The Politics of Deconstruction

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It is by now something of a commonplace that, despite its adversarial rhetoric, deconstruction possesses questionable value as a radical political praxis. Gerald Graff, for example, has argued that deconstruction’s posture of rebelliousness is readily assimilable to the imperatives of advanced capitalist society, which in fact thrives off of verbal opposition.\(^1\) Frank Lentricchia proposes that the poststructuralist project reinforces rather than subverts the reification to which it opposes itself; it is an “activity of textual privatization, the critic’s doomed attempt to retreat from a social landscape of fragmentation and alienation.” Deconstruction, he concludes, “does not isolate [the critic] from the mainstream conditions of modern society, but rather constitutes an academic elaboration of them.”\(^2\) Edward Said asserts that deconstruction fails as a political praxis because it lacks a political analysis. “Contemporary ‘Left’ criticism,” he complains, “is vitally concerned with various problems stemming out of authority,” but “nowhere in all this will one encounter a serious study of what authority is.”\(^3\) Terry Eagleton, who offers the sharpest political insights about Derridean deconstruction, argues that deconstruction actually rejects an oppositional politics, for it “provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them.”\(^4\)

While these and other critics have advanced some very useful arguments about the dead-endedness of the deconstructionist project in terms of politics, deconstruction has not yet been exposed in its full political bankruptcy. There are two main reasons for this. First, a number of critics argue that there are in effect two Derridas: a “false” Derrida who has been contaminated by conservative misappropriations, and a “real” Derrida who bears the torch of a truly liberatory program. Lentricchia, for instance, notes that “the fundamental aspects of Derrida’s writing do not sanction a new formalism or a new hedonism,” but that “the Yale Derrideans will not in the long run threaten every partisan of traditionalism, because they will turn out to be traditionalism’s last
formalist buttress." Gayatri Spivak and Michael Ryan, as we shall see, argue that Derrida's bourgeois followers have simply ignored the radical—indeed, Marxist—implications of his project.

A successful critique of deconstruction's adversarial posture, I propose, would have to delineate the continuity between Derrida and his American disciples and demonstrate that Derrida's implied politics are essentially as supportive of the status quo as are theirs. This critique would also have to point out that any "Marxism" claiming to enlist deconstruction on its side is itself a highly dubious proposition, bearing more resemblance to a left pluralism than to a program for proletarian revolution. Second, deconstruction has not yet been rooted from its lair because those critics who take exception to its propositions and implications have not provided adequate historical foundations for their ideological analyses. Deconstruction is chided for its separation from practice, its shallow conception of "opposition," its eradication of a purposive subject, its celebration of impotence—all very valid points. But most of these arguments operate from the assumption that deconstruction is an exclusively philosophical and literary-critical phenomenon and has not itself arisen from political practice. A historical materialist examination of the politics of deconstruction would have to locate deconstruction within the principal political movements and debates of our era—specifically, within the context of the notions of liberation and opposition generated by New Left theory and practice. We need not take seriously the claims of deconstructive politics, but we should understand their origins and take seriously their existence.

I shall not attempt a discussion of deconstruction's relation to the New Left in this brief essay, but I shall set forth an ideological critique that should prove useful to more extended historical analyses. First, I shall briefly examine the politics implicit in the critical perspective of the Yale School of deconstruction: I shall argue that this viewpoint signals not merely a patrician disregard for the world beyond literary discourse, but in fact a highly developed cluster of essentially conservative social attitudes. Next, I shall set forth the claims to oppositional status—both rhetorical and substantive—that are articulated in the work of Derrida. In this context, I shall also discuss the arguments of those who hold that Derrida's project is compatible with—or even supersedes—that of Marx. Then I shall refuse the notion that Derrida's position is in any important sense "radical" and shall propose that his perspective is not so remote from that of the Yale critics as it might first appear. I shall suggest, finally, that Derrida's politics are assimilable only to an essentially revisionist and antirevolutionary reading of Marx—in other words, to a fundamental misreading of the Marxist text rooted in an antipathy to a Leninist epistemology and politics.

I recognize that, in much of what follows, I depart from a conventionally "literary" discussion of deconstruction and raise considerations and arguments that are not frequently found in critical writing. I focus my discussion as I do not because I find the literary applications and procedures of deconstruction unworthy of commentary, but because there is an urgent necessity for literary critics to examine more closely the concept of the "political" as it applies to our investigations. We are quite willing these days to admit that all discursive activity is in some sense political, but we are ordinarily quite imprecise, even naive, when actual political questions arise. In the case of deconstruction this kind of conceptual fuzziness is particularly unpardonable, since deconstruction poses itself as in some sense a radical, if not a revolutionary, practice, carrying implications far beyond the narrow domain of textual exegesis. It is the purpose of this essay to offer some interpretations of this "in some sense," and more generally, to clarify the relation between literary and political spheres of discourse and practice.

In an essay entitled "Criticism, Indeterminacy, Irony," Geoffrey Hartman sets forth a series of theses that can, I believe, be taken as paradigmatic of the political perspective implicit in the textual maneuverings of the Yale School. Indeterminacy, Hartman argues, constitutes delay, and the delay is intrinsic: from a certain point of view it is thoughtfulness itself, Keats's "negative capability," a labor that aims not to overcome the negative or indeterminate but to stay within it as long as is necessary. . . .

