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Much ado about 'nothing'

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Much ado about 'nothing': evaluating three immanent critiques of post-structuralism

Poststructuralism refers to a cluster of traditions that coalesce in French social theory from the mid-1960s. However, a lot hinges on the weight we attribute to the different stands within 'poststructuralism', and here I accentuate the decisive intervention of Jacques Derrida. In my view, the approach inaugurated with Derrida's early works - such as *Of Grammatology* and the essays collected in *Writing and Difference* - represents the most significant strand of poststructuralist thought, including for the study of politics,¹ and in this paper I defend Derrida's core assumptions about language and discourse from what we might call three immanent critiques of poststructuralism. I refer to these as *immanent* critiques because they each come from quarters that are associated with 'poststructuralism' in the wider sense, and I designate these critiques respectively as the ethical, metaphysical, and political critiques.

The first section shows how Derrida reworked the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Derrida developed the Saussurean notions of the arbitrary nature of the signifier and the production of semantic value through equivalences, and he pushed these ideas to their necessary conclusion. Inspired in large part by the work of Martin Heidegger, Derrida developed a series of ontological, or what Rudolf Gasché called 'quasi-transcendental', claims about the essential relationality of identity, and about the priority of the terrain of signification or discourse, understood as a precondition of our perception of/engagement with 'the world' (Gasché, 1994, 99). It is this broad emphasis on the discursive conditions of perception/action that I endorse, and not any narrow understanding of 'deconstruction' as a method of reading texts, and, as well as Derrida's own contribution, this general phenomenology of 'discourse' has been most cogently elaborated in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This viewpoint is encapsulated in Derrida's provocative statement that 'there is no outside of the text' (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) (Derrida, 1976). This is typically mistranslated - as 'there is nothing outside of the text' - and here I embrace this alternative iteration. This is because everything essential in this discussion turns on the attributes we ascribe to the 'nothingness' or the non-being that marks the limit of the discursive terrain. Indeed, the ethical, metaphysical, and political critiques all impute this 'nothingness' with different characteristics, and significant political consequences follow from these alternatives. In short, I examine the respective assertions that the *extra*-discursive 'nothingness' is a) the source of an inscrutable ethical demand, b) can be understood as a material realm of 'vital forces', and alternatively c) that nothing positive

¹ This is not to underestimate the contributions of other figures - such as Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault - but I think their contributions are best re-appropriated and put to work in ways that are consonant with a phenomenology of 'discourse' that principally takes its coordinates from Derrida.

can be said about this limit point of the discursive terrain, but 'it' nonetheless becomes manifest within the realm of signification in the form of a disruptive *event*.

These claims and counter claims represent some of the most significant debates within contemporary continental philosophy. In part, the objective here is to subject them to a precise critical examination and evaluation, but I also say something distinctive about the future course of poststructuralism. Whilst I reject the ethical and metaphysical responses, I feel some sympathy for the political critique of Derrida's work. This is because, as we see in more detail below, the key political import of poststructuralism appears to have been a politics of incessant critique, and in my view this stance is insufficient. Those who take odds with the politics of deconstruction are therefore right to draw attention to a more robust politics of the event. However, I also argue that we do not have to choose between these alternates. Instead, I make the case that politics always unfolds in a productive tension between the intermittent manifestations of 'the event', i.e. the emergence of those disruptive moments that denote the limit point of the discursive terrain, and a more restrained set of political manoeuvres that remain possible within the field of signification.

