

Deconstruction and the Political

(or how not to speak, while still speaking,
of deconstruction and politics)

More than two decades ago, in one of Jacques Derrida's first interviews, Jean-Louis Houdebine advanced the 'first sketch of a question: what relationship do you think is developing between [the] economy of a dialectical materialist logic and the economy that you have based on a problematic of writing?' This two-day conference at the University of Essex (27–28 October 1994) set itself the task of treating the issue anew, especially now that Derrida's long-awaited *Spectres of Marx* has appeared. In his opening remarks, Ernesto Laclau implicitly recast and generalized Houdebine's question to Derrida by asking: 'What does it mean to take a decision in an undecidable terrain?' The conference took the form of three panels, each dedicated to a different facet of the theme: 'Spectres of Marx', 'Deconstruction and Hegemony', and 'Deconstruction, Politics, and Ethics'.

Richard Beardsworth opened the first session by declaring that we are already in the twenty-first century, faced with new and pervasive technologies that put at risk our understanding of time and temporalisation. While accepting much of Derrida's argument in *Spectres* on a strategic level, Beardsworth nevertheless wished tentatively to criticize it for failing to re-articulate Marxian ontology in terms of a genealogy of the relation between humanity and technology'. Simon Critchley raised similar questions, concentrating on the concepts of the messianic, the political, and the 'New International' at work in *Spectres*. According to Critchley, while Derrida sketches 'the preconditions for a new socialist hegemonic articulation', he fails to explain how the New International might actually be hegemonized. Samuel Weber's contribution was more optimistic in tone. 'Piece-work' detailed the possibilities of a deconstructive approach to the political by way of comparison with Marx and Carl Schmitt. It concluded that the spectral and the messianic provide 'a way of thinking the relationship of past, present, and future that might not be based on the ontological priority of the present, of sameness over alterity'.

The second session concentrated largely on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's work on hegemony, to which Derrida refers in *Spectres*. Taking Derrida's book as his starting point, Egidius Berns tirelessly catalogued a wide range of similarities and differences between Laclau's and

Derrida's concepts of hegemony. Aletta Norval investigated the 'hybridity' of subjective identity in relation to post-colonial discourses. Focusing on Homi Bhabha's ambiguous, albeit ground-breaking, use of the term, Norval articulated her own position, linked to Laclau and Mouffe's theories: 'to think of hybridity as an experience of thinking the in-between, the borderline itself'. Jelica Sumic-Riha juxtaposed modernist and post-modernist theories of justice. Rawls' *Theory of Justice* was sized up against Lyotard's *Differend*, but the comparison was heavily weighted in Lyotard's favour, as Sumic-Riha opted to portray the relation between the two in Lyotardian terms, as a differend.

Laclau's own contribution proved more daring, as he outlined a 'new step' in a deconstructive approach to political decisions which expands 'the logic of undecidability to wider and wider fields, and consequently to the terrain in which a decision has to be taken and a political, hegemonic, moment has to intervene'.

The third and final panel seemed rather arbitrarily put together. Hent de Vriess' paper was based on a close reading of Derrida's essay 'Donner la mort'. It displayed great skill in delineating the issues of ethics and messianicity, but failed to draw them together to form any satisfying conclusions. Rodolphe Gasché unassumingly but perspicaciously proposed that Derrida reinterprets the categorical imperative through 'invention', whereby 'thinking must invent the universal law' in the singular event of a response to the aporia. The final paper, 'Virtual Derrida', was, alas, a brief and baffling attempt to reflect on a word – 'necessity' – whose nature, it was claimed, has been lost to us, by analyzing it along the 'virtual axes' of ghosts and promises.

One might suspect that there was a certain madness at work over the course of these two days, for it was not politics of which the participants spoke, but 'messianicity', 'aporia', 'the promise', and 'the spectral'. But at its best, and given the limitations of the day, such discussion conceals something within its own admittedly inadequate gestures, something that (as Polonius remarks of Hamlet) 'madness often hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be deliver'd of'.

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