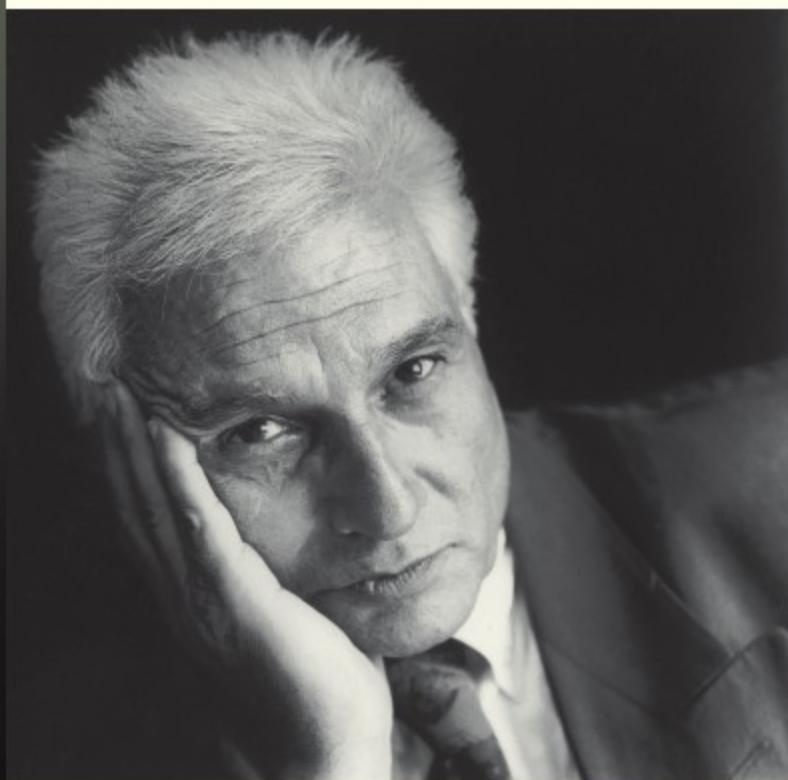


# Derrida and the time of the political



Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, editors

# Derrida

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*and the time of the political*



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Edited by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac

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# Introduction:

## Derrida and the Time of the Political

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PHENG CHEAH AND SUZANNE GUERLAC

The main purpose of this collection of essays is to offer a critical assessment of Derrida's later work on the political, with respect to its position within his entire corpus and to its contribution to the study of the political and politics. Skepticism concerning the importance of deconstruction for political thinking has been widespread among American critics, especially those curious about the relation between deconstruction, Marxism, and socialist politics. The impatient series of questions that the American Frankfurt School social theorist Nancy Fraser posed at the beginning of her 1984 polemic is representative: "Does deconstruction have any political implications? Does it have any political significance beyond the Byzantine and incestuous struggles it provoked in American academic lit crit departments? Is it possible—and desirable—to articulate a deconstructive politics? Why, despite the revolutionary rhetoric of his circa 1968 writings, and despite the widespread, often taken-for-granted assumption that he is 'of the left,' has Derrida so consistently, deliberately and dexterously avoided the subject of politics?"<sup>1</sup>

The essays in this volume engage with the multifarious ways in which deconstruction directly bears on the delimitation of the political sphere and the implications of Derrida's thought for urgent instances of concrete politics. Needless to say, considerable work has been done on the question of deconstruction and politics, and we can give only a very selective and brief indication of the existing secondary literature here. Partly in reaction to the overly literary focus of the now defunct Yale School, more politically minded literary theorists of a Leftist persuasion in the late 1970s and the 1980s, most notably Gayatri Spivak and Michael Ryan, sought to articulate deconstruction together with Marxism, either by arguing for the usefulness of deconstructive concepts such as *différance* and trace for Marxist ideology critique even as they tried to supplement deconstruction with critical social theory, or by reading Marx as a deconstructivist *avant la lettre* who demonstrated the "textual" character of value and the capitalist system.<sup>2</sup>

The implications of deconstruction for feminist theory and politics, espe-

cially the concept of sexual difference and its relation to “French feminist” thought was, of course, a topic of heated discussion from the 1980s onward and has led to much productive ferment.<sup>3</sup> Spivak used deconstruction to forge an innovative form of postcolonial Marxist feminist critique, and Derrida’s accounts of iterability and performative language were creatively reformulated in Judith Butler’s account of gender performativity.<sup>4</sup> The reception of Derrida’s work in social and political theory was, however, more muted. In their theory of radical democracy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe pointed to the solidarity between their understanding of the social as a contingent discursive field that is riven by antagonisms and Derrida’s early arguments about the dissolution of the transcendental signified by the infinite play of signification.<sup>5</sup> This motif of the differential play of signification was most alluring for sympathetic social and political theorists, who used it to envision radical forms of community and nonpositivistic, nonfoundationalist understandings of politics.<sup>6</sup> But most of these appropriations of Derrida were not based on a systematic study of his corpus and largely focused on his pre-1980 writings.

A more sustained engagement with Derrida’s work took place after 1990, in the wake of his association with the Cardozo Law School, where deconstruction was endowed with an ethical significance by being read in relation to Levinas’s ethical philosophy of alterity. Drucilla Cornell, a legal scholar then at Cardozo Law, positioned Derrida’s work in relation to the ethical and political philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Adorno, and Levinas as well as Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory. She characterized deconstruction as a philosophy of the limit, a utopian ethics that gestures toward the Other of any community or system, and explored its implications for legal and political transformation.<sup>7</sup> Simon Critchley’s *Ethics of Deconstruction* likewise explored Derrida’s indebtedness to, and departure from, Levinasian ethics. But unlike Cornell, Critchley concluded that Derrida’s work leads to an impasse of the political because it fails to move from ethics to politics: “Deconstruction fails to thematize the question of politics . . . as a place of contestation, antagonism, struggle, conflict, and dissension on a factual or empirical terrain.” Indeed, Critchley argued that because “the rigorous undecidability of deconstructive reading fails to account for the activity of political judgment, political critique, and the political decision,” he needed to articulate “a political supplement to deconstruction,” a politics of ethical difference in which politics is persistently interrupted by ethics.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, the publication of Derrida’s long-deferred study of

Marx led to reassessments of the relations between deconstruction, Marxist thought, and socialist politics from Leftist philosophers and intellectuals such as Laclau, Fredric Jameson, and Antonio Negri.<sup>9</sup> *Specters of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship*, a book on concepts of fraternity and its relation to democracy, fueled another body of commentary (written under the tutelage of Geoffrey Bennington, a translator and accomplished scholar of Derrida's work, and a contributor to this volume) that specifically considered how traditional understandings of the political and politics are overturned by Derrida's deconstruction of their underlying logics.<sup>10</sup> Richard Beardsworth's *Derrida and the Political* is a cogent reconstruction of Derrida's argument that the aporia of time always exceeds any form of political organization and points to a promise beyond any given or ideal community. Alex Thomson's recent book, *Deconstruction and Democracy*, offers a useful assessment of the differences between liberal and radical democracy and the deconstructive understanding of democracy.

But compared to the literature available in French, there has been little analysis in the Anglo-American context of Derrida's later work, which specifically took up political and ethical themes such as democracy, responsibility, fraternity, hospitality, forgiveness, and sovereignty. Even fewer authors critically consider this work in relation to Derrida's entire corpus in an attempt to determine the legacy of his contribution to our thinking about politics and the political.<sup>11</sup> This collection of essays attempts to do this in a user-friendly manner. It is intended not only for those who have been long influenced by Derrida's thought but also for newer and even uninitiated readers who are curious about how his later texts open up a different critical perspective on the political.

