BOOK REVIEW

Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology

Edited by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe & Ashley Woodward,
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How does one contribute to a process of transformation towards great social justice and what are the barriers that stand in the way? Some of the ideas presented in the book *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* help us to address two issues vital to the above: first, that of why it is that humans are sometimes so loathe to oppose the forces and factors that prevent them striving for greater social justice, and second, how one can envision alternative forms of leadership—ones that rest less upon the power or influence of specific individuals, but do take into account human (and non-human) interdependencies. The publication of this text is a step in the direction of making Simondon's work more readily available, and helps us to see how a different understanding of how human individuality is formed offers new insights into both these issues.

Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology claims to be the first book in English dedicated entirely to the work of this French philosopher. Born in 1924, Simondon was a doctoral student of both the philosopher and physician Canguilhem and the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. His work has been foundational for Deleuze, but also has links to Latour, Massumi and Stengers, amongst others. His major writings are only now becoming available in English, so it has taken a long time to acknowledge his role in influencing these other thinkers. As the introduction comments, two main themes emerge, ontology and technology, but our main interest is his ideas on human formation, and therefore their implications for change, development and education more generally.

Chapter One is a translation of a previously unpublished text of Simondon on "Technical Mentality" and is helpfully followed by a commentary consisting of a questioning of Brian Massumi by the editors. This highlights the key themes of *individuation*, *metastability*—the fragile, provisional equilibrium that is subject to constant perturbation (p. 30), and the idea of the *pre-individual*—that which is always in advance of the actual process of individuation and which enables the constant possibility of change and transformation (p. 32).

Chapter Three by Elizabeth Grosz offers an exploration of feminist reflections on Simondon's work and takes us further into the discussion of his concept of individuation which is so relevant to our wider debate. Simondon is interested in how pre-individual forces, not yet individuated, produce individuals of various kinds (p. 38). Such forces not only pre-date the individual, but constitute the potentialities each individual contains and that both sustain and transform it. So the individual is always more than itself, and has the potential to undergo further changes after it is constituted as such. What one is at any particular moment is only one manifestation of what one might be or become. "Being is at once pre-individual, individuating and individuated; it becomes something, something emerges or erupts, but it leaves in its context or milieu a residue or excess that is the future for further becomings" (p. 38).

This quote offers a critical insight into how Simondon's work coheres with the concern for threshold concepts which are essential to the search for growth and development through educational process. In our recent book, *Heterotopia: Alternative Pathways to Social Justice* (Caroline Baillie, Jens Kabo & John Reader, Zero Books, 2013) we employed the notion of threshold concepts to suggest that it is only when one is prepared to step out into the unknown, to enter "zones of entanglement" by "hanging out in the fog," that growth is likely to occur. Yet this itself presupposes the capacity of humans to change and be changed through such encounters with what is unfamiliar, hence the potential importance of Simondon's ideas on individuation and metastability. One needs to take these ideas further of course, but the notion of metastability, the potential of individuals to subvert and transcend their individuality at any particular moment, rather than to achieve or remain in a position of comfortable equilibrium, is surely vital to the process of transformation required by new pathways towards social justice.

Transduction is another term that Simondon uses to describe this dynamic, being "the process by which the various pre-individual forces move out of step with each other, generate a disparation, a problem, which individuation addresses through the creation or discovery of a process, event, dimension or object that enables a new order to emerge at another level" (p. 42). Although the conceptual language here is difficult, I believe it is also rich in meaning and possibility, and Grosz herself concludes that there is much here for feminism to draw upon as it struggles with the ideas of how identity is formed and re-formed.

Chapter Four engages in greater detail with Simondon's employment of the growth of crystals as a key exemplar of his notion of individuation. This is his main picture for an ontology of becoming, of metastability in action, and the simplest image of transduction. It begins with a very small seed, grows out in every direction within its pre-individual milieu, each already formed layer serving as the structural basis of the next molecular stratum (p. 59). There is a pluralism of phases brought about by the changes and out-of-phasesness that is the individuation process, but what emerges is always still in the process of developing and does not result in a stable or completed identity. At the heart of this are ideas of the fold (taken up by Deleuze¹), internal and external resonances, tensions and excess, each of which suggests that it is relation with that which is other that instigates and stimulates the process of change. As we described it in *Heterotopia* these are the liminal spaces that are entered when we venture into the cloud of unknowing or zones of indeterminacy. By entering into relation, one takes the chance of both being changed and changing the other.

Further chapters go on to talk about the concept of anxiety in Simondon's work (Chapter 5); his concept of aesthetics (Chapter 8); the links with Deleuze (Chapter 9); and the book concludes with a glossary of 50 key terms in his work that itself offers a comprehensive means of accessing his ideas (pp 203–231). It is in Chapter 5 that one encounters Simondon's understanding of the *transindividual* which brings into question how it is that individuals are part of a wider process of relationships, and this, in turn, allows us to see questions of politics and leadership in a different perspective. He does not hold to a notion of the psychological world as being autonomous, but rather proposes that there is a dialectical character to the process of psychological individuation, and indeed a mediation between the physical and the biological, between the world and the self, and this means a dialectic between exterior and interior that enables us to recognize the interconnected and collaborative character of human action (p. 80). It is through our relationships with others that we have most impact upon social and political life and these are mediated by emotion and affect which take place at the pre-individual level. Whilst one can recognize the importance of acknowledging this dimension of human activity, and the possibilities for change that

¹ See especially Deleuze's *Cinema 2*, Athlone Press, 1989, Chapter 4 on "the Crystals of Time."

it brings into the picture, it does perhaps run the risk of underestimating the role of reason in the process of entering the required zones of entanglement.

The dimension of this work that I find most perplexing is that of how one interprets the process of pre-individuation in terms of time. If it is the case, as Simondon appears to argue, that the pre-individual is always present and thus is subject to change because of its inherent metastability, then it would seem to presuppose that there is not a linear understanding of time where one moves smoothly from one state of being to another. That which apparently *is* has to continue to contain that which *is not*, but which *might be* at some point . . . almost as if some backtracking can occur which brings the past into the present in a new way. If humans are so like crystals, then is there really enough continuity of identity or personality to prevent constant disintegration of the individual? Does there not have to be enough stability to counter or contain the metastability, in order for there to be coherent or consistent activity? If all is change and becoming, could one even begin to conceptualize alternative pathways towards social justice? Perhaps this is where the model begins to reach its limits, and where later developments from biology and technology might add different dimensions to this conceptual framework.

However, this does not alter the fact that the journey throughout the book is one of discovery and no little challenge, so I would commend the book as a whole as a vital and valuable way into the thought of this recently recognised philosopher, and a source of ideas that complement and develop other explorations into the fields of education and transformation.

FURTHER READING

- Baillie, C., Kobo, J., & Reader, J. *Heterotopia: Alternative Pathways to Social Justice*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2013.
- Crockett, C. *Deleuze Beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity and Event*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Deleuze, G. *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. London, UK: Athlone Press, 1989.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Latour, B. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R., & Baillie, C. *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*. Boston, MA: Sense, 2010.
- Reader, J. *Blurred Encounters: A Reasoned Practice of Faith*. Vale of Glamorgan, Wales: Aureus, 2005.