# *Towards an Improper Politics,* by Mark Devenney, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 175pp, ISBN 9781474454032, £75.00 (hardback).

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The differential distributions of precarity and equality have come to the forefront of our news cycles and our lives, as well as the transnational systems that connect us through borders. The responsibility and response-ability of our political systems have been questioned over and over, and critical political thought has a wealth of grist for its theoretical mill. As a critical theory of democracy and transnational populism, *Towards an Improper Politics* presents a response to two key problems of critical thought and practice. Devenney argues that post-foundationalist theories have been (incorrectly) accused of undermining a politics committed to material equality. In doing so, they take for granted existing forms of property, without viewing it as an area for intervention and rearticulation of life chances. The second problem Devenney challenges is the propensity for left politics to invoke the 'proper' too quickly – claiming an a-priori ontological justification drawn from philosophies of history or ethics.

To address these problems, Devenney makes as his central aim the thinking of the improper, which is given other faces in the course of the book; difference, the real, the 'other', antagonism... The improper, for Devenney, is what disturbs and simultaneously makes coherent the proper, and he argues improper thought is a vital component of democratic politics. Taking a definition from its Classical Greek roots, '*demos*' meaning 'of the people' and '*kratos*' meaning 'the power to act in unison' (p.111), Devenney conceptualises a Democratic ideal that may be unfamiliar to some, one where the key polity characteristic is a commitment to the material equality of all, rather than anything to do with

voting rights. The critique of inequality in contemporary so-called democracies is the animating force behind Devenney's arguments.

*Towards an Improper Politics* collates ideas from several other of Devenney's works, which are here fully developed. There is also much in *Improper Politics* which is new, such as an equivalence drawn between hegemony, the proper and property relations and an innovative politics characterised by its outside nature, its *différance* (Derrida 1997). Devenney sets out his argument in six chapters, each introduced with a short story of political action, using narrative to show politics at play and providing a much needed grounding for Devenney's abstract conceptual work. Rather than establishing separate concepts, each chapter builds upon what came before in a manner which occasionally feels repetitive but nevertheless reaches a well-reasoned and persuasive peak in chapter five before turning to practical implications.

In chapter one, *Property, Propriety and the Limits of the Proper,* Devenney sets out to establish the antagonist for the conceptual assault that the rest of the book will mount. Beginning with an account of post-cold war establishment of legally enforceable global systems of property, the bulk of the chapter engages with Laclau and Mouffe's post-foundationalist rejection of Marxist ontology which assumed all political antagonisms are explicable in terms of ownership (1985: ch1). By avoiding property in favour of logics of identification, Devenney argues Laclau and Mouffe miss a more nuanced and non-foundationalist critique of the social formation of property, hinted at within Marx, which Devenney thinks through in considerable detail within the chapter. Using deft linguistic acrobatics which may prove troublesome for some readers, Devenney argues property is the key form taken by inequality, orchestrated by hegemonic regimes of 'proprietary orders' (p. 20), which determine both property relations, and 'propriety' or the state of being proper. This linking of property and propriety within the hegemonic proprietary order is a repeating motif that serves as the backdrop for the rest of the book.

The counteraction to such a regime is outlined in chapter two, *Theorising the Improper.* Devenney's simplest explanation of improper politics is that it exists outside and antagonises the proper and the proprietary order. The bulk of the chapter addresses the theory and ontologies of his radical and agonistic democratic theorist contemporaries; Devenney accuses them of taking for granted an ontological assumption of the desire for answers, to return to a theoretical 'centre' which neutralises radical potential. For example, Mouffe (2013) asserted Occupy failed because it did not articulate an alternative or counter-hegemonic political project. Against that, Devenney argues that was never the aim, and that creating a new outside space and praxis is itself a worthy goal. Circling back to property, Devenney borrows from Agamben in theorising a usage of the word which renders it neither as property nor indeed as object but inappropriable (p.60). This is not a renouncing, a lack or an opposition, but a deactivation which exceeds utilitarianism (Agamben 2015:80-90) and enacts something beyond the limits of propriety, outside; improper. Whether or not thinking improperly is truly outside a political system or merely the setup to another counterhegemony is never quite articulated by Devenney, nor how improper politics can be 'outside' the hegemonic struggle whilst still

engaging with it (p.64). My instinct is that this is suspect – if an improper politics was realised and successful, would it become the norm and therefore integrated or transformed into the proper? Devenney's theory could be taken further here.

In chapter three, *The Politics of a Brick*, the reader is taken on a detour from the theoretical argument to consider instead the practical outworkings of an improper politics in relation to Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Whilst Butler rejected the notion of the proper object (1994), using performativity to question the object nature of the self/body and the discursive power of popular sovereignty, Devenney critiques Butler for failing to extend performativity into the realm of property (p.77). This section serves to introduce some of the pivotal concepts for chapter five, where Devenney delivers his central thesis. The chapter itself is however still interesting especially for those concerned with protest and assembly regarding performative improper politics and the articulation of new spaces for the popular will (p.79).

