

---

# Critical Institutions: Alternative Modes of Institutionalisation in Derrida's Engagements

*Cillian Ó Fathaigh*

---

## **Abstract**

In this article, I consider the role of institutions in Jacques Derrida's political engagement. In spite of Derrida's significant involvement with political causes throughout his life, his engagements have received little sustained attention, and this is particularly true of his work with institutions. I turn to two such cases, the *Collège international de philosophie* and the *Parlement international des écrivains* and argue that these represent an alternative mode of institutionalisation. These institutions seek to destabilise other institutions as well as themselves. Looking closely at the institutions that Derrida founded, we see three common characteristics emerge. These institutions are anti-hegemonic, self-reflexive and international. I then connect these to Derrida's thought, offering a reading of the undecidable, which brings forth the importance of conventions in the decision. Finally, I demonstrate that the three shared characteristics of Derrida's institutions form part of an effort to open up space for the possibility of alterity. Through this, and beyond a distinction between theory/practice, we come to see Derrida's institutional engagements as an active form of critique, both of other institutions and themselves.

*Derrida Today* 14.2 (2021): 169–185

DOI: 10.3366/drt.2021.0264

© Cillian Ó Fathaigh. The online version of this article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited.

[www.eupublishing.com/drt](http://www.eupublishing.com/drt)

**Keywords:** Institutions, Engagements, Politics, Conventions, Critique, Derrida.

\*

From South African apartheid to educational reforms, from the *sans papiers* to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, by any account Jacques Derrida was a highly engaged intellectual.<sup>1</sup> Though these interventions have often been mentioned, usually as a brief coda or a passing footnote, they have received little sustained attention.<sup>2</sup> Attending to them, however, can lead to some curious results; curious not just for our understanding of Derrida biographically, but also for a more thorough understanding of his philosophical work. In this article, I want to pursue one of these results: Derrida's frequent involvement with institutions. Indeed, Derrida has rarely been considered as a thinker of institutions, often presented instead as someone who stands outside them, critiquing them. Yet even a superficial glance over his political engagement points to a remarkably consistent participation in institutions: this includes working within pre-established institutions, as well as founding new ones. Here, I want to look at two such examples, the *Collège international de philosophie* and the *Parlement international des écrivains*. In focusing on these, I will bring out a set of three common characteristics—anti-hegemonic, self-reflexive and international—and argue that these attributes are crucial in destabilising other institutions, as well as themselves. Through this, we come to see a consistent effort in Derrida's work to develop alternative and more just forms of institutions.

### **Institutional Engagements**

The question of Derrida's relation to institutions is not a new one. Indeed, throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, Derrida's work was more explicitly placed in dialogue with institutions. A major line of argument here is that deconstruction is a critique of institutions. Drucilla Cornell's excellent *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992, 174–75) describes Derrida's "ideological" critique' as a way of demonstrating the irreducibility and 'excess' of justice to any institution or system of positive law. Similarly, Richard Beardsworth has understood deconstruction as a 'radical "critique" of *institutions*', demonstrating that no institution can fully justify its own foundation, and offering 'an account of why all political projects fail' (Beardsworth 1996, 19). In this sense, Derrida's work serves as an important and powerful resource

for demonstrating the limits and violence of institutions and their foundation. Yet though this captures Derrida's critique of institutions, it says nothing about their creation. How can we square this with Derrida's frequent founding of and collaboration with institutions? To begin addressing this dimension, we can find a fruitful starting point in an important essay by Samuel Weber, 'Ambivalence: The Humanities and the Study of Literature'.<sup>3</sup> Here, Weber also brings out the potential for the critique of institutions within a deconstructive framework, showing the 'ambivalent demarcations' that structure an institution's relation to its outside. Yet, towards the end of this essay, Weber also speaks of the 'trace of *another* form of institution' (Weber 1985, 23). Though Weber does not fully expand on this remarkable suggestion, he does perceptively tie it to one of Derrida's institutions, the *Collège international de philosophie*. Less than two years after its foundation, Weber proposes that the *Collège* may contain the possibility of 'alternative forms of institutionalization' (Ibid., 24). In this article, then, I want to pursue this suggestion and through Derrida's institutions gain a more comprehensive idea of what these 'alternative forms of institutionalization' might entail.

