The context in which this paper emerged was my attempt to understand power and the possibilities of resistance to power. I had come to the conclusion that traditional concepts of power did not adequately explain the phenomenon of power in contemporary modern/postmodern society. While there may be elements of these theories that are necessary to reconstruct a theory of power, the traditional/classical concepts of power assume something about human beings that has been brought into question by Critical Theory but also the times. They assume that human beings are, at least, somewhat autonomous and have the capacity of self-interested rationality. And they assume that these two traits allow people to understand their own interests and also realize that their interests might be in conflict with the interests of those in power. Because of these assumptions, traditional theories focus on the capacity of power to deceive, coerce, control social institutions, including most importantly ideological institutions.

Neil Postman in his book Amusing Ourselves to Death says the literary model for these traditional concepts of power is 1984—Big Brother controls the population through lies, surveillance and violence. But the title of Postman’s book refers to Walter Benjamin’s comment that he could imagine a population being amused to death by its own destruction. Quote. But such an understanding of society and its population requires another understanding of power. Postman argues that the novel Brave New World reflects the system of power in our society. As he says, “. . .in Huxley’s vision, no big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history . . .people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.” It seems we might imagine Bentham’s panopticon, as Foucault does, but with a few amendments, the gates are always open, the cell doors always unlocked, and everyone has a cell phone and access to social networking. And each night all the citizens voluntarily participate in a collective virtual ritual celebrating their freedomby tweeting.

Critical Theory, especially Horheimer’s and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, heavily influenced by Nietzsche’s insight that the human power to create worlds, because of fear, as resulted in their submission to their own creation, has given us the conceptual tools to articulate a more adequate concept of power. I refer to three main themes in their narrative of the Enlightenment from freedom and liberation to a system of total domination-enlightenment. The first theme is the fear of nature. According to their narrative, the fear of nature has led to attempts to control and dominate nature. However, because human beings are part of nature, the result has been human beings dominated by their own creation. At the beginning of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, they say “the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”

The second theme is their analysis of the emergence of the culture industry in modern society and its function within the system of domination. It needs to be recognized that this was before television, the internet, computers, cell phone, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The culture industry functions in two fundamental ways in relation to the idea of power as domination. The culture industry produces standardized cultural commodities for the marketplace, in fact, H/A argue it reduces all cultural productions to the marketplace and in so doing eliminates the distinction between high and low culture. Eliminating this disinction reinforces the system of domination because it eliminates what critical theory believe is the utopian moment in high culture, and the utopian moment is essential for keeping alive the emancipatory project. Quote emancipatory project and utopian moment. They also argue that the culture industry has the power to create standardized subjects who desire the standardized commodities. This capacity to constitute subjectivities, further developed by Marcuse, his idea of one dimensionality, and Foucault insights into the relation of knowledge and power, undermines the Enlightenment idea of the autonomous, self-directing, self-willing subject, rational subject, and in doing so undermines the assumptions underlying traditional/classical concepts of power.

Critical theory’s critique of technology, more specifically, its critique of instrumental and progressive theories of technology.DEVELOP

As a result of my encounter with critical theory, I have come to an understanding of power that better explains power in the contemporary world, but because this new understanding of power is so totalizing, it raises the question: are there any longer possibilities of resistance to power? In the terms of Critical Theory, in a system of total domination, where Adorno remarks, “the whole is a lie,” does it make sense to even speak of an emancipatory project? This is a question that critical theorists have addressed and answered invarious ways; Adorno’s negative dialectics, Marcuse’s turn to Freud, also his “great refusal,” and Habermas’s theory of communicative action. I felt that none of these answers provided the basis upon which to construct and emancipatory project.

It was in this context that I turned to post-structuralism, specifically the writings of Jacque Derrida after reading Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences, and before reading anything else. I had no idea what I was to encounter. At times, it seemed as if Derrida’s writings were “blather,” to borrow a phrase from Beckett, at times abstruse/ obscure, and at times, the highest level of philosophical reflection. I proceeded none the less with my analysis/confrontation of his work.

Derrida claims that his position, deconstruction, is both ethical and political. As ethics, he says, it is a response to the call of the other, and as political, it is an intervention. He also argues that there is a messianic moment to deconstruction, not messianic in the sense of coming of the redeemer, savior, but messianic in the sense of the coming of a just society in the future. “This universal structure . . . [messianic]. . .of the promise, of the expectation of the future, or the coming, and the fact that this explanation of the coming has to do with justice – that is what I call the messianic structure.”

