

Book Review: Returning to Judgment: Bernard Stiegler and Continental Political Theory by Ben Turner

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Abstract:

Book review of Ben Turner's *Returning to Judgment: Bernard Stiegler and Continental Political Theory*.

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1. Context

Bernard Stiegler is a philosopher whose oeuvre is as divisive as it is magnificent. He is an inventive and pioneering philosopher of technology, a voracious systematiser, a conceptual engineer, and a deconstructionist *par excellence*. For some, he is a clear source of inspiration, a heavy influence on the new and exciting wave of critical continental thought that returns—in our age of digital networks, ecological catastrophe, institutional inertia, hyper-capitalist exploitation and cultural atrophy—to questions of nature, technology and humanity with renewed vigour and fresh eyes. For others, Stiegler is more of a reformer than a radical, more conservative than his work initially appears, and perhaps even an author whose thought lends itself to hyperbolic—perhaps even superfluous—conceptual innovations and internal contradictions.

Turner deftly guides us through both the primary texts and secondary literature interrogating Stiegler's key texts, providing an original and insightful interpretation of his intervention into continental political theory.

2. Returning to Judgment

Turner takes as his starting point when relating Stiegler's body of work to contemporary continental political theory, the literature's commitment to overcoming the problem of totalisation. Totalisation is framed as a mode of necessarily exclusionary thought, often relying on the shaky grounds of

reason, rationality, and/or nature for justification, and almost always disrupted after the fact by the problematisation of such exclusions, unable to accommodate or account for difference once articulated. Continental political theory is understood to generally avoid explicit political judgements for fear of unintentionally reproducing pre-existing hierarchies, power relations, and/or terms of exclusion, and instead remaining steadfast to its normative commitments to inclusivity and openness.

Chapter 1, “The Default of Origin,” introduces the Stieglerian claim that the human is without essence. Turner argues that ontology itself is limited by the fictional status of all concepts responding to our purported origin, an origin necessarily precluded by our socio-technical context, the first limit to political ontology. Turner underlines the importance of the “non-inhuman” as a concept in Stiegler’s thought, as it demonstrates the limitations (both philosophically and linguistically) of trying to think of the human as a category while clearly acknowledging the inherent contingency that must remain clear with any plausible definition. Turner also brilliantly captures the more elusive notion of the “a-transcendental,” found in scattered references across Stiegler’s work—it bears family resemblance to the intentions of the non-inhuman, in that the a-transcendental is a semiotic recognition of contingency. As Turner writes, “any transcendental that regulates humanity’s understanding of itself, its place in the world, and its political significance is mediated and produced by the technical objects that define the empirical contexts from which such concepts emerge.”¹ Turner provides an excellent introduction to the anthropological and philosophical basis for Stiegler’s account of the origin of humanity and its imbrication with technicity, concluding with one of his more controversial contentions: “technical pre-humans are social but not political.”²

In Chapter 2, “The Pharmakon,” Turner addresses the status of the pharmakon as a concept in Stiegler’s work in providing a minimal definition of politics wherein the political is defined in response to the poisonous and curative properties of any given technological horizon. The political, therefore, totalises from a localised position, and thus political ontology’s second limit is found in its inability to exhaust this undecidability (in the Derridean sense). Stiegler’s account of technics and the human (or should I say, non-inhuman) provides the following theoretical conclusions: firstly, technicity both structures human existence and always for the transformation of these conditions by exposing stupidity.³ Here stupidity refers specifically to reactionary thought unable to perceive openness or contingency and thus retreat to judgements that generically reproduce the established order of things; secondly, and perhaps more controversially, the political refers solely to emergent antagonisms caused by any specific

1 Ben Turner, *Returning to Judgment: Bernard Stiegler and Continental Political Theory* (New York: SUNY Press, 2023), 16.

2 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 47.

3 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 72.

technically supported social condition.

In Chapter 3, “Individuation and General Organology,” Turner addresses the influence of Gilbert Simondon, specifically his concept of individuation, and how this post-ontological process of thinking through conceptual judgements is limited by processes of individuation. Turner argues that Stiegler’s interpretation of Simondon (articulated through the methodological tool of “general organology”) is best understood as informing the view that the political emerges in response to pharmacological problems while maintaining a recursive and indeterminate relationship with its conditions of origin.⁴ Stiegler’s general organology—post-ontological methodology—forms the third limit to political ontology: that all concepts emerge from particular processes of individuation and thus cannot be reliably universally applied.⁵

In Chapter 4, “Libidinal Economy and Proletarianization,” Turner explicates Stiegler’s account of desire, libidinal economy and proletarianisation. Stiegler’s fourth limit to political ontology, according to Turner, is that desire cannot be a universalisable concept accessed at the level of ontology due to its historicity, yet because there is no pre-historical desire, any politics of desire must totalise its conception to give meaning to individuation.⁶ Turner begins here an effective and persuasive critical interrogation of Stiegler’s theoretical contentions: Turner suggests that Stiegler’s account of the libidinal economy relies on explaining a set of local problems by way of an apparently universal politics of desire. He contends that “Stiegler’s political understanding of desire emphasises the need to critically assess the pharmacological nature of its relationship to totalisation rather than presupposing an ontological, productive desiring force that is opposed to totality.”⁷ Stiegler’s account of proletarianisation is similarly accused of totalisation—presupposing a universal subject (of desire) in danger of losing cultural and symbolic knowledge, itself framed as a form of violence without accounting for other (more obvious) examples of the violent destruction of knowledge.⁸ For what it’s worth, I would also contend that Stiegler’s reformulation of the proletariat as no longer representative of a class relation but rather a universal figure of subjectivity within computational capitalism that encompasses all classes is an obstructive and unhelpful provocation to Marxist critiques of similar phenomena.

