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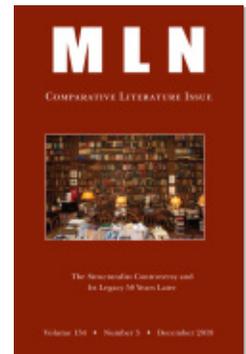
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Around Derrida's Intervention in Baltimore: "Decentering" as a Marker of Poststructural Displacement?



Claude Smith

This intervention focuses on some of the circumstances, issues, and consequences of the article "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," published by Derrida following the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins. As for the context, we know that 1966 was a "great" structuralist year. It is sometimes even said that it was *the* "structuralist year" because of the quantity of important works that have been published on structuralism at that time (Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme* 328; *History of Structuralism* 316). It is therefore also a year in which the problem of structuralism appeared, even in the eyes of a wide public, as a novelty.

Thus, an issue of the journal *L'Arc* was devoted to this subject, presenting the "scene" of the structuralist irruption as an anti-existentialist scene.¹ Jean-Paul Sartre was called upon to defend himself. This was obviously a somewhat questionable presentation of the situation, but it seems to be symptomatic of the terms in which a fairly broad public considered the advent of structuralism as a rupture with Sartre—to the point that the vocabulary used by the journalists was that of "conspiracy (*conjuración*)."² So, it was certainly not entirely by chance that some of these putative "conspirators" were invited in Baltimore, to discuss this structuralist "controversy" that the organizers of the conference intended to echo.

¹See *Jean-Paul Sartre*, special issue of *L'Arc*, no. 30, 1966.

Yet, this dimension of “rupture with Sartre” can be attenuated by the fact that it did not concern some of the main issues in which Sartre was engaged, whether they were about social class, race, or gender relations. From this point of view, what appeared to journalists as a general “conspiracy,” could be limited to a criticism of the more strictly philosophical position of the “subject first,” taken in the “absoluteness” of his founding freedom—which was, indeed, radically challenged.

It is nevertheless significant that, in this issue of *L'Arc*, among the counterarguments put forward by Sartre against his alleged structuralist opponents, the topic of “decentering” was already highlighted: Sartre reproached the “structuralists” of proposing a “decentering” that would make any “*praxis*” of the subject in history impossible (Sartre, “Jean-Paul Sartre répond” 91–92). This may already suggest that around the interpretation of this term, a large part of the meaning of what changed in this moment of intellectual life could be played out. However, it can be noted that “decentering” seems also to be the key term in order to understand what is at stake in Derrida’s intervention.

And yet, in Baltimore, the debate on existentialism was no longer central. This is particularly apparent in retrospect: fifty years later, it is not the presentation of the novelty of structuralist theses, but already the topic of *another* discussion, that makes us consider this moment as one of those in which a new approach would have been born, by which, if criticism was addressed to structuralism, it was less in the name of excessive “objectivity,” than of an *internal* limit needing to be overcome. It could still be a criticism of “totalization,” but from a significantly different point of view, that has sometimes been called “poststructuralist,” and of which Derrida’s intervention would be an essential witness, perhaps the most significant.

The term “decentering” was not, of course, created by Derrida. We saw that it was already used by Sartre. It is not a neologism, like “*différance*,” “*archi-trace*,” or others. But Derrida gave it an unprecedented critical potential: he managed to make it a disclosure of the difficulties inherent in any structuralism. From this point, one may wonder whether any “poststructuralism” is not dependent, in one way or another, on this kind of thought of decentering.

As the problems are those of a whole period, the analysis of these developments will be clarified by the reference to authors with whom Derrida was constantly discussing. This is all the more true if we take into account the fact that “decentering” does not present itself as a simple or unitary operation. It is not self-evident that one can speak of *the* decentering and understand precisely what it means, because it

is not self-evident that one can question in the same way the centrality of a subject of consciousness, or that of an ethnic group—or of logos, traditional ontology, the phallus, or the voice.

I will also try to insist on, or at least open up for reflection, a number of background issues, which concern in particular two aspects of the Derridean decentering, and whose impact has been decisive for many subsequent developments, particularly in the field of what we call *cultural studies*: the questioning of the centrality of the West, which has nourished some thinkers of the postcolonial current; and the questioning of the centrality of the phallus which is crucial in all kinds of attempts to rethink gender relations. We may also wonder, moreover, whether, or to what extent, it is pertinent to claim to unify these critical or deconstructive directions.

