## Connolly’s History of the Present: Strategies of Detachment and Attachment

Consonant with the approach proposed here, and with Connolly’s method as well, the starting point for any adventure in political theorizing is the problematization of pressing issues in the present, where the key tasks are characterization, critique and evaluation (see Connolly 2004a). For example, in *Identity/Difference*, he frames his account of the

present by sketching out ‘a phenomenology of life and death in late modernity’ (Connolly 1991: 16). He begins by endorsing the unavoidable analytic of finitude, which for thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault haunts each human existence. In *Being and Time*, for instance, Heidegger ties human finitude explicitly to *Dasein*’s knowledge of its own death, thus conceding to finitude an intrinsically temporal dimension (see Heidegger 1962: 329). But *Dasein*’s foreknowledge of its own death can be lived out inauthentically or authentically, as a human being can choose to live a meaningful life by ‘finding itself’ amongst the myriad of possibilities it encounters (Heidegger 1962: 42). Here, in Connolly’s words, the ‘foreknowledge of death can encourage a human being to establish priorities in life, to consolidate the loose array of possibilities floating around and within one into the density of a particular personality with specific propensities, purposes, and principles’ (Connolly 1991: 17).

But while the analytic of finitude in late modernity gives rise to a series of incipient dangers – the intensification of ‘dependent uncertainty’ as the self is ensnared in new networks of disciplinary power, the trend for citizens to divest from the common life in the name of privatization and individualism, and the appearance of numerous anxieties associated with what Connolly calls the ‘globalization of contingency’ (Connolly 1991: 20-25) - it is not without its promises. For though the alienation and fragmentation of the late modern condition may intimate the demand for ‘a more harmonious collective identity’, an alternative problematization may hone in on the nexus between normalizing pressures and their pathological outcomes, *and yet* glimpse new possibilities - new types, traits and dispositions – which resist the drives to conformism and bio-power. What is needed, then, is a loosening up of the bonds that squeeze difference and contingency out of identities (Connolly 1991: 172-3).

Here Connolly invites us to ‘broaden’ our ‘reflective experience of contingency and relationality in identity’ (Connolly 1991: 180), and to resist temptations to naturalize or normalize our conceptions of identity. This process can be fostered by writing ‘genealogical histories of the social construction of normality and abnormality’ (Connolly 1991: 191), which ‘expose the falsification necessarily lodged inside articulations’ (Connolly 1987: 154). The genealogical model seeks not to ground identity in a transcendental or foundational way, or to attune it with a ‘higher unity’; instead, it seeks ‘attunement to discordance within the self, discordance between the self and identities officially established for it, between personal identity and the dictates of social identity, between the vocabulary which encourages the pursuit of self-realization, identification, knowledge, and virtue and that which must be subdued to enable those formations’ (Connolly 1987: 155). In short, then, ‘critical genealogies are indispensable to cultivation of the experience of contingency in identity\difference’ (Connolly 1991: 181).

However, the indispensable resources of genealogy and deconstruction are *insufficient* to pose effective challenges to dominant modes of analysis, because they ‘refuse to pursue the trail of affirmative possibility very far’ (Connolly 1995: 36). Instead, he counters the nihilism of a purely negative critique by articulating the *ontopolitical* dimension of political analysis.<sup>2</sup> He thus supplements Derrida and Foucault’s ‘strategies of detachment’ with a ‘strategy of attachment’ that necessarily ‘invokes a set of fundaments

about necessities and possibilities of human beings', including what they are composed of, how they relate to nature, to each other, and so on (Connolly 1995: 1):

To practice this mode of interpretation, you project ontopolitical presumptions explicitly into detailed interpretations of actuality, acknowledging that your implicit projections surely exceed your explicit formulation of them and that your formulations exceed your capacity to demonstrate their truth. You challenge closure in the matrix by affirming the contestable character of your own projections, by offering readings of contemporary life that compete with alternative accounts, and by moving back and forth between these two levels (Connolly 1995: 36).<sup>3</sup>

The ontopolitical presumptions that are projected into the objects of Connolly's 'detailed interpretations' draw on Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, James, and others. Its ethical component is premised on what Nietzsche calls an '*abundance of being*' (Nietzsche 1999: 4) – an ontology of 'existential gratitude', as Connolly sometimes calls it, which 'is an experience of overflowing' or 'vitality' (Connolly 2005b: 244).

Now it is evident that Nietzsche did not really approve of 'the prejudices of democratic taste' (Nietzsche 1999: 7-8). Yet Connolly most certainly does, for he frames his commitment to abundance and radical immanence by endorsing a particular democratic sensibility. Indeed, it is because of the '*ambiguity of democracy*', especially those forms that are 'infused with a spirit of *agonism*', where 'the culture of genealogy has also gained a strong foothold', that democratic forms of articulation and mediation enable 'anyone to engage fundamental riddles of existence through participation in a public politics that periodically disturbs and denaturalizes elements governing the cultural unconscious' (Connolly 1991: 191, 211).

Connolly does however set important prerequisites for the proper functioning of democratic politics. Hence in more recent texts like *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, *Neuropolitics* and *Pluralism* he favours a regime of deep and multidimensional pluralism, where 'the cultural centre is pluralized along multiple dimensions and the procedures of governance are set in this dense plurality' (Connolly 1999a: 92). Connolly's regulative ideal involves the creation of a 'majority assemblage' of disparate minorities based on a programme that could narrow income inequalities, widen educational opportunity, and improve job security, medical care, retirement prospects and housing for the many, by instituting a new settlement in which all citizens can participate equally and with dignity in a shared political economy (Connolly 2005a: 7-8). Finally, this reworked 'overlapping consensus' also acknowledges 'numerous lines of affinity and interdependence between human beings and nonhuman nature', so that 'the pursuit of pluralism and equality is infused with the drive to reconstitute historically dominant relations between the human animal and the rest of nature' (Connolly 2005b: 251).

## **Immanent Naturalism**

In *Neuropolitics*, these ontopolitical projections are informed by a further methodological twist, which supplements the strategy of detachment and attachment with a ‘double-entry model’ of political analysis (Connolly 2002a: 215). This new sensibility challenges the lawlike model of explanation, which is assumed by most empiricists and rational choice theorists to be the *only* rational form of explanation; contests the search for ‘deep, authoritative’ interpretation by hermeneuticists and social constructionists; and problematizes the positing of a transcendental reason put forward by proponents of the Kantian/neo-Kantian tradition (Connolly 2004a: 344). Connolly’s ‘double-entry orientation to the paradox of political interpretation’ intervenes in the gap between a first orientation, in which the social critic launches her investigation by acting ‘*as if* complete explanation is possible’, and a second gesture whereby the interpreter contests the hubris that informs the initial ‘regulative ideal’: critical explanation thus oscillates in the space between the two registers (Connolly 2004a: 344).

