



PROJECT MUSE®

Deconstruction, Politics, and Psychoanalysis

Adam Rosen-Carole

The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis,
Volume 1, 2014, pp. 135-140 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ujd.2014.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/572077>

Deconstruction, Politics, and Psychoanalysis

ADAM ROSEN-CAROLE

Asked, "In relation to your own political commitment: would you say that it is a commitment against or in spite of your philosophy? Or should it be seen as a specifically deconstructive way of doing politics?" Derrida affirms, "Yes, I do all I can to try to adjust my 'commitments' to the unconditional affirmation that runs through 'deconstruction'" (2005, 128). Suggesting an even stronger bond or more intimate alliance, a more profound affinity or affiliation, indeed an internal connection or reciprocity between his intellectual activity and his political commitments and judgments, Derrida elsewhere speaks of "my reflections, *and thus also* my political commitments and evaluations" (2008, 213; emphasis added), and of "an active (and therefore also political) act of interpretation" (2008, 215).

Yet as committed to thoughtful praxis as he may have been, no doubt admiring the courageous engagements of public intellectuals such as Voltaire, Hugo, Zola, and Sartre, and despite, or perhaps in view of, his persistent availability to fantasies of resistance, Derrida maintained, and publicly expressed, deep reservations about the haste with which public intellectuals take positions within rather than thematizing or analyzing "the structure of [their] public space (press, media, modes of representation, etc.) or the nature of [their] language, [and] the philosophical or theoretical axioms of [their] own interventions" (2002, 113). Voltaire, Hugo, Zola, Sartre, and suchlike figures "who," Derrida

remarks, are “so easily called ‘intellectuals’” (1992, 38), are so eager to put “[their] authority *as . . . writer[s] . . . in the service of a . . . cause,*” that they fail to appreciate the mediating efficacy of the audiences to which and institutions through which their interventions are addressed (2002, 113). “They [do] not think,” Derrida continues, beginning to demarcate his particular manner of critical engagement, his ethico-theoretical principles or priorities, from theirs, that “they [need] to begin by analyzing and transforming the apparatus; they simply . . . [supply] it with a content, however revolutionary” (2002, 113).

Derrida, in contrast, proclaims and performs the priority of analyzing and engaging the scenic apparatus of his interventions, which “involves,” he says, “not only technical or political powers, procedures of editorial or media appropriation, the structure of public space (and thus of the supposed addressees one is addressing or whom one should be addressing),” but also “a logic, a rhetoric, an experience of language, and all the sedimentation this presupposes,” as well a history of critique that regulates the form of what will be considered an appropriate or legible question or demand, an intelligible intervention (2002, 113).

Derrida’s reticence to immediately assume a stance as a public intellectual, to put his authority as a writer, such as it is, in the service of a cause, is perhaps sourced in a worry that even though the public sphere is in principle open to and at times even solicitous of interventions by public intellectuals, it is organized to substantially transform the character and content of these interventions, adjusting them to the imperatives of spectacle and consensus, and so ensuring by means of the “event” or “critical intervention” that nothing happens, or as little as possible.

Nevertheless, Derrida manifestly refused to refrain from addressing normative demands in and to institutions that he knew full well would receive them as spectacular—thus aesthetically neutralized—performances of critical intervention; as reducible to an easy, salable, content (1992, 39); or as ponderous offerings encouraging optimistic attachments to the social structures critically interrogated or denounced, or to the broader traditions and

systems informing and supporting them, in virtue of their potentiality or perfectibility, or else as encouraging depressive realist attachments to the essentially corruptible, perhaps profoundly or even indelibly corrupted, institutions and practices under critical scrutiny. Refusing to acquiesce to the extortion of silent complacency as the condition for removal from the risks of institutional manipulation, Derrida repeatedly ventured normative claims that in all likelihood would be received as sentimental expressions of a public intellectual's heartfelt convictions, and so as authorizing by enacting a liberalist, anti-political because anti-antagonistic, relegation of value to privacy, conscience, or interiority, and of solidarity to compassion, or else a liberalist instrumental reduction of the political to an arena in which to pursue the hegemony of personal interests and values; in either case a consignment of normative orientation to subjective disposition or personal commitment, and therewith a depletion and withering of substantial ethical life consequent upon or correlative to the grossly irresponsible responsabilization of the individual and the compensatory expansion of affective or imaginary structures of sociality.

