Confused, good-for-everything, hate object: Of deconstruction, cultural studies, and academic irresponsibility

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“But there remains the question of propriety and impropriety in writing, that is to say the conditions which make it proper or improper. Isn’t that so?”

(Socrates/Plato, quoted in Derrida 1997: 68)

1. The Wrong Derrida

When I heard and read the public announcements of Derrida’s death, I wanted Derrida to be wrong. This was not simply the usual want; namely, what Derrida called the ‘irresistible’ metaphysical ‘desire to restrict play’ and misappropriation. Rather, it was the want for Derrida to come to be wrong: Not ‘to have been wrong’; but ‘to come to be wrong’. For, he wasn’t wrong. He isn’t wrong. But we ought to want him to come to be wrong. Already this would mean that it is not all in the ‘future anterior’, not all ‘in the post’, as Derrida often suggested; although this is still to hope for an otherness ‘to come’ – namely, the change demanded by deconstruction. Unfortunately, though, Derrida remains only too right. For, what arrived with crushing, programmatic predictability were the denunciations, defamations, misrepresentations: Derrida, they said, was unintelligible, nonsensical, meaningless, postmodernist, relativist, ‘deconstruction-ist’, confusing and ‘therefore’ confused, too serious, too trivial, too difficult, too silly, too much, too little, too French. All of which merely reconfirms precisely how right Derrida remains, and how wrong this is.
But what do I mean by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and referring to what? I am referring to Derridean deconstruction’s primary ‘target’: the hostility, violence, and resistance of institution – both noun and verb: institution(s), and institution. As Derrida put it, ‘Deconstruction is an institutional practice for which the concept of the institution remains a problem’. Given this, you might say, hostility to deconstruction is hardly surprising. But what does the hostility come as a response to? Of hostility and resistance to deconstruction, Derrida once argued:

If it were only a question of “my” work, of the particular or isolated research of one individual, this wouldn’t happen. Indeed, the violence of these denunciations derives from the fact that the work accused is part of a whole ongoing process. What is unfolding here, like the resistance it necessarily arouses, can’t be limited to a personal “oeuvre,” nor to a discipline, nor even to the academic institution. Nor in particular to a generation: it’s often the active involvement of students and younger teachers which makes certain of our colleagues nervous to the point that they lose their sense of moderation and of the academic rules they invoke when they attack me and my work. If this work seems so threatening to them, this is because it isn’t eccentric or strange, incomprehensible or exotic (which would allow them to dispose of it easily), but as I myself hope, and as they believe more than they admit, competent, rigorously argued, and carrying conviction in its re-examination of the fundamental norms and premises of a number of dominant discourses, the principles underlying many of their evaluations, the structures of academic institutions, and the research that goes on within them. What this kind of questioning does is to modify the rules of the dominant discourse, it tries to politicize and democratize the university scene…”

In this sense, it is clear that if such work arouses resistance, hostility, or even ‘wrath’, this is not simply because of its difference, but rather because of its uncanny excess of propriety, its ‘properly improper (uncanny, unheimlich)’ character. Accordingly, if we were (reductively) to represent deconstruction as if it were some simply hostile,
tendentious or polemical activity, like a straightforwardly political project, then it could be said to proceed according to a strategy described by Slavoj Žižek as:

overidentifying with the explicit power discourse – ignoring [its] inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises) – [as an] effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning.⁶

Viewed like this, then in its close readings of texts (or any constructions), and in its quasi-transcendental mode of questioning, deconstruction reveals any institution’s difference from ‘itself’, from all that it could or should or might otherwise be, from the thought or promise of its better, less violent, realisation. Here, deconstruction is the exposure of any institution or establishment to the enabling limitation that is its own contingency and constitutive, contradictory bias. Thus, deconstruction draws attention to the violence of institution, in the hope of inciting acts of re-institution with a view to the ‘lesser violence’.