The paper addresses the question whether Derrida’s thought offers/provides the basis for constructing an emancipatory project. The major difficulties in analyzing Derrida’s thought is the form/style that his writing takes.The style he adopts is almost inaccessible which makes it appear/seem if he is intentionally trying to be misunderstood. I believe that he is and I call this the will to be misunderstood. He can be situated in a tradition related directly to our conference, Nietzsche and Critical Theory. In his radical critique of reason and of the tradition of western philosophy, Nietzsche adopts a non-philosophical form/style. His form/style is composed of aphorisms, parables, poems, epigrams, and dreams. Nietzsche says that he does not want to understood, nor does he expect to be understood by the common man, or scholars. He fears the tyranny of the reason he is critiquing. Understanding and assimilation from paperAnd he believes that a revaluation of all values would include the revaluation of the entire discourse of western philosophy, a genealogical unmasking of the entire tradition and its levelling function. Nietzsche does of course hope that a future man, the ubermensch, will understand himand undertake the task that stands before him.

Adorno also argued that form/style had to be part of radical critique and in a system of total domination the form/style could not reproduce the system. In fact, Adorno said, at one point, I do not want to be understood. He meant that he did not want to be understood if to be understood meantassmimilationor the reader was passively accepting the delivery of an idea. Adorno thought that writing was and understanding had to be an active process. He adopted a style that while as not as poetic as Nietzsche, challenged the reader to think. Quote from Held. Both Nietzsche and Adorno shared a belief, and it was that coming to understand was an act of being in the world, and what one knows and who one is are the same. Sources

In order to answer the question the paper addresses, I felt it necessary to analyze Derrida’s work as unity of form/content. In other words, I approach his writing, thought, style as a presentation. And the form/content question/problem is the focus of my paper. Derrida assumes that the tradition of western philosophy is embedded in, constructs, reconstructs and legitimations the structure of power in society, the hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions, its values, and its violence. If this is true, he asks, how can philosophy provide a position from which to critique the system of power, which would also include a critique of itself. Derrida’s strategy is twofold: he adopts a logic of the other, a logic of *supplementarity*, and he adopts a form/style consistent with the logic. The form/style involves new terminology, new ways of using traditional terminology, and process of “thinking” and ‘writing” that is ambiguous, multivocal, and opaque. His form style is a new way of writing, a new language. This strategy, according to Derrida, leads ultimately, not just to the realization that the excluded other is a necessary component in the west’s self-understanding of itself, and the violence towards the other is embedded in our institutions, but it also leads us to place of exile from the familiar, conventional and taken for granted. From this position of exile, a space is opened, he claims, in which society appears unfamiliar and questionable. Undecidability, other, decision.

Derrida is quite clear about his form/style and its goal. He says about his style, it is analogous to Menippean satire, “or something like philosophic parody where all genres—poetry, philosophy, theater, et cetera—are summoned up at once . . .it is something like farce.” In the same work, he states:

Perhaps the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you

as much as possible in as many forms as possible. It is the desire to perfect

a program or a matrix having the greatest potential variability, undecidability,

pluravocality, et cetera, so that each time something returns it will be as

different as possible.

The following are examples of his style;

This approach, he argues, creates a “non-site, or non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy.” And this “non-site” is the reason why Derrida believes deconstruction should be taken seriously, why it is “too political for some,” “a response to a call,” “an openness towards the other, and “subversive.”

Before I examined the claim that deconstruction creates a position which is both ethical and political, I need to mention a problem that arises by adopting this style. Derrida seems to be quite sensitive, ironically, to being misunderstood, or misrepresented. Quote about too political for some. Derrida’s defenders frequently argue the same. An example is

Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh in The Philosophy of Derrida. Commenting on the exchange between John Searle and Derrida, they say Searle “misrepresents Derrida” and compounds this misrepresentation by demonstrating a “disrespect for the very protocols of professional

rigor that he wished to represent.” Derrida defends his exchange with Searle and says, that the debate was governed by “the most demanding norms of philosophical discussion” even though the form of his responses were a “multiplication of discursive gestures, statements and forms of writing.” As I say in the paper, there are limits to farce, parody and satire. There is a danger that the laughter of the parodist, or satirist, might be taken simply as the laughter of the clown, rather than the laughter of the Nietzschean *ubermensch*. And I would say that something else when one claims that one wants things to “come back” with the “greatest potential . . . undecidability,” one might be misrepresented.