In Chapter 5, “Stiegler’s Theory of Political Judgment,” Turner argues, with support from the post-foundational political ontology literature, that political judgment actively forms the political, and thus

4 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 73.

5 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 74.

6 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 100.

7 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 116.

8 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 101.

it cannot be said that any ontology can absolutely account for all possible responses to pharmacological problems.⁹ Such an understanding of political judgment implies a plurality of ways to understand the political/non-political, given the plurality of political origins that must therefore escape any single political ontology.¹⁰ Turner's reading of post-foundational political ontology supports the necessity of totalisation as articulated by (his plausible and persuasive reading of) Stiegler. Turner argues that the concept of judgment, therefore, unifies Stigler's philosophy of technics and its consequences for post-foundational political ontology.

In Chapter 6, "Judgments on the Impossible: Otium, Antigone, Amateurs," Stiegler's concepts of Otium, the Antigone complex and the amateur are all analysed through the lens of the possibility of constituting political judgments that resist totalisation. Turner contends that Stiegler distinguishes between the impossible and the improbable to "conceptualize how impossibility is unthinkable outside local and totalizing conditions,"¹¹ and this distinction informs the viability of these concepts as a means of thinking outside totalisation. Stiegler's fear of the automatic society, of algorithmic governmentality in its most extreme forms, must be met with concepts capable of resisting its tendencies—and Turner convincingly argues that all three concepts may be considered a-transcendental in the Stieglerian sense.¹²

In Chapter 7, "Neganthropology and the Problem of Judgment," Turner explicates Stiegler's novel interpretation of contemporary debates regarding the Anthropocene. Stiegler's own phrasing, the Neganthropocene, is a concept designed to highlight the way in which knowledge is characterised by a pharmacological tendency toward entropy.¹³ Much like the issues of the automatic society and libidinal economy, Stiegler presents neganthropology as a universal political problematic—yet such a problematic contradicts its purported aim of supporting plurality in that his use of terms assumes direct metaphorical alignment with the scientific principles of entropy and gives the human an assumed status as the universal subject of such an analysis.¹⁴ Turner specifically interprets Stiegler as intimating that "all humans experience the problems of this conjuncture in the same way because of the shared propensity to violence"¹⁵—ultimately, an arduous sojourn through a list of conceptual innovations, inventions and contrivances just to arrive at a quasi-Hobbesian observation, an energetic conservatism.

9 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 127.

10 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 138.

11 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 154.

12 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 167.

13 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 168.

14 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 169.

15 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 190.

In Chapter 8, “The Polis as Judgment on the Origins of the Political,” Turner is equally unimpressed with Stiegler’s late tendency to locate the polis in ancient Greece, precluding the possibility of a plurality of emergences of politics across the world and, indeed, as inherent to the process of individuation. Turner argues—and it must be said far more in the spirit of Stiegler’s early a-transcendental philosophical contentions—that “the political does not have a single origin because it is formed by local fictions regarding the nature of the non-inhuman.”¹⁶ Therefore, attempting to locate the origins of politics in ancient Greece seems not only historical conjecture (that many historians would simply label as false) but also betrays the plurality of political emergence(s) that early Stieglerian analysis of the relationship between politics and technicity implies.

In the conclusion, “A Pharmacology of the Political,” Turner’s reading of Stiegler is marshalled to resolve his ongoing issues with the current limitations of political ontology. Turner is sympathetic to Stiegler’s ongoing influence, specifically for providing contemporary political thought with the challenge of navigating difficult social, philosophical and political problems with a language of judgment that necessarily invokes totalisation whilst remaining open to future contestation. Rather than abandoning ontology altogether, theorists must recognise its limits and the plausible complications that arise from the business of universalising concepts, ideas and theories for a global, interconnected social world in the language of necessarily localised conceptual vocabularies.

There is a cognitive bias known as the law of the instrument where a specialist is known to become over-reliant on a single tool—when you are holding a hammer, everything looks like a nail, as the saying goes, and there is a reading of Stiegler that may understand his work as that of a specialist whose tool of over-reliance is the very idea of a tool, or “tool”-ness, itself. Turner resists such dismissiveness and instead demonstrates the exciting potential in the early work of Stiegler that more pessimistic and totalising later projects appear to foreclose—returning to political judgement may be a necessary theoretical move, but not at the expense of plurality and possibility. Turner’s work exposes these internal contradictions and is, therefore, essential reading for those interested in Stiegler’s concepts within the author’s broader context and his philosophical legacy moving forward.

References

Turner, Ben. *Returning to Judgment: Bernard Stiegler and Continental Political Theory*. New York: SUNY Press, 2023.

16 Turner, *Returning to Judgment*, 195.