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Derrida's Nationalism & Deconstruction of Politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a brief context of the development of Derrida's thoughts on politics and on the concept of nationalism or institutionalisation over the years, considered both as a contribution to political theory and as a political practice in its own right. In the more limited space of this paper I will briefly set out what I see as the key features behind Derrida's work on deconstruction of language reflecting the shades of deconstruction of nationalism, and what reasons could have affected his thought and post-modernism as well. The paper suggests, what I believe are the consequences of thinking about politics and about nationalism in the specific context of devolution of power.

Keywords: Institutionalisation, Post-Modernism, Deconstruction, Nationalism, Structuralism

I. INTRODUCTION

Born in 1930 and departing away in 2004, Jacques Derrida was one of the most significant but contested and criticised philosophers of the 20th century. He pioneered deconstruction, a postmodernism philosophy and technique for analysing and exploring texts solely via the text itself, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."³

In 1983, Derrida began his seminar on 'Philosophical Nationality and Nationalism', which was to last four years. It provided much of the impetus for the development of deconstruction as a political practice over the ten years that followed and culminated in the publication of "*Politics of Friendship*." Derrida makes three main points in his argument: first, that nationalism is always cosmopolitanism; second, that all philosophy must be national (and hence political); and third, that nationalism is a philosophical idea.

II. POLITICAL POSITIONS: RISE OF INSTITUTIONALISATION IN MODERNISM

One needs to first comprehend the types of political stances the globe has experienced over the centuries in order to comprehend the authentic background of Derrida's perspective on nationalism. It had been dominated by rulers, such as kings, queens, pharaohs, and popes, but

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³ "There is nothing outside text", Of Grammatology (1976)

as technology advanced, communication became simpler for lower-class individuals. Everyone found it simpler to understand more difficult ideas. Even philosophical ideas expanded among the people, resulting in the 18th-century Enlightenment era, giving rise to a disdain for the king, the aristocracy, and religious authorities. And as a result, many simple modern concepts such as liberty, freedom, tolerance, progression, constitutional, government, and the ideas of deductive reasoning, logic, scientific method, and objective truth became popular. The time accelerated the industrial revolution, resulting in industrialised cities, a massive exodus from rural farming, and a large increase in population in urban areas, resulting in the birth of the middle class. Modernism eventually emerged in this way, as a rise in logical thinkers who rejected supernaturalism and religion in favour of ideas based on the scientific method and who only believed in that which could be supported by evidence. The modern movement was born in the age of reason and logic and carried it to its logical conclusion.

Naturally, "God died," as Nietzsche put it, and society simply became more secular. Instead of being motivated by their religious identity, people were now motivated by other ideas like patriotism, capitalism, communism, and fascism. The globe was being mapped, knowledge was growing, technology were making life better, society were becoming more organised and institutionalised, and art was questioning conventions. Modernism had evolved into a coherent theory of growth and progress based on reason and science, which gave rise to the notion that institutions were in the greatest position to direct all actions and understood what was best. But then came World Wars I and II, the development of the nuclear weapon, which might wipe out all life on Earth, and the cold war, which held the entire world captive.

At the time, Derrida was writing, which was completely different from now. Because of the internet and mass media, institutions have grown in number, fractured, and become somewhat more democratic today. However, the public finally had enough in the 1960s when Uncle Sam posters were used to strike the U.S. institutions over sending sons to die in the jungle, and we're still witnessing the same conflict today.

Or the US Army, the second-largest institution in the world, was engaged in an unlawful and mostly unfair war in Vietnam as an equivalent for the Soviet Union, which had just emerged from one of the most egregious and terrifying abuses of power in human history. Without mentioning Mao's tremendous leap ahead, the Khmer Rouge, imperial wars, colonialism and neocolonialism abuses of power in the name of neoliberalism, anguish that murdered millions of people and maintained the attraction that millions of people saw another institution known as "Marxism,"

A theory and language that, in the eyes of its proponents, disclosed the world's reality and kept all of these concepts and institutions together.

A heritage of distinct political ideas that each generated books, essays, articles, and a network of commentators, university professors, sympathisers, and adversaries supports each institution in its own way.

The political philosophy of John Locke, which dates back to 1651, served as the foundation for the American Constitution. Theories about the Divine Right of Kings and the Rights of Sovereigns to rule throughout the world have been influenced by Hobbesian tradition. And of course, Vladimir Lenin's writings served as the inspiration for the politics of the Soviet Union's nearly 300 million citizens for the majority of the 20th Century.

III. POST-MODERNISM: STRUCTURALISM IN QUESTION

All of these occurrences made it clear that the very institutions we believed would advance us into the future also had the potential to do us in. Post-modernism, which is a direct reaction to modernism, steps in at this point. Even if post-modernism does not entirely replace modernism, we are not required to adhere to just one theory because they sort of co-exist as rival theories. Post-modernism doesn't have the principle of rejecting everything, but it does challenge everything, starting with modernism and going all the way back to the age of enlightenment. Society's faith in the institutions' ability to employ science to advance us into the future was dashed. There is no longer a universal moral code, cohesive identity, shared set of values, and faith in either institutionalised government or institutionalised science. People are free to develop their own particular ideologies, reasoning, and sense of meaning in life since structure has been replaced by limitless choice.

Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an “event,” if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural—or structurality—thought to reduce or to suspect. But let me use the term “event” anyway, employing it with caution and as if in quotation marks. In this sense, this event will have the exterior form of a rupture and a redoubling.⁴

In reality, political systems, political parties, power structures, bureaucracies, and institutions are made up of shared languages, systems of words and sentences that when combined, form the theory, the foundation, the objective, and the authority of that institution. On the surface, these structures are composed of physical objects such as buildings, websites, telephones,

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”

numbers, people, documents, and networks.

Therefore, it is important to remember all this when reading Derrida's view on nationalism as the whole structure of nationalism or any other structure for that matter being based upon language itself in terms of its much layered context is derived from, that ruptures and redoubles over a period of time. Thus, the fixed notion of being a structure has failed. According to Derrida, philosophy has a logocentric past, which means that it has assumed the existence of an ultimate truth that can be discovered through language. Because language is indecisive and cannot be reduced to a single clear meaning, he believed that this was innately incorrect.

IV. DECONSTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE

In order to understand what Derrida means when he says things like "monsters cannot be announced, one cannot say: "Here are our monsters," without immediately turning the monsters into pets," one must understand Ferdinand Saussure's structuralism, for which Derrida engaged.⁵ When Saussure was co-teaching at Geneva at the turn of the 20th century, he claimed that signs with two sides—a signifier and a signified—are what give language its meaning. The component that the brain senses as an input by the textual, sound, or visual trees is known as the signifier. The signifier designates a signified, which is the idea of a tree. The signified is the notion; it cannot be an actual tree because various trees are meant when individuals use the term "tree." It is the common human conception of a tree. Saussure argued that the signifier and the signified are joined in the brain like two sides of a sheet of paper, and that it is the contrasts between two signs that give them meaning.

Taking this concept and expanding upon it, Derrida claimed that signs were not only interdependent in terms of meaning but also that additional signs were always present inside the meaning of a single sign via what he termed "trace," such as the sign "a" within the sign "b." Depending on the person, a pig can be many other things as well, including partially pink, huge, little, unclean, farm-related, pork and animal. All of these ideas may be identified in the notion by their traces while neither being present nor missing in the signifier pig. Derrida wrote that "the trace is not presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace."⁶ Trace is a component of what Derrida called "Différance," which denotes the impossibility of meaning existing in the void between signs.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms', *The States of Theory*. pp. 63-94.

⁶ speech and phenomena, p.156

Différance is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means by which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive production of the intervals without which the 'full' terms would not signify, would not function.⁷

Derrida's main argument with regard to each of these concepts is that since language is so subjective and because meaning may fluctuate from reader to reader, there isn't ever going to be a universal truth that all people can access through a single theory, philosophy, or organisation. Furthermore, Derrida believed that a large portion of the legacy of western philosophy was founded on binary oppositions, where one word or notion is given prominence and is asserted to be more natural or to contain more truth than the other, such as right-left, male-female, inside-outside, high-low, speech-writing, or the opposition between inside and outside. Many writers, whether on purpose or not, assume that there is a hierarchy and that certain terms are more essential than others.

With all of this in mind, we can examine Derrida's most well-known book, *Of Grammatology*, which was published in 1967. Although it is a notoriously challenging book, it is crucial to remember the importance of institutional critique in order to comprehend why Derrida decides to focus so much of the book on the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One of the most significant philosophers of modernity, Rousseau's ideas can be traced back to not only the French Revolution, which gave rise to the modern world, but also to those of Freud Marx, Immanuel Kant, and nearly every other philosopher of the time. Some scholars even draw a direct connection between Rousseau and totalitarian governments of the 20th century. In contrast to the institutions he observed around him, Rousseau's ideas envisioned a political society that was more like to nature. His ideas frequently centre on the thesis that civic society has polluted mankind. He said that "when there is no effect, there is no cause to seek. But here the effect is certain, the depravity real, and our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts towards perfection."⁸

The "written word" is, in Rousseau's view, the most peering example of this corruption because, as he claims, speech expresses our thoughts almost instantly, always in the moment, and always face to face. However, the dependence on writing has corrupted speech's naturalness, creating a barrier and distance between two minds. In accordance with Rousseau's theory, writing represents organisations and societies that are far apart, unrelated, and distinct and are hence