It is because of this hyper-ethico-politicising movement that perhaps all institutions must resist deconstruction. No one and yet everyone can resist deconstruction: ‘différance instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom’.⁷ Everyone wants deconstruction to be wrong. Everyone: those who reject and those who embrace deconstruction. Or rather, everyone wants deconstruction to be wrong about them, about their institution. No one wants (let alone is able) to have to ceaselessly and interminably subject themselves and what they do to the harrowing ordeal of the undecidable. This is as true for those who reject deconstruction and trade in ‘clear-conscience certainty’ as it is for those who claim to ceaselessly and interminably subject themselves and what they do to the harrowing ordeal of the undecidable. For the whole point here is that anything constituted/instituted/established, resists.⁸ (In vaguely Durkheimian terms: it is precisely because the sacred is contingent that it inspires and requires violence.) For deconstruction, the point is to change it. But to what, and which way? Derrida held that

‘the best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the
search for an *archia* tremble’; but also that every obligation activates contradictory and
reciprocally subversive injunctions. Thus, even though it seems certain that ‘clear
conscience certainty’ must be exposed to the ordeal of undeciding, the problem is that so
too must the certainty of uncertainty, as well as the certainty that this way, my way, our
way, is the right and most responsible way to do it. Ultimately, then, this remains all
about institution – all institution and all institutions. The object of deconstruction is
*institution* and the institution, *establishment* and the establishment. Nevertheless, Derridean deconstruction still established many apparent institutional
friendships, allegiances, partnerships, collaborations, and so on. Indeed (as Derrida
insisted on many occasions), deconstruction is always only ever only part of a process:
constitutively; always a supplement. It is, of course, though – therefore and necessarily –
also a ‘*pharmakon*’. As such, it must both ‘be’ and ‘have’ its own ‘faux amis’: false
friends; apparent affilations but deep differences. So, the question, ‘who are Derridean
deconstruction’s friends’, will have no simple answer, especially given that,
deconstructively-speaking, friendship is *never* neutral, simple or innocent. There are
always ‘politics of friendship’. Who or what are those friendships, and what are the
politics?

For Derrida, in one trope, the *political* moment or event arises when ‘telecommunication’
or regular relations and distributions and communications are ‘derailed’, ‘jammed’ and
warped. This is basically (to reiterate) why deconstruction places such great emphasis
on ‘merely’ *reading* – on working interminably and vigilantly at reading, listening, being
attentive and sensitive, and not presuming in advance that something is already simply
understood. Reading is never ‘mere’, *if it is reading*: it is the possibility of freeing from
sedimented practices, presumptions, strictures, institutions and establishments; and re-
deciding, re-establishing, re-instituting. As such, any who engage in such work might be
numbered among deconstruction’s ethico-political ‘friends’. Derridean deconstruction’s
‘friends’, then, will obviously not be limited to literal or explicit friends of Derrida. Nor
need one be Machiavelli to comprehend that even avowed or intentional ‘friends’ may

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actually be *faux amis*. ‘Friendship’ is undecidably both promise and threat: always possibly either or both lesser or greater violence. Friendship is a pharmakon, and not necessarily a solution.\(^{14}\)

In other words, the possibility of the political arises in the opening *to* and *of* alterity; or, that is, in *reading*; and specifically in a patricidal or un-institutional, non-legitimated reading – the ‘errant’ reading, which, in Derrida’s reading of Socrates-Plato on ‘writing’ is that which will attract the ‘wrath’ of the god-king. In Socrates-Plato’s rendition of Theuth’s invention (writing), right from the outset, the god-king begins by ‘pointing out not only its uselessness but its menace and its mischief’.\(^{15}\) Being ‘useless’, a ‘menace’, a ‘mischief’ maker, or all at once; being excessive, or inadequate, or multiply improper; being sophistry, simulation, equivocation; introducing triviality or over-seriousness; digressiveness or tendentiousness; pointlessness or bias; playfulness or murderous intent; anarchy, demonic democracy or totalitarian conservatism; elitism or iconoclasm; from being terrible and destructive to being trivial and gratuitously additive – and always being that which ‘doesn’t come from around here’:\(^{16}\) these are the key coordinates of the attacks made against what Derrida calls ‘writing’, ‘supplement’, ‘pharmakon’, ‘parasite’, throughout the canonical institutional history of the west.\(^{17}\) These accusations are also identical to those made against deconstruction itself.\(^{18}\) They are also, of course, identical to those made against cultural studies.