To understand why Weber connects this possibility to the *Collège*, it is important to fully understand one of Derrida's most longstanding areas of engagement: education. Since at least 1974, and the founding of *GREPH*, Derrida was consistently involved with educational institutions. This ranged from public criticism of university appointments—for example the appointment of the right-wing philosopher Pierre Boutang to a chair at the Sorbonne—to participation in a governmental committee on educational reforms, eventually published as the Bouveresse-Derrida report in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Of all his political activities, this is perhaps his most well-known; in part because it has influenced some excellent work by other academics on the university,<sup>5</sup> but also because much of this material was published in *Du droit à la philosophie* in 1990.<sup>6</sup> This has helped provide a foundation from which one can properly address his participation in these national discussions. The rigorous work of Vivienne Orchard, for instance, has shown how Derrida's thought in the 1970s was deeply embedded in contemporary political debates, including adopting the rhetoric of modernisation and democratisation of the 1975 Haby reforms (Orchard 2011, 51). Similarly, Simon Morgan Wortham (2006) has brought out the important place of the *Collège international de philosophie* within Derrida's work and its relevance for contemporary discussions of the university. Yet there is still work to be done to fully

appreciate Derrida's engagements around education, not least on the *Collège's* position as an institution. Established in 1983, the *Collège* was an important collaboration between multiple philosophers, but was founded by Derrida, François Chatelet, Dominique Lecourt, and Jean-Pierre Faye.<sup>7</sup> There is much that can be said about the *Collège*, an institution that still makes an important contribution to French intellectual life today, but here I want to focus on three characteristics that Derrida's own accounts of the *Collège* privilege. These are its relation to other institutions and its disruption of consensus (what I label the anti-hegemonic); the putting into question of its own foundations (self-reflexive); and, its effort to challenge the restrictions of the national (international).

When founding an institution, attributing it a unique purpose is usually 'the done thing'. And so Derrida's insistence from the outset that the *Collège* be placed in direct relation and collaboration with other institutions seems somewhat odd. Indeed, it is here we can begin to see the relational dimension of this institution. The *Collège* was never meant to be a stand-alone tower in the intellectual landscape, but rather a bridge connecting itself to already established institutions. In an interview in *Libération*, to mark the founding of the *Collège*, Derrida foregrounds this, describing the *Collège* as a 'supplementary (*supplémentaire*) instrument at the disposition of other institutions' (Derrida 1983, 15). Ten years later, in a radio interview, Derrida insisted on this relational dimension. He explained that the *Collège* had a non-combative approach to other institutions, instead seeking to work 'as much as possible in collaboration with these institutions' (Derrida 1993, 21:35).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, almost another decade after that, in describing the *Collège* in a talk at Cerisy-la-Salle, we find Derrida once again insisting on this aspect of the institution. The *Collège* was not designed to 'wage war against, to counter or set itself against [...] the currents which dominate the state institutions of research or teaching; but rather to balance them or freely question the hegemony, to open them up and occupy the margins' (Derrida 2005a, 253). Across twenty years, this was for Derrida a defining feature of the *Collège*: that it was an institution not in conflict with other institutions, but in dialogue with them.

However, the reference we see above to questioning the 'hegemony' and opening the margins is an important one and can help us better determine this relationship. If the connection that Derrida envisions between the *Collège* and these other institutions is not a combative one, it is not a cosy one either: instead, the *Collège's* role is to challenge and disrupt an institutional consensus. This is apparent in the choice

of subjects that were privileged there. Marking the tenth anniversary, Derrida described ‘the novelty of problematics’ as ‘our regulating principle’ (Derrida 1993, 21:40). And in 2002, he emphasised once again that ‘the research of these new objects, themes, and fields [...] was our main imperative, our constant, active and overriding concern’ (Derrida 2005a, 253). This commitment to developing new problematics is a core motivation behind this institution. It also represents one of the most effective methods of challenging institutional consensus, by providing a space for objects of study that might otherwise be neglected or pushed to the margins.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that rather than understanding the *Collège* as purely relational, we should instead understand the *Collège* as placing itself in relation to other institutions precisely to challenge the intellectual hierarchies that these institutions have established. As we will see, this anti-hegemonic element is also a feature of Derrida’s work in the *Parlement international des écrivains*.