Indeterminacy resists formally the complicity with closure implied by the wish to be understood or the communication-compulsion associated with it. Criteria of correctness or correspondence (of truth) may be caught up in this complicity. Indeterminacy functions as a bar separating understanding and truth. Understanding is not disabled but is forced back on the conditions of its truth: for example, the legitimacy of its dependence on texts.6

Indeterminacy necessitates, therefore, a "radical perspective" on "semiliterate" culture that has lost itself in a Babel of competing (mis)representations.
Every statement, idiom or idiolect has now its rights; and this situation of *anomie*, where there are too many styles, terms, interpretations, leads to a low-grade *anomie* that is expressed in TV sitcom... There is no presence; there is only representation and, worse, representations. The crisis focuses on that, not on language as such. It is a crisis of *evidentiality*. How do we save phenomena that cannot save themselves?

Hartman therefore calls for "resistance... to conversion of representation into presence," a resistance that presumably will be conducted under the aegis of deconstruction. He concludes,

No wonder some are scared witless by a mode of thinking that seems to offer no decodability, no resolution. Yet the perplexity that art arouses in careful readers and writers is hardly licentious. It is the reality: it is only as strange as truth. It recalls the prevalence of propaganda, both in open societies that depend on conversation, jawboning, advertising, bargaining, and in censored societies that become sinister and inquisitorial, adding to their torture chambers the subtest brainwashing and conditioning devices without giving up the brazen and reiterated lie. Can any hermeneutics of indeterminacy, any irony however deeply practiced and nurtured by aesthetic experience, withstand either society while they are still distinguishable?

We may note a few things about this passage. To begin with, its rhetoric is emphatically liberatory. Indeterminacy furnishes a "radical" perspective. It is "labor" that will hold out "as long as is necessary" against an instrumentalist reductionism. It "resists" the "complicity with closure" of a naive logocentrism; moreover, rather than "licentiousness," it "thoughtfulness itself." It proposes an unabashed willingness to confront the open-endedness necessary for critical thought, even though the less courageous are "scared witless" by a "mode of thinking that seems to offer no decodability, no resolution." Deconstruction stands forth, indeed, as the only sane discourse amidst the Philistine "jawboning" of bourgeois society, as the final ironic gesture of resistance against the torture chambers of countries behind the Iron Curtain.

A liberatory program, indeed, one that would presume to rescue us from various and sundry kinds of reification and oppression in the modern world. But what substantive social analysis underlies this apocalyptic claim? To begin with it appears that the "crisis in evidentiality" in late capitalist culture, epitomized by the "anomie... expressed in TV sitcom," is attributable to a state of widespread popular "semiliteracy," in which—horror!—"every statement, idiom or idiolect now has its rights." It is odd that an advocate of a "radical perspective" should object so strenuously to the extension of "rights" to different linguistic communities: one ought rather to expect that a proponent of textual freeplay would welcome any diversity that would call into question the logocentric models enforced by the dominant linguistic order. In this attack on *anomie* and *anomie*, Hartman may well wish to target the organs of propaganda in consumer culture; but his criticism of the media converges in a telling way with a revulsion against the consumers of mass culture themselves, who are presumably accountable for the low quality of the communications they receive from New York and Hollywood.

Indeed, we might note, to the extent that Hartman sets himself in opposition to the late capitalist social formation at all, he focuses exclusively on its characteristic mode of exchange—the modern form of the "cash nexus"—and on the linguistic conventions that accompany this mode of exchange. Hartman does not seem much concerned with the forms of production and distribution that undergird the contemporary system of exchange: his is essentially a formalistic argument, reflecting on a mode of intercourse—or on those who engage in that intercourse—rather than upon real relations of class and power.

Moreover, we should not slough over the fact that Hartman articulates a simple old-fashioned anti-communism in his ascription of a liberatory posture to the deconstructive project. One does not need to be an advocate of Soviet or Eastern European forms of government (I certainly am not) to see the speciousness of the assumption that he posits as "original" and "present" grounds for his argument—e.g., his opposition of "open" and "controlled" societies. One might question the "radicalism" of a perspective that so complacently assumes that American society is "open" for all its inhabitants. Finally, we should note that, in traditionally elitist fashion, Hartman places his hopes for the future on the class of literary intellectuals, who, as possessors of a critical "irony practiced and nurtured by aesthetic experience," are the only ones capable of "resisting" or "withstanding" the totalitarian tendencies of twentieth-century mass culture. While this statement clearly expresses a patrician bias, it does so in a particularly significant manner. The intractability of social reality is assumed in advance, and the intellectual's freedom therefore consists in his or her occupation of a position on the margins that entails little or no concrete social responsibility.

I have quoted and then criticized Hartman's statement at some length because it is necessary, I believe, to go beyond the commonly held estimate that the Yale Derrideans are simply somewhat removed from
more urgent social realities. Gayatri Spivak articulates this estimate when she argues for a disjunction between Derrida and his American disciples and invokes as an analogy Walter Benjamin’s distinction between Brecht’s alienation techniques and those of the Romantic Ironists. “All that [Romantic Irony] demonstrates,” declared Benjamin, “is the philosophical sophistication of the author, who, while writing his plays, always has at the back of his mind the notion that the world may, after all, be just a stage.” The judgment carried by this parallel does not go nearly far enough: the conviction that all the world is a stage necessitates, in Hartman’s case at least, an unmistakable disdain toward the people who are stuck with the job of actor. Besides, the American deconstructionists would probably be happy enough to grant Spivak’s parallel with the Romantic Ironists, merely adding that their strategy of indeterminacy entails not “licentious[ness],” but “thoughtfulness itself.” In other words, it is important to realize that the Yale critics’ conservatism is hardly restricted to critical and literary matters alone, for they are perfectly willing to admit to a “traditional” stance in this sphere. As J. Hillis Miller has stated, “My instincts are strongly preservative and conservative. I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts.”

