Derrida's Deconstruction Of Authority

Saul Newman

2001

Contents

Macquarie University, Department of Sociology, Sydney, Australia

Derrida occupies a number of crucial terrains in the radical imaginary, and has capital consequences for anti-authoritarian politics. Through the unmasking and deconstruction of the textual authority of logocentrism, Derrida allows us to develop a critique, using the same logic, of the contemporary political institutions and discourses based on this authority. He also shows us that no identity is pure and closed — it is always contaminated by what it excludes. This undermines oppositional politics, because identity is in part constituted by what it opposes. More importantly, through the various deconstructive strategies and moves that Derrida employs, he allows us to examine the subtle and pernicious logic of the *place of power* — the propensity for radical politics to reaffirm the authority it seeks to overthrow. He points to the limits of the two possible strategies of radical politics — inversion and subversion — showing that they both culminate in the reaffirmation of authoritarian structures and hierarchies. That is to say, they both fall victim to the logic of the place of power. These strategies are the two poles that skewer radical political theory. Derrida, however, shows a means of transcending this impasse by weaving together subversion and inversion, affirmation and absolute rejection, in a way that re-evaluates these terms, and thus *displaces* place. In doing so, he goes beyond the problematic of poststructuralism by retaining Man as his own limit — leaving him constitutively open to a radical outside. This notion of an outside constructed through the limits of the inside — the limits of philosophy and politics — is central to any understanding of the political. It constitutes a politico-ethical dimension of justice and emancipation, which works at the limits of the law and authority, unmasking its hidden violence, and destabilizing institutions that are based on it. Derrida's political thinking may be seen, then, as an *an-archism*, an interrogation of authority, a politico-ethical strategy which questions even its own foundations, and forces us to re-evaluate the limits of our contemporary political reality.

Abstract: This article explores the political aspect of Derrida's work, in particular his critique of authority. Derrida employs a series of strategies to expose the antagonisms within Western philosophy, whose structures of presence provide a rational and essentialist foundation for political institutions. Therefore, Derrida's interrogation of the universalist claims of philosophy may be applied to the pretensions of political authority. Moreover, I argue that Derrida's deconstruction of the two paths of 'reading' — inversion and subversion — may be applied to the question of revolutionary politics, to show that revolution often culminates in the reaffirmation of authority. Derrida navigates a path between these two strategies, allowing one to formulate philosophical and political strategies that work at the limits of discourse, thereby pointing to an outside. This outside, I argue, is crucial to radical politics because it unmasks the violence and illegitimacy of institutions and laws.

The political aspect of Jacques Derrida's thinking, in particular his critique of authority, has been somewhat neglected. However his interrogation of rational and essentialist structures in philosophy makes his work crucial to any contemporary critique of political institutions and discourses, and indeed any understanding of radical politics. Derrida instigates a series of strategies or 'moves' to unmask the suppressed antagonisms and differences within the Western philosophical discourse whose claims to universality, wholeness and lucid self-reflection have been sounded since the time of Plato. His critique has important implications for political theory: his questioning of the claims of philosophy may be applied to the claims of political institutions founded upon them. Derrida's discussion of the relation between metaphysical structures of essence and presence and the hierarchies and dominations they make possible, as well as his critique of oppositional and binary thinking, allows his work to be read as an assault on the place of power. The place of power refers here to the tendency of radical political philosophies and movements to reaffirm the very structures of authority they seek to overthrow. However, the logic of *deconstruction* operates in a way that is somewhat different from the poststructuralist logic of dispersal that characterizes the work of such thinkers as Foucault and Deleuze. Derrida allows us to explore the possibility of strategies of politics that refer to a radical exteriority — an outside to power and authority. Through this outside one can interrogate and resist authority without invoking another form of authority in its place.

Deconstruction

'Deconstruction' is the term most commonly associated with Derrida and, while it is a widely misunderstood and misused term, it will nevertheless be used here to describe the general

Derrida's an-archy

It is through this form of deconstructive logic that political action becomes *an-archic*. An-archic action is distinguished here from classical anarchist politics — the anarchism of Kropotkin and Bakunin — which is governed by an original principle such as human essence or rationality. While it is conditioned by certain principles, an-anarchic action is not necessarily determined or limited by them. An-archic action is the possible outcome of a deconstructive strategy aimed at undermining the metaphysical authority of various political and philosophical discourses. Reiner Schurmann defines an-archic action as action without a 'why?'.[46] However, a deconstructive notion of an-archy might be somewhat different: it might be seen as action *with* a 'why?' — that is, action forced to account for itself and question itself, not in the name of a founding principle, but in the name of the deconstructive enterprise which it has embarked upon. In other words, an-archic action is forced to account for itself, just as it forces authority to account for itself. It is this selfquestioning that allows political action to resist authority, to avoid becoming what it opposes. So this notion of an-archism may be seen as making radical politics account for itself, making it aware of the essentialist and potentially dominating possibilities within its own discourse. Moreover, through some of the deconstructive moves and strategies outlined above, an-anarchism seeks to free radical politics from essentialist categories that inevitably limit it. Derrida's unmasking of the authority and hierarchy that continue to inhabit Western thought, as well as his outlining of various strategies to counter them, have made this an-archist intervention possible.