### 2. The Wrong Cultural Studies

Does this mean that deconstruction and cultural studies are identical, related, or equivalent; or friends? From what viewpoint? As representation is never neutral, we must enquire into any perspective that construes x as y. And, of course, a critical or hostile view from elsewhere might not be the best judge of something like deconstruction’s and cultural studies’ statuses, relations, similarities or differences. But who *could* be the best possible judge? Derrida? Someone ‘in’ deconstruction? Someone ‘in’ cultural studies? Someone ‘in’ deconstructive cultural studies? Someone from somewhere else entirely?

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This is the problem of all articulation or representation: it’s never neutral, never certain, and always working for certain (or uncertain) interests.

Take this friendly representation, for instance: Following the first wave of insulting obituaries to Derrida, Terry Eagleton emphasised the importance of what Derrida ‘opened up’ for and ‘introduced into’ responsible political and ethical thinking. Eagleton insisted that Derrida ‘remained a staunch member of the political left’ who ‘aimed to prise open classical leftist ideas such as Marxism to the marginal, the aberrant’ and that ‘in this sense his project had affinities with the work of Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and the 1970s feminists in Britain’. This seems like a very friendly gesture: affiliative, supportive; emphasising the ‘proper’ politicality of deconstruction, asserting its fundamental left-ness, its likeness to proper feminism, Derrida’s affinity to properly politically responsible intellectuals, like those in cultural studies. Eagleton says: Derrida was one of the good guys, one of us, not one of them: Derrida was with cultural studies. But was he? Speaking of the future of the humanities, Derrida once asserted that:

[The] deconstructive task of the Humanities to come will not let itself be contained within the traditional limits of the departments that today belong, by their very status, to the Humanities. These Humanities to come will cross disciplinary borders without, all the same, dissolving the specificity of each discipline into what is called, often in a very confused way, interdisciplinarity or into what is lumped with another good-for-everything concept, “cultural studies.”

Now, neither the predicative instability nor the immense interpretive reserves of these formulations (for who actually does the lumping and who actually is confused?) can eradicate the negative marking of cultural studies here (not to mention ‘interdisciplinarity’ – whatever that is). What remains clear is that the deconstructive ‘humanities to come’ will not be cultural studies. Why might Derrida have a problem with cultural studies? Why won’t the deconstructive humanities to come be – or even be like – cultural studies? He doesn’t say. But one of his closest collaborators, Geoffrey
Bennington,\textsuperscript{21} was once keen to offer a – if not ‘deconstructive’ (for that would be misrepresentative), certainly ‘deconstructionist’ – case against cultural studies.

For him, the problem with cultural studies is precisely ‘legacy’ of ‘Raymond Williams’, ‘Stuart Hall’, ‘Tony Bennett’, and indeed ‘Terry Eagleton’.\textsuperscript{22} And it is their “‘interminable self-confident and self-righteous political-cum-cultural-studies-speak” which lacks the necessary “theoretical sophistication” and self-awareness to even understand its own political and cultural situation, let alone set about changing it’.\textsuperscript{23} Cultural studies is nothing more than a pseudo-intellectual, ‘clear-conscience’ soap-box pontificating kind of “‘Late-Show” journalism’,\textsuperscript{24} waffling on about politics as its raison d’être without stopping even for a moment to even to think about what politics and the political might be. The problem with cultural studies, for Bennington, then, is simply that it doesn’t question enough, think enough or read enough. His argument is the following: cultural studies sees itself as a political project. Political responsibility and intervention is its raison d’être. It bangs on about politics all the time. But it doesn’t actually think about the political. Rather, it presumes it knows what politics is. Thus, says Bennington, ‘politics’ – the heart of cultural studies – is placed in a ‘transcendental position’ (everything is judged in terms of ‘politics’) – but it is also absolutely excluded from cultural studies. For, in believing it knows what politics is, cultural studies never questions what politics is. The question of politics is excluded from cultural studies, and it labours under the misapprehension and disorientating fantasy that holding forth about the politics of this or that is to carry out one’s political and intellectual responsibilities. In short, Bennington’s problem with cultural studies is his perception that – unlike deconstruction – cultural studies believes it knows, and hence it abandons reading and thinking.\textsuperscript{25} This sounds like an impeccably intellectually and politically responsible concern – indeed so much so that it has been picked up by many of the deconstructively inclined within cultural studies with an almost masochistic glee. Surely we can all agree: Reading and thinking must never be abandoned!