We must recognize that the concept of “privileged texts” goes hand in hand with the concept of privileged people, and that the Yale formulation of undecidability can be interpreted to facilitate positions that are distinctly anti-working class, anti-communist, and even racist.

But what can be said of Derrida himself? Can it be charged that he subscribes to the same cluster of attitudes that I have attributed to Hartman? In order to answer these questions, we must examine the grounds on which Derridean deconstruction makes its claim to oppositional status. In what follows, I do not, of course, propose anything like an exhaustive account, or even a comprehensive summary, of the deconstructionists program. I simply attempt to isolate what I see as being deconstruction’s most significant claims to a liberatory philosophical method.

Before I undertake an inquiry into the substance of Derrida’s argument, however, I would like to note that Derrida’s rhetoric, even more than Hartman’s, is characterized by an idiom of adventurousness and subversion. If words could kill, the last vestiges of Western metaphysics would now be six feet under. In his early essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” Derrida threw down the gauntlet. The deconstructive practitioner, he boasted, must relinquish all longing for presence, “play the game without security,” and engage in an “affirmation of a world of signs” that “determines the non-center otherwise than as the loss of center.” In “Différence,” he continued, “in the delineation of deconstruction everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a telos or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the field.” In “Living On: Border Lines,” he proposed that “all organized narration is a matter of the police,” “insofar as it posits a narrator/voice [that] is the voice of a subject recounting something, reinventing an event or a historical sequence, knowing who he is, where he is, and what he is talking about.” In Positions, where he clarified and defined the essential terms of deconstructive practice, Derrida claimed that the strategy of binary opposition characteristic of all Western metaphysics entails not “the peaceful coexistence of a vie-à-vie,” but a “violent hierarchy.” It is the goal of deconstruction, accordingly, to “overturn,” “displace,” and “transgress” this hierarchy; its strategy of undecidability “resists” and “disorganizes” binary opposition. And, unlike “representation,” which simply “castrates,” and even “polysemy,” which remains committed to a “theological and totaling dialectics,” dissemination “marks an irreducible and generative multiplicity.” Even if one did not follow the details of Derrida’s argument, it would be difficult to miss its emancipatory—indeed, messianic—tone.
seeks to counter this hegemony not by "constraining a third term" or
"abolishing" the opposition, but by exposing its internal contradictions—
any other strategy, Derrida argues, would end up "resurrecting" the very
exclusionary mode of thought that it seeks to vanquish. Deconstruction
is therefore a "technique of trouble," aiming not to substitute one
authority for another, but rather to undermine the epistemological
grounds upon which any authority presumes to rest. It "sounds the knell
of the classicum," revealing that boundaries—whether generic or
otherwise—denote property relations in a textualized terrain.

In keeping with this assault upon the power relations encoded in
language, deconstruction calls into question the premises both of nam-
ing and of arguments based upon naming, pointing out that term which
posits itself as the "origin" of a logical chain is in fact the product of a
whole process of prior textualization, a process that is inevitably politi-
cal. The presumption of a "referred" that is transparently "present"
through language is a strategy characteristic of Western metaphysical
thought in all its modes, declares Derrida. A deconstructive recupera-
tion of discourse, by contrast, reveals that "presence" is not the "abso-
lutely central form of Being but . . . a 'determination' and . . . an
'effect.' " Accordingly,

the present becomes the sign of the sign, the trace of the trace. It is no longer
what every reference refers to in the last analysis. It becomes a function in a
structure of generalized reference. It is a trace, and a trace of the measure of
the trace.

Thereby the text of metaphysics is comprehended. Still legible; and to be
read. 15

Not only binary opposition, then, but also the logocentrism of the
"longing for presence," that operates as the logical premise to binary
opposition, is exposed in its complicity with existing institutions of
power. Placing the "text of metaphysics" sous nature, deconstruction
exposes the text's contradictory nature—not by negation, but by "dif-
férence." Indeed, Derrida claims, this technique is much more danger-
ous to bourgeois hegemony than is any "revolutionary" discourse that
unproblematically assumes its capacity to represent itself by means of
inherited linguistic formulations. Speaking of the "politico-
institutional problem of the University," he declares:

What this institution cannot bear, is for anyone to tamper with . . .
language, meaning both the national language and, paradoxically, an ideal of
translatability that neutralizes this national language. It can bear more

readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of "content," if
only that content does not touch the borders of language . . . and of all the
juridico-political contracts that it guarantees. 16

Indeed, Derrida argues, logocentrism is "the matrix of idealism. Ideal-
ism is its most direct representation, the most constantly dominant
force." Accordingly, "if matter . . . designates . . . radical alterity (I
will specify: in relation to philosophical oppositions), then what I write
can be considered 'materialist.'" 17 While, as we shall see shortly,
Derrida has carefully steered clear of a confrontation with "the text of
Marx," he lays claim to an enlightened epistemological position on
grounds similar to those invoked by Marx.