---

[46]Reiner Schurmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 10.

cipation is still at work today, although in different forms and represented by different struggles.

The question of rights reflects upon the differences between deconstructive politics and classical revolutionary politics. Both strategies have a notion of political rights and a form of emancipative struggle on the basis of these rights. The difference is, though, that classical revolutionary politics sees these rights as essential and founded in natural law, while the politics of deconstruction would see these rights as *radically founded*: in other words, these rights are without stable foundations and, therefore, their content is not prefixed. This leaves them open to a plurality of different political articulations. A deconstructive analysis questions the idea of natural, inalienable rights. Derrida, for instance, in his critique of liberal social contract theory, argues that these 'natural' rights are actually constituted discursively through the social contract and that, therefore, they cannot claim to be natural.[45] These rights, then, are displaced from the social to the natural realm, and the social is subordinated to the natural, just as writing is subordinated to speech. As Derrida argues in his critique of Rousseau, the social is the supplement that threatens, and at the same time is necessary for, the identity of the natural: the idea of natural rights can be formulated only discursively through the contract. There is no pure natural foundation for rights, and this leaves them open to change and reinterpretation. They can no longer remain inscribed within human essence and, therefore, can no longer be taken for granted. If they are without firm foundations, one cannot always assume that they will continue to exist. They must be fought for and, in the process, will be reformulated by these struggles.

direction of Derrida's work. Christopher Norris defines deconstruction as a series of moves, which include the dismantling of conceptual oppositions and hierarchical systems of thought, and an unmasking of 'aporias' and moments of selfcontradiction in philosophy.[1] It might be said that deconstruction is a way of reading texts — philosophical texts — with the intention of making these texts question themselves, forcing them to take account of their own contradictions, and exposing the antagonisms they have ignored or repressed. What deconstruction is not, however, is a philosophical system. Derrida does not question one kind of philosophy from the standpoint of another, more complete, less contradictory system. This would be, as I shall argue, merely to substitute one kind of authority for another. This is a trap Derrida assiduously tries to avoid. He therefore does not come from a point of departure outside philosophy. There is no essential place of outside the system. Rather Derrida works *within* the discourse of Western philosophy itself, looking for hidden antagonisms that jeopardize it. Moreover, his aim is not to undermine philosophy, as has often been claimed. On the contrary, Derrida's critique of philosophy is itself fundamentally philosophical. By opening philosophy to this questioning, Derrida is being faithful to the spirit of philosophy: unquestioning and slavish adulation ultimately makes a mockery of philosophy. Deconstruction is, therefore, a strategy of questioning philosophy's claims to reflexive self-identity.

Deconstruction may be seen as a critique of the authoritarian structures in philosophy, in particular 'logocentrism' — that is, philosophy's subordination, throughout its history, of writing to speech. The privileging of speech over writing in philosophical texts is an example of what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence' in Western philosophy. It is an indication of how far philosophy is still grounded in the metaphysical concepts it claims to have transcended. Derrida points to

---

[45] Michael Ryan, 'Deconstruction and Social Theory: the Case of Liberalism', in *Working Through Derrida*, ed. Madison, p. 160.

[1] Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p. 19.

Plato's *Phaedrus* in which writing is rejected as a medium for conveying and recording truth: it is seen as an artifice, an invention which cannot be a substitute for the authenticity and immediate presence of meaning associated with speech. Where speech is seen as a means of approaching the truth because of its immediacy, writing is seen as a dangerous corruption of speech — a lesser form of speech, which is destructive of memory and susceptible to deceit. Moreover, speech is associated with the authority of the teacher, while writing is seen by Plato as a threat to this authority because it allows the pupil to learn without the teacher's guidance.[2]

Derrida attacks this *logocentric* thinking by pointing out certain contradictions within it. He shows that Plato cannot represent speech except through the metaphor of writing, while at the same time denying that writing has any real efficacy as a medium at all. As Derrida says: 'it is not any less remarkable here that the so-called living discourse should suddenly be described by a metaphor borrowed from the order of the very thing one is trying to exclude from it.'[3] Speech is, therefore, dependent on the writing that it excludes. Writing is an example of the 'logic of supplementarity': a *supplement* is excluded by presence, but is, at the same time, necessary for the formation of its identity. Writing is thus a supplement to speech: it is excluded by speech, but is nevertheless necessary for the presence of speech. The unmasking of this logic of supplementarity is one of the deconstructive moves employed by Derrida to resist the logocentrism in philosophy. Speech claims to be a self-presence that is immediate and authentic to itself, whereas writing is seen as diminishing this presence. However, Derrida shows that this authenticity, this purity of self-identity is always questionable: it is always contaminated by what it tries to exclude. According to this logic no identity is ever complete or

tional and moral categories — it can also become a discourse of liberation if it can be unmoored from its essentialist foundations and radically refounded as a non-essentialist, constitutively open political signifier. As Derrida says:

> Nothing seems to me less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal. We cannot attempt to disqualify it today, whether crudely or with sophistication, at least not without treating it too lightly and forming the worst complicities. But beyond these identified territories of juridico-politicisation on the grand political scale, beyond all self-serving interpretations … other areas must constantly open up that at first seem like secondary or marginal areas.[43]

One could argue that because poststructuralism abandons the humanist project, it robs itself of the possibility of utilizing the politico-ethical content of this discourse for theorizing resistance against domination. In other words, it has thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Because Derrida, on the other hand, does not rule out the Enlightenment-humanist project, he does not deny himself the emancipative possibilities contained in its discourses. Nor should radical politics deny itself these possibilities. Derrida suggests that we can free the discourse of emancipation from its essentialist foundations, thereby expanding it to include other political struggles hitherto regarded as of little importance. In other words, the discourse of emancipation can be left structurally open, so that its content would no longer be limited or determined by its foundations. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, for instance, may be expanded to encompass the rights of women, sexual and ethnic minorities, and even animals.[44] The logic of eman-

---

[2]ibid., p. 31.

[3]Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: Uni-

[43]ibid., p. 28.

[44]ibid.

for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as an event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations.'[41] Justice is an event that opens itself to the other, to the impossible. Its effects are always unpredictable because it cannot be determined, as law can, by an a priori discourse. It is an excess which overflows from law and cannot be grasped by it. Justice functions as an open, empty signifier: its meaning or content is not predetermined. Derrida's notion of justice is without a pre-determining logic, a justice whose very structure is governed by a lack, an emptiness which leaves it open to reinterpretation and contestation.

The politics of emancipation

Justice occupies a politico-ethical dimension that cannot be reduced to law or institutions, and it is for this reason that justice opens up the possibility for a transformation of law and politics.[42] This transformation though is not an absolute rejection of the existing order, because this leads only to the founding of a new order. It is much more radical than that: it is a refounding of political and legal discourse in a way that unmasks the violence and lawlessness of its origins, and lack of legitimate ground, thus leaving it open to continual and unpredictable reinterpretation. This logic of unmasking — which is a political logic *par excellence* — may be applied to our political reality to expose its limits. This is not to reject our contemporary political discourses but, rather, to reinterpret and re-evaluate them. For instance, the discourse of emancipation, which has been with us since the French Revolution, should not be rejected but, rather, reformulated. While the Enlightenment-humanist ideal of emancipation has the potential for becoming a discourse of domination — through its essentialization of ra-

---

[41]ibid., p. 27.
[42]ibid.

pure: it is constituted by that which threatens it. Derrida does not want to deny self-identity or presence: he merely wants to show that this presence is never as pure as it claims to be. It is always open to the other, and contaminated by it.

This logic of *supplementarity* may be applied to the question of classical revolutionary politics, which centres around an essential identity. Thus, in Marxist discourse the proletariat is a revolutionary class whose identity is essentially opposed to the political and social structures of capitalism. Might it be argued, then, that these structures are actually a supplement to proletarian identity itself, in the same way that writing is the supplement to speech? Any identity of resistance would be highly problematic if it was, in part, constituted by the very forces it professed to oppose. Derrida's critique throws into doubt the question of essential identity and whether it can continue to be foundation for political action against power and authority. Moreover his critique of self-identity forces us to confront the fact that power itself cannot be contained in stable identities — such as the state, for instance. Rather power is an identity that is always unstable, contingent and diffuse.

Derrida continues this critique of essential identity by showing not only that its unity and purity are questionable, but also that it constitutes an authoritarian identity. It establishes a series of hierarchical binary relationships in philosophy, in which one term is subordinated to another. Derrida sees these as 'violent hierarchies'. Logocentrism establishes the binary hierarchy of speech/writing, in which writing is subordinated to speech, representation to presence. Presence constitutes a form of textual authority that attempts to dominate and exclude its supplement. However, this authority is continually jeopardized by the excluded supplement because it is essential to the formation of the identity of the dominant term. These binary structures nevertheless form a *place of power* in philosoph-

---

versity of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 148.

ical discourse. They provide the foundations for political domination. For instance, Foucault argues that philosophy's binary separation of reason/unreason is the basis for the domination and incarceration of the mad. Binary structures in philosophy perpetuate practices and discourses of domination.

