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BOOK REVIEW

Deconstruction after Derrida

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Mustapha Chérif, *Islam and the West: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). xxii + 114 pp. ISBN 0226102866. US\$19.00 Hardback.

Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009). xv + 199 pp. ISBN 9780415964944. US\$95.00 Hardback.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last years, there has been a steady stream of books published on deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida in addition to the many books by Derrida himself. Derrida's death on 8 October 2004 in no way stopped this wealth of publications, including texts on Derrida, deconstruction, and politics. There have been a number of books on Derrida,¹ including edited volumes,² and there is now a Derrida journal, *Derrida Today*. This is in addition to posthumously published works by Derrida himself, of which *The Beast and the Sovereign* will be of most interest to this journal's readers.³ Much of this literature links deconstruction and Derrida's writings to politics. This may be in part because of Derrida's own engagement with political concepts and institutions in his later work, but may also be a reaction to the emergence of new political phenomena (e.g. international terrorism of the al-Qaeda type) which in turn creates a need to rethink traditional concepts (e.g. sovereignty).

Interestingly much of this literature on deconstruction and politics comes not from political scientists, but from other disciplines, including philosophy, comparative literature, and law. This includes the two books under review

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here—Mustapha Chérif's *Islam and the West* and Martin McQuillan's *Deconstruction after 9/11*⁴—neither of which is written by a political scientist. As is the case with many other contemporary texts on Derrida, these two books examine how Derrida and deconstruction can help us understand contemporary political phenomena. The two books both address issues related to the signifiers '9/11,' 'Islam,' and 'the West,' but they also question the received meanings of those signifiers, for instance, the idea of 'Islam' as a monolith and as the Other of 'the West.'

TWO SHORES

Islam and the West contains a foreword by Giovanna Borradori as well as a lecture by Mustapha Chérif from a conference in honor of Jacques Derrida immediately after his death in October 2004. The main part of the book is entitled 'A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.' The 'conversation' between Chérif and Derrida is from a public debate that marked the end of a colloquium on intellectual encounters between Algeria and France in Spring 2003. It consists of long quotes of Derrida's interventions interspersed with Chérif's account of what he himself said and why. It is, in Borradori's words, 'the earnest transcript' (x) of what Derrida said at the occasion, but it is unclear what Chérif's role was: conversational partner? interviewer? This is also ambiguous because of Chérif's celebratory references to Derrida as 'the great philosopher' (19), the 'eminent philosopher' (61), and a 'master' (27). One wonders how Derrida, the deconstructor of authority, would react to this.

The conversation between Chérif and Derrida centers on issues that have preoccupied both Chérif and Derrida in their respective works, first of all the issues of the shores—that is, the borders and, hence, the identity—of Europe and the relation between the West and its Others, especially Islam. For Derrida's part, the discussion of these issues is framed by discussions of central political concepts such as democracy, cosmopolitanism, sovereignty, the state, secularism, and faith.

Both Chérif and Derrida are Algerians. Derrida was born and grew up in Algeria in the 1930s and 1940s, and Chérif works there as a professor of philosophy and Islamic studies at the University of Algiers. Algeria condenses two of the issues addressed in the book. There is, first, the relation between the North (France) and the South (Algeria), between former colonizers and colonized in a postcolonial world. Second, there is the relationship between state and religion, which was also at stake in the 1992 military coup against the looming electoral victory of the Islamic fundamentalist party *FIS*. The two things converge today in the discourse of the so-called war on terror: the South and East—especially the Middle East—are associated with Islam which is in turn associated with terrorism aimed against the West, especially 9/11. Importantly, Islam is construed as monolithic, as one thing and one thing only, and as saturated by fundamentalism and, as such, non-modern as opposed to the modern, reasonable, and moderate West.