The choice of such a topic—the *later* writings of Derrida *on the political* (although the relation between the political and the ethical is very much at stake)—raises from the start the issue of the legitimacy of introducing any kind of periodic division in Derrida's writings, such as that between his early and late work, given that deconstruction's radical rethinking of time challenges models of linear development. Implicitly, it also raises the question of a political turn in Derrida's thinking. Derrida explicitly rejected any suggestions of such a turn. "There never was in the 1980s or 1990s . . . a political turn or ethical turn in 'deconstruction,'" he insisted, "at least not as I experience it. The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking of the political, of the contour and limits of the political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune

double bind of the democratic.”<sup>12</sup> Derrida saw his engagement with ethical and political issues as an elaboration of some of the practical implications and consequences of the aporias that had always concerned him.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, deconstruction was always “political” because it analyzed European ethnocentrism and phallogocentrism as defining characteristics of the inherited tradition of European thought. However, he added that this did not mean that nothing changed over the years, “that nothing new happens between, say, 1965 and 1990. But what happens remains without relation or resemblance to . . . the figure of a ‘turn’” (*R*, 39).

Derrida rejects the figure of the turn not only because it implies a turn toward something that was not there before, but also because it implies the conceptual preexistence of something toward which one turns, and therefore a certain teleology. Indeed, instead of turning toward a field of political thought, Derrida’s “political” writings investigate and challenge the borders between the political, the ethical, and “politics,” or merely instrumental action. He insists that works such as *Specters of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship* neither constituted a political theory nor proposed a deconstructive politics. “I don’t think that there is such a thing as a deconstructive politics,” he remarks, “if by the name ‘politics’ we mean a program, an agenda, or even the name of a regime.”<sup>14</sup> Derrida’s writings, as we shall see, challenge and displace our understanding of the term.

In various interviews, Derrida has enriched this somewhat predictable response to the question of the political turn. He has characterized a shift that took place in his work as a “becoming more explicit” of the political force of his thinking, a shift that began with *Specters of Marx* and continued with *Politics of Friendship* and the seminars which surrounded the latter on questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as well as subsequent works such as “Force of Law” and various engagements with legal theory undertaken in conjunction with the Cardozo Law School. Two conditions were necessary for this shift, he added. The first concerns the reception of his thought. Before turning to explicitly political or ethical questions, Derrida had to establish the specific force—even the necessity—of the work of deconstruction. The specificity of deconstructive operations, the thinking of *différance*, had to be assured philosophically, that is, in relation to Husserl and the critique of phenomenology, and to the thinking of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud, before the Derridean treatment of political issues and themes could have any chance of being understood.

The second condition for this becoming more explicit of the political

involved changes in the world historical context, changes that would exert pressure on the reception of any discourse. Specifically, Derrida explains, he could write on Marx only after the fall of communism if what he had to say was to be heard. It is as if Marxism had to die on the historical scene before it could be written in the spectral mode, as a haunting.

In an interview given in 2004 in *L'Humanité* Derrida characterized deconstruction as “a singular adventure whose gesture depends each time on the situation, the context, above all political, of the subject, on his or her rootedness in a place and a history.”<sup>15</sup> Deconstruction happens not only in language and in texts but also in the world or in history. As Derrida put it, politics—the classical tradition of politics as a politics of sameness, of the nation-state—“is being deconstructed in the world,” for example, through the undoing of the distinction between manual and intellectual labor in the late capitalist valorization of information technology, or the generation of virtual realities in science and technomediation that render untenable the classical philosophical opposition between act or actuality (*energeia*) and potentiality (*dynamis*). The deconstructive notion of absolute hospitality, for example, is called for by events of the world such as globalization and postnationalism. “These questions are not destabilizing as the effect of some theoretico-speculative subversion. They are not even, in the final analysis, questions but seismic events. *Practical* events, where thought *becomes act* [*se fait agir*], and body and manual experience (thought as *Handeln*, says Heidegger somewhere).”<sup>16</sup> It is in response to the deconstruction occurring in events of the world that philosophical deconstruction can become an activity that intervenes. The need for a deconstruction of concepts such as politics, democracy, friendship (or the friend/enemy opposition) occurs in relation to changing events in the world, changes associated with a certain “modernity,” as Derrida puts it—or, as others might prefer, postmodernity.

In Derrida’s explicitly political writings, *différance* sometimes goes by the name “mutation,” especially when it comes to the historical scene. In *Politics of Friendship*, for example, Derrida writes that if deconstruction introduces a necessary mutation into the thinking of the political field, this is because “we *belong* . . . to the time of this mutation, which is precisely a terrible tremor [*secousse*] in the structure or the experience of the belonging [*l'appartenance*].”<sup>17</sup> Deconstruction happens in time, and yet Derrida’s radical rethinking of time has led to critiques of historicism, models of linear progress, teleology, and eschatology that would prevent any easy division of his own oeuvre into phases of “early” and “late” on the basis of either a sharp break or

a narrative development. We therefore adopt Derrida's figure of mutation to account for shifts in his work because it allows for a repartition of before and after without any historicist affirmation of continuous development and provides a way to speak of *différance* as diversification. "There is a history of 'deconstruction,' in France and abroad, during the last thirty years," Derrida has written, but he characterizes this history in terms of diversification, speaking of "the essential diversification" of deconstruction.<sup>18</sup>

We thus insist on a visible mutation in Derrida's writings since the late 1980s for at least three reasons. First, Derrida did not refrain from marking epochal shifts in philosophical discourse, as evidenced by his delineation of "the Age of Rousseau" and "the Age of Hegel."<sup>19</sup> Second, in 1980, at the first Cérisy conference on his work, where the politics of deconstruction was first broached in a concerted manner, Derrida himself pointed to a change in emphasis in his work beginning in the late 1970s, from that of an obligation to infinite questioning, the obligation of maintaining the question (*garder la question*), to that of attending to a call (*appel*), order, or demand of the other:<sup>20</sup> "Although I am always concerned with Lévinas' questions, I could not write it like that today. . . . Why wouldn't I write like I had in 1964? Basically it is the word *question* that I would have changed there. I would displace the accent of the question toward something that would be a call. Rather than it being necessary to maintain a question, it is necessary to have understood a call (or an order, desire or demand) [of the other]."<sup>21</sup>

This affirmation and response to the call of the other gave deconstruction an explicitly affirmative character.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as Derrida links the unconditionality of justice, ethical responsibility, and democracy to an affirmative experience of absolute alterity, his writings on ethical and political issues from the late 1980s until 2004 are part of the phase of affirmative deconstruction. This phase was signaled in 1978 in an engagement with Nietzsche on woman (the other in sexual difference) as an affirmative power that escapes the proper and the process of appropriation; subsequent texts, such as Derrida's suggestive readings of Blanchot and Joyce, were concerned with double affirmation ("Yes, Yes").<sup>23</sup>