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "interview with Julia Kristeva" in "Positions", pp. 21.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences" [The First Discourse] 1750

natural. According to him, writing that appears to be in need of correction it is language itself that changes it., “it changes not its words but its genius; its substitutes precision for expression.”⁹ He held the view that writing and speaking are both effective ways to express thoughts and ideas. Writing requires that all words be used in accordance with accepted use, whereas speaking allows for greater interpretation due to the tone of voice. It is impossible for a language that is written to retain the lively quality of a language that is spoken for an extended period of time because he determines them as he pleases, is less obliged to be clear, and provides more forcefulness. This instantly highlights a paradox in Rousseau's thinking, which he was well aware of despite his incessant criticism of writing, he is forced to articulate his views through writing. Rousseau claims that speech is natural and complete in and of itself, but Derrida counters that if that is the case, adding writing to it exposes that it was not. Writing can fulfil tasks that speech could not but had the potential to when it is used instead of writing. So how, Derrida asks, could it be fully natural! Rousseau and Saussure were both cool writing a tyranny but “where is the evil? One will perhaps ask. And what has been invested in the ‘living word’ that makes such ‘aggressions’ of writing intolerable?”¹⁰ There is no outside text, according to Derrida, who also believed that what Rousseau wrote was extremely organic, very genuine, and an integral part of Rousseau's reality rather than a filtered version of it. For this reason, his most famous quote is that "there is no outside text" and that language exacts its vengeance through time for words' postponed meanings.

V. DECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONALISM AND "OTHER"

Derrida's theory is relevant to our day because it exemplifies postmodern scepticism, the diminishing belief in institutions' supreme authority, and the idea that nothing should be exempt from meticulously studied scrutiny. But many people regarded Derrida as a nihilist and someone who, in an open letter, signed by eighteen academics, “Jacques Derrida does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour...and attacks upon the values of reason, truth and scholarship.”¹¹

Let's examine the argument in support of Derrida that a significant portion of his legacy and that of the general public may be attributable to one little-known but essential concept. It is important to keep in mind what Derrida is criticising in order to comprehend him and Deconstruction, the philosophy-inspired approach. Why he is one of the most liberal liberationists and democratic supporters of our day because of this. The significance of his work and what results from a critique of writing itself is a critical look at institutions. His work first

⁹ Essay on the origin of languages by Rousseau.

¹⁰ Of Grammatology

¹¹ Letter to the editor of The Times (London), 1992

appeared to be a thorough investigation of grammatology or writing.

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue... The idea is to disarm the bombs... of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants...¹²

Derrida is inclined to agree with Celan that the power essence of the Jew is to have no property, their essence to be without essence. He is not trying to locate a Jewish homeland, to establish a strong nation-state with an adequate national defence. He is also not trying to secure for them their own private property. Like Lyotard- whatever their differences - he wants nothing to do with "geophilosophy," a philosophy that grows like a plant on some national private property.

One should not rush to make the clandestine immigrant an illegal alien or, what risks coming down to the same thing, to domesticate him, to neutralise him through naturalisation. To assimilate him so as to stop frightening oneself (making oneself fear) with him.¹³

The impacts of opacity, national boundaries, or even patriotic claims, in Derrida's opinion, have never been as pronounced as they are now, despite the fact that there has never been greater (international) communication, travel, and trade. Derrida insists to refuse to subscribe to any political rhetoric or theoretical discourse which generates strangers whether inside the State or at its borders rather than one which listens for without attempting to enfold or engulf it and with the understanding that borders are movable and temporary by nature. But this can only be done by turning that which we presume to be our own so-called nation, culture or values but also our language inside out.

VI. CONCLUSION

In contrast to Derrida's more reckless detractors, deconstruction is a constant, though sometimes oblique, discourse on democracy and a democracy that is yet to come. Derrida's democracy is a profoundly pluralistic political system that opposes the dread of an organic, ethnic, or spiritual oneness, or of the native, native ties of the country, which crush to dust anything that is not of the dominant type and genus. The very idea of a community is to fortify ourselves in a common against the other, to draw ourselves together in a circle against the other. He dreams of a nation without nationalist or native closer, of a community without identity, of a non-identical

¹² As quoted in: John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, p. 231.

¹³ *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (p. 174)

community that cannot say "I" or "we."

The same duty dictates respecting differences, idioms, minorities, singularities, but also the universalizability of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and univocity, the law of the majority, opposition to racism, nationalism and xenophobia.¹⁴

Ironically, however, these social institutions are left without any authority, rights, or legitimate capacity to achieve the goals that Derrida pursues when deconstructionism completes its task. Derrida himself came to the conclusion that justice and democracy were preferable to tyranny and injustice. We may infer from this comment that Derrida thought it was beneficial and desirable to have love and kindness for immigrants, Jews, and Arabs. But how can deconstructionism avoid being a "universal acid" that destroys both the good and bad parts of nation-states, the same poison that eats away at destructive nationalism and also destroys the legitimacy of institutions of justice? A straightforward way to address the aforementioned tension would be to "try to think beyond nationalism but without presuming that we can step beyond it," quoting Derrida's lesson.

¹⁴ Other Heading, trans. Michael B. Naas, p. 78

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