Derrida ordinarily carries out his project of deconstructing Western
metaphysics on a fairly high level of abstraction, but occasionally he
articulates the more concrete political implications of his project. In
"The Ends of Man"—delivered, he is careful to note, amidst the events of
May, 1968—he pointed to the correspondences between the violence of
the West's "linguistic" relationship to the rest of the globe and its
"ethnological, economic, political, military relationships." He stated
that a "radical trembling can only come from the outside," meaning,
presumably, the "other" of the West—the oppressed nations and peo-
dles of color—and urged that the task of those "inside" is, meanwhile,
to engage in the dual deconstructive activity of overturning and
transgressing. 18 In "The White Mythology," he expanded upon the
racist and imperialist implications of the strategy of binary opposition:

Metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the cul-
ture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European
mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal
form of thought he must still wish to call Reason . . . White mythology—
metaphysics has eroded within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it,
the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white
ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest. 19

Like Roland Barthes' Mythologies, which unmask the ideological repres-
sentations justifying colonial and neocolonial rule, Derrida's text aligns
itself—at least rhetorically—with liberation movements against Eu-
ropean and American hegemony.

Derrida proposes, in short, that the deconstructive project is not
self-indulgent word-play, but an epistemological practice possessing the
capacity to expose and disrupt the ideological straggers by which
advanced capitalist society legitimizes itself. He has therefore been
careful to point out the various misconstruals of deconstruction that might end up distorting his project of its radically adversary quality. He has frowned, for example, upon those American uses of deconstruction that produce "an institutional closure" stablizing current power relations. He has argued, moreover, that traditional liberal freedom of speech should not be allowed to represent itself as freedom from domination. "It would be illusory," he declares.

to believe that political innocence has been restored, and evil complications undone, when opposition to them can be expressed in the country itself, not only through the voices of its own citizens but also those of foreign citizens, and that henceforward diversities, i.e., oppositions, freely and discursively relate to one another. That a declaration of opposition to some official policy is authorized, and authorized by the authorities, also shows, precisely and to that extent, that the declaration does not upset the given order, is not
besoromne.\(^\text{21}\)

It is clear that Derrida has a much more sophisticated understanding than Hartman of the strategy of liberal co-optation. He has insisted, in addition, that deconstruction aspires not simply to "neutralize the binary oppositions of metaphysics [by] residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it," but instead to "overturn" and "transgress" and "displace" in a double gesture that is simultaneously negative and positive.\(^\text{22}\)

Reading Derrida along the lines I have set forth here, Gayatri Spivak and Michael Ryan have argued that Derrida’s methodology is eminently compatible with that of Marx and in fact supplements and buttresses Marx’s work on ideology in important ways. Spivak, in a review of Derrida’s \textit{Limited Inc.} \textit{aka}, describes deconstruction as

a practically fractured yet persistent critique of the hidden agenda of ethnic-political exclusion; a sustained though necessarily fragmented stand against the vanguardism of theory; and, most importantly, a call to attend to the ever-askew “other” of the traditional disciplines; the need persistently to analyze that “confrontation,” to figure out and act upon that “something like a relationship” between “ideology” and “social production” which, non-self-identical, will not keep us locked in varieties of isomorphism. These are enabling principles far more than a constant cleaning-up (or messin-up) of the language of philosophy, although the importance of this latter is not to be underestimated. If the “other that is not quite the other” were to be conceived of as political practice, pedagogy, or feminism—simply to mention my regional commitments—one might indeed look for “revolutions that as yet have no model.”\(^\text{23}\)

The effect of the deconstructionist project, Spivak concludes, goes “rather further than a new school of literary—philosophical criticism, or even a mere transformation of consciousness. Presumably, according to Spivak, deconstruction can aid in the transformation of that materiality upon which transformed consciousness will operate.

Spivak is, we should note, by no means oblivious to the weaknesses to which many literary deconstructors are prone. Participating in the Cérisy seminar dedicated to an examination of “la politique” and “le politique” in the work of Derrida—the seminar significantly entitled \textit{Les Fins de l’homme}, after Derrida’s apocalyptic text of 1968—she decried the tendency of deconstruction to “marginalize” the question of political economy and to place philosophical discourse at the center, thus practicing the very exclusionary operation against which Derrida has warned. She also noted that more than discourse is at stake where questions of power are concerned: “Le corps du travail, bien qu’il soit un texte, n’est certainement pas un texte parmi d’autres.”\(^\text{24}\)

The challenge facing deconstruction, she argued, is to incorporate the concerns of Marx, who, in his defetishization of the mysteries surrounding exchange value, undertook “une confrontacion massive de la philosophie et de son autre complice. Philosophiquement parlant, il y a là une belle aport, à partir de laquelle une lecteur subtile pourrait montrer un Marx deconstructeur avant la lettre.” Were deconstruction to take on this task, she concluded, it could become “un instrument politique puissant,” directed “vers les femmes, vers le monde non-occidental, vers les victimes du capitalisme.” Even though, she concedes, the Derrida who in 1968 called for an “ébranlement radical” “n’invite plus ce project,” nonetheless his methodology makes possible—indeed, she implies, necessitates—such a rapprochement between the texts of Marx and Derrida.