Inversion/subversion

It must be made clear, however, that Derrida does not simply want to invert the terms of these binaries so that the subordinated term becomes the privileged term. He does not want to put writing in the place of speech, for instance. Inversion in this way leaves intact the hierarchical, authoritarian structure of the binary division. Such a strategy only reaffirms the place of power in the very attempt to overthrow it. One could argue that Marxism fell victim to this logic by replacing the bourgeois state with the equally authoritarian workers' state. This is a logic that haunts our radical political imaginary. Revolutionary political theories have often succeeded only in reinventing power and authority in their own image. However, Derrida also recognizes the dangers of subversion — that is, the radical strategy of overthrowing the hierarchy altogether, rather than inverting its terms. For instance, the classical anarchist's critique of Marxism went along the lines that Marxism neglected political power — in particular the power of the state — for economic power, and this would mean a restoration of political power in a Marxist revolution. Rather, for anarchists, the state and all forms of political power must be abolished as the first revolutionary act. However, Derrida believes that subversion and inversion both culminate in the same thing — the reinvention of authority, in different guises. Thus, the anarchist critique is based on the Enlightenment idea of a rational and moral human essence that power denies, and yet we know from Derrida that any essential identity involves a radical ex-

— in the text of philosophy, just as other struggles might resist the state in the 'text' of politics. Indeed, there is no point separating the deconstruction of philosophical texts from the deconstruction of power: the two realms of struggle are inextricable because political authority is dependent upon its sanctioning by various texts, such as those by Hobbes, and by the logocentric discourse of reason. The deconstructive moment is a 'revolutionary' moment in this sense.

However, if one is to avoid re-establishing the authority of law in one's struggle against it, then law must be distinguished from justice. Law, for Derrida, is merely the general application of a rule, while justice is an opening of law to the other, to the singularity which law cannot account for. Justice exists in a relation of alterity to law: it opens the discourse of law to an outside. It performs a deconstructive displacing of law. For a decision to be just, for it to account for the singularity denied by law, it must be different each time. It cannot be the mere application of the rule — it must continually reinvent the rule. Therefore, justice conserves the law because it operates in the name of the law; but at the same time, it suspends the law because it is being continually reinterpreted. As Derrida says: 'for a decision to be just and responsible, it must … be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, re-justify it.'[39]

Justice, moreover, exists in an ethical realm because it implies freedom and responsibility of actions.[40] Justice is the experience of the impossible because it always exists in a state of suspension and undecidability. It is always incalculable: the promise of something yet to come, which must never be completely grasped or understood, because if it is it would cease to be justice and become law. As Derrida says: 'There is an avenir

---

[39]ibid., p. 23.
[40]ibid., pp. 22–3.

violence without ground.'[36] Like Foucault, Derrida shows that the origins of laws and institutions are violent — they are antagonistic and without essential ground. This does not mean that the origins of law are illegal: because they are prior to law, they are neither legal nor illegal.[37] Rather, the legitimacy of law is undecidable. A deconstructive interrogation of law reveals the absence, the empty place at the base of the edifice of law, the violence at the root of institutional authority. The authority of law can, therefore, be questioned: it can never reign absolute because it is contaminated by its own foundational violence. This critique allows one to interrogate any institutional and political discourse that claims to rest on the authority of the law, and this makes it an invaluable tool of radical anti-authoritarian politics.

However, as Derrida argues, deconstruction cannot have as its aim the complete destruction of all authority: this only succumbs, as we have seen, to the logic of place. As Derrida says, the two temptations of deconstruction can be likened to Walter Benjamin's notion of the alternate paths of the general strike — to replace the state or to abolish it:

> For there is something of the general strike, and thus of the revolutionary situation in every reading that founds something new and that remains unreadable in regard to established canons and norms of reading, that is to say the present state of reading or what figures the State, with a capital S, in the state of possible reading.[38]

In this sense, then, deconstruction may be seen as a strategy of resistance against the authority of meaning — the *state*

---

[36]Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', *Deconstruction & the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–66 (p. 14).

[37]ibid.

[38]ibid., p. 37.

clusion or suppression of other identities. Thus, anarchism substituted political and economic authority for a rational authority founded on an Enlightenment- humanist subjectivity. Both radical politico-theoretical strategies then — the strategy of inversion, as exemplified by Marxism, and the strategy of subversion, as exemplified by anarchism — are two sides of the same logic of logic of 'place'. So for Derrida:

> What must occur then is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy, for anarchy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather the Umdrehung must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself.[4]

In other words, to avoid the lure of authority one must go beyond both the anarchic desire to destroy hierarchy, and the mere reversal of terms. Rather, as Derrida suggests, if one wants to avoid this trap the hierarchical structure itself must be transformed. Political action must invoke a *rethinking* of revolution and authority in a way that traces a path between these two terms, so that it does not merely reinvent the place of power. It could be argued that Derrida propounds an anarchism of his own, if by *anarchism* one means a questioning of all authority, including textual and philosophical authority, as well as a desire to avoid the trap of reproducing authority and hierarchy in one's attempt to destroy it.