Let us turn to the text. It can be divided into three parts:

I. First of all, a kind of long introduction puts the history of the concept of structure into perspective. It deals both with a long duration—the permanence of the relationship between the structure and its center—and with an event—the rupture that would have occurred because of reflection on the “structurality of the structure.”

II. Secondly, the text focuses more precisely on Lévi-Strauss and the human sciences; then both the merits of a certain structuralist displacement, and some of its difficulties, are considered, notably concerning the relationship between ethnological and metaphysical concepts.

III. In the third stage, points of tension are delimited, and perspectives are opened, whether on the side of “supplementarity” or on the side of the various possible “interpretations of the interpretation.”

Let us try to focus on each of these points. How do they allow us to reflect on the issues I have just announced?

I. First, the historical perspective. I will begin with a remark on the use of the term “redoubling.” Confusion is possible here, particularly because of the implicit reference, identifiable from the beginning of the text, to certain developments in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. This reference, which runs throughout the text, corresponds to a necessarily recent reading of the book (published in 1966). However, Foucault, in this “Archaeology of the Human Sciences,” which had almost been entitled “Archaeology of Structuralism,” already gave a very particular place to this theme of the “double.” The aim was to describe a historical-epistemological situation, marked by “the

doubling of the empirical in the transcendental”—concurrently with the “repetitions” of the unthought in the Cogito, or the “withdrawal” or “retreat” in the “return of the origin” (Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* 329–346; *The Order of Things* 347–366). But these “redoubling” and “repetitions” were then considered as impasses inherent to modern humanism, from which we could only escape by breaking away from the expectations of modernity.

For Derrida, the situation is quite different. At the same time as he implicitly refers to them, it seems that he distances himself from Foucault’s developments—particularly concerning the use of lexicons of the “*episteme*” or “*arche*-ology.” As for the terms “repetition” or “redoubling,” they are more invested here with the positive values that are given to them, in Derrida’s eyes, by the thoughts of the Eternal Return (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Freud), or the repetition-destruction of metaphysics (Heidegger). As a result, here, redoubling is less envisaged as a sterile and impotent repetition, than as what, even in the structuralist *event*, would make it possible to break away.

It may be noted that, in his intervention at the opening of the Baltimore conference, René Girard already presented this “doubling” of the interpretation on itself as an original characteristic of the structuralist perspective. Derrida takes up this position, specifying that this redoubling operation is also a reflection on the “structurality of the structure.” It is a thought that becomes a repetition: the structure becomes capable of this “fold,” we could say, by which it turns around on itself. And at the same time, it becomes able to understand “the law that commands its desire for the center”—the desire to limit the play, or to ground it, to return it to a center. Thus, repetition opens up this understanding that the desire for a center is the desire for a *fixed* center that would escape the logic of substitution that it simultaneously organizes. However, by writing its history, we reveal the series of possible names of this center that thus also appear as substitutes. This creates a new situation.

I do not insist any more on the role of this historical perspective, but it is important to keep in mind the positive role it gives to “redoubling.”

II. I now come to the second stage of Derrida’s intervention: the moment when the discussion with Lévi-Strauss really begins. This discussion is not simply polemical. Certainly, it echoes the reproaches of “an-historicism” or “empiricism” that are frequently addressed to the anthropologist. But each time, the assessment is nuanced: it is a

mixture of praise and criticism that emphasizes a supposed *ambiguity* in Lévi-Strauss's approach which needs to be pointed out.

Lévi-Strauss's approach is first positively evaluated because it implies a decentering, a *shifting of perspective*, and makes it possible for the West to critically look back on itself. Thus, a few years later, Lyotard will make a particularly subversive use of this work, proposing a comparison of the "form of mythical discourses" (such as the original myth of the Murngins) with some of the most traditional Western rhetorical and philosophical forms (from the philosophies of history to the "construction of the notion of the Living Present" in Edmund Husserl), showing that they all obey the same requirement: that of absorbing the emergence of otherness, or the event, in a familiar system of differential oppositions (Lyotard, *Discours*, figure 149–153; *Discourse*, Figure 146–150). Anyway, the effect of these analyses is to make the Western discourse lose some of its status as an exception, and to question its character as an irreplaceable, or in-substitutable, center.