Finally, what distinguishes Derrida's writings since the late 1980s and indicates a distinct mutation *within* affirmative deconstruction is the inflection of the aporias of affirming and responding to the other in terms of a structure of urgency, decision, contamination, and negotiation that he located at the heart of any ethical responsibility and political imperative. At the 1980 Cérisy conference, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and the American theo-

rist Christopher Fynsk noted that Derrida's work was marked by a certain reserve or remove (*retrait*) in relation to the political and to politics, as evidenced by his reticence to offer a theoretical elaboration of the conjunction between the Marxist text and deconstruction.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, for a time, the *retrait du politique*, "an 'eclipse' [*se-retirer*] of the political (and . . . of politics and of the world henceforth determined, in quasi-exclusive fashion, as political)," emerged as the guiding thread of a deconstruction of the political.<sup>25</sup> This implied a sharp delimitation of politics (*la politique*), an empirical category that refers to events in the world and the taking of political positions and actions concerning these events, from the political (*le politique*) as an autonomous domain with its own essence and a field of philosophical inquiry. In this spirit, Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy warned against speaking of politics simplistically without a preliminary deconstruction of the political itself: "In speaking of *the political*, we fully intend not to designate *politics*. . . . What remains to be thought by us, in other words, is not a new institution (or instruction) of politics by thought, but the political institution of so-called Western thought."<sup>26</sup>

Derrida's later writings specifically diverge from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's position concerning the need to quarantine the political from contamination by "mere politics." These writings embrace the contamination of politics as an exigency that follows directly from the very aporias of deconstruction. Hence, although Derrida also deconstructs the classical philosopheme of the political in the name of something unconditional and ultrapolitical, "something in politics, or in friendship, in hospitality which cannot, for structural reasons, become the object of knowledge, of a theory, of a theoreme," he argues that the unconditional gives rise to a structure of urgency and precipitation, an exigency that forces the reasoning subject to respond in a decision in which what is unconditional and incalculable is necessarily contaminated by the calculations and negotiations we associate with politics.<sup>27</sup> As we shall see in more detail further on, Derrida's late writings specifically perform this "contamination" or interaction between politics and the ultrapolitical, the conditioned and the unconditioned.

Furthermore, deconstruction can itself be considered an event and an activity insofar as it brings about a confrontation between philosophemes and categories of knowledge and decisive mutations in the world, causing an interruption of the former by the latter in order to force a mutation in thought so that it can be adequate to the task of thinking these important shifts, instead of being outstripped and rendered irrelevant or *effete* by them.

Only in this way can thought live on instead of being imprisoned within a past present. Deconstruction intervenes by tracking the points of instability within political institutions and systems articulated around presence with the aim of intensifying these instabilities in the interests of emancipatory transformation. In *Philosophy in the Time of Terror*, Derrida characterizes the philosopher as someone who, “in the future, . . . [would] demand accountability from those in charge of public discourse, those responsible for the language and institutions of international law. A ‘philosopher’ . . . would be someone who analyzes and then draws practical and effective consequences from the relationship between our philosophical heritage and the structure of the still dominant juridico-political system that is so clearly undergoing mutation. A ‘philosopher’ would be one who seeks a new criteriology to distinguish between ‘comprehending’ and ‘justifying.’”<sup>28</sup> And the task is urgent. Concerning the political violence of the present day Derrida has written, “If intellectuals, writers, scholars, professors, artists . . . do not . . . stand up together against such violence, their abdication will be at once irresponsible and suicidal. . . . Our acts of resistance must be, I believe, at once intellectual and political. We must join forces to exert pressures and organize ripostes and we must do so on an international scale . . . always by analyzing and discussing the very foundations of our responsibility, its discourses, its heritage and its axioms” (A, 125–26).

This political commitment of thought might be called a nonsubjective, nonegological or impersonal engagement. It implies an imperative to commit and engage that comes to thought not from within the proper subject of thought but from an outside that constitutes thought as a nonsubjective or impersonal activity. This impersonal engagement, however, can also be concrete, marked by a signature. “The question of biography does not bother me at all. . . . It is necessary to restage [*remettre en scène*] the biography of philosophers and the engagements they underwrite, especially political engagements, in their proper name.”<sup>29</sup> The engagements signed “Jacques Derrida” were numerous, varied, and significant. He intervened and directly addressed pressing concrete ethical and political issues of his (and our) time such as feminism, racism, the future of Marxism, the vicissitudes of neoliberal global capitalism, the situation in Algeria, cosmopolitanism and human rights, the place of Europe in the contemporary world, the destabilization and reinvention of sovereignty, hospitality to migrants and refugees, forgiveness in historical situations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the death penalty. Specifically, he intervened in favor of striking

workers in 1995; took positions in support of dissident intellectuals from Eastern Europe, founding, with Jean-Pierre Vernant, the Fondation Hus in 1981; took positions against racial violence, the Iraq war, the expulsion of the *sans papiers*, the death penalty, and in support of the rights of the Palestinian people and of reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Algerian intellectuals, and Nelson Mandela. “I venture to think that these forms of engagement [*engagement*], and the discourses that supported them, were in themselves in accord . . . with the ongoing work of deconstruction. . . . I don’t feel my writing and my actions [*engagements*] were at odds with one another, [there have been] just differences of rhythm, of modalities of discourse, of context, etc.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Derrida’s writing has always been “political” in that it has always been strategic, interested in shifts in tone, in various ways of saying things, and in addressing different interlocutors differently, whether in terms of location—France or the United States, for example—or of medium: the seminar, the book (according to different venues), the interview.

### *The Other Friend: Toward Another Politics*

Although there are many paths into the more explicitly political writings of Derrida, the work that announces the problem of the political as such, even in its title, is *Politics of Friendship*. If, as we have already noted, the shift to affirmative deconstruction implies responding to the call of the other, Derrida elaborates this stance through an exploration of the figure of the friend. *Politics of Friendship* examines a traditional notion of friendship, one that poses the friend as brother in a tradition that runs from Aristotle through Cicero to Montaigne, among others, and that Carl Schmitt takes up again in modern political theory with his friend/enemy opposition. It explores the alliance or complicity between this conception of the friend as an idealized version of the self and a traditional political conception of democracy. As Derrida subsequently puts it in *Rogues*, the politics of fraternity “privilege[s] . . . the masculine authority of the brother, . . . genealogy, family, birth, autochthony, and the nation” (*R*, 58). This politics, which is structured around concepts such as the nation and national citizenship, he argues, is in the process of being left behind in today’s world of transnational institutions, globalization, and “rogue” nations. It is a politics we must seek to displace in our thinking, for as a politics of exclusion based on race, class, and gender, it leads to war, often in the especially virulent forms of civil war and genocide.

"I tried in *Politics of Friendship*," Derrida writes, "to deconstruct . . . the Greek, Abrahamic, Jewish, but especially Christian and Islamic privileging of the figure of the brother in ethics, law, and politics, and particularly in a certain democratic model" (*R*, 57–58). He deconstructs this figure of the friend, finding in the classical tradition that promoted it the outlines of another friend. In Aristotle, we find "friendship, knowledge and death, but also survival [*la survie*] inscribed in one and the *same* configuration" (*PF*, 7). Cicero, writing in the tradition of Aristotle, proposes the notion of the *true friend* that is such only in relation to death. This other friendship implies the strange temporality of a relation in which one "feels oneself . . . engaged to love the other beyond death" (*PF*, 12). Here, friendship implies the temporality of survival and mourning, a friendship that Derrida reconstructs in reference to another notion of "friend," already elaborated by Maurice Blanchot, where the friend is radically other, absolutely singular, unknowable, and never present as such. This friend cannot be reduced to a version of oneself.