This relaying movement is rooted in a new ontopolitical compound that Connolly names ‘immanent naturalism’. Set against a philosophy of transcendence, and transcendental thinking more generally, his naturalism captures ‘the idea that all human activities function without the aid of a divine or supernatural force’ (Connolly 2002a: 85-6).<sup>4</sup> *Immanent* naturalism is contrasted with *eliminative* and *mechanical* naturalism, where the eliminative variant is ‘a metaphysical faith that reduces the experience of consciousness to non-conscious processes’ (Connolly 2004a: 341), and the mechanical view ‘denies any role to a supersensible field while finding both the world of non-human nature and the structure of the human brain to be amenable ‘in principle’ to precise representation and complete explanation’ (Connolly 2002a: 85). Instead, immanent naturalists (such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and so on) emphasize the differential intermixing of culture and nature, ‘depending upon the capacity for complexity of the mode of being in question’, yet query the possibility of necessary and sufficient laws of nature as propounded by ‘classical natural science’ (Connolly 2002a: 85-6).

Drawing inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari, Connolly argues that one of the most basic assumptions of immanent naturalism is its commitment to ‘vague essentialism’ – ‘essences that are vagabond, anexact and yet rigorous’ - which are distinguished from ‘fixed, metric, and formal essences’, yet still constitute ‘fuzzy aggregates’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 407, cited in Connolly 2004a: 342). A paradigm case of the ‘volatile character’ of this ‘immanent field of matter-energy’ is the human self, which is reconfigured as the ‘human body/brain system’ prior to its cultural immersion (Connolly 2004a: 342). This results in a layered and embodied conception of the self that is relationally immersed in various worlds of cultural meaning – a complex and unevenly articulated series of ‘mind/brain/cultural complexes’ – whose multiple relays between consciousness and the unconscious, affect and intellect, technique and sensibility, the visceral and the refined, defy programmes of reduction, subsumptive explanation, and depth hermeneutics (Connolly 2002a: 90). In short, the various ‘layers of the body/brain network’ (Connolly 2002b: xvii), and their insertion in meaningful practices, are ‘traversed by surplus energies, unstable mixtures, and static that might, given an unexpected shift in circumstances, issue in something new and surprising’ (Connolly 2004a: 342).

The philosophy of immanent naturalism also leads to a questioning of the dominant models of causality in the social sciences, as well as more sophisticated accounts of multi-causality.<sup>5</sup> Here again, Connolly contests accounts of efficient causality, which predominate in mainstream political science, and ‘acausal’ pictures of interpretation associated with interpretivism, which are based on the ‘mutual constitution’ of social phenomena (Connolly 2004a: 342). While the logic of efficient causality is not excluded from the picture, it is not deemed sufficient to account for processes of ‘emergent causality’. The latter, when it happens, is *causal* ‘in that a movement at the immanent level has effects at another level’, but it is only *emergent* for three reasons: 1) we do not know the character of the immanent activity before registering its effects at a second level; 2) the new effects are inscribed into the ‘very being’ and structure of the second level in a way that disallows its complete disentanglement from the effect generated; and 3) there are a complicated array of connections between the first and second levels to engender the sedimented outcome.

### Points Of Accord

As against the reductive logics of naturalism, social constructivism, or teleological transcendence, Connolly’s double gesture of seeking full explanation in terms of emergent causalities, yet holding the outcomes of such investigation in abeyance so that other possibilities can be disclosed, yields a distinctive approach to critical political theory. In this approach, the explanatory task is to problematize and account for pressing issues in the present, while the practice of critique ‘is to occupy strategic junctures where significant possibilities of change are under way, *intervening* in ways that that might help to move the complex in this way rather than that’ (2004a: 344).

Now the primary purpose of this essay is not to dispute Connolly’s account of radical contingency, nor its implications for critical explanation and political intervention. I want instead to accept a large chunk of what Connolly says, and then use his conceptual resources as a springboard for further probing and reflection. First, I endorse his view that we bring various ethical and normative commitments to our interpretations of problematized phenomena. We must accept Nietzsche’s critique of ‘the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless, knowing subject”’, which demanded ‘that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense’ (Nietzsche 1967: 119). Indeed, from Nietzsche’s viewpoint there is ‘*only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”’; and the more *affects* we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity” be’ (Nietzsche 1967: 119).

Secondly, I agree with Connolly’s doubling gestures that refuse the either/ors of critical detachment without positive affirmation, and the forced choice between reductive

naturalism, deep interpretivism, and Kantian transcendentalism. ‘Ontopolitical interpretation’ and ‘immanent naturalism’ are Connolly’s alternative names for these dominant oppositions. But are there other ways to flesh out the notion of ontopolitical interpretation? And can one play other games with the philosophies of immanence and transcendence, and yet remain faithful to the ontological postulates of Connolly’s approach? My answer to these rhetorical questions is affirmative. But first I need to set out the grounds for such affirmations, after which I can explore their explanatory and critical implications for political analysis.

## **The Games of Immanence and Transcendence**

I want to begin by interrogating the forced choice between naturalism, deep hermeneutics, and regulative transcendence, when we are asked to articulate our perspectives on critical explanation or ethico-political attachment. As Connolly rightly suggests, these ‘existential faiths’ are usually produced by drawing sharp lines between naturalism and transcendence, on the one hand, and between immanence and transcendence on the other. And although these boundaries are often interrelated in subtle ways, it is generally assumed that the construction of the first division asks us to choose between matter and consciousness, bodies and minds, the sensible and the supersensible, nature and culture, and so on, whereas the second asks us to choose between a purely internal plane of immanence, in which there is nothing beyond or higher than ‘a swarm of differences - a pluralism of free, wild or untamed difference’ subsisting within and below existence - and the positing of a pure exteriority (such as ‘God’ or ‘the Good’) that stands outside or above ‘the anarchy of beings within Being’ (Deleuze 1994: 50; Smith 2001: 174).

Starting with the latter division, it is common today to claim that the philosophies of immanence and transcendence stand opposed to one another in post-structuralist theory. In this picture, Deleuze and Derrida are often presented as exemplars of these rival perspectives, though this may be more of a caricature than a rich portrait of their respective positions. Nonetheless, for purposes of argument, Deleuze is usually taken as an archetypal philosopher of immanence, whose ‘genetic principle of difference’ ushers in a model of abundance that exceeds actuality by propelling new possibilities into being. By contrast, Derrida’s qualification of ideas like responsibility and forgiveness with adjectives such as ‘infinite’, ‘pure’, or ‘absolute’ is often taken to be a paradigmatic philosopher of transcendence. His deconstructive reading of the aporetic structure of forgiveness, for example, where forgiveness must, on the one hand, be absolute and unconditional for it to be an act of forgiving, while each singular act of forgiving is always conditional and contextual on the other, highlights the productive tensions his approach seeks to make visible: what we take to be the conditions of possibility of a particular act, concept or phenomenon, turns out on further reflection to be the latter’s condition of *impossibility* as well (Derrida 2001). Indeed, Derrida’s reflections yield a more general insight about the structure of human desire, namely that there is something lacking or missing in every structure or field of discursive practice, and it is the role of impossible objects (such as ‘justice’ or ‘democracy’) to try and fill this lack by standing



in or substituting for this incompleteness, though the object itself will always be compromised in the process.