This deconstructive attempt to transform the very structure of hierarchy and authority, to go beyond the binary opposition, is also found in Nietzsche. Nietzsche believes that one cannot merely oppose authority by affirming its opposite: this

---

[4]Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 81.

is only to react to and, thus, affirm the domination one is supposedly resisting. One must, he argues, transcend oppositional thinking altogether — go beyond truth and error, beyond being and becoming, beyond good and evil.[5] For Nietzsche it is simply a moral prejudice to privilege truth over error. However, he does not try to counter this by privileging error over truth, because this leaves the opposition intact. Rather, he refuses to confine his view of the world to this opposition: 'Indeed what compels us to assume that there exists any essential antithesis between "true" and "false"? Is it not enough to suppose grades of apparentness and as it were lighter and darker shades and tones of appearance?'[6] Nietzsche *displaces*, rather than replaces, these oppositional and authoritarian structures of thought — he displaces place. This strategy of displacement, similarly adopted by Derrida, provides certain clues to developing a non-essentialist theory of resistance to power and authority. Rather than reversing the terms of the binary opposition, one should perhaps question, and try to make problematic, its very structure.

The end(s) of man

The prevalence of these binary structures indicates, according to Derrida, how much philosophy is still tied to metaphysics: it is still dominated, in other words, by the place of metaphysics. In the same way, one might argue that political theory is still dominated by the need for a place, for some sort of essence that it has never had, and yet continually tries to reinvent. The demand for a self-identical essence in politics and philosophy would be, according to Derrida, the residue of the

---

[5]See Alan D. Schrift, 'Nietzsche and the Critique of Oppositional Thinking', *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989): 783–90.

[6]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1990), p. 65.

tions moral philosophy: rather, it is a *re-evaluation* of ethics.[35] It shows us that moral principles cannot be absolute or pure: they are always contaminated by what they try to exclude. Good is always contaminated by evil, reason by unreason. What Derrida questions is the *ethics of morality*: if morality becomes an absolute discourse, then can it still be considered moral or ethical? Deconstruction allows us to open the realm of ethics to reinterpretation and difference, and this opening is itself ethical. It is an ethics of *impurity*. If morality is always contaminated by its other — if it is never pure — then every moral judgement or decision is necessarily undecidable. Moral judgement must always be selfquestioning and cautious because its foundations are not absolute. Unlike much moral philosophy grounded on the firm foundations of human essence, deconstructive ethics has no such privileged place and, therefore, enjoys no such self-assurance.

Law, justice and authority

The *undecidability* of judgement, which is the necessary outcome of a deconstructive critique, has implications for political discourses and institutions, particularly the institution of law. Derrida argues that the authority of law is questionable and, to a certain extent, illegitimate. This is because the authority that supposedly grounds law is legitimized only when law is instituted. That means that the authority upon which law is established is, strictly speaking, non-legal, because it had to exist prior to law. Therefore, the original act of instituting law is an illegitimacy, a violence: 'Since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a

---

[35]Richard Kearney, 'Derrida's Ethical Re-Turn', in *Working Through Derrida*, ed. Gary B. Madison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 30).

the violence of an ethical outside, of an *alterity* that is ethical in its exclusion and singularity. Levinas tries to transcend Western philosophy, to rupture it by confronting it with the Other, the point of irreducibility which will not fit into its structures.[32] Deconstruction may be seen, therefore, as an ethical strategy which opens philosophy to the *other*. It tries to step, if only for an instant, beyond the confines of reason and historical necessity, and this 'stepping beyond', this momentary transgression, constitutes an ethical dimension — an *ethics of alterity*. Derrida writes:

> To 'deconstruct' philosophy, thus, would be to think — in a most faithful, interior way — the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine — from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy — what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this somewhere motivated repression.[33]

This questioning of philosophy does not lead to the moral nihilism that deconstruction has often been accused of promoting. As John Caputo argues, deconstruction is a strategy of *responsibility* to the excluded other. Unlike hermeneutics, which tries to assimilate difference into the order of the same, of Being, deconstruction tries to open a space for difference. Derrida's thinking is, therefore, a *responsible anarchy*, not an irresponsible anarchy as some have claimed.[34] Deconstruction, then, is by no means a rejection of ethics, even when it ques-

category of the divine. God has not been completely usurped from philosophy, as has always been claimed. God has only been reinvented in the form of essence. Derrida is influenced here by Nietzsche, who argues that as long as we continue to believe absolutely in grammar, in essence, in the metaphysical presuppositions of language, we continue to believe in God. As much as we may claim the contrary, we have not ousted God from philosophy. The place, the authority of the category of the divine remains intact, only reinscribed in the demand for presence. For Derrida the Man of humanist discourse has been reinscribed in the place of God:

> What was named in this way was nothing other than the metaphysical unity of Man and God, the relation of man to God, the project of becoming God as the project of constituting human-reality. Atheism changes nothing in this fundamental structure.[7]

This spectre of God-Man has yet to be exorcized from our midst. For instance, Derrida shows that Heidegger's notion of Being does not displace the category of God-Man-Essence as it claims to have done: on the contrary, Being merely reaffirms this place. The notion of Being is only a reinscription of humanist Essence, just as Man was only a reinscription of God. The authority, the place, of religion and metaphysics, remains intact.[8] Derrida's analysis is important because it exposes the authoritarianism that still inhabits certain structures of thought. Moreover, it shows that any kind of radical political theory must first be aware of its own latent metaphysical structures, and therefore its own potential for domination.

