

Jason Read: The Politics of Transindividuality

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If, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari famously argued, philosophy involves the creation of concepts, then Jason Read's new book is a superb illustration of philosophical practice. Although Read did not himself create the concept of *transindividuality*, he has probably done more than any other contemporary philosopher to develop this concept by exploring its history and emphasizing its applications—especially as an instantiation of what, following Louis Althusser, we could call a concept *for Marxism*. Indeed, Read's book is a venture into *Transmarxism*, that is, both a way of opening up Marxism in order to communicate with other philosophical and political traditions and also of summoning non-Marxist traditions to encounter the conceptual richness of Marxism at its critical best. Given the wide scope of Read's book, in a brief review it is probably wise to restrict our attention to the following: see how Read understands the concept of transindividuality, provide a sense of how he uses it to engage in close textual readings, and offer a critical assessment of how well he makes a case for its value.

First of all, then, what exactly does Read think is the importance of the concept of transindividuality? He proposes that it “has a retroactive function, making possible a rereading of other figures and concepts in the history of philosophy,” since “the divide between individualism and totality has become a persistent theme in interpretations of the history of philosophy”. The concept therefore allows one to investigate the history of philosophy “outside of the binary of individual versus society, liberating it from the persistence of dualism and division”. It also makes it possible to grasp the specific novelty of transindividuality in terms of its ontology, politics, and philosophy of society” (p. 17). Finally, the concept alters how we think of the very “practice of philosophy,” since it “crosses the domains of ontology, politics, and political economy, without necessarily reducing one to the other”.

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Indeed, Read's "central claim" in his book is that "the question of collectivity, of transindividuality, is not only simultaneously ontological, political and economic, encompassing the different senses in which things, or people, can be said to be individuated, but it is so in a manner that cannot be neatly, or hierarchically, organized" (p. 19). The concept of transindividuality, then, highlights a level of reality that exists prior to both individuals and collectivities and so rejects the mereological false alternative of part/whole; it recognizes an ontological "plane of consistency" (to use Deleuze and Guattari's formulation) out of which both parts and wholes arise, interact, collapse, and then are recomposed.

The very structure of Read's book exemplifies transindividuality: in a series of alternating chapters and excursuses, Read interweaves detailed discussions of a wide range of contemporary French and Italian writers who are not particularly well known by Anglophone philosophers and political theorists: Gilbert Simondon, Frédéric Lordon, Bernard Stiegler, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Yves Citton. In fact, Read has been one of the leading philosophers in the English-speaking world to introduce these figures to those who have not, or are unable, to read them in their original languages.

After a short introduction to the concept of transindividuality, in his first chapter Read engages in a "prehistory" that involves close readings of works by Spinoza (the *Ethics*), Hegel (the *Philosophy of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*), and Marx ("On the Jewish Question" and Volume One of *Capital*). He then offers an excursus on how the French philosopher Étienne Balibar has deployed the concept in his efforts to construct a new "philosophical anthropology" and to defend what he has called "equaliberty" in order to draw attention to the "insurrectionary side to political identity" that "overturns and displaces the various partial identities and collectivities, classes, nations, and races which are so many different naturalizations of hierarchy and inequality" (p. 96).

The key figure to which Read next turns is Gilbert Simondon, who is responsible for initially naming the concept of transindividuality in the context of a twofold philosophical reflection on the "relation of the individual to technology and of the individual to society" (p. 106). Read devotes his second substantial chapter to situating, or as Read writes, "individuating" Simondon's writings in relation to possible lines of interpretation and use, especially by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Muriel Combes, Paolo Virno, and Bernard Stiegler. He also stages a reengagement of Simondon with three precursors with respect to their treatment of substance and the affects (Spinoza), the "dialectic of intersubjectivity" (Hegel), and alienation and "living labor" (Marx). Read finds that Simondon's valuable analysis of the ontology of transindividuation nonetheless requires a practical "shift"—with a greater attention to politics and political economy. As he writes, "this shift will be both a displacement, a shift of an ontology onto the terrain of social reality, and a reorientation to the current conjuncture" (p. 142).