Of course, simply because an institution seeks to be anti-hegemonic does not mean that it cannot itself become hegemonic. And Derrida seems quite aware of this problem. His answer comes in the second characteristic shared by his institutional engagements: self-reflexivity. Derrida did not want the *Collège* to only respond to other institutions, but to also be in constant response to itself. In fact, the very status of the *Collège* is presented as one of its central political themes: ‘the political reflection of the *Collège* concerns its own status’ (Derrida 1993, 22:10). To achieve this, the *Collège* itself has a deliberately unstable structure, working ‘against any definitive stability’ (Ibid., 21:33). This involves concrete institutional structures, such as having no permanent positions available, having a maximum term of four years for membership, as well as being originally founded without a president.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, though we have seen that the *Collège* is committed to an openness to new problems, the original conception had a strong critical focus on the traditional concepts that would stabilise an educational institution, emphasising that ‘The concept of “critique”, of “legitimation” [...] may in turn, like that of the institution and several others, call for new elucidations’ (Derrida 1983, 15). Alongside a deliberately provisional institutional structure, therefore, the ideas that were privileged at the *Collège* are those which ensure that this institution is continuously challenging and disrupting any conceptual stability that could arise.

The final characteristic that marks the *Collège international de philosophie* can be found in the name itself: international. This was of such importance that Derrida describes this as ‘a sacred principle in the charter and title of the *Collège*’ (Derrida 2005a, 254). Orchard

has brought out how the inclusion of foreign academics was not simply superficial, but that these academics were integrated even into the ‘administrative, decision-making process of the running of the college’ (Orchard 2011, 145). Though the president of the *Collège* has nearly always had French nationality, the directors of different educational programs, as well as the membership of different administrative committees, have often included a significant proportion of non-French nationals.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this has an effect of bringing questions of translation and exchange between cultures to the fore, ‘especially around the languages and translations of philosophy’ (Derrida 2005a, 254). In this respect, we can understand this as consistent with the disruption achieved by the previous two characteristics: introducing an international dimension thus disrupts any national context that might permanently stabilise the institution.

In paying close attention to the *Collège*, we can glimpse the basis for these ‘alternative forms of institutionalization’. It is the anti-hegemonic, self-reflexive and international dimensions that represent the most important characteristics of this institution for Derrida. Indeed, if these three attributes form any sort of whole, it is their destabilising role: disruptive both of other institutions and the *Collège* itself. Importantly this is not a unique case, but something which repeats itself more than a decade later in quite a different context: the *Parlement international des écrivains*.

### Parlement international des écrivains

The range of Derrida’s political engagements is perhaps best illustrated by the difference between the *Collège* and the *Parlement international des écrivains*: one an educational institution designed to pursue and support new research in France; the other an organisation designed to support refugees, particularly persecuted intellectuals, across the globe. Derrida is far from a one-trick political pony. Of course, Derrida’s work with the *sans papiers* is occasionally acknowledged in discussions of his conception of unconditional and conditional hospitality. Yet, as Judith Still (2010, 10) has brought out, even those who have avoided the gross caricatures of Derrida’s work on the unconditional have not given adequate attention to Derrida’s longstanding interest in conditional laws. This included an active and very public resistance to the *Pasqua-Debré* laws; a series of laws from 1993 to 1996, that restricted residency rights, refugee applications and claims for nationality.<sup>12</sup> Collaborating with Bourdieu in particular, Derrida made

several public statements attacking these legal changes. For instance, in *Libération* in 1995, Derrida attacks the changes to access to healthcare for undocumented migrants that these laws created: ‘under the pretext of dissuading the installation of undocumented migrants (*étrangers en situation irrégulière*), Mr Pasqua has practically barred them from any access to social security. He has thus gravely violated the principle of the universal right to health’ (Bourdieu et al. 1995, 6). Alongside these public interventions, Derrida was also heavily involved in founding and participating in the *Parlement international des écrivains*. It is through this institution that we will see these same three characteristics emerge.

Though both the *Collège* and the *Parlement* carry international in the title, the *Parlement* might well be said to be even more of an international endeavour and certainly a much larger initiative. This international dimension, of course, emerges from its aim to support at risk intellectuals around the world and we see, for instance, Salman Rushdie elected as the first president. In this sense, its scope is global. However, as an intellectual community, it also had an international makeup, including Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Breyten Breytenbach and Wole Soyinka. The *Parlement*, therefore, was not only interested in supporting intellectuals, but also in creating a sense of international solidarity and community between these intellectuals. Indeed, though the institution was based in Strasbourg, the first congress was held in Lisbon in 1994. Similarly, the political support it received could be said to be more European than French. Via the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the charter of the *Parlement* was adopted symbolically by over four hundred European cities. At least twenty-four of these provided asylums to refugees through the *Parlement*. Furthermore, on the 21 September 1995, a resolution seeking financial support from the European Commission was passed by the European Parliament.