Derrida argues that it is necessary to think the end of Man, without thinking essence. In other words, one must try to ap-

---

[32] See John Lechte, *Fifty Contemporary Thinkers: from Structuralism to Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 117.

[33] Derrida, Positions, p. 6.

[34] See John Caputo's 'Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida's Responsible Anarchy', *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1988): 59–73.

[7] Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1982), p. 116.

[8] ibid., p. 128.

proach the problem of the end of Man in a way that avoids the perilous trap of place. Philosophy's proclamation of the death of Man does not entirely convince Derrida. So perhaps Foucault's sounding of the death-knell of Man — when he predicted that the figure of Man would disappear like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea — should be taken with a grain of salt.[9] There is still, at least for Derrida, the intransigent spectre of God-Man-Essence that refuses to be exorcized: it remains as firmly entrenched in philosophy, and indeed in politics, as ever.[10] Moreover, as Derrida has argued, it is not possible to destroy this place. Heidegger, by positing a pre-ontological Being to overcome metaphysics, has remained only more faithful to the metaphysical tradition.[11] This strategy of absolute rejection, as we have seen already, never works: it merely reinvents authority in another form. It constructs the dubious binary of authority-power/revolution, in which *revolution* becomes potentially the new form of power.

However, have poststructuralists like Foucault and Deleuze fallen into the same trap? It could be argued that Foucault's dispersal of the subject into sites of power and discourse, and Deleuze and Guattari's fragmentation of the subject into an anarchic and haphazard language of machines, parts and flows, are operations that deny radical politics a necessary point of departure. So in their rejection of humanism, perhaps Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, have paradoxically denied themselves the possibility of resistance against the domination they see as inextricably involved in humanist discourse. Poststructuralism, in this sense, has left a theoretical void in radical pol-

---

[9]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 386.

[10]Derrida plays upon this idea of spectre or 'spirit'. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 120–1.

[11]Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida & the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 119.

For Derrida, as we have seen, the notion of an absolute break, an absolute transgression, which is central to classical revolutionary politics, is only a reaffirmation of the 'system' one wishes to escape. Transgression, as Derrida argues, can only be finite, and it cannot establish a permanent outside:

> … by means of the work done on one side and the other of the limit the field inside is modified, and a transgression is produced that consequently is nowhere present as a fait accompli. One is never installed within transgression, one never lives elsewhere.[29]

So deconstruction may be seen as a form of transgression, which, in transgressing the limits of metaphysics, also transgresses itself.[30] It affirms nothing, does not come from an oppositional outside, and dissipates upon crossing this limit. It exposes the limits of a text by tracing the repressed absences and discontinuities within the text — the excess that the text fails to contain.[31] In this sense, it is transgressive. However, it is also a self-effacing movement — a transgression that cancels itself out. Deconstruction neither affirms nor destroys the limit it 'crosses': rather it re-evaluates it, reinscribing it as a problem, a *question*. This uncertainty as to the limits of transgression — this undecidability, is the closest Derrida comes to an outside.

This radical outside is, for Derrida, *ethical*. Philosophy has been opened to what it excludes, to its other. The act of forcing philosophy to confront its own structures of exclusion and repression, is a thoroughly ethical gesture. Derrida is influenced here by Emmanuel Levinas, who tries to think the limits of the Hegelian tradition by showing the point at which it encounters

---

[29]Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 12.

[30]See Michael R. Clifford, 'Crossing (out) the Boundary: Foucault and Derrida on transgressing Transgression', *Philosophy Today* 31 (1987): 223–33.

[31]ibid., p. 230.

may allow us to conceive of a politics of resistance which does not restore the place of power. So not only does Derrida suggest a way of theorizing difference without falling back into essentialism, he also point to the possibility of an outside.

The 'outside' of ethical responsibility

So this limit, this impossibility of closure, is perhaps, at the same time, the constitution of a possible outside — an outside constructed from the limitations and contradictions of the inside. These contradictions make closure impossible; they open philosophical discourse to an Other. This is a radical outside. It is not part of the binary structure of inside/outside and it does not have a stable identity. It is not clearly divided from the Inside by an inexorable line: its 'line' is continually reinterpreted, jeopardized, and constructed by relations of antagonism. It is an outside that is finite and temporary. Moreover, it is an outside that obeys a strange logic: it exists only in relation to the inside that it threatens, while the inside exists only in relation to it. Each is necessary for the constitution of the identity of the other, while at the same time threatening the identity of the other. It is therefore an outside that avoids the two temptations of deconstruction: on the one hand, it is an outside that threatens the inside; on the other hand, it is an outside that is formulated from the inside. Derrida makes it clear that it cannot be seen as an absolute outside, as this would only reconsolidate the inside that it opposes. The more one tries to escape to an absolute outside, the more one finds oneself obstinately on the 'inside'. As Derrida says: 'the "logic" of every relation to the outside is very complex and surprising. It is precisely the force and the efficiency of the system that regularly changes transgressions into "false exits".'[28]

(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 24.