Post-structuralism: there is 'nothing' outside of the text

In much the same vein as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Saussure sought to displace the standard picture of language in western philosophy, where individual words 'name objects, [and] sentences are [simply] combinations of such names' (Wittgenstein, 1967, No. 1). In Saussure's structural linguistics the relationships between words and objects (either mental or physical objects), is replaced instead by a focus on the relationships between signs (Saussure, 1998). Moreover, the sign is comprised of two elements, the signifier (sound) and the signified (concept), and one of Saussure's crucial observations was to stress the arbitrary nature of the signifier. This means is that there is no essential relationship between a given signifier and its concept or signified, and this can be demonstrated by the fact that there are different signifiers in diverse languages for the same concept, e.g. 'dog' and 'chien' refer to the same conceptual phenomenon, depending on which side you find yourself of the English Channel. Importantly, this means if we want to understand the production of linguistic meaning, or signification, we should not refer signifiers back to some essential features that are presumed to be in the concept (or signified), and even less so to any characteristics of the physical object (or referent). Instead, the meaning of any given term or signifier is dependent upon its value - as an equivalent term - in a series of formal differences between signifiers within an established linguistic structure (Saussure, 1998, 110-120). Again, this resonates with Wittgenstein's conclusion that the meaning of a term is determined by its use in the game-like practices of everyday language (Wittgenstein, 1967, No. 7, No. 43). For example, if we want to understand what we mean by 'chair', on Saussure's account, the point is to establish the relationships between this signifier and a

series of related signifiers – e.g. ‘tables’, ‘cushions’, ‘sofas’, etc. – within a given linguistic structure, e.g. a household design magazine. Or, to take a more obviously political example, if we want to understand the meaning of ‘democracy’ the point is not to establish intrinsic features of this phenomenon, but rather to see how this term is related to a set of equivalent terms - e.g. to ‘free and fair elections’, a ‘free press’, the ‘rule of law’ etc. – within a given linguistic structure, e.g. western liberal-democratic ideology.

In his work in the late 1960s Derrida endorsed these insights and he sought to push these ideas to their (onto) logical conclusion. Derrida saw several limitations remaining in Saussure. The first was that Saussure did not break fully enough with a priority that runs through the entire western tradition, which tends to privilege speech over writing. In the Platonic tradition, this is because the spoken word is understood to have greater proximity or presence to the ‘pure’ signified or concept. Derrida aimed to fully disrupt this priority, and he does so by stating the primary significance of writing, what he calls ‘*arche-writing*’ (Derrida, 1976). However, it is important to appreciate that this has virtually nothing to do with the priority of the written text. Derrida’s objective was, instead, to use this reversal of philosophical priorities to reveal a more profound dependence of human beings on the fabric of textuality as such, i.e. on the realm of discourse and the interplay of signifiers. To put this in more existentialist terms, we might say there simply is no pure concept or signified because the human subject always already finds herself thrown into the fabric of signification, which provides a prior condition for her perception of and encounter with the world of objects; there is, in other words, ‘nothing outside of the text’ in this generalised understanding as the terrain of signification. Again, there are strong parallels here with Wittgenstein, who maintained that we will try in vain to think of any object without using language, and Laclau and Mouffe also put this point well, in their account of ‘discourse’ as an ontological category that provides conditions of possibility for any meaningful engagement with the world of objects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, 105). As they put it, in ‘our interchange with the world, objects are never given to us as mere existential entities; they are always given to us within discursive articulations’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, 103).

On my view, this basic paradigm represents the most significant moment within the more general developments of ‘poststructuralism’. Indeed, this is the core insight and most valued treasure of poststructuralism. This viewpoint has not been surpassed by subsequent developments within continental, let alone analytical philosophy, but nonetheless needs to be reiterated and defended. We need also to safeguard one of the central consequences of this basic worldview, and this is essentially Derrida’s other core insight, which follows from his critical reworking of Saussure’s account of the relational quality of signification. I speak of Derrida’s account of the instability that is the intrinsic characteristic of language (i.e. of text, discourse, or writing in this general sense), and which repeatedly interrupts all attempts to fix meaning within the ‘organising principle of [a given] structure’ (Derrida, 1978, 352-353). Indeed, one of the abiding themes in Derrida’s brand of *poststructuralism*

has been to find many ways to express the (non-dialectical and open-ended) 'rupture and a redoubling' that is characteristic of the movement of signification (Derrida, 1978, 351). In this regard, he follows Friedrich Nietzsche who similarly stressed the generative power of language, understood as a 'mobile army of metaphors' (Nietzsche, 1976). Again, Laclau and Mouffe also follow on this point. In their terminology: all 'discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity, which overflows it'; 'instability and precariousness' are therefore the 'most essential possibility' of every discourse, and so no 'discursive totality is absolutely self-contained' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 113; Laclau, 1990, 109).