But, according to deconstruction’s own values, then; this begs the question of precisely what or which particular texts of cultural studies Bennington and Derrida are reading and
thinking about in order to make or imply their generalising, pejorative, denunciations? (Who is ‘confused’, and who is doing the ‘lumping’?) Why does first Bennington and then Derrida evoke the proper by way of discriminating against cultural studies? Why is there no reading in either case? Why is there the very same reductive flattening and homogenising that is simultaneously said to be anathema to deconstruction? Why scapegoat cultural studies in order to specify deconstruction ‘proper’? Moreover, what ultimately is the difference between these right-offs and, say, Slavoj Žižek’s relentless ‘straw-manning’ of a cultural studies of his own invention? For that matter, what is the difference between these and the Richard Dawkins’ style of scapegoating cultural studies? For Dawkins, cultural studies exemplifies the ‘debased’, the irresponsible, the trivial, the ‘fun’. What are the differences between these constructions of cultural studies as a ‘hate object’? There is one apparent difference. With Dawkins and the rest of Anglophone academia and media, ‘cultural-studies-bashing’ can joyously go much further than the ‘deconstructionist’ version. This is because Dawkins & Co can take the extra satisfying step of diagnosing cultural studies as being a consequence of (to quote Dawkins) ‘the meaningless wordplays of modish francophone savants’, whose activity ‘seems to have no other function than to “impress the gullible”’.

Thus, for the mainstream of Anglophone academia, cultural studies is merely an errant child infected, seduced, intoxicated by foreign, alien (‘French’) sophistry. Here, the problem is French. For the ‘francophone savants’, on the other hand, cultural studies is… well: sophist, simulacrum, bastard child of them, from over there: unthinking ‘British’ pc ‘leftism’ and hyper-ideological ‘American’ ‘multiculturalism’.

But, in cultural studies bashing, what actually is being bashed? Of the Dawkins variety, Joanna Zylinska argues:

What is most significant about these attacks is the insubstantiality of the target they both adopt and rely on.…. [T]his method works “by fixing an indeterminate target, to give an illusion that something … concrete and ridiculous … is under attack”.

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For this purpose, the identity of cultural studies has to be both pre-decided and excluded from investigation...: indeed, the vehemence of such arguments depends on the refusal to engage with, or perhaps the misunderstanding of, the debates within cultural studies concerning its legitimacy, its disciplinary boundaries and its political commitment.\textsuperscript{29}

Given the fantasy aspect of the non-object of the ‘straw-manning’, then maybe we need not worry too much about such attacks. But, as others have argued, such attacks must be ‘understood in the context of conflicts between the sciences and the humanities in conjunction with anti-liberalism, anti-intellectualism and conflicts among the left over what constitutes a legitimate politics’.\textsuperscript{30} So, as Derrida advised, we ought to ‘stay sensitive both to the comedy and to the seriousness, [to] never give up either the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility’.\textsuperscript{31} Accordingly, we should ask: what is comical about this, and what is serious? In the case of Bennington, perhaps we might merely smile at the fact that he simply ‘repeats without knowing’ the very crime he accuses cultural studies of committing: For him, as for Dawkins, ‘the identity of cultural studies has to be both pre-decided and excluded from investigation’. His is precisely the sort of excluding inclusion that he says is a problem with too much (unspecified) left criticism. He is in fact no different from the very thing he invents and imagines he is responsibly correcting. But what is nevertheless serious about such a comedy? The fact that it might be mistaken for deconstruction; taken to be of or for deconstruction; conflated by association; deemed to be in any sense related to anything like the interrogative ethico-political quest for the lesser violence.

But what about this; what about myself? What about my own implication and imbrication in this? Am I so bloody pure, less violent, and holier than thou? Of course not. Which is precisely why what is necessary is to inscribe oneself within the circle of write-offs, put-downs, ridiculous simplifications and violent reductions that it is always possible to see and denounce and diagnose in others. For, surely, seeing ourselves and our closest acquaintances, most contiguous neighbours, and diametrical disputants within this very reflex metaphysical schema ought to oblige and authorise a different step, different
responsibilities, a different engagement. . . . Or shall we just enjoy writing off the others, polemically, again, and again? This kind of activity is precisely what Marcuse called ‘scholarshit’: intellectual work ‘built upon the model of war and unconditional surrender, designed primarily to eliminate one’s opponent’, which proceeds by ‘mistaking polemic for its own sake for resistance as such’. But this is ‘repeating without knowing’, ‘submission to a law’ of ‘disciplinarity’; the power of correction, of policing, of the institutional production, regulation, distribution and spacing of ‘docile’ and ‘disciplined’ subjects. Quite other than this, fidelity to Derridean deconstruction demands working to make Derridean rectitude be wrong.

