

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

05 November 2018

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Baldwin, Andrew (2019) 'Thinking with Protevi : difference, the present, and the political.', *Political geography*, 70 . pp. 137-139.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.02.002>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

© 2019 This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Additional information:

## Use policy

---

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

John Protevi's "Geographical aspects of current theories of human evolution" theorises state formation from a decidedly geohistorical perspective, counter-posed to platonism, constructivism and evolutionism. Routed through a political ontology of war and violence, his argument, as I understand it, undertakes to displace the 'deep roots' theory of war in which war is said to be an artefact of our primate inheritance and thus an immutable aspect of human sociality. This is the view that the human disposition for war is an evolved characteristic to which Protevi's illuminating paper provides a contrasting account. Through a non-teleological reading of warfare and violence derived from "live debates" in cultural anthropology, evolutionary psychology, and political theory (specifically that of James C. Scott), Protevi reconceptualises the founding violence of state formation as geohistorically contingent, as opposed to a trait inherent to human being.

By scrambling the terms on which the geographical dimensions of the political can be thought, Protevi's thesis puts the challenge to political geography. Whereas much current political geography orbits around more conventional political categories like sovereignty, citizenship, territory, and borders, Protevi throws a different suite of concepts into the mix: human self-domestication, berserker rage, chimpoctrism, and reduced dimensionality. But more than a sidelong challenge to political geographers, his paper puts the immutability theory of human nature under the microscope. With reference to Sylvia Wynter's (2001) "sociogenic principle" (i.e., embodied feeling as the conjugation of social patterning and neurochemistry), he argues that humans evolved for "greater plasticity" such that all of human being is available to "prosocialization processes." His point being that humans are predisposed to radical neuro-chemical reconfiguration, an insight which suggests that the full range of human prosocial experience is yet to be fully disclosed.

There is much about Protevi's argument that merits consideration. His treatment of the Human Self-Domestication thesis (i.e. sanctions against reactive aggression), for example, offers an important ontological basis for thinking species emergence, especially where this concerns the neurological composition of proto-humans. Consistent with much of Protevi's work on the imbrications of the somatic and cognitive, his treatment of HSD denaturalises human neural-cognition, furnishing the basis for thinking the neurological as simultaneously political, contingent, emergent and thus mutable. So even while we inhabit a world-geohistorical moment which promotes reactive aggression – and here I have mind neoliberalism as the antisocial rationality governed according to principles of atomisation, social immunity, blame, and intersubjective competition – Protevi's claim that the neurological is political allows us to imagine the possibility of reactivating human prosocial neural dispositions. The biopolitical dimensions of this are of course both enabling *and* worthy of our critical attention. Enabling because incentivising prosociality promises to subdue the reactive aggressions of those who promote blame and antagonism as social goods. Yet it is also worthy of our critical attention insofar as the political right nowadays characterises 'progressives' 'liberals' and 'social democrats' as precisely reactive aggressive and thus a threat to its version of prosocial life. In the wrong hands, HSD theory could end up authorising, indeed, naturalising fascist desire. Protevi's reading of the neural as political and thus mutable is therefore extremely important because it allows us to reconceptualize the political as not only contestation or disagreement but as anything that might inaugurate a new political physiology. Remaining attentive to the mechanisms by and through which fascism is becoming newly embodied and maintained in political affects of rage, shame, indifference, resentment, and so forth is therefore of utmost importance to any prosocial political diagnosis of the present. Similarly, for those seeking to respond to our contemporary geohistorical crisis by bringing into being a new Earth, the people to come, or a new human, Protevi's claim that the neural is political means, in his case, doubling down on "sympathetic care and fair cooperation" as a neural-political resource for prosocial life. Our present conjuncture may not necessarily be headed towards some dreaded Malthusian confrontation with scarcity. If human being is a virtual multiplicity, then we are in fact equipped to actualise our way out of the present by recomposing our political physiologies. These are the grounds of and for optimism.

The second half of Protevi's paper is also worthy of our consideration. I am especially drawn to his insight that the economies of violence in the form of primitive accumulation and taxation depend on

the presence of non-state peasants and barbarians who are drawn into necessary conflict with the state even while evading its cadastral logic. His argument here seems to imply a refusal of sovereign absolutism, and thus a refusal that the barbarians can be written off as merely ahistorical figures cast out from politics and law. As necessary supplements to state formation, and thus as bona fide political agents, the 'barbarians', which, from the vantage of the present 'European' state would include insurgent Indigeneities, migrants/asylum seekers, Black Lives Matter, are by this reasoning inherent to political transformation. It is not hard to imagine then how the affective dispositions of these "minor" traditions are rapidly reshaping the neural-political landscapes from which sympathetic care and fair cooperation actualise.

Among these promising elements, though, the paper raises a series of ontological tensions arise that warrant further reflection. These are to do with race, the present, and the political.

## **Difference**

The first of these tensions concerns the recurring absence of race in theories of state formation. Where difference *is* present in Protevi's analysis, it relates to pre-state warfare and state-formation. The paper refers, for example, to the notion of "eco-social difference" by which Protevi means not male vs female bonding, chimps and bonobos respectively, but "nomadic egalitarian foragers versus hierarchical sedentary horticulturalists and agriculturalists (bands vs chiefdoms and states)." The former as I understand the argument comes into being through Human self-domestication – the in-group polices against reactive aggression, and is positively motivated to pursue joy-enhancing behaviours. The claim here is that intergroup war doesn't pay for nomadic egalitarian foragers as "there's too much to lose and too little to gain." (p.x) Whereas the latter – sedentary agriculturalists – come into being through economies of violence, stratification, taxation, and capture. This eco-social difference it would seem is a fully expressed geohistorical difference which Protevi positions as fundamental to a geohistorical explanation of state-formation.