Ryan’s \textit{Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation}—which is dedicated to Spivak—attempts to articulate the terms of such a rapprochement. The central revolutionary feature of Marx’s thought, Ryan proclaims, consists in its capacity to decenter the “originary” presuppositions of bourgeois ideology. Thus in his assault upon classical political economy’s attempts to naturalize and fetishize such historical products as property, wage labor, rent, and capital, Marx enacted a methodological deconstruction profoundly akin to the epistemological rupture contained in Derrida’s formulations of “différence” and undecidability. Indeed, Ryan argues, Marx and Derrida deploy very similar strategies in their critiques of positivism, idealism, naturalism, and objectivism. By contrast, Ryan argues, the theory and practice of Lenin-
ism is founded in a logocentric paradigm that equates meaning with the
vanguard party, thereby eliminating that play of difference which con-
stitutes the essence of revolutionary activity. Leninism, he contends, is
"exclusive, elitist, hierarchical, [and] disciplinary." A truly radical
appropriation of Marxism, Ryan argues, would abandon the totalitarian
epistemology implicit in the Leninist program and pursue a "radical
democracy" that would retain bourgeois democratic freedoms and "dis-
place[e] and defus[e]... power relations." For Ryan, Marx's discourse is
privileging to subvert the logocentrism not only of bourgeois rule but also
of Leninist and post-Leninist socialism. In place of the authoritarian
category of "representation," it proposes the radical discursive mode of
"metaphor," which, Ryan claims, always denies definitive (and therefore
totalitarian) closure to the propositions it entertains.

While Spivak and Ryan argue that deconstruction's oppositional
posture consists largely in its alignment with Marxism, it is important to
point out that other theorists have used the categories of deconstruction
to propose a—presumably radical and liberatory—deconstruction of
Marxism itself. Stanley Aronowitz, for example—in an essay significant-
ly entitled "Towards a New Strategy of Liberation" in his The Crisis in
Historical Materialism—deposes a Derridean vocabulary in his critique
not only of bourgeois strategies of hegemony but also of Marxism's
presumed failure to subvert that hegemony. Speaking of the antirevolu-
tionary role played in recent decades by both Western and Eastern
European Communist parties, Aronowitz argues, "The left, because of
its claim to a master discourse—its 'scientific' claims—becomes the
most indefeasible enemy of the opposition in those countries where it
'represents' the masses within the state." In other words, the revision-
ist policies of the Eurocommunist parties are, for Aronowitz, traceable
not to class-collaborationism within the working-class movement, but
to a fundamental error in Marxism's claim to totalize the dialectic of
historical development by positing the primacy of the class contradic-
tion. "Marxism's economic logocentrism has constituted its major weak-
ness, both theoretically and politically," he declares. In working out a
"new strategy of liberation," then, the left must fashion a "new historic
bloc" built upon "the micropolitics of autonomous oppositional move-
ments" rather than upon the notion of class. This "new historic bloc"
would have to "become anti-hegemonic as a political and social princi-
ples, recognizing the permanence of difference." While Aronowitz's dif-
fferences with Spivak and Ryan are obvious—they see Marx as a pro-
todeconstructionist, while he sees Marx as wedded to the "bourgeois
rationalist order"—it is nonetheless suggestive that all three invoke the
language of undecidability and rupture in their prognostications for
social change.

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If Derrida has been so careful to disavow any connection with those
critical appropriations that would tame the disruptive character of the
decomstructive project, and if his leftist adherents have deployed Der-
ridean concepts in their critiques of racism, imperialism, and sexism,
can Derridean deconstruction be dismissed as inassimilable to a radical
politics? Can one assert that Derrida's continuity with the Yale School is
more significant than his affinity with a radical analysis of modern
capitalist social relations? I believe that one can—and should—still
argue that the political implication of Derrida's project is fundamentally
anti-progressive—but that in order to make this argument, one must
pursue the critique of Derrida beyond the usual sorts of objections that
are made to deconstruction's solipsism or its denial of objective reality.
For example, M. H. Abrams' complaint that a deconstructive reading is
"parasitical" on an "obvious or univocal" reading is itself highly
vulnerable to a deconstructive "overturning," since it postulates "origi-
nal" an authoritative textual appropriation that is necessarily constituted
by dominant critical conventions. A humanist or positivist critique of
Derrida's project is not sufficient. If one seeks to understand the political
bankruptcy of deconstruction, I believe, one must grant its occasional
value as an instrument of ideological exposure and must admit that its
denial of self-evidence is not necessarily tantamount to a subjectivist
relativism. But then one must confront the essential flaw in Derrida's
project—namely, its fundamental antipathy to centralism, an antipathy
that is shared by all Derrida's supporters on the left and that, in my view,
finally vitiates their liberatory postures as well as his. If my endorsement
of Leninist politics brings down on me the disapproval of some who
might otherwise agree with my critical description of deconstruction, so
be it: it is high time that a critique of deconstruction undertaken from a
Marxist-Leninist perspective be distinguished from one mounted from the
vantage point of liberalism.

Before confronting directly the substance of Derrida's claims to op-
positional status, however, I would again like to come back to the
question of style. For the messianic overtones of Derrida's rhetoric raise
real problems for his claim to have superseded the metaphysical op-
erations of binary opposition. Derrida’s language—which, he would be the first to admit, can hardly be neutral in its procedures of reference, however much it may self-critically circle back on itself—implies a profoundly dualistic view of philosophical debate. Indeed, Derrida’s entire universe is essentially Manichean, for it is characterized by an incessant battle between the two sides of its Force. The bad side of the Force comprises such oppressive operations as domination, mastery, appropriation and reappropriation, presence, representation, telos, totality, fixity, castration, and above all—the evil Emperor—logocentrism. On the good side of the Force are rallied such friendly creatures as rupture, différance, trace, heterogeneity, dispersal, autonomy, dissemination, refusal of mastery, and—the blond, blue-eyed Luke Skywalker—undecidability. While Derrida proposes to overturn and transgress binary opposition, it is difficult to see how the rhetorical operations generated by such a dualism can do anything other than perpetuate the linguistic adjudication of a real, privileged interior, in contradiction to a false, derivative exterior. The margins have simply taken over the role of the center.