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1 (Derrida 1974: 59)
2 ‘When antitheorists claim that individual preferences or orientations determine the critical bent of literary judgements, they reaffirm this institutional conception with which they identify unbeknownst to themselves. To pursue the financial metaphor, institutions do not acknowledge the debt as their own but collect the interest on it, thereby fostering the formation and the maintenance in dominant position of a privileged class. This is the target of deconstructive practice, which aims at nothing less than, in a first stage, the restoration of a universal indebtedness since this appears to be the only ground on which equality, as a social fact, can be thought of. In this connection, it is worth observing that the privileging of the epistemological model in recent theory derives from the fact that the ethical model no longer had the capacity to produce equality and, again, those who are presently advocating a return to the ethical, and who frequently justify this return by their distaste for theory, are choosing a ground that cannot but result in inequality since it is always located in a postinstituting moment. The epistemological ground favored by deconstruction permits the assertion of an equality between all human beings by virtue of their dispossess from the domain of meaning’. Wlad Godzich, “Afterword: Religion, the State and Post(al) Modernism”, in Samuel Weber, Institution and interpretation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.162.
3 (Derrida 2002: 53)
4 (Derrida 1995: 409-410)
5 (Derrida 1998: 29)
6 (Žižek 2000: 220)
7 (Derrida 1982: 22)
8 ‘I am not for the destruction of the universitas or the disappearance of the guardians, but precisely one has to make a certain war against them when obscurantism, vulgarity above all, becomes ensconced, as is inevitable.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Envois’, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, trans. Alan Bass (London: Chicago, 1987), p.88.
9 (Derrida 1978: 141)
Deconstructing Jacques’, Julian Baggini, editor of The Philosophers’ Magazine, said this: ‘British-trained philosophers like myself don’t know much about Derrida, though that doesn’t stop some of them dismissing him. I don’t dismiss him, but nor do I know enough to be able to sum him up’ (Baggini 2004). With this, Baggini apparently unintentionally and inadvertently nevertheless strikes a key point. Everything devolves on the force and consequences of contingently instituted reading practices. Or, as John Protevi puts it, ‘the reading of marks is institutionally enforced. Reading strategies outside the institutionally enforced reading code make no sense, as anyone who reads the bewildered responses to deconstructive readings can tell you’ (Protevi 2001: 64). In other words, deconstruction seems ‘complicated’, ‘difficult’, or ‘unintelligible’ because it looks for the work of bias in all constructions. What Protevi calls the dominant ‘metaphysical reading code’ (‘normal’ reading) looks only for ‘pure meaning’, or signification. Deconstruction looks for ‘the interweaving of force and signification’ (Protevi 2001: 64), insisting that all contexts are only established in and ‘structured by force’, by contingently instituted ways of making sense. In other words, ‘sense is always made – forcefully, contingently, politically, consequentially. (For Protevi, then, ‘Deconstruction is political physics, the diagnosis of the metaphysical lifting of opposites from the reserved field or general text as a skewing of them into new hierarchies, a twisting of them on the basis of previous hierarchies. Any hegemonic formation of meaningful force and forceful meaning is, however, never total, but has held in reserve the possibility of reinforcing its elements in different, disseminative, formation and contexts’ (Protevi 2001: 65).)