What is criticized, however, is the *use* that Lévi-Strauss makes of certain *concepts*. For Derrida, this problematic use contradicts his fundamentally decentering position; and it leads to the double pitfall of Rousseauism and empiricism:

1. Derrida first uses the example of the relationship between nature and culture, and the status of the prohibition of incest. He criticizes the way in which Lévi-Strauss, at the same time as he disrupts the traditional opposition of nature and culture, nevertheless relies on this same old opposition when considering what would make the Nambikwara "innocent," or their "extraordinary goodness." For Derrida, as he explained in *On Grammatology*, such remarks, even if they were made in a non-theoretical language (that of *The Sad Tropics*), are symptomatic: they could be articulated with the "phonocentrist" way in which Lévi-Strauss analyses the appearance of writing in these societies as the corruption of a "good origin" ("pre-scriptural innocence"), in very Rousseauist terms. Beyond the legitimate empirical pleasure Lévi-Strauss may have experienced in the company of the Nambikwaras, the form of his assessment could be considered a symptom, a way of "repeating" (in a pejorative sense this time) a very traditional philosophical gesture. This would lead to an unthinking complicity between a certain "counter-ethnocentrism" and ethnocentrism—through a kind of essentialization, largely mythical, of the "good savage."

2. For Derrida, it is important to be concerned, particularly in the human sciences, with the way in which existing concepts are used:

they are never completely irrelevant from the point of view of the metaphysical heritage for which they are responsible. Why persist in criticizing the concepts of an author who willingly assumes his embarrassment, and claims only to do what is possible, with the means at hand? Here, the sequence towards the Lévi-Straussian theme of "*bricolage*" takes place. Here again, Derrida's critical position is twofold: on the one hand, Lévi-Strauss shifts the discourse by claiming his work to be "mytho-poetics"; but then, his positioning in terms of method is subject to a certain reproach of incoherence, compared to what was one of the starting points of structuralism, namely a form of opposition to empiricism. From then on, Derrida tells us, uncontrolled empiricism also reintroduces, into Lévi-Strauss's own work, uncontrolled forms of ethnocentrism.

This time, Derrida seems to agree with certain aspects of Foucault's critical analysis of redoubling, or of "empirico-transcendental *doublet*" (empiricism and transcendentalism as symmetrical and correlated limits for knowledge). But he is perhaps even closer to Althusser, whose analyses, published in 1965, repeatedly insist on the correlation between the absence of a rigorous theoretical concept, the "epistemological void," and the "philosophical" or "ideological fullness," which would tend to take its place (in particular by "abuse of origin"), because ideology would "abhor a vacuum" (Althusser, *Pour Marx* 1, 127, 2, I 80, II 56; *For Marx* 127, 107, 145). Except that Derrida affirms less the need to overcome ideology by science than the need to escape metaphysics through its deconstruction, while avoiding the traps set by tradition.

With regard to ethnocentrism, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist discourse then appears to be caught in the tension between two "doublings": the deconstructive redoubling by which the relativity of the Western center (particularly as a Living Present) is exhibited; and the redoubling as an unthought repetition of a metaphysical gesture or, in Foucauldian terms, of a certain modernity. The latter would be, in a rather paradoxical way, like a kind of internal turning point to a certain ethnocentrism: from the belief in the Living Present as an organizing center, or from teleological evolutionism, to what could be called a form of "empirico-Rousseauism."

III. Let's come to the last moment. The aim is to question the limits of the structural method. Derrida discusses here the 1964 Overture of Lévi Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*, in which it is a question of knowing what to do, with regard to totalizing ambitions towards the

object in ethnology. It is also an opportunity to review the relationships between empiricism and the transcendental, within the framework of the structural method. The limit could be considered in two ways:

First, from the point of view of the *too much*, and the empirical inexhaustibility of the field: the “theoretically limitless series” of cultural events cannot then be apprehended for itself, but it could be, says Lévi-Strauss, from the point of view of its conditions of possibility (almost transcendental), that is, of the syntax and the “body of rules” which “presides over” its engendering (Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques - Le cru et le cuit* 15–16; *The Raw and the Cooked* 7–8).

Second, from the point of view of the *lack*, and the absence of a center: in this respect, Derrida proposes a comparison between the 1964 text and the 1950 “Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss,” which allows him to introduce the topic of supplementarity: if there is no center, or at least no fixed, absolute center—and at the bottom, that is what structuralism is the witness to—then there remains something like a hole, or a lack, and there is a place for the substitution game. That is to say, there is something coming anyway. But it’s something floating, like *mana* in some cultures, or “the set of terms that can take its place.” It is this type of elements that Lévi-Strauss proposes to designate as a “*valeur symbolique zero*” (a term taken from linguistics), or to consider as a supplementary signifier—without signified, but which would be the condition (almost transcendental) for the possibility of the chain of meanings.