Blanchot had initially approached the question of friendship in relation to the act of writing, with the friend as other figuring the position of the reader. Increasingly, however, the figure of the friend as radical other becomes an ethical term for Blanchot, one linked to a notion of radical hospitality and of absolute responsibility (specifically after his encounter with Robert Antelme, author of a powerful account of experiences in German camps during the war).<sup>31</sup> For Blanchot the friend is someone we must "welcome in a relation to the unknown [*accueillir dans le rapport avec l'inconnu*]" and whom we encounter—if this can indeed be called an encounter—in a mode of infinite distance, through a "fundamental separation, on the basis of which what separates establishes a relation."<sup>32</sup> The friend as radical other is associated with a refusal of all hope in the kind of mass political movements that resulted in the disasters of the Holocaust. Hence, Blanchot's elaboration of this figure of friendship calls into question the very possibility of political association and even of the social bond.<sup>33</sup>

Blanchot elaborated the paradoxical relation to the friend as other in a particularly enigmatic fashion in the narrative text *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* (1953). In his lengthy commentary on this text, Derrida reads Blanchot through Nietzsche and analyzes the figure of the friend in terms of an experience of radical alterity and singularity that remains irrecoverably other, as opposed to the Levinasian conception of the ethical relation as an immediate encounter with the other.<sup>34</sup> In *Politics of Friendship* (based on seminars dating from 1988) Derrida takes the risk of exploring what the

political implications might be of the Blanchotian figure of the friend as radical other. Having deconstructed the classical notion of the friend, revealed its complicities with a certain politics, and displaced the figure of the friend onto the heteronomous, even transcendent figure of the absolutely other, he goes on to ask what kind of politics this notion of the friend might imply: “Let us dream of a friendship that goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double . . . [and] let us ask what the politics would be of such a ‘beyond the principle of fraternity’” (*PF*, viii). What might this politics be? If democracy is a politics of friendship, where friendship is constructed on the basis of resemblance or identification, the notion of friend as other will be associated with another conception of democracy: democracy to come.

The friend, as written by Blanchot and rewritten in another register by Derrida, implies a temporality of that which cannot be fixed or even figured in the present. For Blanchot, the friend is not someone or something one can even talk about. One can only speak *to* the friend, and, since the friend is never fully present (at best, the friend survives), one can only speak to the friend through the trope of apostrophe, addressing the other in his or her absence in a gesture toward the future. It is in this sense that Derrida reads the celebrated statement of Aristotle, repeated by Montaigne in the *Essais*: “O my friends, there is no friend.” There is no friend because the friend, as other, is never fully present and cannot be fixed or thematized in a third-person statement; a friend can only be addressed — “O my friends” — spoken to even in absence (“there is no friend”) or in the survival associated with the act of mourning.

We do not pose this other friend as a reflection of ourselves. It comes to us. Its encounter is an event that comes to us from the otherness of an unknown future. The question of the other, then, carries with it the question of the otherness of time considered as the giving, or coming, of time from the unconditionally other, from we cannot know where, bringing we cannot know what. The friend as other thus implies an engagement with the very happening, and contingency, of time as it is experienced through the coming of events in their surprise. We can compare this to the time of becoming that Bergson elaborated in terms of “qualitative multiplicity” and radical heterogeneity. Time is here understood as force, with respect to which, as Bergson put it, “the same does not remain the same.”<sup>35</sup> This force of time, which is a force of invention, implies radical singularity such that we never feel the same thing twice. This experience of time cannot be spatialized, mapped out, represented, anticipated, or mastered. Similarly, Derrida speaks of the “*passage* of time *through* time [*le passage du temps à travers le temps*]” (*PF*, 16) to

characterize time as an opening onto the unknown and the unknowable. Friendship, in the way Derrida rewrites it after Blanchot, opens time. The friend as other implies contingency and singularity, and the politics of *this* friendship implies a notion of democracy that is to be thought within the flow of time—time as the coming of what comes. The friend as radical other therefore announces the temporality of democracy to come.

Democracy, Derrida suggests, has always been “to come” in the sense that the concept has always remained plastic; there has always been a whole spectrum of democracies—from constitutional monarchy to the plebiscite—and to this extent democracy has always been open to transformation. It is “the only name of a . . . quasi regime open to its own historical transformation, to taking up . . . its interminable self-criticizability [*auto-criticité*], one might even say its interminable analysis” (R, 25). In the Enlightenment tradition of Rousseau and Kant, this openness is called “perfectibility.”

Democracy, therefore, has always been open to self-difference. “Democracy is what it is only in the *différance* by which it defers itself and differs from itself . . . at the same time behind and ahead of itself,” Derrida writes in *Rogues* (38). Even as a concept, democracy is always already deconstructive; it “sends us or refers us back [*renvoie*] . . . to *différance* . . . as reference or referral [*renvoi*] to the other, . . . as the undeniable experience . . . of the alterity of the other, of heterogeneity, of the singular, the non-same, the different, the dissymmetric, the heteronomous” (R, 38). It is in this sense that democracy is never simply present; it is always in a mode of survival and promise: a democracy to come.

Through the notion of autoimmunity, Derrida intensifies the deconstruction of a stable idea of democracy by pushing the notion of perfectibility, rephrased as “interminable self-criticizability,” in the other direction of self-undoing. Democracy’s openness to alterity also implies a certain alterity to itself that is not simply conceptual but operational or pragmatic, including on the scene of events. The logic of modern representative parliamentary democracy is autoimmune, Derrida notes, because democratic processes are structurally vulnerable to undemocratic forces, which can be democratically elected to power: “The *alternative to* democracy can always be *represented* as a democratic *alternation* [*alternance*]” (R, 31). We see this in the case of Algeria, where an Islamist regime with the intention of abolishing democratic processes was likely to gain power democratically. Democracy is always to come, then, also because it is always undoing itself and is never fully present.

In *Philosophy in the Time of Terror*, Derrida analyzes the world political situation in terms of autoimmunity, demonstrating concretely that “repression in both its psychoanalytical sense and its political sense—whether it be through the police, the military, or the economy—ends up producing, reproducing and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm” (A, 99). As he reminds us, the attacks of 9/11 were planned in the United States and carried out with pilots trained here, using American planes. Efforts to “attenuate or neutralize the effect of the traumatism [of 9/11] (to deny, repress, or forget it, to get over it) are but so many desperate attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements . . . which produce, invent and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome” (A, 99). The war in Iraq is one of the most obvious and irremediably tragic cases in point at the present time.

If, for Derrida, democracy is intrinsically (as a concept) and historically (in its operations) aporetic or “autoimmune,” how are we to understand the notion of democracy to come? Certainly not, Derrida insists repeatedly, as the anticipation of an ideal democracy, one that would eventually overcome the aporias of historical democracies as we have known them. If anything, Derrida’s elaboration of democracy to come renders explicit and even affirms its aporetic structure.

### *Time of the Political: Teleology and Sovereign Ipseity*

To arrive at a deeper understanding of the aporetic structure of democracy to come and its main implications for rethinking the political, we need to grasp why it is that for Derrida our experience of time as such is necessarily aporetic. Democracy to come is certainly a privileged syntagm and the guiding thread in Derrida’s final writings on the political. But as a structure or movement of interminable opening that refers to an unconditional other, its aporias are figures of the aporia of time that deconstruction has been concerned with from the start. Simply put, Derrida’s argument is that under conditions of radical finitude, time can be thought only as coming from an absolute other beyond presence. But because the relation to alterity also constitutes the order of presence and experience in general—since presence or experience presupposes persistence in time—any presence is subject to a strict law of contamination by an other that destabilizes, disrupts, and makes presence impossible even as it maintains, renews, and makes presence possible by giving it a to-come.