This international membership and European support were not the only ways that the *Parlement* went beyond the national. Indeed, the resolution passed by the European Parliament supported the *villes-refuges* (sanctuary cities/refuge cities) initiative, and here the international and anti-hegemonic come together.<sup>13</sup> The *villes-refuges* was the major project of the *Parlement*. It proposed an alternative model of support for refugees, challenging the state-based model which was seen as responding inadequately to humanitarian crises. It was based in part on the Jewish conception of the ‘refuge cities (*villes-refuges*), where sanctuary could be sought in six specific cities’ (Derrida 2001, 17). However, alongside this echo of the Torah, perhaps a greater influence

was the Medieval European conception of sovereign cities: ‘the city itself could determine the laws of hospitality, the articles of predetermined law, both plural and restrictive, with which they meant to condition *the Great Law of Hospitality*’ (Ibid., 18). In this context, the city could claim a degree of sovereignty by appealing to its right to condition the unconditional itself and not have this limited by the state. As he states elsewhere: ‘They are sites of sovereign hospitality, beyond the tradition of Medieval cities. These refuge cities resemble these states without a state open to “citizenship through residence”’ (Derrida 1994, 12). This initiative thus sought to disrupt a consensus that the only imaginable migration and refugee policy was tied exclusively to the nation-state. Through this, the *villes-refuges* offered a counter-sovereignty and a different model of citizenship. As well as offering an alternative model, this idea also served to place political and symbolic pressure on the state to change its current policies on migration. Here, we see the relational dimension emerge: the *villes-refuges* are not absolute replacements, but rather alternatives that are designed to disrupt and effect change in the network as a whole.

As with the *Collège*, we see that the *Parlement* is presented as a supplement to other institutions. One key text where this was particularly clear is Derrida’s vice-presidential address to the *Parlement* at its 1994 congress, published also in *Libération*. Here, he proposes that what is unique about this institution is not its interest in the ethical and political problematic of migration. Indeed, he stresses that these are shared across many similar organisations that bring together intellectuals and writers, such as the International Committee for the Support of Salman Rushdie, PEN, or the Writers in Prison Committee, and he acknowledges that they often work closely together. It is this collaborative approach that marks Derrida’s understanding of the *Parlement*: rather than designed to be the sole or unique institution, it is presented as working with and alongside others. What sets it apart from these institutions is the way it disrupts the concepts on which these are based: ‘If there *was* a singularity to our project, it comes first of all from the *necessities* and the *duties* (*devoirs*) of invention’ (Derrida 1994, 12). Yet again the role of this institution is to introduce something new into a network of institutions, rather than overthrowing that network altogether. Moreover, if we ask what exactly is to be invented, we see that it is the fundamental values and concepts which found and justify the *Parlement*. This question returns us to the self-reflexive. The *Parlement* is designed to interrogate concepts such as belonging, ‘we belong without truly knowing what “belonging” now



means' (Ibid.). Indeed, this also applies to the concept of community, something which is reflected in the title of the text, 'The duties (*devoirs*) of our "community"' (Ibid.). These are the very ideas, particularly of an intellectual community, that structure the institution that Derrida participates in; yet, as he makes very clear, the role of this institution is not simply to act on these concepts, but also to continuously reflect on them. In fact, this is quite explicitly tied to self-reflexivity. The preparatory document, which Derrida cites in his address to the *Parlement*, states: 'The Parliament will be whatever the writers make of it, on condition that they never cease to define it and to question what it must be, etc.' (Ibid.)

Of course, with very different aims and objectives, the *Collège* and the *Parlement* are far from identical institutions. Yet, despite these differences, we can still identify a common effort to disrupt other institutions, as well as to establish institutions that disrupt themselves. It is this double aim that marks these alternative institutions. Yet the question still remains as to how and to what degree these alternative institutions are deconstructive. To answer this, we must consider how these political engagements relate to Derrida's political thought.