[28]ibid., p. 135.

itics. Derrida points here to the limits of the poststructuralist argument.

Beyond poststructuralism

Derrida allows us to re-evaluate the problem of humanism. He describes two possible ways of dealing with the problem of *place* in philosophy — the two temptations of deconstruction. The first strategy is:

> To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language. Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.[12]

So this strategy of working *within* the discourse of Enlightenment humanist metaphysics, using its terms and language, risks reaffirming and consolidating the structure, the place of power, that one is trying to oppose. Derrida is talking here about Heidegger's critique of humanism, which, he argues, involved a replacement of Man with the equally essentialist and metaphysical Being.

The second strategy, according to Derrida, is:

> To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself

---

[12]Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', p. 135.

outside, and by affirming an absolute break or difference. Without mentioning all the other forms of trompe-l'oeil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted, the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground.[13]

This alternative move of making an absolute break with the discourse of humanist metaphysics, of seeking an outside to which one can escape, and from which one can resist authority, would represent the logic of poststructuralism.[14] Alan Schrift, for instance, sees this strategy in Foucault's *The Order of Things*.[15] As I suggested before, Foucault and Deleuze may be seen to be making an absolute break with humanism — dispersing the subject into fragments and effects of discourses, machines, desires and practices, etc. According to Derrida, this would have the same effect as the first strategy: by attempting a complete change of terrain one only reaffirms one's place within the old terrain. The more one tries to escape the dominant paradigm, the more one finds oneself frustratingly within it. This is because, in its over-hasty rejection of humanism and the subject, poststructuralism has denied itself a point of departure for theorizing resistance to essentialist humanist discourses such as rationality. Derrida argues that deconstruction — and for that matter, any form of resistance against authority — is always caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of these two possible strategies, and must therefore navigate a

---

[13]ibid.

[14]Derrida says that this style of deconstruction is the one that 'dominates France today'. See ibid.

[15]Alan D. Schrift, 'Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the End(s) of "Man"', in *Exceedingly Nietzsche: Aspects of Contemporary Nietzsche-Interpretation*, ed. David Farrell Krell and David Wood (London: Rout-

neutralization of philosophy's authoritarian structures. Rather, it must proceed through a strategy of displacement — what Derrida calls a 'double writing', which is a form of critique neither strictly inside, nor strictly outside philosophy. It is a strategy of continually interrogating the self-proclaimed *closure* of this discourse. It does this by forcing it to account for the excess which always escapes, and thus jeopardizes this closure. For Derrida, this excess has nowhere to escape to: it does not constitute a place of resistance and, once it escapes, it disintegrates. This excess is produced by the very structures it threatens: it is a supplement, a necessary, but at the same time, dangerous and wayward, part of the dominant structure. This excess which deconstruction tries to identify confronts philosophy with a limit to its limitlessness, a limit to its closure. The proclaimed totality and limitlessness of philosophy is itself a limit. However, its complete closure to what threatens it is impossible because, as deconstruction has shown, the thing that it attempts to exclude is essential to its identity. There is a strange logic at work here, a logic that continually impedes philosophy's aspiration to be a closed, complete system. Deconstruction unmasks this logic, this *limit of the limit*.

The limits that Derrida identifies are produced *within* the tradition of philosophy — they are not imposed from a nihilistic, irrational outside. As Derrida says: 'The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures.'[27] This positioning of limits is important here because it points to the possibility of an outside — an outside, paradoxically, on the *inside*. To position oneself entirely on the outside of any structure as a form of resistance is only to reaffirm, in a reversed way, what one resists. This idea, however, of an outside created by the limits of the inside

---

MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. * 28.

[27]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

not one based on an essential identity — but rather one constructed through the logic of supplementarity, and based on its own *contaminatedness*.

The infrastructure may be seen as a tool of anti-authoritarian thought: it is a model which, by its own structural absence of place, by its own lack of essence, undermines from within various structures of textual authority. At its centre is an absence. It is 'governed' by a principle of *undecidability*: it affirms neither identity nor non-identity, but remains in a state of undecidability between the two. The infrastructure is a way of theorizing difference that makes the formation of stable, unified identities in philosophy impossible. It is also a model that allows thinking to transcend the binary structures that have limited it. So the aim of this strategy is not to destroy identity or presence. It is not to affirm difference over identity, absence over presence. This would be, as I have suggested, to reverse the established order, only to establish a new order. Difference would become a new identity, and absence a new presence. The point of Derrida's thinking is not to seek the founding of a new order, but rather to seek the displacement of all orders — including his own.