Read's second excursus takes up what he calls a "Spinozist Critique of Political Economy," and—guided by such eminent Spinoza scholars as Antonio Negri, Pierre Macherey, Alexandre Matheron, and Pascal Sévérac—he draws attention to how Spinoza himself understood the affects. But he also makes accessible to an Anglophone audience the fascinating work of Frédéric Lordon, who has

“supplement[ed] Marx’s theorization of the historical destruction and creation of different modes of production and their corresponding modes of subjection with Spinoza’s theory of desire” (p. 158). In Read’s view, Lordon has provided exciting new analyses of the ways in which capitalist institutions have composed and harnessed the affects in order more effectively to dominate and exploit both individuals and collectivities, especially “framed in terms of the shift between Fordism and post-Fordism” (p. 159).

In a third substantial chapter Read moves beyond Lordon’s analysis of the affective dimension of the economy and explores the “political economy of transindividuality” in the work of such writers as Bernard Stiegler and Paolo Virno, both of whom are indebted to Simondon in their explorations of the “hidden abode” of individuation. Read argues that Stiegler has transformed Simondon’s problematic in two respects: first of all, Stiegler “stresses the essentially temporal character of every transindividual individuation”; secondly, and more importantly, he breaks with Simondon’s “tentative identification of the pre-individual with nature and the transindividual with spirit, stressing that the basis of our individuation is not some putative nature, but an inheritance of texts, tools, and technology” (p. 170). In a critique of Marx, Stiegler focuses on consumption in a way that links him to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, insofar as he views “modern society [as] not an individualistic society, but a herd society” (p. 190).

But, as Read insists, “consumption is not the entirety of political economy” (p. 193). As a result, he turns to the work of Paolo Virno, who has renewed Marx’s concern with the “hidden abode” of production but has framed his analysis “less in terms of consumption, and the rise of a consumer society oriented towards its subjective formation through the cultural sphere, than in terms of a fundamental change in production” (p. 194), namely, from a Fordist to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation. Virno focuses on Marx’s suggestive remarks in the section of notebooks posthumously known as the *Grundrisse* that emphasized a historical shift in productive activity under capitalism toward machinofacture that constituted the “general intellect” as a “primary productive force” (p. 196). However, as Read points out, Virno has doubly deepened Marx’s perspective: “First, Virno argues that much of what Marx ... described has come to pass, knowledge has become a dominant productive force, transforming capitalism, but this has not led to an emancipatory reversal ... Second, what Marx failed to grasp, or predict, was the extent to which the general knowledge of society is manifest not just in machines, technology from the locomotive to the Internet, but also in living labour, in the diffused knowledge of workers that interact not just with technology but also with increasingly complex social relations” (p. 197). Finally, Read identifies a key point of dispute between Virno and Stiegler regarding the emancipatory potential to break with the capitalist mode of production: “In sharp contrast to Stiegler, who sees in the intersection between transindividual individuation and capital only the dissolution of any constitution of the collective and the individual, Virno sees the constitution of a new collectivity and new individuality, a social individual and multitude, in the contemporary process of production ...” (p. 214).

Read’s third excursus covers the writings of Maurizio Lazzarato, who has argued that there has been a “radical shift” in the “intersection between contemporary

capitalism and transindividuality ... from Marx's time" (p. 228). More importantly, he has offered "a way of tying together the threads of the political articulation of transindividuality and the economics of transindividuality through what he calls 'noopolitics', the politics that acts on imagination, habits, and ideas" (p. 228). In particular, Lazzarato has investigated the ways in which debt "produces subjectivity" above and beyond "creat[ing] revenue or reduc[ing] taxes". As Read continues: "The individual under debt is one whose actions, past, present, and future, are viewed through a lens shaped by debt, through the anxiety and fear of paying off one's debts in the future" (p. 239).