### **Institutional Decisions**

How, then, do these institutional engagements relate to Derrida's philosophical work? It is far from given that they do, or indeed that they should.<sup>14</sup> After all, it would be a brazen reader that would insist that there is one unified interpretation of Derrida, a thinker who spent his whole life demonstrating the trap of such unification. Yet, for all that, we should not be too quick in divorcing thought from practice, or the theoretical from the political. Indeed, an important crossover between Derrida's philosophy and his institutional engagements occurs precisely around one of Derrida's key political concepts: the undecidable. It is worth pausing to stress that this is something of a counter-intuitive statement. The undecidable is a fundamental moment of aporetic uncertainty, caught between two poles, whereas institutions, in their most basic form, are a series of conventions, which direct, shape and limit our capacity for action. Here, I wish to show that these positions are not contradictory, but in focusing on institutions, we can bring out a neglected aspect of the undecidable: the important way that rules and conventions are factored into the moment of decision. This has received less emphasis in the reception of this concept and indeed, at times, in Derrida's own account. Yet, I propose that a careful reading of his

work can bring this out. I argue that, though there is no rule to guide the decision, Derrida is far from indifferent or agnostic about the rules which such decisions create. It is here that we see the political task in deconstruction and the way that Derrida has pursued this task in his own political causes.

As Derrida brings out in each of his dealings with the unconditional and conditional, responsible decisions are to be taken between these two poles. In this aporetic encounter, we are incessantly pulled between the two. There is no rule, convention or program that can guide where we can find an ethical balance within this negotiation. However, though the unconditional represents an infinite, unrealisable pole, it does not lead to paralysis or inaction in the face of current harm and injustice. It is for this reason that Derrida insists on 'the singular urgency of a *here and now (ici maintenant)*' (Derrida 2005, 105). It is precisely this here and now that separates deconstruction from the teleology of a regulative idea; allowing an appeal to the unconditional without this ever becoming an alibi for passivity. It is this 'interventionist perception of the here and now, always *in the name of* the democracy-to-come' which marks a need to take action, to decide, in the moment (Bennington 2000, 33). Here, we see the lack of guiding rule of the undecidable: at times it is more just to intervene in the current system, in the present, and at times, it is necessary to uproot, challenge and critique the basis of that system entirely. It is impossible to know which is more responsible. The undecidable is this lack of rule as to when and how we should intervene.

With the here and now we might certainly be able to explain some of Derrida's political involvements; anyone who has felt the disgust of injustice, cruelty or suffering knows what it is like to take (or wish to take) immediate action. From this point of view, many of the petitions that Derrida signed, and indeed organised, can be explained through the here and now. This would allow us to interpret each engagement as an individual moment where Derrida took the risky decision to intervene. This would help us understand discrete instances where Derrida took a position on this or that issue. Yet, at least at first, it does not get us very far in explaining Derrida's work with institutions. Institutions are not just for the here and now, they live on into the future: they do not only mark singular interventions within a particular context, but rather determine what sort of interventions are possible within future contexts. It is here that we need to look more closely at the decision.

Despite their lack of rule, decisions in the here and now are not completely removed from a consideration of rules. Though there may

be no rule that guides our choice, our choice in the here and now is not a one-off event. Instead, it changes or re-institutes new rules and conventions. In this sense, rather than describing the undecidable as a lack of rule, it might be better to present it as the establishment of a new rule. Or, more precisely, the lack of rule as to how to establish this new rule. This is not something that we have to impose on Derrida's text, but rather something that is already at work there. In 'Force of Law', for instance, we see that this moment of decision is not rule-less, but invents its own rule: 'Not of the absence of rules and knowledge but of a re-institution of rules which by definition is not preceded by any knowledge or by any guarantee as such' (Derrida, 1992, 26). There is no guidance, no rule or content that can direct our decision, 'acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule' (Ibid.), but this does not at all mean that there is no involvement of rules. Instead the decision re-invents the rule. Derrida continues this point later, when he stresses the need to calculate and negotiate with the conditional: 'Not only *must* (il faut) we calculate, negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable, and negotiate without the sort of rule that wouldn't have to be reinvented (*ré-inventer*) there where we are cast ("jetés")' (Ibid., 28). It is not that such negotiation is without a rule, but rather the old rule is taken up, recast and reformed. Again, no rule can guarantee the ethics of the decision, but the decision itself involves the re-invention of rules. It is important to emphasise the radical potential of the 're-invention', one which should – or at least could – transform completely the current laws and policies. We cannot be certain that such a transformation is for better or worse, but either way this transformation is not a one-off event, instead it establishes rules and conventions that determine what is possible thereafter.