The central premise behind Derrida’s challenge to the political field is that

all canonical understandings of the political and politics presuppose concepts of time that deconstruction radically puts into question. For instance, fundamental concepts pertaining to the political sphere such as force, violence, power, and freedom; a state of nature versus a state of civility or society; the various forms of human power and their institutions, such as the law, sovereignty, economic exchange, economic exploitation through the extraction of surplus value computed in terms of labor-time (Marx), and political domination, are all underwritten by pre-deconstructive understandings of time — what Derrida called the metaphysics of presence, and Bergson, spatialized time. Normative categories of political thought, such as legitimation and justification (Kant), teleology (Hegel and Marx), and the public sphere (Habermas), also presuppose such dogmatic notions of time. Hence, a radical reposing of the question of time, one that does not take time for granted as a given but that attends to the aporetic giving of time, will necessarily shake up canonical political concepts and categories. Indeed, there is an immediate political import to this questioning: ontologies of presence, as they have informed political philosophies, institutions, and practices, necessarily lead to reactionary and repressive forms of politics. “Nondemocratic systems,” Derrida suggests, “are above all systems that *close* and *close themselves off* from this coming of the other. They are systems of homogenization and of integral calculability. In the end and beyond all the classical critique of fascist, Nazi, and totalitarian violence in general, one can say that these are systems that close the ‘to come’ and that close themselves into the presentation of the presentable.”<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, Derrida has repeatedly indicated that the *à-venir* (to-come) is the condition of “another concept of the political,” a rethinking of the political and of politics beyond all current concepts.<sup>37</sup>

The *à-venir*, first discussed at length by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, is the thought of an opening onto a future that is not a future present.<sup>38</sup> It is an advent or coming that is structurally imminent to every present reality insofar as it is the pure event that interrupts present reality but without which reality could not maintain or renew itself as a presence. This imminence is not something that can be predicted or anticipated precisely because the coming is that of the other. Indeed, the other *is* this coming and should therefore not be regarded as another subject, substance, or presence. Instead of the Heideggerian understanding of thinking as an openness to the advent of Being, as letting Being be, deconstruction is the opening of a space that lets the other that disrupts and renews presence come.

The main elements of Derrida’s thinking of the aporetic time of the politi-

cal are a deconstruction of temporal concepts such as teleology, eschatology, and messianism that underwrite most political movements (progressive and conservative); a deconstruction of the ontotheological concept of sovereignty; a new understanding of fraternity and democracy based on an openness to the other; and a rethinking of responsibility and of the relation between the ethical and the political.

Teleology and eschatology are modes of thinking that inform philosophical accounts of moral progress and historical and political transformation such as those of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, as well as the neoliberal U.S.-centric vision of globalization popularized by Francis Fukuyama that Derrida severely critiques in *Specters of Marx*. Crudely put, teleological and eschatological modes of thought understand history as the fulfillment of a telos that one can rationally anticipate in advance in the form of an idea that we can hope to approximate (Kantian teleology), work toward actualizing (as in Hegelian-Marxist teleology), or anticipate as a coming to an end (*eskhaton*) that is revealed through philosophical thought, divine revelation, or faith (philosophical and Christian eschatology).

Derrida rejects teleology and eschatology on two philosophical grounds. The invention of time—time as the giving of the new—is the time of the coming of, or as, an event. In the first place, since the end (telos or *eskhaton*) is an ideal presence that is grasped in advance, it effaces the coming of time in, and as, singular event and neutralizes or cancels historicity by reducing it to a program or plan that we pursue through rational calculation. Second, such an ideal end opens up a horizon that can be infinitely deferred and contrasted to the finite and profane present. While this can provide a basis for a critique of the present, it can also lead to quietism and inaction, to a patient waiting for the promised end.

In the place of eschatoteleology, Derrida offers an understanding of historicity based on the concept of a “messianism without content,” which carries a force of emancipatory promise thanks to the very openness of the future which leaves open the eventuality, the perhaps or maybe (*peut-être*), of what is hoped. Thus, while challenging both teleology and eschatology, the *à-venir* is also “the messianic without messianism”: an open-ended because absolutely undetermined “messianic hope” that is marked by an urgent injunction to act in the present (*SM*, 65). Derrida thus inherits from Marx the injunction for radical action which, when coupled with a critique of Marx’s “ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity,” becomes a generalized messianicity (*SM*, 170). At the same time, we can understand this contentless messianicity by analogy with the unconditionality of the

Kantian moral law. On the one hand, it is a purely formal principle, without content. On the other hand, it carries an injunction to act, according to the celebrated formula: You can, therefore you must.

The structure of autoimmunity (a figure that evokes the AIDS virus and that Derrida locates both in the historical scene of democracy and as an aporia of democracy to come) leads to the most radical challenge Derrida poses to traditional political thinking: the deconstruction of sovereignty. Because autoimmunity implies a contamination of the self in its very constitution, it undermines what he refers to as the ipseity of the subject. Ipseity is the philosopheme at the heart of any positive form of sovereignty (that of the state, a people, an individual, etc.), the “I can” or power of a self to constitute itself by gathering itself unto itself and mastering itself. Sovereign ipseity and eschatoteleology are different aspects of the power of reason. The realm of ipseity is precisely the realm of the possible and the potential, what “I am able to do,” just as the regulative idea as telos and eskhaton is the intelligible figure of an end that is possible as long as I can think it in advance. What ipseity and teleology have in common is that they neutralize the alterity and singularity of the event that characterizes the à-venir’s movement of opening up by reducing the event to something within the domain of the sovereign rational subject.

From Derrida’s viewpoint, since the ipseity of a finite being is always compromised because it cannot give itself time, sovereignty is necessarily ruptured in its constitution by an exposure to the other from which time comes. Sovereignty is autoimmune. The critique of ipseity thus reinscribes fundamental features of the critique of the subject that have belonged to deconstruction all along and that are informed to an important extent by psychoanalytic reflection. For the structure of autoimmunity “tak[es] into account within politics what psychoanalysis once called the unconscious” (*R*, 110). The other exists not only outside the self (as friend) but also within it, as the other that is marked off by repression but that is always active. It not only operates on the level of the individual (or the sovereign) but pertains also to the demos itself, which is divided from itself, and hence to its very power, or *kratos*. “How many votes [*voix*] for an unconscious?” Derrida asks in *Rogues*. “Who votes . . . in the psychic and political system? . . . The superego? The ego? The subconscious? The ideal ego [*le moi idéal*]? . . . The primary process, or its representatives? How are the votes to be counted?” (*R*, 54–55). The radical nature of Derrida’s reflections on the political derives in part from the fact that he does not steer clear of the

wrench psychoanalytic reflection throws into the political field but incorporates it into his deconstruction of that field.

From a geopolitical perspective, the deconstruction of sovereignty in the name of democracy to come is a response to the undermining of national state sovereignty by various modalities of globalization, including the proliferation of alternative nonstate forms of sovereignty such as that of international human rights regimes. As Derrida puts it, “Such a questioning of sovereignty . . . is at work today; it is what’s *coming*, what’s *happening*. It is and it *makes* history through the anxiety-provoking turmoil we are currently undergoing” (R, 157). We see here that the crucial point of the *à-venir* is not the infinitely deferred point of arrival—the telos or eskhaton that never arrives—but the process of an “it happens” (*ça arrive*) that is not subject to the rational subject’s power or control because it comes from the other, from the future, a happening with which it is nevertheless urgent to engage.