Chapter four continues Read's concern with the "politics and economics of transindividuality" by introducing Yves Citton, who has investigated how we might reimagine and bring about "a transformation of power, both political and economic" (p. 267). However, Read argues, despite their admirable focus on storytelling and narrative, Citton's writings lack an adequate account of "the economics of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, conceived in any narrative of crisis or economic transformation; it is framed entirely as a transformation of gestures" (p. 284).

In a brief conclusion, Read returns to the question of how taking seriously the concept of transindividuality enables us to reimagine the nature of philosophical practice in two respects. First of all, "transindividuality is a critical perspective on our impoverished notions of both collectivity and individuality, not in the sense that it simply opposes them in a sterile opposition of true to false, but in the sense that it comprehends the way in which images and ideas of collectivity and individuality emerge from transindividual relations (p. 286). Secondly, "transindividuality necessarily exceeds the bounds of philosophy proper, turning from speculative and ontological matter to one that is infused with politics, economics, and history" (p. 286).

Let consider, at last, how successfully Read has supported his contention that employing the concept of transindividuality enables us better not only to engage with the history of philosophy but also to reconfigure the practice of philosophy. Let us also identify a couple of the book's shortcomings.

Read's book is ambitiously conceived and densely composed and argued—but to good effect. Read excels at close readings of texts. Occasionally, one may feel lost in the thicket of chapters and excursions and lose sight of the book's larger aim. But this effect is subversively deliberate. If for Kant, say, the overriding philosophical problem was how to "Orient Oneself in Thinking," for Read the problem is how temporarily to "Disorient Oneself in Thinking"—the better later to reengage in a more critically informed, engaged, and emancipatory practice.

There is a drawback with his book, though, since Read engages primarily in a *descriptive* task: to identify the wide range of forms that individuals and collectivities can assume. As a result, what is implicit but largely remains missing from the book is an equally important *prescriptive* or *normative* task: to inquire into which forms of individuality and collectivity are better or worse for human flourishing? Although Read clearly favors a revolutionary transformation when "the individuation of the collective is no longer reproductive of the social order" (p.

285), he could pay more attention to how we might imagine the process of transindividuation in a post-capitalist society.

For example, in Volume One of *Capital*, as Read rightly observes (pp. 74–79; pp. 211–213), Marx calls into question the ways in which capitalism appropriates the cooperation of workers in order better to extract surplus value from their labor. But in *Capital* Marx also imagines the possibility of a society of “freely associated” producers who would cooperate in ways to enhance their own lives and serve their own purposes, not the continued accumulation of capital. Arguably, such forms of communist transindividuality would morally surpass any exploitative forms that have arisen in the history of capitalist forms of transindividuality. In his discussion of Virno, Read does touch briefly on the possibility of new types of communication that could form the basis of political and economic organization (pp. 223–226), but this would seem to be a fruitful direction for further philosophical reflection on, and debate over, the politics of transindividuality.

Also, on several occasions in his book Read discusses Spinoza’s relation to Marx in terms of their common ontological commitment to the view that a human being is neither an “isolated individual” nor a “kingdom within a kingdom” but is always already irreducibly a “part of nature”. But he does not pay sufficient attention to processes of transindividuality that cross the human/nonhuman divide. It is true that Read acknowledges Simondon’s conception of pre-individuals regarding the biological “individuation of living species and organisms” (p. 108). Yet he fails to address the biological limits of transindividuality with regard to what classical Marxists have called *basic needs*—however much these needs turn out to be mediated socially as individual and collective desires and interests. In the last instance, all conceivable forms of transindividuality require food, water, shelter, etc., in order to insure their continued existence. Indeed, this is why a normative commitment to what we could call *Deep Green Marxism* seems more urgent than ever if humanity is to fashion and embrace new forms of human/nonhuman identification and association that no longer imperil the survival of humanity and other species on Earth but instead promote the conditions necessary for their flourishing.