However, by explaining state formation qua eco-social difference, I wonder whether Protevi's geohistorical method repeats the long-standing erasure of "race" from Western theories of state-formation and geopolitics (Shilliam, 2008). Consider, for example, the British international relations theorist Robbie Shilliam whose reading of the Haitian revolution demands that race be conceptualised as central to nineteenth century international world order, foreign policy, and the development/security nexus. Set against the neo-Weberian notion that state development follows an instrumental logic set down by European states, and against the historical materialist claim that the Haitian revolution was driven by the dialectic of labour and capital, Shilliam argues that Haitian state formation was driven centrally by the master/slave dialectic itself underpinned by the politics of race. Race matters to theories of state formation, such that if we follow Shilliam all the way, its neglect has immediate consequences for Protevi's argument about human neural plasticity. In a mesmerizing companion essay on the Haitian revolution, Shilliam (2017) places the midnight voodoo groundings of the enslaved at the spiritual core of the revolution. This is a retelling of the revolution in which the impetus for justice is summoned from the uncolonised spiritual hinterland in the form of the Iwa, the spiritual agents who reside in the cosmic waters of Gine. So yes, Haiti is called into being through revolutionary warfare, but a warfare whose origins are cosmic. This is a cosmic racial reading of state formation which runs counter to the earth-war nexus at the core of Protevi's argument, and yet it seems to me that cosmology is an indispensable element in prosociality and thus the neural political structure of violence. We risk a partial account of political physiology when Haiti left is left out of the mix.

## **The present**

A second tension, related to the first, concerns the present we are presumed to occupy when engaging with the argument. Methodologically, the paper reaches into the paleoanthropological and geological

archives. I found this aspect of the paper somewhat unsettling without a clear sense as to why these archives ought to form the epistemological ground for the claim to human plasticity. The paper is written in the present and yet the present remains mostly occluded from the argument. Consequently, it provokes me to ask a number of questions: As participants in the argument, what time are we being asked to occupy when engaging with it? Not *where* is the argument, but *when* is the argument? Or to borrow from Nigel Clark (2018), when am I in relation to the argument? For my part, I read the paper from the vantage of a global present thoroughly marked by an encompassing even if differentiated violence – for sure the Anthropocene, but also nuclear war, racism, fascistic capitalism, of governing through dread. But this present moment of violence seems peripheral to the argument even while we know the present is impossible to escape analytically. We are trapped inside it, such that our readings of the world beyond the present (into the primordial or the future) are themselves only ever present. What then is the ontological status of the present in the argument? Does this even matter and if so how? What might it mean to read the palaeontology of violence from the vantage of a violent present? And here let me pick up on a line in which Protevi refers to the “highly contentious world of palaeontology”. By this I assume he means that palaeontology offers a theory of the human forged from fragments of the past: a bone here, a skull there, or a footprint in the mud. And in this respect I am drawn to ask a final question in relation to the present: what does it mean for us now in the present to reflect on early human prosociality in a way that passes through the “contentious world of palaeontology” which itself has to be understood as a distinctively humanist science whose origins are ostensibly early nineteenth-century Europe?

When I read this paper, and when I consider that it was delivered as a *Political Geography* keynote lecture at the AAG conference in New Orleans, I also can't help wonder whose present the argument is intended to inform. What specific formations of solidaristic political physiology does he wish to bring into effect and in relation to what present? One has to work very hard not appreciate how the political context of the Mississippi Delta is a heady mixture of Anthropocenic violence, geological white supremacy, the long wake of plantation slavery, and Indigenous displacement. Protevi, of course, knows this. His rich and rewarding accounts of political affect in relation to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans are more than sensitive to these interrelated violences (Protevi, 2008). Yet somehow the Anthropocene present of coastal Louisiana seems peripheral to the earth-war nexus that he works up through his engagement with palaeontology. What difference would it make to his geohistorical theory of plasticity if thought through the register of what Christina Sharpe (2017) calls “wake work” rather than that of the paleo. What political physiology of “sympathetic care and fair cooperation”?

### **The political**

And finally as is a recurring theme in Protevi's expansive political philosophy, this paper returns us once again to the relationship between nature and the political. What are we to make of the useful analytical distinction between these two concepts that one finds in, say, historical materialism, if we embrace the geohistorical method? On the one hand, it seems as though Protevi's analysis leaves no room for such a distinction - welcome news to those for whom the distinction is a destructive nightmare at the heart of the intersecting crises of capitalism and humanism. But to cleave these categories enables a form of analysis in which nature can be understood as the grounds for the political, a key intellectual resource for diagnosing the ever-shifting terrains of power.

CLARK, N. 2018. The politics of strata. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34, 211-231.

PROTEVI, J. 2008. *Political affect: connecting the social and the somatic*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

SHARPE, C. 2017. *In the wake: on blackness and being*, Durham, Duke University Press.

- SHILLIAM, R. 2008. What the Haitian Revolution Might Tell Us about Development, Security, and the Politics of Race. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50, 778-808.
- SHILLIAM, R. 2017. Race and revolution at Bwa Kayiman Millennium: *Journal of International Studies*, 45, 269-292.
- WYNTER, S. 2001. Towards the sociogenic principle: Fanon, identity and the puzzle of conscious experience, and what it is like to be "black". In: DURÁN-COGAN, M. F. & GÓMEZ-MORIANA, A. (eds.) *National identity and sociopolitical changes in Latin America*. London and New York: Routledge