If the rhetoric of Derrida’s prose leads us to wonder whether there might not be a logical contradiction in his strategy of argument, a closer scrutiny of its substance only confirms this suspicion. For, pace Spivak and Ryan, I would argue that there is little radical utility in a program that hypostatizes its refusal of mastery and militates against the formulation of any “third term” that would articulate and concretize its supression of the exclusionary operations of metaphysical thought. While I would not choose to argue that, in its specific propositions, Derrida’s argument is as complacent and elitist as that of the Yale critics, I would assert that his methodology leads logically enough to the kind of criticism that they practice.

I would propose, first, that Derrida’s refusal to “transcend” binary opposition leads to a re-fetishization of the very metaphysical pain to operations that it has taken such pains to defetishize. While Spivak and Ryan argue quite emphatically that Marx’s procedures of critique are essentially comparable to those of Derridean deconstruction, they are, I believe, fundamentally wrong. Consider the strategy of defetishization deployed in the following excerpt from the Grundrisse:

The conditions and presuppositions of the becoming, of the arising, of capital presuppose precisely that it is not yet in being but merely in becoming; they therefore disappear as real capital arises, capital which itself, on the basis of its

own reality, posits the conditions for its realization. Thus e.g. while the process in which money or value for itself originally becomes capital presupposes on the part of the capitalism an accumulation—perhaps by means of savings garnered from products and values created by his own labour etc., which he has undertaken as a non-capitalist, i.e., while the pre-suppositions under which money becomes capital appear as given, external presuppositions for the arising of capital—nevertheless, as soon as capital has become capital in such, it creates its own presuppositions, i.e. the possession of the real conditions of the creation of new values without exchange—by means of its own production process. These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its action as capital—now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as posited by it—not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence.

Here Marx dissects the self-evidence of the binary opposition wage-labor/capital, revealing that these terms, rather than serving as “origins” of a scientific discussion of political economy, are themselves products of an extensive prior textualization. Recognition of process, for Marx, defetishes “presence”; “becoming” is the key to “presence.” He demonstrates at length in Capital that this opposition is a function of a historical specific process of proletarianization—specifically, the wresting of the peasantry from the land—rather than an eternal truth of the human condition, as the political economists of his time would have it. But Marx was a dialectician, not a deconstructionist. He described the historical roots of the opposition, wage-labor/capital, not simply in order to demonstrate its historicity as the negation of feudal social relations, but in order to surmount it with a “third term”—communism—that would serve as the negation of that negation. Oppositions are, for Marx, dialectical rather than static: the bourgeoisie may be at present the principal aspect of the opposition bourgeoisie/proletariat, but in time the proletariat becomes the principal aspect of the contradiction, because of a motion internal to the contradiction—i.e., class struggle—that enables it to produce its own “third term.” For Marx, in other words, dialectical oppositions produce their own synthesis: “[The] integument is burnt away. The knoll of capitalist private property stands. The expropriators are expropriated... Capitalist production begins, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation.”29 The knoll that Marx sounds is not the knoll of the classicum, but the knoll of a mode of production; the agent of this process is not deconstructive discourse, but a historically specific class-subject. And the historical opposition that the revolutionary proletariat negates
is not a metaphysical product of ideological domination but a real opposition: Marx proposes to overturn and transgress the binary opposition wage-labor/capital not because it is a binary opposition, but because it is a binary opposition that prohibits the historical development of human potentiality. It will, presumably, be replaced by another binary opposition, such as the contradiction between humanity and nature, or between consciousness and materiality. His critique is therefore substantive rather than formalistic. Marx takes to task not the existence of opposed categories qua categories, but their historically specific contents.

Despite some superficial resemblances between the procedures of defamiliarization and deconstruction, then, I would assert that Marx’s project is very different indeed from that of Derrida. For Derridean deconstruction extracts binary oppositions from their historical moment, formalizes and hypostatizes contradiction, and elevates undecidability to the status of the historical subject. In our determination of the political relationship between Derrida and his American disciples, then, the central question we debate should not be whether or not undecidability has become a third term, a new metaphysics, in the hands of less subtle practitioners. There is, to my mind, no doubt that Derrida’s argument avoids much of the self-satisfied conservatism that attends the discourse of the Yale critics. The awareness of the racist implications of hegemonic discourse that is manifested in “The White Mythology” is clearly at variance with the horror at cultural diversity that is implicit in Hartman’s discussion of indeterminacy. And Derrida’s insistence that deconstruction entails a conscious procedure is very different from J. Hillis Miller’s complacent contention that literary discourse “perform[s] on itself the act of deconstruction” with critic and author alike serving as amanuenses of language’s inevitable and natural procedures of self-annihilation.