*The Im-possible Political:*

*The Passive Decision and Unconditionality*

Three fundamental consequences follow from the deconstruction of sovereignty. First, Derrida fractures the apparently indivisible unity of sovereignty and unconditionality. According to Schmitt’s definition, the sovereign’s ability to make the exceptional decision, that is, to decide on the exception and to suspend the law, means that sovereignty is indivisible. This indivisibility follows directly from the fact that reason of state—reason as the state, the power of reason concentrated in the indivisible unity of the legitimate state—is unconditional. The sovereign is absolute and lies beyond all conditions and relativism. When the legitimacy of the state is called into question, whether by the popular nation (revolutionary nationalism), the public political culture of a democratic society (Rawls), the critical public sphere of civil society as this is legally institutionalized in procedures of democratic public discussion (Habermas rewriting Kant’s “public use of reason”), or simply by individual human beings asserting prepolitical rights, what is disputed is the embodiment of sovereign reason in the state. According to these conventional analyses of sovereignty, sovereign reason itself remains absolute and unconditional; it is simply relocated in the nation or the people, democratic political culture, the public sphere, the individual.

According to Derrida’s view, however, the sovereign’s unconditionality is only *apparent*. As an instance of ipseity, sovereignty is necessarily auto-

immune. Hence, as we have seen, it opens itself up to the unconditionality of the coming of the other, to the event, and to time. We could say that only the *à-venir* is unconditional, and that this unconditionality is without sovereignty because it does not presuppose ipseity, that is, self-mastery and power. Derrida calls it a weak force, a force without power, a force that is vulnerable precisely because it opens up unconditionally, without alibi or defense, to the coming of the other. Indeed, Derrida suggests that the very fact that national state sovereignty can be contested or challenged by the doctrine of human rights, which presupposes the sovereignty of human beings, indicates the divisibility, shareability, and therefore autoimmunity of sovereignty.

Second, the deconstruction of ipseity, and therefore of sovereign reason, leads to a radical rethinking of freedom. “Freedom,” Derrida argues, “is the faculty or power to do as one pleases, to decide, to choose to determine *oneself*, to have self-determination, to be master, and first of all master of oneself (*autos*, *ipse*). A simple analysis of the ‘I can,’ of the ‘it is possible for me,’ of the ‘I have the force to’ (*krateo*), reveals the predicate of freedom, the ‘I am free to,’ ‘I can decide.’ There is no freedom without ipseity and, vice versa, no ipseity without freedom — and, thus, without a certain sovereignty” (*R*, 22–23). The critique of ipseity, however, implies that freedom must now be thought beyond its canonical definition as autonomy and self-determination that informs almost all accounts of political freedom today, from liberalism to communitarianism. In Derrida’s words, “What must be thought here . . . is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude” (*R*, 152).

This perspective is clearly at odds with the entire Frankfurt School tradition. Insofar as deconstruction involves a questioning of calculative reason (although one that arises from Heidegger’s critique of calculative thinking (*das rechnende Denken*)), it is partly in solidarity with the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental and technical reason. But Derrida’s dissociation of the unconditional from sovereign reason and his characterization of unconditionality in terms of an opening toward the absolutely other problematizes, and even undoes, the critical reason celebrated by the Frankfurt School. Whereas critical reason is still a figure of ipseity and so remains imprisoned within the closure or circle of presence, deconstruction points to an outside that is prior to reason and that leaves its trace within reason.

Freedom, in Derrida’s understanding, is not, in the first instance, reason’s capacity for autonomy. It comes from the other, and to this extent, auton-

omy, quite paradoxically, arises only in response to this other. Speaking of the experience of friendship and justice as examples of this freedom, Derrida observes that “responsibility assigns freedom to us *without leaving it with us*, as it were — we see it coming from the other. It is assigned to us by the other, from the place of the other, well before any hope of reappropriation allows us the assumption of this responsibility — allowing us . . . to assume responsibility . . . in the space of *autonomy*” (*PF*, 231–32). The deconstructive openness to the event thus implies a hyperbolic sense of responsibility insofar as this becomes situated in the call of, and response to, the other who escapes rational calculation. The event as other therefore imposes an infinite responsibility that cannot be discharged precisely because it cannot be assumed or appropriated by the rational subject who can then clear its conscience. Responsibility in this sense cannot be reduced to freedom of conscience. It should not lead, as Derrida puts it, to “a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished).”<sup>39</sup>

Third, the thought of this constitutive opening to the other leads to the difficult and enigmatic concept of a passive decision, as distinct both from the sovereign decision of exception (Schmitt) and the deliberation of public reason (Habermas). For if the freedom of the rational subject comes in or is its response to the other, then decision is prompted by, and also comes from, the other. It is therefore in the original instance passive and unconscious, not active and conscious (*PF*, 68–69).

This notion poses a clear challenge to all theories of the sociodiscursive construction of identity, including that of Habermas. Such theories are invariably based on the philosopheme of recognition. In the Habermasian discourse ethics version, the intersubjective formation of ethical agents occurs through rational-discursive deliberation over the shared norms, values, and traditions of concrete communities. Ideally, such discursive deliberation should lead in multicultural societies to a moral universalism that is sensitive to difference, where respect is shown to all the members of a community through a nonappropriating inclusion of the other.<sup>40</sup> But however much it may attempt to include the other in its otherness, from the perspective of deconstruction the dyadic structure of self-constitution in recognition will always efface the absolute other because recognition, staged by Hegel in the master/slave dialectic (and restaged, prominently, by Sartre), remains within the domain of intersubjectivity. Regardless of how different the other

may be, it is always another *human subject* that is recognized in and through discursive deliberation. Recognition itself thereby becomes a mode of appropriation of the other into (dialectical) sameness. Accordingly, the public space of political morality or right (*Recht*) and ethics (*Sittlichkeit*) opened up through recognition is always blind to the event and forecloses the passive decision.

In contradistinction, Derrida's account of friendship as a relation to alterity focuses, as we have seen, on the structure of address, apostrophe, and appeal that radically opens up the rational subject to an indeterminable other instead of seeking to include the other within the domain of the self as an "other self" through the structure of recognition. What Derrida calls "pure ethics" would imply an economy that exceeds the structure of recognition (a "general economy," as he put it in his early essay on Bataille): "Pure ethics, if there is any, begins with the respectable dignity of the other as absolute *unlike* [*l'absolu dissemblable*], recognized as nonrecognizable [*reconnu comme non reconnaissable*], indeed as unrecognizable [*méconnaissable*], beyond all knowledge, all cognition and all recognition" (R, 60). And, Derrida adds (implicitly contra Habermas), "far from being the beginning of pure ethics, the neighbor as like [*le prochain comme semblable*] or as resembling, as looking like, spells the end or the ruin of such an ethics, if there is any" (R, 60).

This is perhaps why literary discourse is crucial to Derrida's deconstruction of the political in its most affirmative aspect. For this language (as Paul Valéry put it in his definition of poetry) cannot ever be paraphrased, just as the friend cannot be spoken of in the third person. It is in this spirit that Derrida calls our attention to the irony that operates at the grammatical crux of the expression "démocratie à venir": "the *to* [*à*] of the 'to come' [*à venir*] wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* [*peut-être*] of messianicity (nonperformative exposure [*exposition*] to what comes . . .)" (R, 91). This hesitation between "the two *to*'s" implies "the secret of irony" and connects the publicity of public space not to the certitude of critical deliberative reason but to the right to fiction, the secret, and literature (R, 91–92). It is in this context that the politics of democracy to come, as hyperethics or hyperpolitics, requires "the poetic invention of an idiom whose singularity would not yield to any nationalism" (R, 158).