Another way of describing this would be to say that deconstruction is not exclusively interested in performative interventions, but also the performative conventions that will follow from these. Consider Derrida's definition of deconstruction in 'Psyche: inventions of the Other': 'Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all [...] it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; its writing is not only performative, *it produces rules* – other conventions – for new performatives' (Derrida 2007, 23 my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> It is exactly the impact of these conventions, in the times after the here and now, which consistently mark Derrida's political involvement and particularly his focus on institutions. Derrida's work does not only concern performative interventions in a particular context, but rather it is also about producing future conventions by which more just interventions can take place. It is

here we can see the motivation behind his institutional work, the need for more just institutions and different forms of institutionalisation.

As such, Derrida's decision is not simply a negotiation with the present in the here and now; it is also a negotiation with the forms and conventions that will determine negotiations in the future. His interventions are not simply discrete individual moments, but they also produce their own conventions and rules to determine the parameters and possibilities of future decisions. Though the undecidable is in part designed to disrupt our traditional understanding of thinking in terms of conventions and conditions of all sorts, this does not mean it can do away with conventions altogether. Derrida's interest in institutions is no doubt a practical reflection of the significant role that institutions play in everyday politics, but it also reflects the important role that they play in his philosophy.

### Invention & Critique

All of this raises the question of the other. And indeed we may well be concerned—especially in my effort here to outline particular characteristics—that focusing on institutions and conventions will leave no room for the other. However, quite the contrary is the case: these institutions are exactly about making this room for the other. The idea of 'letting the other come', *laisser venir l'autre*, can help bring this out. This 'letting come', as Derrida often emphasised, is not a passive act: 'Letting the other come is not inertia ready for anything whatever' (Derrida 2007, 39). Though we cannot force or make the other arrive or happen, we can prepare the ground for it: 'Yet it is necessary to prepare for it; to allow the coming of the entirely other, passivity, a certain kind of resigned passivity for which everything comes down to the same, is not suitable' (Ibid.). One of the ways that Derrida suggests that this preparation can take place is by disrupting *structures de forclusion*:

I am careful to say 'let it come,' because if the other is precisely what is not invented, the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting (*déclôturer*), destabilizing foreclusionary structures (*structures de forclusion*) so as to allow for the passage toward the other. But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming. (Ibid., 45)

The other, therefore, is not something we can invent, but its invention is something for which we can clear a space and set the ground. This preparation is done by destabilising or disrupting the structures that

would limit, prevent or make less likely the coming of the other. Derrida labels these foreclosure structures, *structures de foreclosure*, which we might also translate as structures of debarment or exclusion.<sup>16</sup> With its focus on conventions and rules, one such structure would surely be institutions. Yet, it is worth noting the choice of verbs here: opening, destabilising, uncloseting or unenclosing ('déclôturer'). This is not a question of rejection or destruction. I want to propose that Derrida's institutional engagements are an example of an active disruption of these structures. His institutions achieve this in two ways, both in actively disrupting other institutional structures and in disrupting their own. Here we can return to the *Parlement* and the *Collège*.

One of the most important characteristics that we saw in both institutions was that they challenge a hegemonic consensus and that they are relational. Derrida was keen to stress that they worked in collaboration with, rather than against, the other institutions in their field. We saw this in the counter-sovereignty of the *villes-refuges*, but also in his address to the *Parlement*, where Derrida acknowledges that this institution was far from the only organisation working to support persecuted intellectuals and he calls for such collaboration. In the *Collège*, Derrida is even more explicit, suggesting that it is a 'supplementary instrument *at the disposition* of other institutions' (Derrida 1983, 15). However, we can now see that this relational approach—perhaps as Derrida subtly acknowledged in the use of 'supplément(aire)'—was not only a generous spirit of collaboration, it was also a way of actively challenging a consensus on certain conventions. The new ideas that emerged in both institutions can be understood then as an effort to intervene in an institutional network and a conscious or unconscious hegemonic consensus. Placing these institutions so explicitly in relation to others is not an act of modesty but an effort to disrupt and to some degree replace the current structures of institutions. It is in this sense, that we can see this anti-hegemonic dimension as a form of preparation and opening of the *structures de foreclosure*, as they exist within a particular institutional network.