Chapter four, *The Politics of Equivalence,* returns temporarily to Laclau and Mouffe's post-foundationalist deconstruction of Marxist economics, offering a critical intervention for contemporary readings and focusing particularly on logics of financial and political equivalence. The key contribution of this chapter to Devenney's counter-hegemonic politics is his observation that the empty signifier of gold cannot determine value (and therefore equivalential relations) unless backed by a hegemonic power (p. 92). In the absence of such a universal equivalent, hegemony is itself secured through other forms of equivalence unrelated to the popular or common will, e.g. the monetisation of social relations and international accounting standardisation. For Devenney, unless Left theory takes account of these alternative articulations of value, it cannot adequately address and oppose the inequalities inherent in property and propriety.

The core thrust of Devenney's rhetorical argument is laid out in chapter five, *Democratic Politics as Improper*, outlining his radical and somewhat idealised democracy which is distinct from most other democratic theorists (e.g. Connolly, Wolin, Laclau, Mouffe, even Butler) by being intrinsically concerned with material equality. He demonstrates that the material (property) and immaterial (propriety) are in dynamic relation and inseparable from each other, and must be considered so when exploring notions of democratic relations. Taking Solon and the Athenian model as his foundation, Devenney explores extending the 'demos' to its logical conclusion of *all* people (including for example migrants, teenagers, prisoners) with no borders or limits, and concludes that boundaries between in and out, citizen and non-citizen are continually contested. Devenney demonstrates that such contested boundaries make it difficult for democratic politics to enact equality as there is always an excess which surpasses the set limits, and therefore democratic theorists often end up endorsing undemocratic power to limit and order the demos. For Devenney, much of contemporary so-called democratic politics undermines the democratic ideal in this way – political parties seek submission to the party line to order the demos, and the state exists on the presupposition of social distinctions within private property relations. Succinctly, "representative democracies separate the abstractly equal political

community, and the private community of economic interest in civil society, where inequality reigns" (p.125). Democratic regimes are thus another proprietary order, policing the 'proper'. Devenney echoes Ranciere (2007:37), in arguing a democratic politics truly concerned with equality would be improper from the point of view of the established order. Rather than an agonistic or deliberative democracy which acts from within the dominant order, Devenney argues improper democratic politics is a method of challenging orders and is therefore *antagonistic* (p.114).

Following chapter five's evisceration of contemporary representative democracy, the question for the reader remains whether Devenney's egalitarian democracy is realisable, or merely an impossible ideal. It is this question which Devenney attempts to answer in chapter six, *Transnational Populist Politics.* He rounds off his argument by returning again to the question of the demos and bringing in salient points from chapter four concerning equivalence. Devenney engages with Laclau's exploration of the tension of universality within populism and the claim that democracy is predicated on the constitution of a democratic people (2005:170). He concludes that the logics of democracy stretch populism to its limit, and that democratic populist politics are incompatible with national logics such as borders (p. 151). As a way of circumventing the problem of political pluralism that allows successive governments to undo all the policies of their predecessors, Devenney suggests a form of redistributed sovereignty away from the nation state structure to a diffuse form where resistance may take place anywhere. Finally, he closes with a call to remake global finance systems, recognising it as the mutually constitutive 'other face' of neoliberal sovereign political power. Despite never quite delivering the decisive final blow one might wish to see in a last chapter (that rhetorical force having been focused more within chapter five), Devenney's concluding chapter offers a welcome turn towards the practical implications of his theory.

This review has been by necessity only a brief reconstruction, but overall *Towards a Democratic Politics* achieves its stated goals of illuminating the currently obscured role of property relations in theories of the political, and effectively cautioning any invocation of 'proper' a-priori ethical justifications by the left. It also opens up new spaces for theoretical and empirical research, for example how antagonistic improper politics might interact with the post-politics of a state which has fallen into political consensus (Ranciere 2004), or how improper politics avoids capture and integration within the proprietary order.

As a treatise for political philosophers and theorists, this book is both timely and deft, however as a handbook for the practical proponent of improper politics it may be too obtuse. Like many classic works of political theory, it demands a high level of theoretical and abstract knowledge with many technical terms of political theory used without explanation (signification, essence, the distinguishing between politics and the Political), referring to a broad range of theorists without contextualising these works or ideas, as well as occasionally inaccessible language including complex vocabulary and sentence structures that may frustrate some readers. It is therefore the task of Devenney's audience to turn this theoretical work into practical forms of resistance accessible to the demos.

For those with a thorough grounding in left political theory, *Towards an Improper Politics* provides a thorough, detailed and persuasive argument. Devenney demonstrates a mastery in the field of high radical democratic theory, as well as contemporary political left critique, and populist politics from a decolonial lens, and this book will be of interest to any with an academic interest or expertise in those areas. Devenney's expertise, creativity and theoretical innovation are undeniable.

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