One immediate difficulty that arises from this initial snapshot is the sharp separation of immanence and transcendence, and the privileging of one over the other, thus reproducing a binary opposition that runs against the grain of poststructuralist thinking. But it is important to stress that Connolly does *not* present matters in this way. For one thing, he insists that a key difference between the two perspectives is not so much their respective philosophical commitments, but the *status* of each perspective for its respective proponents. More importantly, while he clearly subscribes to a philosophy of immanence, the very point of his immanent naturalism is to blur the stark division between immanence and transcendence (Connolly 2005b). In equal fashion, Connolly also complicates the strong opposition between the natural and the transcendental by first seeking to naturalize the transcendental, and then weakening the capacity of any naturalism to explain the world in a conclusive fashion. In this regard, he repositions Kant's insinuation of 'an inscrutable transcendental field' into the gap between our experience of phenomena and our endeavour to explain them via laws of the understanding (using concepts such as causality, space and time), by rewriting this 'eternal, supersensible, and authoritative' dimension into 'a layered, immanent field' (Connolly 2002a: 83-5). Connolly thus seeks to '*naturalize a place for mystery*' and this element of mystery is folded into his conception of 'emergent causality' (2004a: 342)

Connolly provides a more complex picture of immanence and transcendence by multiplying the games we can play with these notions.<sup>6</sup> Yet his advances do not exhaust the many ways of interpreting the 'immanent/transcendental field' (Connolly 2002a: 87). A further possibility was intimated in my discussion of Derrida. Recall that Derrida claims that certain fields of discursive practice such as ethics or politics are predicated on our identification with objects that promise a fullness which is ultimately impossible. Signifiers such as 'justice', 'democracy' or 'infinite responsibility' transcend any particular practice, though they are intrinsically flawed or compromised when actualized in any specific historical context. This logic presupposes that any existing discursive practice or system is missing at least one object – it is structurally incomplete – and it is this lack that activates and structures subjective desire.

Here we see the emergence of a further dialectic between immanence and transcendence, where the former is always structurally incomplete or lacking, while the latter is caught in a paradoxical play between possibility and impossibility, which highlights the finite and precarious character of any particular transcendent object. It seems, therefore, that Derrida's reworking of immanence and transcendence shares important affinities with an 'ontology of lack', rather than 'abundance'. But it is important to stress that these two ontologies are not necessarily opposed perspectives: just as immanence and transcendence are folded together, so lack and abundance are mutually implicated, as one is the condition of possibility for the other.

In other words, the very production of 'flawed' or 'impossible transcendentals' like democracy, justice, responsibility, and so on, presupposes that something is lacking in a

particular regime or practice - an absence of the very things that the flawed transcendentals are designed to repair or overcome. Moreover, this interweaving of lack and abundance (or 'excess' or 'surplus') is a characteristic feature of Derrida's readings. His deconstructive readings of Rousseau's philosophy, for example, pinpoint a proliferating chain of supplementary 'additions', in which each supplementary token functions as 'a surplus' - 'a plenitude enriching another plenitude' - but also 'adds only to replace'; or, as Derrida puts it, 'if it fills, it is as if one fills a void' (Derrida 1976: 144-5). The paradoxical logic of the supplement, therefore, speaks both to the addition of something new, and the completion of something that is primordially lacking: a series of 'failed representations' that indicate an 'originary absence' in the thing represented. Excess and surplus are thus internally connected to lack in a strange dialectic. Indeed, this logic is a characteristic feature of Derrida's general deconstruction of a pure interiority confronting a pure exteriority, where he endeavours to reinscribe this binary via the concept of a 'constitutive outside', where a lack in the inside 'requires' completion by an outside (see Staten 1984).<sup>7</sup>

But for social and political analysis, the key question centres on the conditions under which a void in any regime or practice is rendered visible, thereby triggering the game of immanence and transcendence I have just sketched out. It is here that the category of dislocation assumes importance. Dislocation can be understood as a condition and as an event. First, it highlights the 'always already' split between an identity and its dependence on a constitutive outside: the fact that every identity is marked by an impurity that prevents its full constitution. In a similar vein, Connolly draws attention to the role of 'litter' in the philosophy of William James, whose endemic 'presence' points to the fact that '[t]here are always subterranean energies, volatilities, and flows that exceed our formal characterizations of being' (Connolly 2005: 73). In James's words, 'something always escapes' from the world (James cited in Connolly 2005: 73).

Yet, second, the category of dislocation also indicates an occurrence in which the primary unevenness of any identity is manifested. Here, for example, it signifies the moment in which the sedimented routines of everyday life are disrupted by an event that cannot be absorbed within an existing practice without modification or change. And it is precisely in situations like this that new objects emerge - a plurality of 'impossible transcendentals' for example - and different forms of identification become possible. This moves us directly to the field of politics and ethics, where the former refers to the public contestation and institution of the norms governing a regime or practice, while the latter captures the various *ways* in which these norms and institutions are constituted and then lived out by subjects. And it is precisely this nexus of processes and practices that brings us directly to questions of method in a more literal sense.

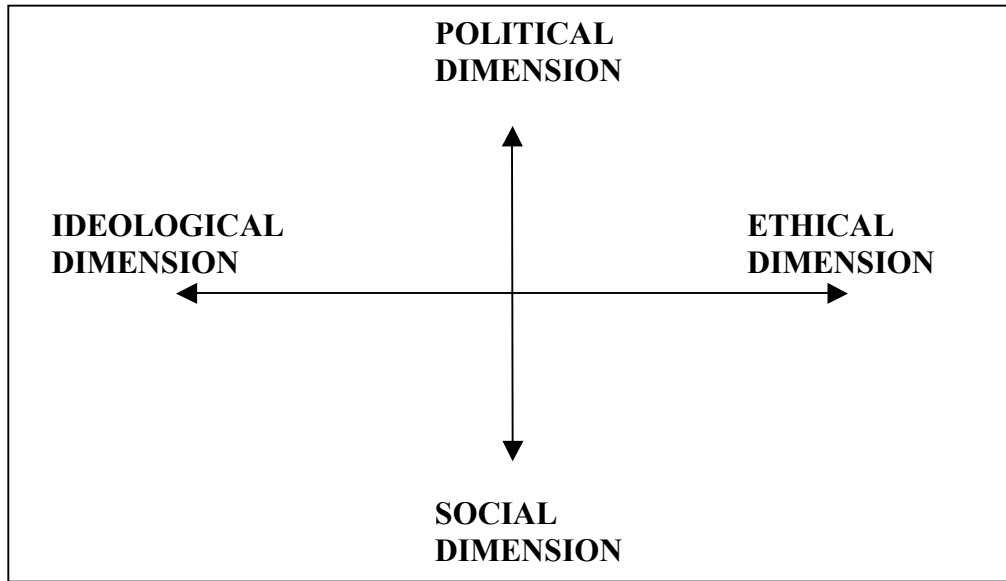
### **Reworking the Transcendental/Empirical Doublet**

Having presented a further variation on the game between immanence and transcendence at the ontological level, I now want to turn to some of its epistemological and methodological implications. These issues move us directly to the relationship between

the natural and the transcendental, rather than the interplay of immanence and transcendence. Relative to Connolly, my goal here is to add a little more content to the ‘perspective seeing’ we presuppose in any empirical investigation, and to situate this layer of presuppositions in a particular conception of the transcendental/empirical doublet. More fully, our ‘perspective seeing’ is rooted, first, in a thick conception of discourse, where our perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, affects, actions and emotions, are all partly composed and constituted by structured fields of meanings, though the latter are themselves historical, contingent and incomplete (Howarth 2000; Laclau 1993). On this basis, I then want to introduce a conception of logics, which can furnish the means to explain, criticize and evaluate the problematic phenomena which we are called upon to investigate. But I begin with the ontological supports of these moves.