Derrida's response to these issues is to talk of the shores of the Mediterranean in an argument reminiscent of the argument about the identity and borders of Europe in

The Other Heading.⁵ The idea is that identities are constituted through exclusion of what they are not, that is, through the creation of Others. According to Derrida, one must therefore critically reflect on one's relation to one's Others, and one must respond to and take responsibility for one's Others, which is to say, the Others that make us who we are. For instance, Europe and France must reflect on the ways in which it relates to Algeria and Islam as its Others (openness? antagonism? etc.). Derrida uses the Mediterranean as a metaphor for this: the identities on the two shores are at once divided by the sea and linked through it because constituted through this division. What is more, for Derrida, identities are never complete or self-identical. This also goes for what we usually refer to as 'the West' and 'Islam': 'There are many Islams, there are many Wests,' Derrida says (39). Similarly, Chérif is concerned with the diversity within Islam, and he argues that there is more than one Islam and, in particular, that there is a tolerant, secular, and modern Islam where there is a place for both religion and reason, for tolerance and other ideals of the Enlightenment.

Although it is not made explicit, Chérif and Derrida disagree on one important point. Chérif believes in the possibility of 'dialogue,' 'mutual understanding,' and 'sharing' (20), that 'addressing the other is possible' (28) and that this is possible without violence. For Derrida, on the contrary, the relation to the other is always one of simultaneous 'connection' and 'interruption' (66), of openness and closure. That is, we must address the other in her otherness, yet this is ultimately impossible. Thus, for Derrida, it is not possible, as Chérif wants, to 'rediscover a common memory' of our humanity (22). For Derrida, any commonality must be constructed, which can only be done in ways that simultaneously exclude and do violence to the other in her otherness.

Like other interviews, *Islam and the West* will provide a useful introduction to Derrida's political thought for those not already familiar with his work. For those already familiar with his work, the book does not add much new, and unfortunately the style of Chérif's interventions in the book means that they do not constitute a critical counterpoint to Derrida's words.

DERRIDA APPLIED

Deconstruction after 9/11 is a more traditional monograph with 10 chapters on contemporary political events and issues. As the title suggests, many of the chapters deal with the so-called war on terror, including the war in Iraq. Other chapters deal with Hungary and Eastern Europe, Cyprus and Palestine, and some of the chapters also have discussions of theoretical figures such as Paul de Man, Sigmund Freud, Edward Said, and Naomi Klein apart from the discussions of Derrida's work.

This is 'Derrida applied,' and Martin McQuillan has some useful thoughts on what it means to apply deconstruction. McQuillan does not intend the book to be a Derridean political or scientific program: 'it does not offer any repeatable and imitable answers' (ix). Instead, he makes the point that a Derridean or deconstructive

politics must be reinvented in each case. Thus, a Derridean politics is necessarily a 'creative' and 'poetic-performative' undertaking that seeks to put Derrida's quasi-concepts (of hospitality, *différance*, etc.) to work (ix).

McQuillan's point has consequences for the traditional distinction between theory and practice (x). Practice should not be seen as the application of a fixed rule to determined contexts; instead, practice becomes the reinvention of the rule (i.e. theory) such that the distinction between the two is blurred. What is more, this view also has consequences for how we treat examples and their exemplarity. We can think of each case as an example of something (say, 9/11 as an example of terrorism) and of each deconstruction as an example of deconstruction. However, properly speaking, the example cannot simply be subsumed to the rule or concept of which it is an example, but must be thought of as an articulation of what it exemplifies. Again it means that the rule is not given in advance of its application, but that the application is a rearticulation (xi).⁶ Accordingly, McQuillan also argues that, for instance, 9/11 has altered our understanding of what it is said to exemplify, namely terrorism, and each deconstructive reading both repeats certain deconstructive gestures and reinvents what deconstruction means.

If we follow this line of reasoning, deconstruction is always occasional, because each deconstruction is a singular example and a reinvention of what deconstruction is. This is so by way of the very nature of deconstructive readings, and it is so whether we are dealing with a reading of the war in Kosovo (Chapters 1 and 2) or a reading of Freud (Chapters 2 and 3). The risk—which is an essential risk—is that the readings do not speak to other texts, events or institutions. For instance, it could be argued that McQuillan's readings and the events he deals with belong to the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Whatever the continuities that also exist between the Bush and the Obama administrations, one must ask how these readings speak to the post-Bush era. So, when reading *Deconstruction after 9/11*, I was often left with the question: perhaps this is deconstruction after 9/11, but what about deconstruction in the age of Obama? Do new US policies and attitudes change the way we should analyze, for example, sovereignty?

