

ARTHUR BRADLEY

Lancaster University

A RESPONSE TO NIALL GILDEA

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to Niall Gildea for his characteristically careful and generous response to my work. In many ways, I fear my reply will be redundant because what he says about the book is so unarguably true that I might even call it obvious—if, of course, I had managed to think of it myself in the first place.

Firstly, I do think Niall—who is himself one of the most important new voices working on deconstruction—is right to detect the presence of Derrida in the book even though his name rarely figures explicitly.<sup>1</sup> It is a parenthetical position that is perhaps symptomatic of the parentheses that deconstruction occupies within the philosophical scene more widely. As with some other figures in the history of philosophy—Wittgenstein comes to mind—I think Derrida is seriously under-read now, not because his work has been refuted or superseded, but precisely because it has not: whatever we mean by “deconstruction” is easier to ignore it as if it never happened. Insofar as I am capable of thinking at all—and I obviously leave this to the reader to judge—I am happy to confess it was Derrida who taught me how to do it.

It’s probably more than a coincidence, too, that the particular essay to which Niall refers in his contribution, “*Cogito* and the History of Madness,” was the first text by Derrida I ever read and one which also significantly influenced my early work on negative theology.<sup>2</sup> If I wasn’t thinking of it consciously when writing this book, I’ve no doubt it has filtered into my general scepticism or hesitancy about the possibility of ever writing a “history” *sensu stricto* of the absence that is unbearable life. In the Introduction to the book, for instance, I already formulate a hypothesis that could have come *verbatim* out of the Foucault-Derrida debate: “a ‘history’ of unbearable life is something of a

---

<sup>1</sup> See Niall Gildea, *Jacques Derrida’s Cambridge Affair: Deconstruction, Philosophy and Institutionality* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also my “God sans Being: Derrida, Marion and ‘a paradoxical writing of the word without,’” *Literature and Theology*, 14: 3 (2000): 299-312; “Without Negative Theology: Deconstruction and the Politics of Negative Theology,” *The Heythrop Journal*, 42: 2 (2001): 133-47; “Thinking the Outside: Foucault, Derrida and the Thought of Negative Theology,” *Textual Practice*, 16: 1 (2002): 57-74; “Derrida’s God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn.” *Paragraph*, 29: 3, (2006): 21-42 and “Mystic Atheism: Julia Kristeva’s Negative Theology,” *Theology and Sexuality* 14: 3 (2008): 279-92.

contradiction in terms because it can only be the history of an absence, of a constitutive exclusion, of that which is not permitted to enter history.”<sup>3</sup>

To turn in more detail to Niall’s comments, I was fascinated by his reading of what we might call Foucault’s “putting-into-parentheses” of unbearable life through the lens of the Foucault-Derrida debate and, in particular, the latter’s identification of a certain problematic “pré-compréhension” of madness in the *History of Madness*.<sup>4</sup> If I understand Derrida correctly here, what I think he is saying is that Foucault falls victim to the same illusion that grips the structuralist revolution and the human sciences more widely, namely, the belief that philosophy can be parenthesized or bracketed off by some allegedly more rigorous system of thought like anthropology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis. In his attempt to move beyond what he sees as the vicissitudes of rational philosophy, however, Foucault (like figures such as Lévi-Strauss before him) simply ends up falling into the crudest, most pre-critically empirical philosophy of madness imaginable: “everything transpires as if, in a continuous and underlying way, an assured and rigorous precomprehension of the concept of madness, or at least of its nominal definition, were possible and acquired.”<sup>5</sup>

If there is an equivalent to this “pré-compréhension” of madness – where the attempt to parenthesize philosophy finds itself unwittingly parenthesized by philosophy – in *Unbearable Life*, I suspect it would be the equally uncritical role that “life” plays in Foucault’s reading of sovereignty. It is one of the main themes of my book that the critique of sovereignty frequently turns around a self-fulfilling appeal to “life” – call it natality, potentiality, positive biopolitics or whatever – which presumes that life always precedes and exceeds the sovereign attempt to capture it. To recall my argument in Chapter 1, Foucault recognises that sovereign power over life and death is not merely the power to decide on whether a living subject should continue to live or die but, more fundamentally, on whether that subject ever possessed the right to be “alive” in the first place: sovereign is he who decides on unbearable life. However, even though he recognizes that life and death are not natural phenomena that fall outside the scope of power, everything once again transpires as if there were an assured precomprehension of life after all. For Foucault, the sovereign “obviously” – but why obviously? – cannot grant life in the same way that he inflicts death which means that the right of life and death is in reality nothing but the

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness” in *Writing and Difference* trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” 49.