Once again, I start by strongly endorsing Connolly’s affirmation of the radical contingency of identities and social relations, as well as his stress on the ‘incorrigible character of contingency and resistances in human affairs’, which gives rise to a social ontology of ‘discordant concordances’ as a ‘contestable projection’ amongst others (Connolly 1991: 225, n. 8). But my ‘contestable projection’ draws sustenance mainly from Heidegger, Lacan and Laclau, where the notion of radical contingency is a fundamental ontological category stemming from an unbridgeable gap between essence and existence - between *what* an object is in any given set of social relations and *that* and *how* it is an object - in which ‘the contingent’ can always ‘subvert the necessary’. In Laclau’s words, ‘contingency is not the negative other side of necessity, but the element of impurity which deforms and hinders its full constitution’ (Laclau 1990: 27). In turn, this conception leads to an affirmation of human finitude, in which each human subject is thrown into a world it does not choose, where it and the world are incomplete and lacking.

I take these presuppositions to imply that any structure of social relations is constitutively incomplete or lacking for a subject. From this perspective, as I have suggested in my reworked game of immanence and transcendence, practices are governed by a dialectical interplay between incomplete structures, on the one hand, and the collective acts of subjective identification that change or sustain those incomplete structures on the other. Moreover, the condition and experience of radical contingency – our negotiation of what Connolly calls the ‘tragic gap’ in existence, as it is revealed in dislocatory events (Connolly 1991: 14) – can be developed into an ontology comprising four basic dimensions of social relations: the social, political, ideological and ethical.



*Figure 1 Four Dimensions of Social Relations*

Figure 1 is a simple matrix designed to represent these four dimensions by capturing two intersecting relationships: the *structuring and contesting* of social relations on the one hand, and the different *ways* social actors respond to radical contingency in their identifications and practices on the other (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 110-13). On this matrix, the horizontal axis is bounded (ideally at its limits) by the categories of the social and the political. The *social* captures those situations in which radical contingency does not affect subjects, as they are absorbed in the ongoing practices of social life, and do not challenge the basic norms that govern them, while the *political* refers to situations in which subjects respond to dislocatory events by reactivating the contingent foundations of a practice and contesting its basic norms. The vertical axis is composed of the ideological and ethical poles. The *ideological* captures the way subjects are blind to, or complicit in concealing, the radical contingency of social relations, while the *ethical* speaks to the way subjects are attentive to its constitutive character and open to the possibilities it discloses.

Of course, these basic categories are expressed in ideal terms, so that any actual activity or social order is understood in terms of *degrees* rather than kinds, and as such can then be plotted along the different axes. For example, any concrete inquiry must focus on the degree to which an identification or practice is ideological or ethical, or the degree to which a social relation is sedimented or reactivated/challenged in any particular context. Indeed, as I shall argue below, any particular object of investigation can be characterized by articulating these different elements into a concrete practice or regime.

## Logics of Critical Explanation

It is against this ontological background that I introduce the category of logics as a means to problematize and account for the phenomena that provoke thinking and critique.<sup>8</sup> In general, the discernment of logics is designed to render practices or regimes more intelligible by helping us to discover their purposes and conditions: what makes them work or ‘tick’ in the ways they do. In Wittgenstein’s terms, logics enable one to distill the ‘essence’ of a practice, though not by penetrating below the surface of phenomena to discover some underlying and unchanging properties. Instead, the aim is to display the possibilities of phenomena in a range of spatio-temporal contexts, perhaps by delineating the rules or grammar governing them, though with the important proviso that the latter are always open-textured summations of practice – or yardsticks with which to understand and evaluate - rather than subsumptive conditions or determinants of action (Wittgenstein 1967: §§ 90, 92).

In more formal terms, logics enable us to distill the rules, purposes, and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible, but also impossible and vulnerable. And the more these presuppositions are discerned and illuminated, the greater the intelligibility of the practices and regimes investigated. In accordance with Connolly’s critique of mainstream political science, logics stand opposed to lawlike explanations, deep interpretations, or causal mechanisms conceived in terms of efficient causality. As against causal laws, logics are not external to the practices or regimes investigated, which they subsume in the name of a universal determination, but nor are they reducible to self-interpretations that are immersed in particular contexts. Logics are *in* the practices examined, yet they are not subsumable by the latter; instead, they provide a bridge between a subject’s own self-interpretation and the investigator’s interpretations of those self-interpretations, and these sets of interpretations may or may not match-up. Logics bring something to the explanation that is not simply given by the practices or interpretations of agents, but they are always anchored in some way in the latter.<sup>9</sup>

Three sorts of logic are crucial in this regard – social, political and fantasmatic logics – and I shall say a little more about each, as well as their linking together in any putative critical explanation. *Social* logics enable a theorist to start addressing a problematic phenomenon by *characterizing* a practice or regime in a certain way. For example, Connolly’s discussion of ‘the second problem of evil’ in *Identity/Difference* is rooted in what he calls ‘the social logic of identity/difference relations’ (Connolly 2002b: xv), where the problem is ‘the proclivity to marginalize or demonize difference to sanctify the identity you confess’ (Connolly 2002b: xv). Aspects of this social logic are fleshed out more concretely in his characterization of the politics of immigration in the Mexico/California borderlands. In this context, he discerns a double logic of ‘differential economic discipline and political separation’, whereby “illegal immigrants” or “aliens” from Mexico are caught in an intensifying system of exploitation. In this contingent, yet ‘durable pattern of disequilibrium’, the provision of cheap labour for capitalist businesses is maintained, and even exacerbated, by the illegal political status of migrant workers, which renders the latter voiceless and isolated (Connolly 2002a: 150-1). One important effect of this contingent constellation is a deepening of divisions within ‘the citizen class

of low-skill workers as a whole', which in turn benefits the employers of labour. Indeed, the consequent 'racialization of economic and cultural issues' divides low-skilled workers as a whole, thus militating against joint political action, as different ethnic and cultural groups are often demonized as threatening others, rather than potential allies in a common struggle.

By their very nature, and as Connolly's illustration demonstrates, social logics are multiple, historical, and contextual. While they do not correspond perfectly with contextualized self-interpretations, and while they may be detached from a situation and generalized across different contexts for explanatory purposes, they are heavily marked by the particular forms of life in which they are embedded. There are, in short, as many social logics as there are concrete social practices or regimes of practices. But while social logics go some way in ascertaining *what* rules govern a practice or regime in a particular context, the task of explanation must also inquire into *why* and *how* they came about and are sustained.

Let's return to the discussion of immigration politics in Mexico/California. One question one might ask about Connolly's account is how and why 'the powerful contrivance of economic discipline and political separation' was brought about in the first place, and how it has been sustained? Connolly is surely right to say that this 'contrivance' is 'a layered, contingent contraption jerry-rigged from multiple materials', and he is correct not to invest some underlying 'logic of history' or 'deep structure' into it. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that this constellation was intended by a 'central power', even though it is connected by 'the diverse intentions of agents at multiple sites with differential power' (Connolly 2002a: 151). And finally, as Connolly also insists, this does not mean that such assemblages are purely cultural or ideological, as they constitute a relatively *sedimented* and *material* complex of forces.