It is these core insights that I defend against the ethical, metaphysical, and also (in part) the political critiques. However, we must first identify what has arguably been the main political import of these ideas, and this, I would suggest, is exemplified in the work and activism of Judith Butler. In her enormously influential *Gender Trouble*, Butler extended these Derridean insights to an analysis of gender relations and the politics of sexuality.² On her account, established gender roles and the priority of heterosexual identities are given a false naturalisation by the relations of power that reproduce the normativity associated with the nuclear family (Butler, 1990, 187). However, as Butler demonstrated persuasively, heterosexual normativity has 'no ontological status apart from the various acts', practices and performances that sustain it (Butler, 1990, 185). It follows from this that the 'possibilities of gender transformation are [also] to be found precisely in the arbitrary' status of extant norms and roles (Butler, 1990, 192). In other words, gender relations and sexual identities are intrinsically open to a politics of subversion or re-signification through performative displacement (Butler, 1990, 191). This often takes the form of 'parody' and 'proliferation', seen for example in queer politics, and these tactics aim to 'deprive [the] hegemonic culture...of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities' (Butler, 1990, 188).

These insights have contributed to the profound transformations in gender relations and the public expression of sexuality in western societies from the late 1960s. We should note however that the temperament that animates this mode of politics is essentially one of *incredulity*, in other words this is a politics of scepticism towards - and critique or deconstruction of - established claims to identity and normality.³ Indeed, this is a politics of *incessant* critique. Because *every* claim to identity can be exposed as an arbitrary discursive construction: each and every identity can be subject to destabilisation through an open-ended play of 'differing and deferring substitutions' (Derrida, 1982a, 3, 6, 11). Moreover, I would suggest that this attitude of profound scepticism has been characteristic of the

² There is, of course, more going on in Butler's work, particularly the uses she makes of psychoanalysis and of Foucault. However, a discussion of these aspects of her work is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Here I invoke the terms 'deconstruction' and 'critique' loosely, in order to draw attention to forms of politics that principally express doubt towards established claims to identity, unity, closure etc. However, these terms also have more precise meanings, for example when we differentiate between poststructuralism and the German traditions of 'critical theory' and in this respect there are significant differences between purveyors of 'deconstruction' and 'critique'.

politics of post-structuralism more generally. For example, this temperament was also the driver behind Foucault's genealogies, which revealed the contingent historical foundations of various practices - institutions and forms of knowledge - that we currently take as given; e.g. the discipline of psychiatry or the practices associated with the criminal justice system. William Connolly puts it well when he describes the politics of post-structuralism as a permanent struggle, or *agon*, against those who deny the contestability of their own claims to unity and identity (Connolly, 2005, 125). Here, I refer to this basic stance as the politics of post-structuralist scepticism. This is, I suggest, the predominant mode of politics associated with post-structuralism, and in many ways this attitude of incessant critique, deconstruction or genealogy, has been enormously significant in effecting change in our societies. There are those however, who claim that this intrinsically sceptical mode of politics is ultimately unsatisfactory, because it draws our attention away from a more generative mode of politics centred on collective mobilisation. As I have said, I have sympathy for these political critiques of deconstruction, and I return to these points in more detail in the final part of the paper. First however, I consider alternatives to the Derridean account that have been motivated essentially by ethical and then metaphysical concerns.

Nothingness – as the source of an inscrutable ethical demand

The first critique stems from Derrida's own work. This is then a fully immanent critique, and if this sounds contradictory, I stress that what we're really talking about is two distinct and in my view incongruous strands in Derrida's writings. I refer to his association of the 'nothing' that is beyond signification – what he otherwise refers to as an 'absolute alterity' – with the source of an infinite ethical demand. Here, Derrida draws on Emmanuel Levinas' aspiration to establish ethics as 'first philosophy' (Levinas, 1999). These claims appear recurrently in Derrida's early and later writings, and other poststructuralists, especially Butler and Simon Critchley, have also taken them up. I raise a number of objections, and above all that this approach is politically disabling.