In the paper I next examine the claim that deconstruction is an intervention on behalf of the other, is political, and is ethical. I point out in the paper that Christopher Norris and Terry Eagleton support Derrida’s claim. Norris says: Eagleton says:

I am more skeptical. In the paper I argue that three assumptions underlie Derrida’s thought and that these assumptions need to be justified argumentatively to warrant this claim. The first assumption is that there is a “thing” or “phenomenon” called western metaphysics, and that its anxious quest for certainty has created a monologue, a “metaphysics of presence,” which is violence towards the Other. Derrida says in Structrure, Sign and Play: The second assumption that needs to be defended is that this phenomenon, western metaphysics is ubiquitous, that it is present as a foundation in all discourses, all codes and all institutions. And the third assumption that needs to be argumentatively justified is that deconstruction creates/opens a space/position that is ethical and political. Derrida needs to justify or explain why undecidability is both ethical and political. It is not clear what he means by ethics and what he means by politics.

In regard to the first assumption, I argue in the paper that it cannot be defended. Obviously, there is a history and tradition which is called western metaphysics. But is it a monologue, is it defined solely, or always by a quest for certainty, is it always violence towards the Other? Edward Said points out that both Foucault and Derrida have a similar strategy, they both “define” the situation, the “challenged entities,” and, then, they persistently attempt to “de-define” the entities that they have defined. In the paper I make two points regarding Derrida’s definition of the tradition. The first is Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics which reconstructs the concept of phronesis, or practical reasoning. And second is the pragmatic tradition and its questioning of foundations. An example would be John Dewey’s The Quest for Certainty. But in the paper, I point out another problem also related to “defining” and “de-defining” the entities. If this definition of the tradition is problematic then Derrida’s method of deconstructing “exemplary” texts is not proof of a monological tradition but just the arbitrary selection of texts that can be deconstructed. For a text to be identified as exemplary, the deconstruction of which would reveal the ubiquity of a metaphysics of presence, there must be a definition of what that text is an example.

In regard to the second assumption, there are certainly ideological underpinnings to all of the institutions in western society, not only, the institutions, but norms and values, hierarchies, inclusions and exclusion, and that these ideological underpinnings have justified and legitimated violence towards peoples, and there is agreement that these ideologies have philosophical roots. I discuss briefly how philosophy has justified the acquisitive individual of capitalism, how the grand narrative of reason marginalized women, and minorities and justified the violence of colonialism, and that philosophy’s role in creating man’s image of himself as lord of the earth which has justified western humanity’s led to the environmental crisis. But, even dominant trends, are not universal, ubiquitous or determinative. Philosophy and postcolonialism, Marx and liberation theology, Heidegger.

In regard to the third assumption that deconstruction as form and the logic of supplementarity is political, Derrida says it is a positive response to an alterity . . . an openness towards the other.” And as I have mentioned before, he argues that it is “at least a way of taking a position, it is a work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern or practice, competences, performances . . .[it] should seek an new investigation of responsibility.” But the question arises, does this radical questioning of texts constitute a critique of society. And Derrida argues yes, because, part of his critique is the deconstruction of boundaries, and one of the boundaries his thought challenges is the boundary between text and world. He says that the deconstruction of the text places the reader in a place of exile. This state of exile is what he means by “undecidability.” But he argues that this state of exile is not indifference, but is a moment of autonomy, a space in which critique can happen, what he calls decision. He says,

A decisions can only come into being in a space that exceeds the

calculable program that would destroy all responsibility . . . there can be no

moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way

of the undecidable. (Sounds kind of religious, a Heideggerian return to Being)

My response to this is twofold. First, what would be the criteria for making a decision in this position of exile/undecidability. He argues that it dereify, critiques “natural kinds,” and in doing so opens a space in the name of what. I turned to Derrida for my second response. In an interview, Derrida is asked, “Can the theoretical radicality of deconstruction be translated into political praxis”? He answers, “I must confess that I have never succeeded in directly relating deconstruction to existing political program.” He then goes on to say, deconstruction allows us “to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality, and, second, “to intervene in a practical and engaged manner whenever the necessity arises.” My immediate response is when wouldn’t that be in our time.