Yet the emergence, formation and sustenance of these contingent apparatuses does presuppose certain conditions of possibility, conditions which can at the same time render such 'resonance machines' impossible. For one thing, they surely presuppose the availability of various discursive elements – signifiers such as 'the American way of life', certain derogatory beliefs about 'illegal immigrants', rhetorical demands to preserve traditional ways of life from alien intrusions, etc – that can be welded together into particular ideological ensembles. At the same time, one can assume that these various elements are contingently linked together in various strategies and practices by particular actors and agencies (though there would be no one 'strategist' or power centre). In short, without any concrete knowledge of this particular case, I am still inclined to investigate the various political and ideological practices through which this contingent and incomplete contraption was constructed, stabilized and reproduced; and I would seek to elaborate theoretical tools with which this task can be achieved.

In other words, the study of micro-politics needs also to explore the strategic linking together of various demands and identities by multiple agents, whether politicians, media representatives, or 'organic intellectuals' of many types, who seek to forge an affective common sense amongst different forces, while actively targeting and excluding others.

And I take it that Connolly agrees in this respect when he stresses the need for ‘political action at multiple sites’ to disrupt and reorganize the dominant apparatus, and calls for the creation of ‘critical assemblages’ composed of multiple actors (Connolly 2002a: 152-3). Equally, I concur with Connolly in stressing the importance of linking heterogeneous demands for a different political economy within and across existing territorial boundaries. But is there any more by way of theoretical reflection and work that can help us to analyze such configurations and how they may be countered? The answer for me resides in the role of political and fantasmatic logics.

### **Political and Fantasmatic Logics**

Political logics help to explain those processes of collective action and struggle that sometimes arise in the wake of dislocatory events, and which may in turn lead to the construction of new frontiers. But they also include practices that endeavour to disrupt or negate the construction of social divisions by deferring or absorbing the claims and demands that emerge. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, political logics comprise logics of equivalence and difference (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The former involves the construction of antagonisms that divide the social field into opposed camps, whereby various identities and differences are rendered equivalent to one another in the face of a common threat or adversary. The result is a weakening of the differences on each side of the antagonistic divide, whether these differences are understood in terms of political demands or social identities, and their overdetermination by signifiers that fuse meanings together.

By contrast, the logic of difference involves the loosening-up or decomposition of equivalential chains of demands/identities via various practices of challenge, institutionalization, deflection or negation. This logic is accompanied either by the pluralizing or opening-up of a regime to new demands and claims, where those in a social field acknowledge and accommodate difference, or it is marked by the differential incorporation or even co-optation of difference, where the cutting edge of claims and demands may be blunted. In other words, if equivalence is the logic of condensing together different demands and identities into a common discourse that divides and simplifies social space, then difference is the logic of pluralization and displacement, where there is a multiplication and complication of social spaces.

Consider for example a national liberation struggle against an occupying colonial power. The movement will typically attempt to cancel out the particular differences of class, ethnicity, region, or religion that mark or divide the oppressed ‘people’ in the name of a more universal nationalism, which can serve as a common reference point for all the oppressed. Indeed, it is often the case that its political identity may be virtually exhausted in its opposition to the oppressive regime. On the other hand, the age-old practice of ‘divide and rule’, whereby an occupying power seeks to exacerbate difference by separating ethnic or national groups into particular communities or indirect systems of rule is invariably designed to prevent the articulation of demands and identities into a generalized challenge to the dominant regime.

However, it is important to stress that there is no *a priori* privileging of equivalence or difference on critical or evaluative grounds. The two logics are no more than regulative ideals, where equivalence involves the logic of combination and difference a logic of substitution in which there is little or no equivalence between demands. Thus there is no way of saying that equivalence is normatively preferred over difference, as the critical and normative implications of these logics are strictly contextual and perspectival. As I shall argue below, our normative evaluation of a particular strategy or movement depends on the particular circumstances and conditions under consideration, where it is quite possible that a pluralizing form of political engagement or even an incorporating strategy is preferable to a more equivalential form. Indeed, it is quite possible for political projects to engage in both logics at the same time, or to combine these different logics in a single campaign, though this requires great political skill and ingenuity.<sup>10</sup>

But any assemblage or contraption has to be installed and reproduced. In other words, it needs to secure the active or passive consent of subjects, or at least the complicity of a range of social actors to its practices and dispositions. This means that it must offer points of attachment and identification that can grip subjects in particular ways, thus providing benefits and enjoyments that affectively bond them to a certain set of actors, causing them to shun and demonize others. It is here that I turn to fantasmatic logics in order to add a further explanatory and critical layer to the approach: if political logics enable a theorist to show *how* social practices come into being or are transformed, then fantasmatic logics provide the means to understand *why* and *how* subjects are gripped by practices and regimes. They concern the *force* of our identifications (Laclau 2005: 101). Fantasmatic logics also contribute to an understanding of the resistance to change of social practices - their 'inertia' so to speak - but *also* the speed and direction of change when it does occur: what might be termed the 'vector' of political practices (Glynos and Howarth 2008).

Take first the relationship between fantasmatic logics and social practices. Though social practices are often punctuated by the disruptions and tragedies of everyday life, social relations are experienced in this mode as an accepted and smooth way of 'going on'. The role of fantasy in this context is not to set up an illusion that provides a subject with a false picture of the world, but to ensure that the radical contingency of social reality remains in the background. But also consider the function of fantasy in relation to the political dimension of social relations. In this context, one can say that the role of fantasy is actively to suppress or contain the dimension of challenge and contestation. For example, certain social practices may seek to maintain existing social structures by pre-emptively absorbing dislocations, thus preventing them from becoming the source of a political practice. In fact, the logic of many management and governance techniques could be seen in this light: they seek to displace and deflect potential difficulties or 'troubleshoot' before problems become the source of antagonistic constructions.<sup>11</sup>

In the immigration case we have been discussing, the role of ideological discourse is important in explaining the way in which American workers with citizenship rights are attached to certain values and practices by identifying with key signifiers. It focuses



attention on those ‘Things’ – particular objects and discourses - that turn us into the subjects we are and hold us fast (e.g. Žižek 1997: 214).<sup>12</sup> The fantasmatic dimension of such discourses draws attention to the contradictions in these identifications and the way these discourses cover-over the radical contingency of social relations in the name of the normal, the natural, and so on. For example, the logic of fantasmatic narratives or signifiers often obey a ‘having your cake and eat it’ form. In many racist discourses, immigrant workers are often presented as lazy scroungers who ‘steal the enjoyment’ of hardworking citizens and families with formal rights by draining their taxes, committing crime, and swallowing-up state resources that could be used for their benefit. But at the same time immigrants may also be depicted as working too hard or for low wages, which threaten to undercut local workforces.

More often than not, these discourses operate below the level of official public disclosure, manifesting themselves in jokes, off-the-record remarks, multifarious informal practices, slips of the tongue, tabloid stories, and so forth. For example, many debates on social policy in the US, which typically assume the welfare system is inefficient, are often underpinned by a fantasmatic narrative in which single African-American mothers are alleged to sponge off hard-working, tax-paying citizens (Hancock 2004). Importantly, this aspect of the narrative typically resists public official disclosure, thereby hinting at its possible *enjoyed* and thus fantasmatic status (Žižek 1997; Glynos 2001).