In Derrida's words, the call to ethical responsibility takes the form of an 'infinity I cannot thematise and [yet] whose hostage I remain' (Derrida, 1992, 22). Indeed, he endeavoured to identify the immeasurable and absolute quality of the ethical injunction. This is why he associated the source of the ethical demand with the 'nothingness' that is outside of the text: on this account, the call to ethical responsibility has an imperative quality that cannot be subject to the forms of substitution and displacement made from within the terrain of signification. The ethical demand is, in other words, literally 'undeconstructable' (Derrida, 1992). Similarly, for Butler, this demand radiates from a 'nameless elsewhere', and in her view the call to conscience is also indissoluble from our experience of embodiment, vulnerability and mortality. As Butler puts it, we cannot deny our primary responsibility to the suffering other 'without ceasing to be [fully] human'

(Butler, 2006, xiv, 20, 130). Despite this emphasis on the unconditional quality of the ethical demand, we should add that Derrida was not a utopian thinker. His point was not that the absolute ethical injunction could ever find full expression in political life. In fact, to the contrary, Derrida stressed how the unconditional ethical demand is only ever manifest in politics in the form of compromised and conditional laws and decisions. The realm of conditional decision making (politics) nonetheless has forever to contend with claims that are unconditional (ethics), and there is a basic incommensurability between the infinite quality of the ethical demand and our finite efforts to respond to it (Derrida, 1992, 5, 24).

Here, I think [it](#) is important to acknowledge the clear homology between these 'poststructuralist' versions of 'ethics as first philosophy' and the more conventional approaches to ethics and politics put forward by neo-Kantians such as John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas. Although the ethical experience is depicted as traumatic and inscrutable, rather than rationally demonstrable, Derrida clearly shared with the neo-Kantians an emphasis on the imperative quality of the ethical demand. Moreover, just like in the more conventional neo-Kantian approaches, the claim is that the ethical experience can first be isolated from the realm of politics, and then in turn the exposure to the 'incalculable demand' becomes something like a 'regulative ideal'. This is especially pronounced in Critchley, but this is also inherent in Derrida's repeated appeal to justice understood as a future redemptive moment, which is itself permanently deferred, or 'to come', but which nevertheless *guides us* 'like the blind' through the perpetual (re) negotiation of concrete political decisions (Derrida, 1994). Moreover, the call to responsibility is also presented as a potential source of political identification. This is explicit in Butler, who says our shared vulnerability and mortality makes a 'tenuous 'we' of all of us', and in Derrida's late writings this is also linked to a 'certain idea of cosmopolitanism' (Butler, 2006, xiv, 20; Derrida, 2000, 2001). Despite differences across nations, cultures, and states, we are brought together through 'the law of unconditional hospitality', and 'conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required even' by this unconditional ethical demand (Derrida, 2000, 77, 79).

It is evident that in these approaches the *extra*-political (and extra-discursive) ethical demand is invoked in order to ensure a number of supervisory political effects, and on my view this is disingenuous, because this approach underestimates the always-difficult task of generating these effects from *within* the political (discursive) realm. Indeed, as we saw in the previous section, elsewhere Butler associates politics precisely with the kinds of manoeuvres – subversive (re)significations, condensations and displacements etc. – that can be articulated from within the terrain of signification. I agree with this initial impulse in Butler's work, i.e. that we ought to see politics in terms of a limited, finite, tactical room for manoeuvre that subjects always retain inside the horizons of the discursive realm, and if we remain for a moment resolutely within this terrain, we can see that it follows that any contingently established norms of regulation and forms of identification, i.e. the always

precarious 'we', can only ever be established *in* and *through* the contingent relations of force that distribute the play of signifiers at a given time and place. In short, it is politically duplicitous to identify the extra-discursive 'nothingness' with the basis of an absolute ethical responsibility and then in turn to appeal to that extra-discursive moment to provide a source of political identification and regulation. This is, as Bonnie Honig puts it in her pertinent critique of Butler, to quietly draw attention away from the 'the intractable divisions of politics' (Honig, 2010, 1, 6).