Derrida's affirmation of nonperformative exposure clearly indicates (perhaps surprisingly for some) that the concept of the passive decision involves a radical questioning of the idea of performativity that deconstruction is conventionally associated with. In his view, performativity remains tainted

with ipseity, the power or mastery of an “I can” that effaces the event. In the ethical, juridical, and political domains, performatives are modalities of language that produce events. However, insofar as a successful performative presupposes a set of norms or conventions that are the defining conditions of this ability to produce an event, and because it then produces an already codified “event,” it also immediately neutralizes, through calculation, the eventness of the event associated with the temporality of the to-come (*R*, 152). Performativity is therefore inherently conservative in its creativeness. A performative presupposes an authority or rightful condition, and it in turn establishes a range of possibilities for the subject that secures its power to act. In Derrida’s words:

Performativity for me is . . . that which neutralizes the event, that is to say, what happens (*ce qui arrive*) . . . . The academic investment in the Western universities . . . in this theory of performativity, the investment in political theory (because the juridical is at work in the performative) has fertile, liberating effects, but also protectionist effects. . . . In a certain way, theories of the performative are always at the service of powers of legitimation, of legitimized or legitimizing powers. And consequently, in my view, the ethical must be exposed to a place where constative language as well as performative language is in the service of another language.<sup>41</sup>

The effacing power of performativity that Derrida points to here must be rigorously distinguished from arguments about political violence in contemporary political theory. Two examples stand out: first, the ontological paradox that the foundation of a new political order always involves violence because it requires the destruction of the previous order and the imposition, on human beings by human beings, of a new legitimate authority that vainly aspires to approximate the absoluteness of divine authority, and second, the historical-relativist argument that the legitimacy of any given political foundation is always contestable because of its historical link to violence (for instance, the Marxist concepts of primitive accumulation or class struggle).<sup>42</sup> These arguments about the violence of founding are now commonplace topoi in political theory and have sometimes made use of Derrida’s writings, especially “Force of Law” and his reflections on the American Declaration of Independence.<sup>43</sup> In contradistinction, the neutralization of the event by the performative that concerns Derrida here refers to a more fundamental, quasi-transcendental violence in which any kind of rational calculation necessarily effaces the eventness of the event.

Derrida's point about the conservative nature of the performative would also apply to accounts of performative subversion in which an oppressive social norm that serves to exclude or marginalize a stigmatized group can be contested and subverted by its performative repetition.<sup>44</sup> For while the performance of a norm can lead to its destabilization, the subversive power generated is conservative in two senses. First, it conserves a counterpower, another ipseity. More important, the subversion actually issues from the norm itself since it is the norm's negation. The subversion is calculable and foreseeable precisely because it is measured in terms of the norm that it destabilizes. Hence, performative subversion also forecloses the event.

Indeed, what is common to uses of the performative in contemporary political theory is a certain relativism whereby instituting acts, whether acts of political foundation or of the constitution of hegemonic subjects, are exposed as contingent performatives by virtue of their connection to concrete scenarios of historical, social, and political forms of violence and exclusion. From a Derridean perspective, the blind spot of these critical analyses of sociopolitical performativity is that they are necessarily conditioned by their location and are, therefore, conditional. They cannot appeal to an unconditional force because they regard any claim to unconditionality as a ruse of hegemonic power and authority. They thus inevitably end up in a historicist or cultural relativism.

Derrida's idea of the originary violence in the effacement of the event also leads to an accounting of the violence in the founding and maintenance of the political domain or of the relational constitution of a hegemonic subject or order. These are seen as determined cases of originary violence. However, because deconstruction severs the link between unconditionality and absolute power, mastery, or sovereignty and defines the former in terms of the pure event, it simultaneously leads to a radical questioning of any state of power or hegemony and enables a move beyond relativism. For unconditionality is now rethought in terms of the sheer exposure and destabilizing interruption of any present state of power to and by the weak messianicity of the pure event.

The passive decision that accompanies the coming of the event therefore implies a radical rethinking of power as such, or more precisely, the concept of the possible that underwrites all conventional accounts of power, capacity, or ability deriving from the concept of *dynamis* or *potentia*. Derrida sometimes characterizes this exposure to the event as "a force without power" or "an unconditionality without power."<sup>45</sup> Even more to the point, it is also the

force of the im-possible that paradoxically makes the possible possible even as it subjects it to contamination:

When the impossible *makes itself* possible, the event takes place (possibility *of* the impossible). . . . For an event to take place, for it to be possible, it has to be, as event, as invention, the coming of the impossible. . . . The issue is thus nothing less than the powerful concept of the *possible* that runs through Western thought, from Aristotle to Kant and Husserl (then differently to Heidegger), with all its meanings, virtual or potential: being-in-potential, in fact; *dynamis*, virtuality . . . , but also power, capacity, everything that renders skilled, or able, or that formally enables and so on. . . . What renders possible renders impossible the very thing that it renders possible, and introduces; but as its chance, a chance that is not negative, a principle of ruin in the very thing that it is promising or promoting. . . . The *im-* of the im-possible is surely radical, implacable, undeniable. But it is not only negative or simply dialectical: it *introduces* into the possible, it is *its usher today*: it gets it to come, it gets it to move according to an anachronic temporality.<sup>46</sup>

The im-possible is therefore not a counterpower that can be deployed against a given state of power. It is not the dispersal of power into a mobile field of relations between micro-powers (Foucault). It is instead the constitutive exposure of power as such (which has been conventionally thought in terms of the circular economy of appropriation or the return-to-self of self-mastery) to what makes it vulnerable and defenseless.

In insisting that the im-possible does not have a negative relation to the possible, Derrida also emphasizes that the im-possible is not utopian, or that which can never be real. As we have already seen, the *à-venir* is precisely not merely ideal. Similarly, the im-possible is the very structure of reality, the force of a propulsion or precipitation that, in giving time, opens up the real, renews it, and gives it a to-come. As Derrida puts it, “*Utopia* . . . can too easily be associated with dreams, or demobilization, or an impossible that is more of an urge to give up than an urge to action. The ‘impossible’ I often speak of is not the utopian. Rather, it gives their very movement to desire, action, and decision: it is the very figure of the real. It has its hardness, closeness, and urgency.”<sup>47</sup> For Derrida, this force is the origin of imperativity and responsibility, whether moral, juridical, or political. It is the structural condition of transforming reality both in the sense that it generates the imperative to act in the practical subject and also because it renders present reality amenable to

transformation. This urgent propulsion of the impossible into the realm of the possible is precisely the structure in which the unconditional or incalculable other demands that we as rational subjects respond and be responsible by calculating and inscribing the unconditional within present conditions even as this is a violation of the other's alterity. It is a question precisely of an "impossible transaction between the conditional and the unconditional, the calculable and the incalculable," "a transaction without any rule given in advance . . . between these two apparently irreconcilable exigencies of reason, . . . calculation and the incalculable" (*R*, 150–51).