As for the status of this element, we can refer to what Deleuze calls, in a text written at about the same time, and published a few years later, the “empty square criterion.” Deleuze is also interested in the way in which, in any structuralist approach, it is about this type of “floating element” that a substitution game would take place, decisive for the articulation between “series” (such as those of signifiers and signified). However, the main example taken by Deleuze in this regard is that of Lacan: it seems to him, for example, that the “letter,” in the context of the “Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*” (to which Derrida himself will return later, from a different perspective), plays the role of the “floating element” *par excellence*, reflecting what it means to be an “empty square.” More precisely, Deleuze notes that Lacan tends to think of the “floating” element under the name of “symbolic phallus,” both “missing in its place” and “making a structure of the entirety of sexuality” (Deleuze, “A quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?” 263; “How do we recognize structuralism?” 187–188).

Derrida, in the text we are considering, does not mention the *Écrits*. But some parallels seem to be possible with this other major 1966 publication. Lacan invites us first to think of the signifying order, and all the effects signified, from a signifier located in an exceptional position, correlated to the primordial repression, and which only functions as veiled. Second, because of the missing signifier, the subject cannot exhaust the meaning of his being: he can only propose, in exchange currency, something else. As such, and even when the paternal metaphor gives support to the law from which the desire is determined, the “center” of the structure remains irreducibly floating between the (imaginary) lack of a sexual object, the (symbolic) elision from the signifying chain, and the designation of the impossible (of real) *jouissance*.

Such a point of view seems in any case already to escape the alternative between the two “interpretations of interpretation” (nostalgia for the origin or affirmation of the free play) that Derrida proposes, at the end of his text, to try to exceed. When later Derrida (and even more Deleuze) will suspect Lacan of placing the phallus in the position of “transcendental signifier,” he will never do so in an absolutely clear-cut way: he will sometimes take the risk of simplifying, and of identifying it a little too quickly with the metaphysical “centers” that have always been established by tradition; but he will also pay recurrent tribute to the merits of the Lacanian critical readings of this same tradition.

To conclude, I will simply try to open the discussion with regard to the two issues that I highlighted in the introduction as issues related to the study of Derrida’s text:

On the one hand, it appears that Lévi-Strauss’s treatment of the opposition between nature and culture has contributed to shifting the conceptions about the West’s relations with its “others”—the term “nature” having played a central role in determining the meaning of this otherness. However, if ethnology represents a displacement in this respect, we could say that Derrida proposes a displacement of *this displacement*, which has the effect of relaunching, by making it more complex, the problem of developing alternative perspectives to the dominant model, from the point of view of the “peripheral” cultural worlds; but he also raises the question of knowing to what extent the center-periphery opposition retains its meaning, since the consistency of the “center” is itself, in some respects, put into question.

On the other hand, highlighting the logic of supplementarity, or the status of the “floating element,” seems to constitute privileged

places around which reflection on the effects of a certain “centrality,” for example of the phallus, can be organized—even if it is not yet thematized by Derrida, and even if its modalities may differ considerably, between its cultural modes of existence, and its consideration by philosophy, human sciences, or psychoanalysis. This results in specific difficulties. To put it briefly: if the centrality of the phallus is that of a “floating element,” can it be subject to the same type of criticism as the traditional metaphysical centralities, previously identified? We know that Derrida’s positions towards Lacan will often be very nuanced in this respect.

I would like to point out in passing—but of course it would require elaboration—that these two questions seem quite distinct *a priori*. In other words, these are not the same conceptions of the center, at first sight, as the one that opposes a logocentric centrality to an external and wild “nature,” and the one that organizes the relationships between a play of presence/absence, of original supplement on the one hand, and on the other hand the articulation of the elements within a structure. These conceptions seem to refer, at first sight, to different places of reflection—except that in the second case, it is the absence of natural origin that confronts us with the twisted logic of its “supplement.” We know that to think about the intersection of these perspectives, Derrida later will propose the ambiguous term “phallogocentrism,” but it will then be less a question of reflecting on the method of the human sciences than of determining the relationship between two types of philosophical mastery (the “hierarchy” and the “wrap”) whose complicity remains to be specified (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, XV-XVII / XIX-XXII). As for the 1966 text, in any case, it does not claim to provide a unifying solution. However, it is one of the merits of Derrida’s intervention, and one of the things that may have given us pause for thought, that this way of opening up these two fields of questioning broadly, and of beginning to show their legitimacy, even their necessity, in this fruitful moment of the return of culture on itself, made possible by structuralism in the human sciences.

Nanterre, IREPH

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