The Politics of Traumatic Temporality


Within Continental political philosophy, from Arendt’s Heideggerianism to Kristevaan aesthetics, there is a strain of thinking that diagnoses our own cultural predicament around problematics of time and history, and most significantly, with reference to problems of memory and forgetting in late modern civil society. This problematic, though diagnosed in the terms of multiple discourses, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, cultural studies, post-Holocaust studies, and discourses on the politics of difference, can be briefly summed up by Derrida’s claim at the start of *Specters of Marx* that social and political philosophy today must concern itself with the articulation of “a politics of memory, inheritance, and generation.”¹ The significance of Tina Chanter’s new book, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger,*² should be situated here. *Time, Death, and the Feminine* stresses the importance of a philosophical interrogation of time for understanding Levinas’ relationship to Heidegger, Levinas’ and Heidegger’s relationships to feminist, critical race, and political theory, and the importance of a contemporary reflection on time and history for thinking the relationship between democracy and difference. Further, Chanter provocatively situates her own practice of reading and writing within an inherited responsibility to the past.

Chanter’s work has always insisted on the laborious reading of history and philosophy that feminist, critical race, and political theories must confront, as well as—against certain strains in philosophy that would render philosophy distinct from the social and the political—the importance of the historical context of philosophical thought. Against those who abandon philosophy and history in political analysis—in both its implications and ground—and those who maintain that philosophy is apolitical, Chanter treads an indispensable, though often sacrificed, border. Her work on Irigaray, Kristeva, Kofman, Levinas, Derrida, Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan (among others) never fails to question the rigorous ground from which feminist theory and political analysis must arise. Chanter’s work is, moreover, exemplary in her willingness to confront the difficulty of figuring what it means to be a reader of philosophy and what it means to inherit a responsibility to the past in one’s own thinking. Her latest book, *Time, Death, and the
Feminine, is no exception to her quite relentless task of binding philosophy, history, and politics and is indispensable reading for those of us concerned with the destiny of Continental philosophy in political discourses.

_Time, Death, and the Feminine_ traces the effect of Heidegger’s critique of the traditional concept of time in the work of Levinas, and further interrogates the role of sexual difference in Levinas’ reading of Heidegger and reconceptualization of time through the ethical relation. Heidegger criticizes the history of Western metaphysics according to its privileging of the now or of the present. He replaces the metaphysics of presence with an ecstatic temporality of past, present, and future based on Dasein’s finitude as influencing the existential experience of time. In ecstatic temporality, the future is privileged, but not at the expense of the other temporal modalities that are co-extensive and equi-primordial. Rather, the dimension of the future highlights the interworkings and complexity of a more originary temporality. Levinas finds Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of presence to be insightful, but ultimately faults him for falling into the same kind of privileging as has happened within the history of metaphysics. For Levinas, Heidegger’s privileging of death as the ultimate limit that gives meaning to my life in resoluteness returns him to a privileging of the same. Levinas insists against Heidegger that it is not my own death that gives meaning and individuates, but is rather the death of the other.

In chapter one, Chanter tracks the fate of sexual difference in the relationships among Heidegger’s ontological difference, Levinas’ rethinking of existence and ethics, and the ambiguity of the concepts of time that inhabit the relationship between Heidegger and Levinas. She demonstrates the centrality of the concept of sexual difference in Levinas’ reworking of Heideggerian temporality. The centrality of sexual difference is constant throughout _Time, Death, and the Feminine_ insofar as part of the task of this text is to argue that sexual difference is structurally resonant in Levinasian ethics. However, Chanter never abandons Levinas even in her most skeptical of moments. Rather, she moves beyond any naïve positionality of oneself as ‘for’ or ‘against’ Levinas and insists that Levinas’ relationship to feminism must remain problematic, but must nevertheless remain. Nevertheless, though the title of Chanter’s text promises to focus on concepts of time and sexual difference, Chanter does not dispense with the equally important dimension of materiality in Levinasian temporality and its relationship to Heideggerian ontology and the critique of metaphysical presence, which is the focus