“right of the sword”.<sup>6</sup> In the same way that Foucault’s critique of reason is predicated on a pre-rational, intuitive concept of madness, his critique of sovereignty is thus predicated on a pre-political – indeed “obvious” – idea of life but, in each case, this alleged “outside” of philosophy is nothing but philosophy’s *own* outside.

In *Unbearable Life*, I also think that (without ever intending to do so) I may end up posing the same challenge to Foucault’s theory of sovereignty that Derrida famously posed to the former’s self-professed history of madness: what presents itself as an attempt to emancipate a pre-political concept of life from the grip of sovereign power ironically turns out to be a new sovereign gesture of domestication or imprisonment of life. It is this naïve precomprehension of life, I think, that leads Foucault to parenthesize what Niall nicely calls the “terrifying greyness” of unbearable life at almost the very moment that he discovers it in his own work. After arguing that life and death are originally political phenomena in *Society Must Be Defended*, I show that he immediately proceeds to “re-naturalize” life once again. To take the French philosopher’s very revealing misreading of Hobbes’s theory of sovereign punishment, which I go on to discuss in detail later in Chapter 1, Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics claim that the Hobbesian subject’s natural right to life constitutes a kind of pre-political point of resistance to sovereign power which will ultimately serve to delimit or restrict that power over time. If Foucault claims that life precedes and exceeds politics in the Hobbesian universe, though, I argue that the exact opposite is actually the case: “sovereignty is virtually present at the very origin of ‘life’ itself” in Hobbes’s political theory, I write, such that “‘life’ itself is already a retroactive sovereign production”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hobbes – far from being a defender of some vital point of excrescence over sovereign power – is an exemplar of what I call the sovereignty over unbearable life.

What, finally, might be done to escape the parentheses of sovereignty that the Foucault-Derrida debate lay bare for us? It is this book’s wager that the answer cannot fall into what I call either the negative biopolitical trap of simply accepting power as an inescapable condition or – what amounts to the same thing – the positive biopolitical trap of prematurely valorising some external position that allegedly exceeds power’s grip.<sup>8</sup> To resist sovereign power over the life-death matrix – and here is perhaps the final lesson *Unbearable Life* seeks to learn from Derrida’s critique of Foucault’s historical archaeology – I thus propose that

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 240.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 29. See also Arthur Bradley, “*Jus Puniendi: La questione della pena in Foucault, Agamben ed Esposito*” in *Teologie e politica: Genealogie e attualità* ed. by Elettra Stimilli (Roma: Quodlibet, 2019), pp. 105-26.

<sup>8</sup> Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 44.

we cannot appeal to some simple outside of sovereignty, whether we call it life, madness, or anything else, but must rather attempt to expose or delimit sovereignty from the inside. If the various political actors, subjects or movements described in this book from the French Revolution up to the Invisible Committee have anything in common, it is precisely this capacity to embrace their apparently abject fate as unbearable lives and transform it into a ground of what I call immanent resistance or even insurrection: “someone who exists outside life and death can,” I write, “be neither killed by a master nor forced to live as a slave.”<sup>9</sup> For me, Roger “Rogue” Riderhood – an obscure Dickensian villain who has been the subject of famous philosophical readings by Deleuze, Agamben and Esposito – thus becomes the first “hero” of unbearable life: Riderhood’s power to resist the sovereign right of life and death derives neither from vitalism nor nihilism, I argue in the conclusion of Chapter 1, but from his uncanny status as a political subject who is neither alive nor dead. In the same way, *Unbearable Life* seeks to unlock the parentheses of sovereignty from the inside.

---

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 44.