The logic of fantasy thus operates to conceal or ‘close off’ the radical contingency of social relations. It does this through a fantasmatic narrative or discourse that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome - the beatific dimension of fantasy - or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable, which might be termed the horrific dimension of fantasy, though in any particular instance the two work hand-in-hand (Stavrakakis 1999: 108-9; 2007). The beatific side, as Žižek puts it, has ‘a *stabilizing* dimension, which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity’, while the horrific aspect possesses ‘a *destabilizing* dimension’, where the Other – a ‘Jewish plot’ or the lazy/overzealous immigrant - is presented as a threatening or irritating force that must be rooted out or destroyed (Žižek 1998: 192). On the whole, then, fantasmatic logics capture the various way subjects organize their enjoyment by binding themselves to particular objects and representations so as ‘to resolve some fundamental antagonism’ (Žižek 1997: 11).

But having outlined its basic contours, I want to add three final remarks about the overall logic of the approach proposed here. First, it is important to stress that political and fantasmatic logics in this approach have a *quasi-transcendental* status. Unlike social logics, this means that although they are only instantiated and manifested in specific spatio-temporal contexts, they can be detached from any particular situation and given a certain degree of independent theoretical content. Political and fantasmatic logics thus formalize an understanding of the ways in which radical contingency and dislocation are discursively articulated or symbolized. But when harnessed together in particular circumstances they can help us to redescribe the ontic level in terms that emerge out of our poststructuralist ontology of social relations.

Second, this process of ‘harnessing together’ involves an articulation of social, political and fantasmatic logics in order to problematize and account for a singular object of critical explanation. As the name implies, this logic of articulation involves a modification and transformation of the different elements at play in each singularity. Articulation is here conceived as both an ontological category that speaks to the way in which social practices always involve the linking together of different elements in the ongoing process of social reproduction, but also as a more methodological notion that captures the theoretical process of connecting together a plurality of factors, forces and explanatory logics so as to constitute a more complex and concrete account of a problematized phenomenon.

Finally, these remarks resonate nicely with Connolly’s notion of emergent causality. At the ontological level, as I have suggested with respect to my reworked game of immanence and transcendence, social change presupposes the dislocation of a practice or regime – a moment of temporality in the strong sense - and the availability of new objects and practices, which provide the raw materials for engaging in the complicated task of instituting a new regime/practice. But it is clear in this regard that any such change cannot be predicted and that no single line of causality can be traced from one regime or practice to the next. This is because their construction involves, first, the disruption of an existing practice or regime and, second, the production of equivalential chains of demands or identities – a fusion of elements - which moves us directly to the terrain of overdetermination, rather than a simple relation or co-relation between given and fully-constituted elements. The move to this terrain highlights the irreducibly symbolic dimension of social relations, and foregrounds the interacting logics of condensation and displacement. Instead of a model of linear or multi-causality, the alternative proposed here has strong affinities with the notion of structural causality, in which social change is the product of a relational constellation of forces, where each element has the capacity to modify the others as they mutually interact in a particular context. A key difference with the latter, however, is that the approach proposed here eschews the idea of a fully-constituted structure, which is sometimes associated with the latter conception.<sup>13</sup>

### **Ethico-Political Critique and Normative Evaluation**

I have touched upon the way my approach presumes and discloses the radical contingency of social relations, while providing a grammar of concepts to interpret the various ontical responses to it. But what are the implications for ethics and normativity? Where is the *critical* dimension of critical explanation? To begin, I hope to have indicated how political logics show other possibilities of social constitution and organization at each moment of reactivation/decision, while fantasmatic logics focus on the *ways* in which subjects identify and are gripped, though only contingently so. However, I most certainly concur with Connolly’s urgent injunction that we need to go beyond the strategy of simply inverting existing hierarchies and binary oppositions to project more ‘positive ontopolitical presumptions’. But how can this be achieved and under what conditions?

I shall briefly address these questions by first focusing on those practices in which the social dimension predominates. Here I assume that the constitution of every identity, practice or regime involves a moment of political exclusion - and thus power - and that every relatively settled set of social relations involves some form of hierarchy. Borrowing from Laclau and Mouffe, there are at least three related ways of complexifying this picture of a social practice: the relations of subordination, domination, and oppression (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 153-4). Relations of subordination indicate those *practices that do not appear to invite or require public contestation of social norms*, either by the subjects engaged in the practice, or by the theorist who is interpreting the practice. Existing social relations are here reproduced without public contestation, as dislocations are covered-over or displaced. Here we might include everyday activities such as working, going on holiday, playing sport, and so forth. All these activities may in fact involve and rely upon relations of subordination, but they are not *experienced* as dominating or oppressive, nor are they regarded as unjust by the analyst.

Relations of domination point to the way subjects are judged, by the theorist, to be dominated, though the norms so judged are not explicitly challenged by those absorbed in the practice. Here interpretation may focus on those *practices which actively appear to prevent the public contestation of social norms from arising in the first place*. This is because social relations are reproduced without public contestation, either because dislocatory experiences are processed privately or informally, or because they don't arise at all. They may take the form of 'off the record' complaints – instances of 'lateral voice' for example - made by employees amongst themselves, or even toward their managers, who then elicit, deflect, or satisfy requests. On the other hand, the concealing of dislocation will be accomplished most completely and effectively if subjects are rendered ideologically complicit in the practices they partake. By contrast, relations of oppression point to those features of a practice or regime that *are* challenged by subjects in the name of a principle or ideal allegedly denied or violated by the social practice itself. Here the experiences of dislocation are symbolized in terms of a questioning of norms, which may be accompanied by political challenges to the practices or regime of practice examined. But equally they may be met with renewed efforts to offset challenges and maintain the existing social relations.

Characterizing practices as fostering or reinforcing relations of domination immediately highlights the sociological and normative character of the approach advocated in this paper. After all, the very identification of a social norm as *worthy* of public contestation, as well as the claim that a norm is actively prevented from being contested, presupposes some view of social domination. It implies that we already have some grasp of the practice, both sociologically and normatively. And this is where *social logics* are particularly relevant, as they are crucial in making explicit the sociological and normative aspects of this process of characterization. In this context, to highlight the *political* dimension of a practice is to be attentive to those *aspects of a practice which seek to generate, maintain, contain, or resolve the public contestation of social norms*. Put differently, the political aspects of a practice involve attempts to challenge and

replace existing social structures, as well as attempts to neutralize such challenges in a transformist way (Gramsci 1971: 58-9).

But what, then, can we say about ethical critique and normative evaluation? It is clear that the focus on radical contingency is connected to the practice of critique, as this focus can disclose points of social contestation and moments of possible reversal. Yet it is also important to distinguish between ethics and our grounds for normative evaluation. Ethics involves an acknowledgment of the radical contingency of social existence – the lack inherent in any order of being - and a particular way of responding to ‘its’ demands. In other words, it involves the cultivation of an *ethos* that faces up to the fact that each of us is necessarily marked by our identifications with an object that fills the lack, and which defines *who* we are and *what* we stand for. For example, a subject might identify with a particular faith, or with the constitutional principles of a modern democratic state – or both – but identify she does. Yet *how* we relate to ‘our Thing’ will be vital for *how* we relate to others, and their identifications. Indeed, in this conception, our relation to others presupposes an acknowledgement and complex *negotiation* with ‘the Thing’ that makes us the subjects we are: a heady mix of attentiveness, investment *and* release – in other words, an ethics of ‘failed transcendence’ that adds a further twist to an ethics of abundance and radical immanence (see Howarth 2006).