In such a rendering, deconstruction construes the world as a ‘general text of force and signification’. As such, it is far from simply ‘about language (or something)’. It is rather a revelation of the imbrication of force and signification constitutive of what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) present as the iterative structure of hegemonies. In one respect, this is precisely what Derrida is about. But, Derrida is even more radical than Laclau and Mouffe’s reconstructed Marxism, because deconstruction (unlike the disciplines of political theory or philosophy) – (‘philosophy (this will be my hypothesis) clings to the privilege it exposes.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Privilege: Justificatory Title and Introductory Remarks’, Who’s Afraid of Philosophy?: Right to Philosophy I, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-2) – is always intimately involved with the question of how legitimacy and illegitimacy, intelligibility and unintelligibility are instituted, established and imposed. Deconstruction is not about telling stories or painting pictures. Deconstruction is not just about diagnosing ‘conditions of possibility and impossibility’. It is much more ‘about’ and involved with challenging ‘conditions of pose-ability and impose-ability’. It is, then, like Laclau and Mouffe’s deconstructive post-Gramscian discourse theory, not only emphatically and irreducibly political and politicking, construing relations as textual relations of contingent and forceful articulation throughout and constitutive of a rivalrous and non-homogenous institutional discursive ‘terrain’; it also – unlike, or more (and ‘less’) than Laclau and Mouffe – an insistent engagement with the problematic matter and double binds of all, including its own, institution. See Derrida (1996): ‘Rorty returned to this topic when he said that it is necessary to begin by publishing works which reassure the university and that this is also a question of politics and editorial legitimation. This is true, but it is not only that. I believe that my first texts, let’s call them more academic or philosophically more reassuring, were already well beyond the editorial field of social legitimation, and were also a discursive and theoretical (I do not say fundamental or foundational) condition, an irreversibly necessary condition of what came later’ (Derrida 1996: 79). This is why it is also not a theory of discourse, and why Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation or translation of deconstruction into political theory does not exhaust it. It is not a ‘theory’ because it cannot with clear conscience leap out of aporia and undecidability. Moreover, aporia and undecidability are not theoretical constructs within or of a deconstructive theory. These are just terms for what deconstructive readings keep bumping into when reading so attentively as to be a ‘monster of fidelity, the most perverse infidel’ (Derrida 1987: 24). In other words, ‘and [here] I am citing, but as always rearranging a little’ (Derrida 1987: 89), deconstruction is and is not ‘theoretical’: ‘a program that cannot be formalized’ but ‘for reasons that can be formalized’ (Derrida 1997: 52). Derrida himself stated it bluntly, simply, and unequivocally: ‘Deconstruction is an institutional practice for which the concept of the institution remains a problem’ (Derrida 2002: 53).

In Derrida’s writing, deconstruction and writing are (among other things) indissociably democratic (1997: 144). This leads Protevi to conclude that: ‘Deconstruction is democratic justice, responding to the calls from all others’ (Protevi 2001: 70). On this note, to return to Laclau and Mouffe, therefore: because of their use of deconstruction and their talk of ‘radical democratic politics’, they certainly seem to qualify as friends of Derridean deconstruction. What might be the politics here? John Mowitt reminds us that there’s more to radicalising democracy than meets the ear and trips off the lips. What is vital, he argues, is ‘inscribing within one’s own position the possibility and necessity of a position which is obscured by what one opposes. Radical democracy ought to involve listening to those whose voices have been drowned out by the very voice of advocacy’ (Mowitt 1992: 221). With this, Mowitt cautions us to ‘hesitate suspiciously’ before Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, precisely because (among other reasons) it is a theory: with a particular, limited, limiting, institutional ‘reading code’ and ‘voice of advocacy’, which must, constitutively drown out. (Mowitt (1992) advocates textual politics’ over ‘discourse analysis’ because even this avowedly deconstructive political theory ultimately does not have the requisite ‘problem’ with the institution, and therefore with itself as institutional practice and institutional way of knowing. Post-Marxism sets itself up as if a subject that can be supposed to know, relying on a stable subject-object split – as in: ‘out there’ is the (political) ‘object’ which presents itself or is presented by discourse in such a way as it can be ‘known’ properly by us ‘knowing subjects’, ‘in here’, in the academy. In this immediate sense, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse analysis limits deconstruction, domesticates it, reins it in (or rather, sends it away), and protects itself from it.) In Derrida’s words, ‘being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world’ (Derrida 1974: 63). Reading, listening, seeing, interpreting, encountering, experiencing, knowing, as much as speaking, are constitutively bound up in and by an institutional politicality that Derrida once catchastically represented as a complex system of ‘telecommunication’: material and symbolic, technological and mediatic, enabling and limiting, economic and social, bounded but derail-able. (But Rancière’s (1996) distinction between police and ‘politics’ ought perhaps to be deployed here: As such, the telecommunicational networks and relays work to police the being-said, -read, -heard, and -done, in ways that are simultaneously enabling and limiting, and are, of course therefore, in a sense ‘constitutively political’ – but ‘political’ understood in that special sense in which everything and therefore effectively nothing is political in any meaningful sense. No, for Rancière, this is police.)