Derrida argues that the strategy of deconstruction cannot work entirely within the structures of logocentric philosophy; nor can it work completely outside it. Rather, it traces a path of undecidability between the two positions. In this way deconstruction avoids the trap of place. It establishes neither a *place of power*, nor a *place of revolution* — which, as I have suggested, are two sides of the same logic of domination — but rather, constructs a path between them, disrupting the identity of both terms. It works from within the discourse and metaphysical structures of philosophy, operating at its limits in order to find an outside.[26] Deconstruction cannot attempt an immediate

Press, 1973), p. 158.

[26]Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge,

course between them. These two strategies of deconstruction skewer political theory: they are the two possible paths confronting anti-authoritarian thought and action. They are both dominated by the threat of place.

Derrida can perhaps show us a way out of this theoretical abyss. There may be a means of combining these two seemingly irreconcilable paths in a way that allows radical politics to advance beyond the problematic of metaphysics and humanism, without reaffirming these structures. Rather than choosing one strategy over another, Derrida believes that we must follow the two paths simultaneously.[16] We must find a way of combining or *weaving* these two possible moves, thereby transcending them. For instance, as Alan Schrift argues, Derrida does not dispense with the category of the subject — rather he seeks to displace, and re-evaluate, it.[17] Rather than think in terms of the end of Man, as Foucault does, Derrida refers to the 'closure' of Man in metaphysics.[18] The difference is that, for Derrida, Man will not be completely transcended, but rather re-evaluated, perhaps in terms of Nietzsche's Higher Man.[19] For Derrida, the authority of Man will be decentred within language, but the subject will not be discarded altogether. Derrida's refusal to dispense with the subject points to a number of interesting possibilities for political thought: perhaps the category of the subject can be retained as a de-centred, non-essentialist category, existing as its own limit, thus providing a point of departure for politics. By discarding Man so hastily, thinkers like Foucault and Deleuze have perhaps neglected the possibility of his re-emergence in another form. So Derrida's critique works at the limits of this problematic, thereby pointing beyond the possibilities of the poststructuralist argument.

ledge, 1988), p. 137.

[16]ibid., p. 138.

[17]ibid.

[18]ibid., p. 145.

[19]ibid.

He suggests, for instance, that the motif of difference is inadequate — while it claims to eschew essence, perhaps it only allows another essence to be formed in its place.

Differance

Deconstruction tries to account for the suppressed, hidden differences and heterogeneities in philosophical discourse: the muffled, half-stifled murmurs of disunity and antagonism. Derrida calls this strategy 'differance' — difference spelt with an a, in order to signify that it is not an absolute, essential difference. It is rather a difference or movement of differences, whose identity as difference is always unstable, never absolute. As Derrida says: 'differance is the name we might give to the "active", moving discord of different forces, and of differences of forces ... against the entire system of metaphysical grammar.'[20] Because *differance* does not constitute itself as an essential identity of difference, because it remains open to contingency, thereby undermining fixed identities, it may be seen as a tool of anti-authoritarian politics: 'It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority... Not only is there no kingdom of differance, but differance instigates the subversion of every kingdom.'[21]

This series of differences has a structure or, as Rodolphe Gasché argues, an 'infrastructure'.[22] The infrastructure is a weave, an unordered combination of differences and antagonisms. It is a system, moreover, whose very nature is that of a non-system: the differences that constitute it are not dissolved by the infrastructure, nor are they ordered into a dialectical framework in which their differences become only a binary relation of opposites.[23] This is a 'system' of non-dialectical, non-binary differences: it threads together differences and antagonisms in a way that neither orders nor effaces them. Infrastructures are not essentialist: their very essence is that of a non-essence.[24] It does not have a stable or autonomous identity, nor is it governed by an ordering principle or authority. It is a 'place' that eschews essence, authority and centrality: it is characterized by its very inability to constitute an identity, to form a place. Moreover, its structural inability to establish a stable identity is a threat to the authority of identity. As Derrida says then:

> There is no essence of the differance; not only can it not allow itself to be taken up into the as such of its name or its appearing, but it threatens the authority of the as such in general, the thing's presence in its essence.[25]

It is here also that Derrida goes beyond the poststructuralist argument. While he employs a model of difference, as do Foucault and Deleuze, he uses it in a slightly different way: differance refers back to some sort of structure or *infrastructure*, some sort of unity constructed on the basis of its own disunity, and constituted through its own limits. Because poststructuralism lacks this idea of an infrastructure that remains structurally open — even to the possibilities of the Same — it could be seen as essentializing difference. So paradoxically, maybe it is precisely because poststructuralism lacks a structure or place, in the way that Derrida provides, that it falls back into a place — a place constituted by essentialist ideas. Derrida's argument is pointing to the need for some kind of point of departure —

[20]Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, p. 18.

[21]ibid., p. 22.

[22]See Gasché, *Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 147–54.

[23]ibid., p. 152.

[24]ibid., p. 150.

[25]Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University