As reserved, cautious, critically scrupulous, and strategic in his interventions as he may have been, Derrida nevertheless advanced normative commitments in full view of the prospects that they would be received as public declarations of ultimately private preferences, and so, perhaps, as enticements for sadistically deflationary fantasies that the great genius is but a man, with more or less recognizable ethical and political views, a man perhaps luxuriating in academic abstraction from the imperatives of political pragmatism, professing exorbitant views on the condition of his institutional inoculation from the requirements of hegemonic political persuasion and institutional efficacy, but ultimately one of us, eminently understandable even if he takes a circuitous route to a recognizable position, indeed perhaps especially understandable as his circumlocutions perform the idealism and grandiosity we might like to inhabit were there time and world enough; or else as fuel for sadistically deflationary

fantasies that support the derogation and dismissal of intellectual work, indeed of thought; anxiety-alleviating fantasies that the work of thought, the specific modality or manner of discourse, or more broadly, of inscription, is irrelevant, a mere surplus or extravagance, no more than a highly cultured, ultra-refined, ultimately excessive route to what is, in the end, a more or less recognizable position—fantasies that his manner of thinking is merely ornamental, either distracting or entertaining in its discursive acrobatics, but, when it comes down to it, ultimately familiar, nothing too special.

What his many and multilayered cautions and precautions suggest is that Derrida was painfully aware that his normative injunctions were at risk of being received as institutionally misplaced proposals, fantasy legislations, and perhaps, as such, forms of narcissistic self-exhibition just on the near side of neurosis which, by means of a performative contract of mutual depravity, sponsor sadistically intrusive interests in the celebrity of the speaker and the sort of gossip about his ethics and politics by means of which the demanding character of his interventions, or more broadly, the task of thinking, is neutralized.

This refusal to avoid complicity with such distortions and extortions is perhaps meant to expose these manipulations, to spring the trap, so to speak, to provoke such manipulative mediations and thereby, in a way, analyze them, or give them to analyzability; at once to expose the impotence to which participatory initiative is condemned under contemporary conditions, to make clear that what an intervention, an initiative or intention, comes to, what it means, is a matter of the manner of its mediations, to demonstrate that public-participatory interventions are *absolutely exposed but hardly unregulated*; and simultaneously to do exactly what they seem to do, namely, to advance, while sophisticating and complicating, recognizable normative ambitions, or more broadly, to give a chance to the normative commitments at issue, to see what may come of them as they are taken up by unforeseen addresses and relayed through unanticipated networks, to take

a chance on the possibility that their efficacy may not be entirely exhaustible by the manipulative mediations to which they will be, inevitably, subjected, that the force or forces they bear, or may come to bear, may not be thoroughly determined by the institutional and phantasmatic mediations by which they are processed.

What I would like to underscore for the moment is that, so understood, Derrida's normative assertions, his commitments to various causes and ethical-political injunctions, judgments, and commitments, *are* (inter alia) analyses of the sociohistorical institutions in which they intervene, analyses concerned with how the democratic accessibility of the public sphere conspires with and obscures the effective immunity of the major centers of social reproduction from public intervention, thus with the collapse or eclipse or fantasy of the public sphere as a forum for collective self-determination.

Derrida's strategy of taking the bait and running all the risks may be an effort to expose the pretenses of the public sphere, to bring into view not just the *corruptability* of democracy but the corruption of democracy: the tendential becoming-ideology of democracy under conditions of neoliberalism. It may also be what he means by adjusting his "'commitments' to the unconditional affirmation that runs through 'deconstruction.'" By self-consciously risking, indeed cultivating an impotent ethical and political exemplarity, Derrida registers an experience of the world as praxis-resistant but perhaps not imperturbable. This is his self-analysis under the penumbra of the political.

Counting on the *après-coup*, the deferred materialization and unpredictable actualization-in-alteration, the gradual, glacially slow and largely under the radar realization of deconstructive and suchlike initiatives, is perhaps, then, wishful thinking. Hope in the place of praxis. But also, perhaps, a chance worth speculating on.

REFERENCES

- Derrida, Jacques. 1992. *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

-
- . 2002. "The Deconstruction of Actuality." In *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews (1971–2001)*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg, 85–116. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 2005. *Paper Machine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 2008. "Marx and Sons." In *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx,"* ed. Michael Sprinker, 213–69. New York: Verso.