Indeed, these differences can be demonstrated with reference to some relevant examples. Critchley illustrates his approach by invoking phenomena such as Band Aid and 'Make Poverty History'. On his account, these movements - which saw millions of people mobilised worldwide, originally in the mid-1980s and then again twenty years later - originated when (the not yet then 'Sir') Bob Geldof experienced an unconditional call to responsibility after witnessing images of starving Ethiopian children in BBC coverage of the famine in 1984 (Critchley, 2007, 17). This originary ethical experience became the 'motivational force' or the '*meta-political* ethical...propulsion into political action', first for (Sir) Bob, and subsequently for the movements he inspired (Critchley, 2007, 13). No doubt this commentary has significant plausibility, and I agree with Critchley that it is impossible to witness images of abject suffering without being traumatised and pulled to ethical conscience. Taken at face value, these movements seem to exemplify the ways in which the call to ethical conscience sometimes forces us to draw current practices into question, thereby opening up the possibilities of responding otherwise. Nevertheless, if we consider the wider role and impact of these particular political movements, they also illustrate how this 'ethics as first philosophy approach' is ultimately politically disabling; because all the while we remain fixated - in trauma - on an ethical response to the immediacy of the suffering 'other' we are compelled to adopt a direct humanitarian response, and so we have turned our attention away from a concrete analysis of the wider political *context*, i.e. the relations of force - economic, political, military, ideological etc. - that produced this suffering in the first place.

In fact, I would go further, and suggest this approach unwittingly finds itself complicit in the underlying political and socio-economic causes of this suffering. Given the current context, where we see the prospect of another massive famine in parts of Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, we should take stock of the fact that these 'ethically motivated' movements do not represent a credible response to the underlying circumstances that consistently reproduce instability and deprivation across the Middle East and parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This is because the limited objectives of these movements (i.e. essentially an outpouring of charity from the privileged beneficiaries of a global system of exploitation and neo-imperialism, designed to alleviate the immediate suffering of the exploited and dispossessed) remain thoroughly complicit in the causes of the problem. The main difficulty then, with this account of the extra-discursive 'nothingness' as the source of

an infinite ethical injunction, is that it inadvertently underestimates the extent of our obligations to assume a finite political responsibility, which itself can only ever take form within the terrain of signification.

Nothingness – as a material ‘world of becoming’

Although the political consequences of the ethical approach can be called into question, we should note that Derrida, Butler, and Critchley are careful to stress the ‘unfathomable’ quality of the extra-discursive source of the ethical demand. They appreciate that nothing meaningful can be said about the ‘nothingness’ that is beyond the text, at least not first without invoking signifiers. The same cannot be said for advocates of the ‘new materialism’. The emergence of this approach has been one of the most conspicuous developments in recent continental thought, and this includes the contributions of theorists like Connolly, Jane Bennett, Brian Massumi, Rosi Braidotti, and Samantha Frost.⁴ These interventions have generated considerable interest, and we won’t fully estimate the impact of this increasingly influential mode of thought in the space available here. Nevertheless, it is important to introduce some evaluation of these theories, and this is because they present their position, in part, as an explicit critique of the discursive approach. As the editors of a collection of essays that showcases the new materialism have put it: the burgeoning interest in ‘materialism’ represents a backlash against the ‘radical constructivism’ that has dominated continental philosophy ever since the onset of post-structuralism, and which is associated above all with a ‘cultural turn that privileges language, discourse, culture, and values’ (Coole and Frost, 2010, 3). My sense is that this is a gross distortion of the Derridean intervention, which is itself a form of materialism, and the legacy of the Derridean paradigm needs securing against the insurgency of these self-proclaimed ‘materialist’ theories. First I identify a core notion that is generic to the ‘new materialist’ viewpoint, which is the idea that we can, in fact, make positive reference to the ‘nothingness’ that is supposedly beyond the terrain of signification, and this is presented as a material world of ‘vital forces’, of ‘embodiment’, and of ‘becoming’. It is because these theories invoke an elementary realm - supposedly beyond the play of signification - in this way, that I refer to this approach as *metaphysical*.