This means that ethical critique is directly connected to the fundamental commitments of one’s social ontology, where it demands detailed analyses of the kinds of fantasies that underpin a given set of social and political practices, as well as explorations of the ways in which fantasmatic objects can be destabilized or modulated. Questions of normativity, by contrast, are directed at the concrete relations of domination in which subjects are positioned. Normative questions thus require the analyst to characterize those relations that are perceived to be oppressive or unfair in the name of alternative values or principles. Two elements come into play here: first, there are the values that are brought to any interpretation by the theorist – in my case the values associated with the project of radical democracy – as well as the accompanying tasks of continually clarifying and modifying them (e.g. Howarth 2008). Second, there is the task of pinpointing and remaining attentive to those new values and identities encountered in those practices interpreted: what might be deemed the counter-logics of social domination and oppression. Or to put it in Connolly’s terms, it requires a commitment to the ‘politics of becoming’ and an attention to ‘the eruption of the unexpected into the routinized’ (Connolly 2004a: 345; Connolly 2004b).

Finally, it is important to stress that this approach concedes a lexical priority to the ethical vis-à-vis the normative. This arises because of the primacy accorded to the presence of radical contingency in its social ontology, but also because normative stances are themselves ultimately contingent. In other words, the norms and ideals that are presupposed and then projected into our various objects of study are intrinsically contestable and revisable. Contingency thus penetrates the realm of normative inquiry, as well as our practices of political engagement. But it should also inform our academic activity by inspiring a suitable *ethos* for conducting research, that is, an *ethos* that

endorses plurality and a 'presumptive generosity' to other perspectives and traditions (Connolly 1999b).

## Conclusion

The practice of what might be called *ethico-political interpretation* shares a strong family resemblance with Connolly's *ontopolitical* method. Its task is to reactivate those options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice or regime – the clashes and forces which are repressed or defeated in moments of becoming – in order to show how present practices rely upon exclusions (which in turn reveal the non-necessary character of existing social formations), and to explore the consequences and potential effects of such repressions. On the other hand, the practice of *onto-ethical* critique is to interrogate the conditions under which a subject is gripped by a particular social practice *despite* its non-necessary character. This mode of critique furnishes the means of critically interrogating the will to ideological closure (the logic of fantasy). Both modes of critique are informed by an ethos of exercising fidelity to radical contingency itself, and their role is to display other possibilities for political decision and identification, as well as different types of identification. But as I have also argued these critical modes themselves do not preclude normative evaluation of existing practices and regimes. Together they contribute to a practice of *ethico-political interpretation*, which strives to articulate explanation, criticism and normative evaluation.

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<p><b>SOCIAL DIMENSION</b></p>	<p><b>POLITICAL DIMENSION</b></p>
<p>Notes ← →</p>	
<p>* My long-standing interest in William Connolly's political theory has benefited from a number of encounters with him and leading commentators on his writings. I was fortunate to discuss some of the issues raised in this paper at a panel at the APSA Annual meeting in Washington in 2005, and in the middle of 2007 I presented two papers on aspects of his work at the University of Swansea and the University of Nottingham respectively. I would like to thank all those who raised questions and made stimulating interventions in these various contexts. In particular, I would like to thank Bill Connolly, Jane Bennett, Sam Chambers, Lars Tønder, Nathan Widder, and Alan Finlayson. Steven Griggs and Aletta Norval also contributed stimulating comments and thoughts. A special word of thanks to Jason Glynos, with whom some of the ideas in this essay were initially developed and published in a book entitled <i>Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory</i>. Of course, I accept final responsibility for the arguments developed in the essay.</p>	

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<sup>1</sup> In his first book *Political Science and Ideology*, Connolly remains wedded to a ‘scientific ideal of political inquiry’, which should ‘aim at the prediction and control of behaviour’; however, even at this early stage of his development, he acknowledges that this ideal ‘has many variants and is subject to competing interpretations’ (Connolly 1967: 6). Indeed, his exploration of the ‘problem of ideology’ problematizes mainstream conceptions of conducting political science by showing that supposedly scientific theories (such as those propounded by pluralists and elitists in the 1950s and 1960s) presuppose ‘an ideological interpretation of American politics’ (Connolly 1967: 48). By rendering explicit ‘the ideological dimension’ that resides in most interpretations of political life, Connolly counters the tendency to expunge and conceal contestable perspectives that underpin scientific research (Connolly 1967: 155).

In *The Terms of Political Discourse* (in 1974) and *Appearance and Reality in Politics* (in 1981), Connolly’s approach turns full circle, as he now explicitly contests the very ideal of complete explanation and prediction in political science, and shows the radical contestability of all concepts, claims and explanations (Connolly 1981; 1993). More fully, three interconnected phases of thinking can be discerned. At first, Connolly draws on the post-analytical tradition of thinking (inspired by thinkers like Wittgenstein, Hampshire and Strawson) to highlight the *essential contestability* of basic theoretical constructs such as power, interest, freedom and responsibility, thus demonstrating the impossibility of a value-free clarification and usage of concepts (Connolly 1981; 1993). Yet this initial endeavour to problematize the ideal of a neutral logic of operationalizing basic concepts for empirical research and normative evaluation is deepened by Connolly’s *genealogical* accounts of the modern self, with its complicated array of desires, differences and identifications, which further historicize and destabilize many of the theoretical certainties presupposed by the search for universal ‘if/then’ regularities between phenomena, or the desire to uncover underlying human propensities and purposes (Connolly 1987; 1991). But more recently, in what some perceive as a surprising swerve in his thinking, Connolly elaborates an *immanent naturalism*, which finds sustenance in the coupling of Gilles Deleuze and William James with recent developments in chemistry, evolutionary theory, and neuroscience (Connolly 2002a; 2004a).

On the one hand, these dispersed elements are held together by a common opposition to scientism and culturalism. More positively, as Connolly insists, these different tarryings with method and social explanation always presuppose a layered set of ontological commitments, affects and investments, which he latterly labels a ‘distinctive existential faith’ (Connolly 2004a: 333). Connolly’s particular faith – which in his later writings is mainly sustained by Nietzsche’s philosophy of abundance – challenges those outlooks that are closed, self-subsistent, reductionist, essentialist, or totalizing. Instead, he endorses an ontology that is marked by discord, multiplicity, and possibility: a view of the world permeated with deep and radical contingency.

<sup>2</sup> While the genealogical model illuminates the discord that is lodged in every identity, Connolly explicitly rejects the pull of a purely negative dialectic. As he has long insisted, a purely genealogical or deconstructive operation is not sufficient to constitute a fully fledged method of political theory. For example, in his reading of various trends in poststructuralist theories of international relations, he gently chastizes Richard Ashley for eschewing the task of developing a more positive theoretical alternative to the flawed models proposed by neo-realists and liberal idealists, and he questions his refusal to move beyond the inversion of problematic hierarchies (Connolly 1991). Genealogy ‘is necessary but inadequate to a mode of reflection that seeks critical detachment from the contemporary ontopolitical matrix’, both because Foucault has a tendency to proceed as if genealogy could simply bracket ontological assumptions in dominant frameworks, and because in his early writings Foucault the practice of genealogy ‘did constitute a refusal to affirm any positive directions or reforms of its own’ (Connolly 1995: 35).