It is difficult for such deconstructive readings not to be dated—dated in the sense of anachronistic because dated in the sense that it is specific to a particular date in the past. Yet, one must also stress that no deconstructive reading is entirely singular. Any deconstructive reading draws on certain (quasi-) concepts (e.g. McQuillan draws upon Derrida's 'hospitality' and de Man's 'promise' in Chapter 7); and any deconstructive reading is iterable, that is repeatable in other contexts even if this repetition will also involve alteration. Each deconstruction is a *reinvention* and a *rearticulation*.

The most important element of the 'new kind of politics' (x) McQuillan argues for with deconstruction concerns international law, and it echoes Derrida's talk of 'a New International' in *Specters of Marx*.⁷ McQuillan refers to 'a new figure of effective international law with an autonomous force at its disposal and universal sovereignty' (15). Two things are new here. First, McQuillan wants a new international regime to substitute the present one in order to, among other things, limit the effects of US

hegemony and to institute a different set of North–South relations. Second, this new international regime of law must take aim at the traditional concept of sovereignty, which Derrida discussed in *Rogues*.⁸ McQuillan’s point here is that we must put into question the received concept of sovereignty, especially state sovereignty, as acting autonomously and in a way that reproduces the alleged self-identity of the state.

‘The New International will have no manifesto, no congress, no offices, no brigades, no party and no web site. [...] it is precisely its spectral status (i.e. its inability to manifest itself) that makes the New International ‘new’ in this sense’ (100). That said, McQuillan has some fairly concrete proposals for what the New International implies. In the case of Iraq, for instance, it implies ‘respect for the principles of international law,’ which in turn implies that Saddam Hussein should have been tried at the International Criminal Court in the Hague (28). It also implies that ‘the UN should assume responsibility for the reconstruction of Iraq. To this end, the UN will also have to be reformed,’ which is to say ruled by a democratic General Assembly (28).

Although I am not sure that I am any wiser about deconstruction or about the cases McQuillan discusses after reading the book, his deconstructive readings of contemporary events are to be welcomed. If anything, Derrida’s legacy should be that: to put his work to work rather than searching his texts for answers to contemporary events, and, unlike Chérif, McQuillan takes at least some critical distance to Derrida. For readers who are not already familiar with Derrida and deconstruction, McQuillan’s style of writing will prove an obstacle though. Much of the book is written in unnecessarily convoluted language, such as when McQuillan writes of a ‘sort of transformation in global political culture’ involving ‘the immanently divisible, transformative performance of an auto-immune figure without totalization as a process of material inscription and the historicization of difference in the unrepresentable of the here and now’ (7). Even someone already familiar with Derrida and deconstruction will have difficulty understanding sentences like this, even when read in context.

CONCLUSION: A NEW DECONSTRUCTIVE POLITICS

McQuillan proposes a new deconstructive politics that sits somewhere between the affirmation of Enlightenment ideals (of e.g. democracy and hospitality) and their necessarily imperfect institutionalization. Thus, this is not a politics that is against or opposed to those ideals, yet at the same time it is not possible to realize those ideals: they are always corrupted. In such a situation, we must ‘determine the ‘least bad’ decision as part of the act of poetic invention,’ (112) and this cannot be an either/or choice between law and violence, peace and war, because there is no law without violence. In this way, McQuillan’s proposal for a new deconstructive politics reflects well Derrida’s position in *Islam and the West* and elsewhere. As a critical gesture, it involves turning the West against itself, insisting that ‘[t]he problem with the West is that it is not Western enough’ (McQuillan, 10). That is to say that the critique of the

West (of US hegemony, the war on terror, etc.) does not take place from a position simply outside or opposed to the West, but uses the critical resources internal to the West. Nor does the critique of the West have to fall back upon, for instance, the reactionary assertion of Islamic truths. In this manner, both *Deconstruction after 9/11* and *Islam and the West* deconstruct the homogeneity of ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ as well as the forced choice between them, and this seems to me to be one of the important contributions deconstruction can make to the study of global politics today.

NOTES

1. For instance, Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
2. For instance, Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, eds., *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
3. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign. Vol. 1*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
4. Mustapha Chérif, *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction After 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009). References in the text refer to these books.
5. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
6. See also the useful discussion of the example in Michael B. Naas, “Introduction: For Example,” in Derrida, *The Other Heading*, pp. vii–lix.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).
8. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).