Indeed, despite their official indebtedness to the phenomenological tradition, it is nonetheless a principal feature of these approaches that they claim to be able to designate – often seemingly in a more or less direct fashion - the chief characteristics of corporeal ‘matter and processes of materialisation’ (Coole and Frost, 2010, 2). Connolly epitomizes this tendency when he explicitly associates the extra-discursive ‘nothingness’ with material ‘energies and forces’ that exceed the ‘social construction of subjects and things’ (Connolly, 1993b, 377). Similarly, Bennett associates the creative movement of matter with an

⁴ For example: Connolly, 2002, 2011; Frost, 2008; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Massumi, 2015.

'impersonal vitality' that runs through all things and 'animates, arranges, and directs the bodies of the living' (Bennett, 2010, 55). These are, if you like, new materialist counterparts to the idea of the 'thing in itself', (ultimately) unmediated by human perception, and there are several notable sources for these would be naturalist theories. One significant inspiration is Gilles Deleuze's ontology of 'life'. In Deleuze's work, life is construed as a singular 'matter-movement', a 'matter-energy', a 'matter flow', or a 'matter in variation' that is repeatedly emergent but without inherent purpose or design (Deleuze cited in Connolly, 1993a, 161).⁵ This conception of an open-ended (i.e. non-dialectical) generative life process also fits well with another major reference point for these theories, which are cutting edge developments within the hard sciences. Drawing on, for example, observations from neuroscience about the generative power of stem cells, or from meteorology or climatology about the complex configurations that determine weather patterns; theorists of chaos and complexity theory have emphasised open rather than closed systems and complex emergent forms of causality.⁶ For the new materialists, these perspectives offer a privileged glimpse of the material world of becoming, and these categories can also explain the emergence and morphology of political assemblages.⁷

Elsewhere I have argued that the extension of the idea of the self-organising qualities of 'life' to the realm of politics is detrimental. It is difficult to see how these approaches can account for political agency, if human beings are seen only as bearers of impersonal forces and processes that circulate through them ([Author Wenman, 2013, Chapter 3](#)). In fact, despite the emphasis on open rather than closed systems and complex rather than simple modes of causality, in some significant respects these theories represent a new kind of determinism. Here however, my objective is to rebut the assertion that the Derridean emphasis on the [primary primacy](#) of the text has been at the cost of a proper consideration of material questions, and second to stress the naivety of these 'new materialist' perspectives when they claim to give positive content to the 'nothingness' that lies beyond discursive representations.

As I have already indicated, the Derridean emphasis on the primacy of the text has nothing to do with a narrow preoccupation with language. The point is instead to draw attention to the ways in which humans are always caught up in the terrain of signification, understood as a precondition of our engagement with the world of objects. On closer examination, it becomes clear that the Derridean emphasis on the terrain of signification is itself a materialist approach. Indeed, Derrida and Laclau both insisted on the materiality of discourse (Derrida, 1976; Laclau, 2005, 68). Here again they followed Wittgenstein, who defined 'language games' in terms of assemblages of linguistic and non-linguistic practices (Wittgenstein, 1967, No. 23). One of the key reference points for the new materialists has been the vitality associated with, for example, the biosciences. However, again the theorists

⁵ For example: Deleuze, 2001.

⁶ For example: Prigogine and Stengers, 1984.

⁷ For example: Connolly, 2002.

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of 'text' and 'discourse' have not disregarded the importance of bodily or corporeal affects. In fact, as students of rhetoric have always understood (going back to antiquity), the articulation of signs is most powerful, when the generative power of metaphor is combined with corporeal affect, i.e. with the movement of the passions, of mood, emotion and so on. So, as Laclau stressed, the emphasis on 'discourse' aims to capture the ways in which we are always bound up in complex configurations of signifiers, forms of action, objects of attachment, and the mobilisation of affect (Laclau, 2004, 303).