(Derrida 1987: 20) For Rancière, too, this arises in the moment of the acknowledgement that an-other has logos and is speaking, and is irreducibly bound to structures of audibility and efforts of speaking and listening – Or, in other words, to reading.

What does this mean – for anything – in practical or any other terms? To offer an answer requires a slight detour through writing. The most relevant route here is to retrace the detour taken by Derrida in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in Dissemination. Here, writing is, as is well known, a pharmakon, both poison and medicine. It is medicine, a beneficial supplement, when it is dispensed by and in the presence of the metonym of the father (the one who stands in for, represents, the father). It is poison, indeed parricidal, a dangerous supplement, in the absence of the metonym of the father. It only has virtue or value, according to Socrates-Plato-Derrida, when that is conferred by the king – a king who is, crucially and constitutively, always only embodied in his representative. Now, this may seem like an oedipal structure, but it is actually rather more an iterative hegemonic structure. Indeed Derrida does himself suggest the need for prudence and hesitation before ‘giving in’ to ‘the easy [presumably ‘psychoanalytic-ifying’] passage unifying the figures of the king, the god, and the father’ (Derrida 1997: 76), with first the logos (77) and then writing being construed as good and bad sons in relation to an oedipal father. For, although one might be both able and inclined to map out a Freudian schema here, for Derrida, both the ability and the inclination would relate to what he calls ‘the permanence of a Platonic schema that assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of logos, to the paternal position’ (76). As he acknowledges, it’s ‘Not that this happens especially or exclusively in Plato. Everyone knows this or can imagine it’. Rather, what Derrida seeks to reveal is, as he says, ‘the fact that [because it is] “Platonism,” which sets up the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality, [therefore it] should not escape the generality of this structural constraint, and even illustrates it with incomparable subtlety and force, [which makes it into something that] stands out as all the more significant’ (76). In other words – those of John Protevi, again – ‘That the basic problem of deconstruction,
even in Derrida’s technically detailed readings of phenomenology, is thus basically political is clear” (Protevi 2001: 20).

15 (76)

16 (Derrida 1997: 104)

17 ‘According to a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy, good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one. Metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic.’ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Trans. B. Johnson (London: Athlone, 1997), p.149.

18 In this sense, it is clear that Derrida thinks (resistance to and the discursive plight of) deconstruction as an exemplary political example. (Derrida clearly always regarded deconstruction as a pharmakon, a supplement, a parasite; and therefore, always in danger of being ‘picked up’ or received or written off as a parricidal ‘discourse with no guarantor’. Any such obsessively un-instituting and reinstituting effort within an institution risks ‘wrath’, ‘expulsion’, sacrificial scapegoating, and being rendered a ‘hate object’.) Therefore, Derrida’s writing on ‘writing’, ‘supplement’, ‘arrivant’, ‘pharmakon’, ‘decision’, and so on, can all be read as ethico-politically motivated studies of the conditions of possibility for (hospitality to) alterity within hegemony, or friendship across any dissymmetrical abyss of difference, as part of an effort to establish a discourse of the lesser violence.

19 (Eagleton 2004)

20 (Jacques Derrida 2001: 50)

21 (1998)

22 (105)


24 (105)

25 See also Wolfreys (2003: 164-165).

26 (Dawkins quoted in Zylinska 2001: 175)

27 (Young 1999: 3)

28 (Dawkins quoted in Zylinska 2001: 175). Žižek, of course, goes further, or rather in a different direction, seeing what he calls ‘politically correct postmodernist deconstructionist cultural studies’ to be a monstrous ideological formation. Of course, Dawkins would lump Žižek in with deconstruction and cultural studies, while Žižek would deem Dawkins to be an ideological knave.

29 (Zylinska 2001: 175-6)

30 (quoted in Zylinska 2001: 175)

31 (Derrida 1995: 404)

32 (Giroux 2000: 14)

33 (Spivak 1999: 337)
34 (Derrida 1997: 75)

35 (123)

36 (Mowitt 1992)

37 References


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