But it is not simply other institutions that these projects seek to disrupt, but indeed their own structures. The self-reflexive dimension common to both is a fundamental part of this alternative institutionalisation. It is a genuine effort to establish institutions that can disrupt their own structures and conventions: this is a way of opening, uncloseting, and destabilising from the inside. Indeed, we saw exactly that this continuous self-interrogation was foregrounded in both cases. This was not only a question of challenging the charter

and founding principles of these institutions, rendering them somewhat provisional, but also of rethinking the very concepts and values on which they were founded: such as, critique, belonging, community, and the very idea of the institution. These institutions were also purposefully self-disruptive, avoiding—or seeking to avoid—any form of permanent closure or conventions that would exclude invention.

In a related way, the international dimension is an important part of the disruption of these structures. This is true in the membership of both structures, but also in the ideas they promote. The focus in the *Collège* on new objects of study was also tied to the interaction and translation between different cultural and national contexts. Equally, the *Parlement's* major initiative, the *villes-refuges*, was deliberately designed to form connections outside of the national, between cities and persecuted intellectuals across the globe. From this perspective, the focus on the international is a resistance to perhaps one of the most pernicious structures of exclusion: the national. In resisting their exclusive inscription within a national context, therefore, these institutions destabilise this structure of exclusion and prepare for the other in a fundamental way; puncturing the national horizon, allowing for conventions to be challenged by developments and changes not only in France, but around the world.

In short, these three criteria have a shared aim and that is to resist, in different ways, and as much as possible, restrictive conventions and contexts. If these three criteria make a whole, it is one that is consistent with this effort to destabilise and open the *structures de forclusion*. These institutions cannot guarantee or force the arrival of the other, but they mark an effort to prepare the ground and create better conditions so that such an arrival might take place.

Importantly, this also returns us to the issue of institutions in our reception of Derrida's work. There, I presented this problematic within an opposition of critique and creation, where only the former had received any sustained attention. However, attending to the latter, we can come to see that such a divide falls flat. As our discussion of the foreclosure structures suggests, the *Collège* and *Parlement* should be seen as a continuation of this 'radical critique'; a critique that takes place not only through thought, but also through action. It is through these institutions that such structures are critiqued, destabilised, weakened and removed.<sup>17</sup> In a move that disrupts the theory/practice divide, Derrida's institutional engagements take place not only from the outside of institutions, but also inside them. These institutions are not the output or, indeed, impact of a previously concocted theory, instead

they are a fundamental way of bringing out the radical limitations of any institution. They demonstrate this in their own structure, but also in their effect on the institutional network within which they intervene. Far from a conservative underside of deconstruction, or an effort to restrict the other, Derrida's work with institutions marks an effort to prepare for the other, where 'to get ready for this coming of the other is what can be called deconstruction' (Derrida 2007, 39).

### Conclusion

In Derrida's institutional engagements, we see an effort to practise and think through an alternative form of institutionalisation. This is far from a rejection of the conventions and rules that institutions necessitate, but an approach to negotiating these. In particular, it involves foregrounding principles that disrupt these new institutions as much as old ones. In this sense, we have seen Derrida return to three characteristics across two very different projects: anti-hegemonic, self-reflexivity, and international. Pursuing these, of course, offers no guarantee of success, nor if successful can these remove the limitations that come with such conventions. They are not a recipe that will allow us to sleep sound within these institutions. Yet equally they are not just interventions in the 'here and now', instead they speak to the prominent place in Derrida's life and work for the construction and invention of more just political projects and through this more just political places and futures.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Gates Cambridge Trust for their financial support of this research (Grant Number: OPP1144).

### References

- Beardsworth, Richard (1996), *Derrida & the Political*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Bennington, Geoffrey (2000), *Interrupting Derrida*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, Jacques Derrida, and Danièle Lochak (1995), 'Pour Un Débat Sur Le Sort Des Étrangers', *Libération*, Paris, 15 March.
- Deguy, Michel (2017), 'Forward: Of Friendship with Derrida', in *In the Name of Friendship: Deguy, Derrida and Salut*, eds. Garry Sherbert and Christopher Elson, Leiden: Brill, pp. x–xviii.