It follows then that the key distinction between the Derridean and the 'new materialist' approaches is not that the former has disregarded 'materiality'. Instead, the later approach imagines we can designate material processes as somehow outside of signification, whereas Derrida and Laclau both present 'discourse' as concurrently an amalgam of signifiers and material affect. As Laclau puts it, 'synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary constitutive' reality, 'they are [instead] part of the primary terrain itself in which...[our perception of the world]...is constituted' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 110). To turn the tables around, it does follow – when viewed from the discursive approach - that the 'new materialists' are naive to imagine we can access an elementary 'world of becoming' that is supposedly beyond the signifier. Indeed, from the Derridean perspective, it literally makes no sense at all to talk of 'nature', 'life', the 'body' etc. as some kind of *extra*-discursive 'reality'. It is not a question of drawing the existence of these phenomena into doubt; the point is rather that nothing *meaningful* can be said about this existence without invoking signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, 100, 104, 109). In other words, the problem with these approaches is that they overlook the intrinsically discursive mediation of our access to 'the world', and so they don't appreciate the essential metaphoricity of their own preferred idioms for naming 'reality'. As a consequence, they eventually fall back upon a pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics, which imagines it has a direct access to the elements of 'life'. By way of contrast, we should reiterate with Derrida the ultimate priority of metaphor, and this to the point where even the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal, or between the realm of 'appearances' and the underlying 'essences', is itself a metaphor (Derrida, 1982b). No doubt this is an extraordinarily powerful metaphor, in fact this is one of the defining tropes of the entire western tradition and it fundamentally shapes the way in which we engage with and perceive the world, but it is no less a figure of speech for the powerful grip it holds on our imagination.

Nothingness - as pure 'void' or event

The final critique comes from different quarters. Here the objections to the Derridean paradigm are driven in part by political concerns, and so we return to the politics of poststructuralist scepticism outlined above. We saw that the emphasis on the arbitrary

nature of the signifier gives rise to a politics of incessant critique. We noted that this deconstructive approach has been put to good political effect, and this is exemplified in Butler's critique of heterosexual normativity, which has been denaturalised through a politics of repeated displacement. However, we also acknowledged that this mode of politics could lead to an impasse, because the presiding sentiment draws our attention away from more collective and more militant forms of politics. I am thinking now of critics such as Slavoz Žižek and Alain Badiou. Indeed, Žižek has for a long time been a prominent critic of the prevalent forms of politics associated with deconstruction, and more generally of the politics of post-structuralism and postmodernism. I think he is more or less correct when he says - in its deepest grammar - the politics of poststructuralist scepticism is not all that different from the liberalism of, say, somebody like Isaiah Berlin (Žižek, 2001, 6). The poststructuralist valorises diversity, and - because every identity is ultimately 'condemned to non-identity with itself' - it follows that 'any stance that does not endorse' the mantra of 'contingency' and 'displacement' is presented as dangerous and dismissed as 'potentially totalitarian' (Žižek, 2001, 6). By way of contrast, Žižek and Badiou invoke a revolutionary mode of politics that is associated with fidelity to resolute forms of action and with dislocatory moments, or with a politics of the *event*.⁸ Moreover, in Žižek in particular, the moment of the *event* is associated precisely with the threshold of signification. This then gives us a third perspective on how to engage the 'nothingness' that is beyond the text.

The advantage of this approach is, I think, that the moment of 'nothingness' is not given any positive content, i.e. this is not the source of unfathomable ethical demand, nor is it figured in terms of 'life' as a material vitality. Instead, here the event is construed as something that can only be presented negatively, i.e. as a pure *void* that is simply postulated as the necessary limit point to discursive representation. It seems to me that this emphasis is essentially congruent with the core insight of the Derridean understanding of the priority of the text, i.e. with the idea that the terrain of signification represents the phenomenological condition of our engagement with the world of objects, and this is notwithstanding Žižek's more general critique of deconstruction. In other words, the key difference between Žižek and the Derridean sceptic is political rather than phenomenological. They both emphasise the precedence of the realm of signification, but Žižek invokes the limit point of this terrain in the form of a disruptive event.⁹ Furthermore,

⁸ For example: Žižek, 2001 and Badiou, 2003.