<sup>3</sup> Connolly thus counters the nihilism of a purely negative critique by articulating the *ontopolitical* dimension of socio-political analysis. The ‘onto’ in ontopolitical is important for him because it ‘invokes a set of fundamentals about necessities and possibilities of human beings’, including what they are composed of, how they relate to nature, to each other, and so on (Connolly 1995: 1). By emphasizing the ontological dimension of experience Connolly questions those social science practices which deny their contestable ontological presuppositions by presuming one or another version of the ‘primacy of epistemology’ (Connolly 1995: 6-9). And to concede primacy to epistemology he explains ‘is to think either that you have access to criteria of knowledge that leave the realm of ontology behind or that your epistemology provides neutral test procedures through which to pose and resolve every ontological question’ (Connolly 1995: 5). Thus, in his terms, ‘every interpretation of political events, no matter how deeply it is sunk in a specific

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historical context or how high the pile of data upon which it sits, contains an ontopolitical dimension' (Connolly 1995: 1; emphasis added).

This master ontological postulate is explicitly related to what Foucault has identified as the 'transcendental-empirical' doublet, which arises from the 'doubling of man' in the modern episteme, where the figure of 'man' appears in the 'ambiguous position' of being both 'an object of knowledge and ... a subject that knows' (Foucault 1970: 312). Here the need to emphasize the ontopolitical aspects of socio-political analysis is intimately linked to the role played by contingency in human affairs, and how we endeavour to cope with it: do we deny, register, or confront it? Taking this as his *ontological* starting point, Connolly argues that naturalists and positivists are prone to deny or repress contingency in the name of lawlike explanations. And while hermeneuticists like Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer are happy to acknowledge an ontological turn, and do not deny contingency, they tend to domesticate the experience of contingency with their gentle - though potentially exclusionary - rhetoric of attunement, integration and articulation. Instead, Connolly advances an argument in favour of 'an ethicopolitical orientation that both asserts that the fundamentals of being are mobile and that, in the ordinary course of events, social pressures accumulate to present particular formations of life as if they were intrinsic, solid, or complete' (Connolly 1995: 34).

Critical reflexivity of this sort, he argues, may promote agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Connolly 1995: 39-40), or what he and others elsewhere term 'presumptive generosity'. Here he advocates the loosening up of 'sedimented forms' in order 'to cultivate further a care for life (hopefully) *already there in protean form* - to incite energies on behalf of extending diversity where it is possible to do so' (Connolly 1995: 34; emphasis added). In Connolly's terms, 'Differences, resistances, and protean energies flow through the "perpetual gaps" within and between social formations, opening up possibilities for the politics of pluralization' (Connolly 1995: 39).

<sup>4</sup> Naturalism is clearly a complex term of art. Alongside Connolly's employment, it can also refer to a unity of method in science, whilst in moral and ethical discourse it is often used to capture the idea that ideals and principles are in some way derived from non-moral facts or grounds, such as the nature of human beings.

<sup>5</sup> These would include positivists such as Jon Elster, evolutionary theorists such as Stephen Jay Gould, as well as certain interpretations of Althusser.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of transcendence is of course slippery, and it is impossible to provide a proper grammar of its various usages in different theoretical and philosophical contexts. But without going into detail here, my conception leans heavily on the work of the early Heidegger, who in turn seeks to radicalize Kant's transcendental philosophy. Heidegger's radicalization of Kant problematizes the sharp separation between a subject and object, in which a 'sphere of immanence' confronts or is directed towards an external, transcendent world of objects. On the contrary, the self - or *Dasein* as Heidegger rephrases the notion of subjectivity - is itself transcendent, in that one of its essential characteristics is to move beyond itself, that is, to 'step over' as Heidegger puts it, by being its own' or 'choosing itself' from various possibilities; or indeed by not choosing itself. Thus transcendence has a 'genuine ontological sense' for Heidegger, which speaks directly to *Dasein*'s 'thrown projection': the fact that it always finds itself in a particular situation not of its choosing, but then has the potential of projecting itself towards other possibilities that 'go beyond' its particular horizon or frame. As Heidegger puts it, then, 'Transcendence is not instituted by an object coming together with a subject, or a thou with an I, but the *Dasein* itself, as "being-a-subject," transcends. The *Dasein* as such is being-towards-itself, being-with others, and being-among entities handy and extant. In the structural moments of *toward-itself*, *with-others*, and *among-the-extant* there is implicit throughout *the character of overstepping*, of transcendence' (Heidegger 1982: 301). And just as transcendence is internally connected to *Dasein* - its 'familiarity in a world', as well as its various projections into the future - so the concept is rooted in temporality: 'The *transcendence of being-in-the-world* is founded in its specific wholeness *on the original ecstatic unity of temporality*' (Heidegger 1982: 302).

<sup>7</sup> This dialectic is also evident in certain variants of psychoanalysis: for example, in Lacan's return to Freud, the *objet petit a* - the object cause of desire for a subject - is characterised by a surplus of meaning and a surplus enjoyment, but it is intimately tied to the lack in the subject.

<sup>8</sup> A much fuller discussion of some of the themes developed in the rest of this essay is discussed in *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, which I co-authored with Jason Glynos. See Glynos and Howarth (2007).



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<sup>9</sup> In articulating this basic ontological standpoint, the principal objects of investigation are *practices* or *regimes of practices* in particular contexts. Here the chief aim of investigation is to explain their emergence and transformation, as well as their stabilization and maintenance. More precisely, inquiry focuses on those moments of dislocation – particular sites of flux and becoming - in which new trajectories and flights are made possible, and new norms and institutions are installed and defended/contested. As I shall argue, the focus on dislocation carries significant critical and ethical consequences.

<sup>10</sup> The empirical implications of these remarks are explored in Griggs and Howarth (2008). The normative aspects are highlighted in Norval (2007).

<sup>11</sup> But how do fantasmatic logics relate to actual *political practices*? Is it not the case that political practices represent a *rupture* with the logic of fantasy, which has a concealing function? The answer is affirmative: even though antagonisms often indicate the limits of a social order by disclosing the points at which ‘the impossibility of society’ is manifest, they are still forms of social construction, as they furnish the subject with a way of positivizing the lack in the structure. This means that while the construction of frontiers presupposes contingency and public contestation it does not necessarily entail ‘attentiveness’ to radical contingency. In other words, radical contingency can be concealed in political practices just as much as it is in social practices. If the function of fantasy in social practices implicitly reinforces the ‘natural’ character of their elements, or actively prevents the emergence of the political dimension, then we could say that the function of fantasy in political practices is to give them *direction* and *energy*, that is, their vector (see Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145-52).

<sup>12</sup> I draw inspiration here from Rudi Visker’s seminal readings of Heidegger, Foucault and Levinas. See Visker, *Truth and Singularity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> The notion of ‘structural causality’ is often associated with the writings of the structural Marxist Louis Althusser, who in turn contrasts his conception with various forms of ‘expressive causality’.