But this difference, while noteworthy, is not as far-reaching as Derrida’s leftist adherents would have us believe. For the real issue at stake is deconstruction’s valorization of the refusal of mastery—its insistence that the strategy of placing exclusionary oppositions sous rature constitutes a viable mode of political praxis. On this question, I believe, Derrida and the Yale critics present a solid united front. It was, after all, Derrida, not Geoffrey Hartman, who declared, “I do not believe in decisive ruptures, in an unequivocal ‘epistemological break,’ as it is called today. Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone.”31 Whether it is practiced in Paris or New Haven, deconstruction cannot—will not—provide the grounds for a rupture that is, finally, anything more than discursive. For to engage in an oppositional praxis based upon a determinate analysis and pursuing determinate results would be to grant that binary oppositions are dialectical, rather than static—historical rather than epistemological. And this is an admission that deconstruction cannot make. Marx was willing to accept the eventuality that any negation would carry with it multiple traces of what it had negated: he knew that the new would always be fashioned out of the cloth of the old. But deconstruction does not envision any process—let alone progress—arising from any clash within binary opposition. If there is to be a “radical trembling,” we will recall, it will come exclusively from the marginalized “other” of the West, and not from any dialectical interaction between the margins and the center. Hence the only activity possible for a deconstructor of good conscience is to adopt a hygienic position that will avoid any contaminating contact with the moldy cloth of history. (We also note here, by the way, a curious re-entry into Derrida’s text of a racist attitude that his methodology of difference would seem to have banished. The notion that progressive-minded Europeans and Americans should restrict themselves to philosophical inquiry while they await the eruption of oppressed nations and races suggests a particularly unfair division of responsibility in the world-historical task of overturning and transgressing bourgeois hegemony.) The fatal flaw of deconstruction—as it is practiced on both sides of the Atlantic, I would argue—is that it is not so much ahistorical as it is anti-historical. It desires to freeze in time (or, better, to hold in suspended animation) its act of epistemological transgression and actively to block the possibility of resolution or synthesis. Deconstruction’s polemic against Hegelian dialectics—which it terms “teleological” and “totalizing”—is in essence a polemic against any praxis that would attempt to transform social relations by means of a plan on the one hand and power on the other: “totalizing” becomes tantamount to “totalitarian.”

What this fetishization of the refusal of mastery amounts to, I believe, is the deconstructionist critic’s antipathy to totalization and synthesis is, finally, greater than his or her antipathy to capitalism. And what this bedrock assumption leads to, in terms of actual political practices, is little more than a rewarmed liberal pluralism. There is, of course, a significant difference between old-fashioned liberal pluralism and its deconstructionist variant, insofar as the classical formulations posit a collocation of discrete subjectivities, each of which possesses a knowl-
edge of "who he is, where he is, and what he is talking about." Deconstructionist pluralism, by contrast, posits a subject who eschews such metaphysical certainties. The deconstructive subject inhabits a distinctly reified late-capitalist world, in which, as Jean-François Lyotard puts it, discourse "is dispersed into clouds of linguistic particles—narrative ones, but also denotive, prescriptive, descriptive, etc., each with its own pragmatic valence. Today, each of us lives in the vicinity of many of these. We do not necessarily form stable linguistic communities, and the properties of those we form are not necessarily communicable." Nonetheless, I would contend, the fundamental unit of the liberal pluralist program remains unaltered: the sovereign (or not-so-sovereign) ego, seeking freedom from authoritarian constraints and entering into social relations (whether communicable or not) on the premise that its autonomy will remain inviolate. Liberal pluralism is an essentially formalistic ethos, positing the equivalence of all forms of power and domination—except, of course, those with which it happens to agree or within which it happens to be enmeshed. While Derrida does not invoke Hartman's heavily loaded opposition of "controlled" and "open" societies, then, his valorization of dispersed and heterogeneity implies a tacit assent with the political premises of liberalism—argue as he may that his methodology poses a greater threat to the bourgeois order than does any "apparently revolutionary ideological sort of 'content.'"

I can at this point anticipate two objections that might be raised. First, one might ask, what of the celebrated "lacunae" in Derrida's writings with reference to Marx? Is it fair to assert the incompatibility of Derrida's methodology with that of Marx when Derrida himself admits that these lacunae "mark the sites of a theoretical elaboration which remains, for me, at least, still to come"? I shall certainly be interested to see Derrida's confrontation with the text of Marx, if and when it should appear, but I do not anticipate that Derrida will find much there to endorse—at least not in terms of an implied political praxis. While Derrida would like to consider himself a materialist "if material means radical alterity," this conditional statement is, I think, something of a hedge. Clearly materialism must entail, in some sense, the determination of consciousness by social being: alterity comes in as a useful epistemological tool for understanding the nature of the mediation between the two categories, but not as a basis for subverting the categories themselves. For all its claim to constitute the definitive criticism of logocentric idealism, then, deconstruction itself qualifies more as an idealism than as a materialism, insofar as it deprives the investigatory of any epistemological grounds for finally distinguishing between materiality and consciousness.

What is more, while Derrida claims not to have abandoned history, but to have endorsed a "monumental, stratified, contradictory" history (he quotes Sollers), he also makes it clear that anything resembling "linear" history is, for him, "metaphysical." Where he requires a "history that . . . implies a new logic of repetition and the trace," he decries the history derived from Hegelian tradition as "not only linked to linearity, but to an entire system of implications (teleology, eschatology, . . . accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain conception of continuity, of truth, etc.)." Marx may have jettisoned a good deal of what he learned from Hegel, but what he kept—Hegel's dialectic "turned right side up"—is exactly the aspect of Hegel to which Derrida so strenuously objects. The Eighteenth Brumaire and Capital may be constituted by a lively awareness of trace and repetition, but they also posit a conception of historical process that is unequivocally linear, through hardly mechanistic or monocular.