- Derrida, Jacques (1983), 'Derrida, Philosophe Au Collège', *Libération*, Paris, 11 August.
- (1992), 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfield and David Gray Carlson, trans. Mary Quaintance, New York and London: Routledge, pp. 3–67.
- (1993), 'Le 10e anniversaire du Collège international de philosophie', *Tranche du mardi*, France Culture, 6 April 1993. Radio broadcast, 21:30–22:30.
- (1994), 'Les Devoirs de Notre «communauté»', *Libération*, Paris, 4 November.
- (2001), 'On Cosmopolitanism', in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, eds. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, trans. Mark Dooley, London and New York: Routledge.
- (2005a), 'Le modèle philosophique d'un contre-institution' in *S.I.E.C.L.E. colloque de Cerisy: 100 ans de rencontres intellectuelles de Pontigny à Cerisy*, eds. François Chaubet, Edith Heurgon, and Claire Paulhan, Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe: Editions de l'IMEC, pp. 245–60.
- (2005b), *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, London and New York: Verso.
- (2007), 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, vol. 1, pp. 1–47.
- Kamuf, Peggy (1997), *The Division of Literature, or, The University in Deconstruction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Orchard, Vivienne (2011), *Jacques Derrida and the Institution of French Philosophy*, London: Legenda & Modern Humanities Research Association.
- Ó Fathaigh, Cillian (2021), 'Kofman's Affirmative Creation: Moral Law, Dom Juan and the Limits of Maternal Debt', *Paragraph* 44: 1, pp. 11–25.
- Still, Judith (2010), *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Weber, Samuel (1985), 'Ambivalence, the Humanities and the Study of Literature', *Diacritics* 15: 2, pp. 11–25
- (1987), *Institution and Interpretation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wortham, Simon Morgan (2006), *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University*, New York: Fordham University Press.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Martin Crowley for (tirelessly) helping me to develop these ideas and to Emilija Talijan, Katie Fleming, Jasmine Cooper and Jules Gawlik for offering insightful feedback on earlier versions of the text. This work was financially supported by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation via The Gates Cambridge Trust (Grant Number: OPP1144).
2. What Vivienne Orchard has labelled a "lieu d'engagement", which turns out in these accounts to be not itself worthy of engaging with' (2011, 79).
3. Reprinted in *Institutions and Interpretations* (1987).
4. See Derrida, 'Où sont les chasseurs de sorcières?', *Le Monde*, 1 July 1976.
5. Such as Samuel Weber's *Institution and Interpretation* (1987) or Peggy Kamuf's *The Division of Literature* (1997).
6. This was unfortunately only translated belatedly in 2002 and 2004. We can reasonably speculate, I believe, that the debates around the politics of Derrida in



---

the 1990s might have been conducted in a very different fashion if participants had been more conscious of this; not least, I think, the 1992 Cambridge Affair with all its nonsense about 'logical phalluses'.

7. It should be noted that Jean-François Lyotard, though not an official founder, seems to have played an important role at the beginning. Michel Deguy, for instance, describes him as one of the founders (Deguy 2007, xiv).
8. This is a radio interview; I am citing original time of broadcast as hours:minutes (HH:MM).
9. As we might imagine, this had a natural tendency towards what could be labelled 'interdisciplinary' or 'transdisciplinary' approaches; however, Derrida more than once (2005, 253) registers his scepticism with regards to such terms. He objects to the idea precisely because it assumes pre-determined objects of study, as well as disciplines determined in advance.
10. The position of director was designed to run the college, according to annual terms; however, eventually the role of president would be created.
11. The only exception being Diogo Sardinha from Portugal.
12. It is worth stressing, in fact, that the first Pasqua law dates from 1987, but this was largely revoked two years later.
13. This can be translated in a range of ways and to avoid confusion, particularly with other initiatives such as sanctuary cities in North America, I have retained the term in French throughout.
14. Though I will not address this here, it is also worth stressing that, like a great deal of Derrida's political involvements, these institutions involved intense collaboration with others.
15. A major target for such invention, as Derrida elaborates here and elsewhere, is precisely the distinction between the performative and the constative.
16. *Forclusion* translates literally as debarment, which is the legal exclusion of the enjoyment of certain rights or privileges. As in many other cases, we see the importance of legal language in Derrida's thinking here.
17. I have made a similar argument with regards to an important but still inadequately studied contemporary and collaborator of Derrida's, Sarah Kofman. See Cillian Ó Fathaigh (2021).