We witness such transactions at work in concrete settings in Derrida's figures for unconditionality, such as hospitality, the gift, forgiveness, justice, and democracy. For example, when Derrida characterizes democracy as impossible and always still to come in a deliberately paradoxical formulation, he points to its inherently aporetic nature. First, democracy and sovereignty are both indissociable and in mutual contradiction (*R*, 100). Second, democracy is impossible because it yokes together, again in aporetic fashion, "freedom and equality—that constitutive and diabolical couple" (*R*, 48). For "equality tends to introduce measure and calculation (and thus conditionality) whereas freedom is by essence unconditional, indivisible, heterogeneous to calculation and to measure" (*R*, 48). Finally, democracy is impossible because although it should in principle be universal and imply absolute hospitality as an unconditional welcoming of the absolutely other (that is, a figure of unconditionality without sovereignty), it "still remains a model of intranational and intrastate political organization within the city" (*R*, 80). Absolute hospitality is impossible in the sense that it could never be politically or juridically instituted. And yet, for Derrida, it remains to be thought as a condition of possibility of hospitality in the more limited sense of the right to asylum, the right to immigration and citizenship rights, and even cosmopolitan right in the Kantian sense: "Only an unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality. Unconditional hospitality exceeds juridical, political, or economic calculation. But no thing and no one happens or arrives without it" (*R*, 149).

If it were a question of only the unconditional term, we could say, as is sometimes charged, that Derrida's deconstruction of the political field has led to a kind of hyperethics. This can be debated, as Derrida himself acknowledges, and it is debated by the essays in this volume. But since Derrida insists that "*both calculation and the incalculable are necessary*," it is precisely the force of the political that is retained and, indeed, intensified by the aporetic tension of democracy to come (*R*, 150).

*Transactions, Legacies*

Derrida's deconstruction of the political field raises a number of difficult questions. One important question concerns the place of committed action. As we have seen, Derrida suggests that the deconstruction of the political field occurs in the becoming of the world, and committed thought is the thinking of the unfolding of the to-come and the changes that occur beyond the limits of our acquired categories of thought. But what is the role of committed action in this picture? How can we even think political action given Derrida's notion of the passive decision and his radical critique of ipseity and teleology, central concepts conventionally associated with political action? Indeed, if the to-come is an imminent coming that always haunts and destabilizes presence as its condition of (im)possibility, is the possibility of action not always predetermined by this coming and, therefore, in a sense, "fated," unfree? What can Derrida's notion of "a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude" mean in concrete settings?

Derrida's critique of ipseity and teleology stems from the privilege he gives the unconditional other. This raises the important question of how deconstruction envisions the relation between the ethical and the political. Does the paramount place of unconditionality in Derrida's thought indicate a subordination or even reduction of the political to the ethical? Does the insistence on the unconditional function as an appeal to what he called "pure ethics" at the expense of politics and political engagements, which require negotiating with the calculable and the empirical? Conversely, if one points to the remainder of sovereignty within democracy as an instance of the inevitability of calculation, does Derrida's attempt to allow for the contamination of the political (the political as contamination) end up contaminating deconstruction itself with an ontotheological concept? Does it imply a conservative politics? And how can one concretely imagine the transactions in which the relation to the unconditional is played out or experienced in ethicopolitical relations? What does the formulation of calculating with the incalculable enable us to think when it comes to concrete problems such as the rearticulating of citizenship and rights in an era of the decline of state sovereignty, the reconfiguration of national culture, the critique of ethnonationalism in multicultural Europe, and the hospitality that should be shown to migrant workers without citizenship in an age of global migration?

Finally, from what geopolitical site is the discourse of unconditional hospitality articulated? Does Derrida's deconstruction of a Western or European political field not follow its contours, with the result that the deconstructive

discourse of the transaction between the conditional and the unconditional, restated in terms of an affirmation of aporetic features, nevertheless remains, at some level, a Western or European perspective? Does the paradoxical notion of a universalization of the singular to which Derrida appeals not remain a universalization of features of Western thought that might itself limit an encounter with the otherness of non-Western practices or modes of thinking the political field?

The contributors to this volume engage with a number of these questions and assess Derrida's deconstruction of the political and its contribution to our understanding of the urgent political issues of our time from a number of different perspectives. Some contributors examine the political and ethical aporias that deconstruction tracks and consider how they shape Derrida's conceptualization of fundamental political concepts. Balibar, Cheah, Bennington, and Brown analyze specific concepts, focusing on Derrida's critiques of teleology and sovereignty in order to draw conclusions concerning the politics of his deconstruction of the political. Rancière questions the boundary between politics and ethics in Derrida and concludes that he sacrifices politics to ethics. To gain critical purchase on the nuanced elaborations of deconstruction, a number of contributors assess how Derrida's understanding of the political and his positions on various political issues differ from those of other figures in the history of Western philosophy, contemporary philosophers, and progressive intellectuals. So, placed in dialogue with Derrida, we hear the voices of Althusser (Balibar), Habermas (Cheah), Patočka (Gasché), Ricoeur (Guerlac), Arendt (Jay), Mauss (Hénaff), Levinas (Ukai), and Lyotard (Rancière). Bennington returns to Rousseau, Hobbes, and Spinoza, and Cheah looks back at Kant in order to explicate Derrida's deconstruction of sovereignty and teleology.

Whereas Ukai demonstrates the concrete usefulness of Derrida's account of the promise for understanding current debates on pacifism and sovereignty in postwar Japan, Hénaff challenges the European standard that informs Derrida's notion of pure giving. Brown and Norton argue that Derrida's understanding of the place of Islamic societies in relation to democracy to come is neo-Orientalist and Eurocentric. Tlatli takes an altogether different approach to the question of the European limits of deconstruction and argues for the pertinence of Derrida's Algerian background to his analysis of the archive and its relevance to a critique of postcolonial Algerian nationalism.

The first section of the book considers Derrida's deconstruction of two

important political concepts: teleology and sovereignty. Étienne Balibar's essay addresses the implications of Derrida's thought for understanding history and historical change. He argues that Derrida points to Louis Althusser's failure to distinguish between teleology and eschatology and offers a nonmetaphysical reformulation of eschatology as the "messianic without messianism." By reading Derrida's elaboration of messianicity alongside Althusser's nonteleological history based on an aleatory materialism of the encounter, Balibar arrives at an instructive contrast between Althusser's understanding of the event as a revolutionary action that opens up the historical process and the deconstructive understanding of the event as the interruption of time. Focusing on *Rogues*, Pheng Cheah, on the other hand, argues in his chapter that Derrida yoked eschatology together with teleology, considering both to be modes of thought that reduce the other to ideality. He elaborates on Derrida's attempt to distinguish the *à-venir* from the Kantian regulative idea that governs the unfinished project of modernity taken up by the heirs of the Frankfurt School such as Habermas. Cheah also considers Derrida's deconstruction of sovereignty, offering a critical assessment of Derrida's account of the autoimmune character of democracy within the framework of contemporary globalization by comparing it to Habermas's project of global democracy. He evaluates the cosmopolitan vocation of democracy to come and questions Derrida's critique of nationalism in light of the promise of revolutionary postcolonial nationalism as a form of resistance to neoliberal global capitalism.

Bennington and Brown also address Derrida's thinking on sovereignty and democracy. Geoffrey Bennington argues that unlike political philosophy, which attempts to reduce the "politics" of politics by turning politics into an object of theory, deconstruction foregrounds this and affirms the impossibility of rendering politics purely theoretical. In the case of sovereignty, this impossibility is elaborated in terms of autoimmunity. Bennington's essay places Derrida's seemingly "eccentric" conception of autoimmunity in a genealogy of canonical political thinkers by tracing similar paradoxes in the political philosophy of Rousseau, Hobbes, and Spinoza. "This non-self-coincidence of any sovereignty and any demos," Bennington argues, "allows Derrida to open up the dimension of the *à-venir* . . . that consistently marks his [understanding of] democracy" as an interminable movement of pluralization, division, and dispersal of sovereignty. Bennington continues the deconstructive project by embedding it deeper into the field of political theory.