But what of the arguments of Spivak and Ryan? it might be asked. After all, both these critics disavow any association with liberal pluralism and maintain that Derridean deconstruction provides a powerful tool for oppositional political movements of a leftist character. To their assertions I would respond, first, with my critique of deconstruction's valorization of the refusal of mastery, adding that Marx's defetishization of political economy sets forth a model for other procedures of defetishization philosophical, literary, and historical—and does not need any supplementation by deconstructive undecidability. But I would go further and assert that Spivak's and Ryan's Marxism itself emerges as somewhat suspect in the light of its unproblematic assimilation to deconstruction. Despite their readiness to identify themselves with the interests of actual oppressed people, I would note, both critics are quite ambiguous about their relation to the principal category of a Marxist social analysis—namely, the concept of class. Spivak expresses her concern about women, the non-Western world, and even the victims of capitalism (whoever precisely they may be), but she remains notably silent about how these groups' rebellious practices could relate to the agenda of proletarian revolution—or, indeed, about whether such an agenda is in order at all. What is more, she refers to her own political activities as "regional commitments"—a telling phrase, for it suggests that her own activities are part of a larger (pluralistic) terrain, in which different individuals, acting on the prompting of their different con-
sciences, stake out their own activist turfs. Each commitment possesses its own "pragmatic valence" (to recall Lyotard), and none is guided by an overall (totalizing) strategy or plan adjudicating whether some activities are more necessary than others to the movement toward a general human liberation.

Ryan develops an argument that reveals even more clearly the fundamental affinity between "leftist" deconstruction and liberal pluralism. For Ryan’s Marx is a peculiar creature who demonstrates his compatibility with Derrida by making manifest his incompatibility with Lenin. In a quite remarkable misreading of Marx’s writings on the Paris commune and of Lenin’s writings on the state, Ryan attempts to depict Marx as an advocate of dispersal and heterogeneity “avant la lettre,” with Lenin playing the role of a positivist authoritarian irrevocably bound to an oppressive and—you guessed it—logocentric conception of the party. In contradistinction to the Leninist strategy, Ryan holds up the example of Antonio Negri’s “autonomist” movement—which seeks to establish democracy in the workplace without fundamentally altering property relations—and of the socialist women’s movement—which seeks the realization of women’s demands through a decentralized network that eschews assimilation to the master (male) network of traditional Marxism.

I would propose, in sum, that the hidden text behind Spivak’s and Ryan’s radicalism is an antipathy to centralism of all kinds—the democratic centralism of a communist movement equally as much as the various forms of domination characterizing bourgeois hegemony. This formalistic anarchism will find precious little support in the writings of Marx, who vigorously organized the International as an articulation of unified proletarian identity and who declared, in the 1872 preface to The Communist Manifesto, that the main lesson taught by the Paris Commune was the necessity of smashing altogether the existing state apparatus. Boiled down to its essentials (a supremely antideconstructionist maneuver and metaphor, I am aware), the Marxism of Spivak and Ryan constitutes a kind of leftist pluralism, one that finds its natural expression in local organizing and at times, coalition politics. (Coalitions, after all, place a primacy upon autonomy and heterogeneity and posit any broader unity as temporary and provisional.) Now, doubtless some will find this program perfectly satisfactory and will wonder at my dis- content. Unfortunately, I do not have the opportunity here to argue the merits of Leninist revolutionism over piecemeal reformism. My main point, however, is that Spivak and Ryan find an affinity between Marx and Derrida only by stripping Marx of his commitment to revolutionary practice; he is a “deconstructeur avant la lettre” only if his text can be construed as a refusal to master—in practice—the text of capitalist domination.

While I find Aronowitz’s political outlook to be even less congenial than that of Spivak and Ryan, then, I would propose that, in a curious way, he has made a more fitting political use of Derrida’s methodology. For Aronowitz’s deployment of a deconstructive rhetoric is unabashedly anti-Marxist and anti-Leninist: he faults Marx for his formulation of a third term—Aronowitz calls it Marx’s “economic logocentricity”—and criticizes the entire Leninist tradition for its authoritarian imposition of this “master discourse.” Rather than purporting to formulate a coherent politics based upon deconstruction, then, he uses Derridean terms primarily to deconstruct inherited notions of the political. To the extent that he does propose a “new strategy for liberation,” he introduces a patently anarchistic perspective. The enemy, he asserts, is the “bourgeois rationalist order” (one might say, Western metaphysics). His preferred strategy entails a “micropolitics of autonomous oppositional movements” that eschews the “master discourse” of Marxism, acknowledges the “unknowable” as a “property of nature itself,” and recognizes the “permanence of difference.” Certainly anything so decisive as the seizure of state power would be a violation of such a politics of undecidability. What remains, then, in terms of a concrete political practice—not only for Aronowitz, but, as I have tried to show, for the whole Derridean, deconstructionist project—is a willfully fragmented movement, of which dispersal and heterogeneity constitute both the promise and the goal. Marxism has been finally banished from the scene, this time with a vengeance.

NOTES

5. Lentricchia, p. 169.


19. Ibid., p. 213.


23. Spivak, "Revolutions," pp. 46–47. The quotation below is from p. 49.


34. Ibid., pp. 56–57.


36. I owe this formulation to Nancy Fraser’s essay, "The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing the Political?" forthcoming in *New German Critique*.

37. Aronowitz, p. 130. I wish to thank my friend and colleague Gregory Meyerson for the many discussions that have helped me to formulate my ideas in this essay.