⁹ Žižek's critique of deconstruction has of course been motivated not only by political but also theoretical concerns. He has, in short, enlisted psychoanalysis as well as his own distinctive reading of Hegel in his critical encounter with post-structuralism. Each of Žižek's conceptual resources carry a lot of baggage and my claim here is certainly not that the full detail of either Lacan's or Hegel's theories are compatible with Derrida's approach. How much of Žižek's elaborate conceptual apparatus we might or might not want to appropriate and rework is a question for another time. Here, I simply make the more precise claim that it is possible to invoke the 'nothingness' of the *event*, in a manner that is consummate with the priority of discourse. Indeed Laclau, more than Žižek, was mindful of the basic commensurability between the Derridean phenomenology of the signifier and the claim that discourse meets its limit in an 'impossible void'.

it does not follow that the moment of negativity cannot be given presence within the discursive realm. In fact, to the contrary, Žižek, and here also Laclau, associates genuine politics with the flashpoint when one element from within a given discursive field momentarily embodies the impossible void. This exceptional mode of representation is presented as a kind of elevation, and the 'dignity' attributed to this object follows precisely from its temporary personification of the 'sublime' limit point of signification. However, at the same time, and here in stark contrast to the claims of the 'new materialists', this moment of nomination only ever takes place *within* the discursive terrain, and so the elevated object (body or person) is really only an 'anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself' (Žižek, 2001, 143, 149). Indeed, Žižek associates political moments with the emergence of tragic-heroic figures such as Antigone or Jesus (Žižek, 2001, 157). These characters represent a direct supplication of the threshold of the discursive terrain, and, through their momentary suspension of/from the existing framework of symbolic representations, they usher in a decisive turning point and change the parameters of what is deemed possible (Žižek, 2001, 163). Consider, for example, the way in which the Nazarene opened the way to a new form of universal community –available equally to Greek, Jew and Gentile - but only through the sacrifice of his own corporeal existence.

Conclusion

Žižek's interventions show it is possible to remain within the terrain of discourse, and yet to endorse a very different form of politics from poststructuralist scepticism. As I have said, I have sympathy for this association of politics with decisive turning points, and I agree that - taken as the first and last word - the politics of poststructuralist scepticism can only lead to a dead end. If the singular impulse of post-structuralism is to reveal every positive assertion as a false claim to unity - as it appears to be, often *ad nauseam*, for many advocates of deconstruction - and in the service of an incessant celebration of diversity, then this is not all that different from the basic orientation of liberalism. In the context of the multiple overlapping crises associated with neo-liberalism, Žižek is also right to stress that today, more than ever, we need a politics that is simultaneously disruptive, generative, and universalist, rather than primarily deconstructive. Indeed, we need only consider recent events such as the Arab Spring or Brexit, to see that politics can and does sometimes take the form of a decisive event, where the unexpected takes centre stage, and where genuine transformation hangs in the balance. These disruptive moments also typically become embodied in tragic figures that temporarily personify the disorderly moment. Consider for example, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi as the catalyst of the Tunisian uprising, or the more figurative sacrifice of Boris Johnson in the case of Brexit.

However, it does not follow that we have to choose between either politics as a decisive event or politics as incessant critique, and in contrast to Žižek we should stress by

way of conclusion that the wisest analysts of the political have always understood that politics inevitably involves the dynamic between the two. It is not a matter of politics as identification (with the event) or diversity (through critique), but rather always a question of the interplay between these contrasting impulses. Moreover, as we have seen, both of these manoeuvres can be made from *within* the terrain of signification. Politics can and does (occasionally) take the form of a decisive moment where some person or body momentarily represents the impossible limit point, the 'nothingness' that is beyond the terrain of signification, and politics also (more often) takes the form of an incessant critique of the arbitrary nature of each and every claim to identity, including the identity of the sublime object 'itself'. We don't have to choose between these alternatives, the challenge is to understand prospects for the specific combination of these manoeuvres within any concrete conjunction of political forces.

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