

# Marxism and Deconstruction

**Johan Degenaar**

## Summary

In this paper some similarities and differences between Marxism and deconstruction are explored. This is done by looking at the different ways terms such as text, history, politics and revolution are used within these two paradigms. In all these cases it is shown that deconstruction succeeds in producing a broader frame of reference. The crucial differences between these paradigms are the following: the method of explanation differs from the strategy of irony; totalisation (based on the assumption that the key to the mystery of history has been discovered) differs from pluralisation (based on the assumption that a variety of approaches to a text is possible); and the program of revolutionary action differs from a transformative strategy which succeeds to transform revolutionary thinking into a continuous activity and which can therefore never claim finality.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word sommige van die ooreenkomste en verskille tussen Marxisme en dekonstruksie bespreek. Dit word gedoen deur te kyk na die verskillende maniere waarop binne hierdie paradigmas terme soos teks, geskiedenis, politiek en rewolusie beskou word. Met behulp van voorbeelde word aangedui hoe dekonstruksie in al hierdie gevalle daarin slaag om 'n ruimer betekenis aan die betrokke woorde te gee. Die belangrikste verskille tussen die twee standpunte hou verband met die volgende teenstelling: die metode van verklaring teenoor die strategie van ironie; totalisering (omdat die sleutel tot die geheim van die geskiedenis ontdek is) teenoor pluralisering (omdat die geldigheid van verskillende invalshoeke tot die verstaan van 'n teks aanvaar word); program van rewolusionêre handeling teenoor transformatiewe strategie wat daarin slaag om van rewolusionêre denke 'n voortgaande aktiwiteit te maak en wat dus nooit op finaliteit aanspraak kan maak nie.

## 1 Introduction

In this paper I intend looking at some of the differences and similarities between deconstruction and Marxism with the purpose of constructing a dialogue between these two methods of philosophising. Deconstruction is a strategy of irony which explores the meaning of a sign in terms of the ever-changing intertextuality or interwovenness of signs. Marxism is a method of explanation which assumes that the political perspective of the class struggle is not one amongst many but rather "the absolute horizon of all interpretation".

In answering some questions concerning deconstruction's relationship to Marxism Derrida (1981: 62) refers to the importance of this encounter but adds: "I persist in believing that there is no theoretical or political benefit to be derived from precipitating contacts or articulations, as long as their conditions have not been rigorously elucidated. Eventually such precipitation will have the effect only of dogmatism, confusion, or opportunism. To impose this prudence upon oneself is to take seriously the difficulty, and also the heterogeneity, of the Marxist text, the decisive importance of its historical stakes."

In his exploration of the concept of matter Derrida points out that his critique of logocentrism is not only a critique of idealism but also a critique of materialism to the extent that the word *matter* has been invested with logocentric values. It becomes a transcendental signified, a new fundamental principle, an ultimate referent, "an 'objective reality', absolutely 'anterior' to any work of the mark". In order to make sense of it the term has to be re-marked "outside the oppositions in which it has been caught (matter/spirit, matter/ideality, matter/form, etc.)" (Derrida 1981: 65). Deconstruction of this opposition will also withhold us from viewing textuality as a form of idealism.

One of the contributions of deconstruction to philosophy is its discussion of the controversial nature of binary oppositions which have conditioned our way of thinking for centuries, for example, the oppositions spirit/matter, culture/nature, male/female, theory/practice, inside/outside, private/public, mental labour/manual labour, etc. This approach has implications for all disciplines and all points of view. Ryan (1982) has explored the way in which it has changed the face of Marxism. The purpose of this paper is to construct a dialogue between deconstruction and Marxism by looking at the different ways in which they handle the following concepts: text, history, politics, and revolution.

## 2 Text

A crucial difference between deconstruction and Marxism can be defined in terms of the concept of foundation. Marxism claims that one needs a foundation to understand a sign while deconstruction allows for a plurality of interpretations. This anti-foundationalist approach enables the strategy of deconstruction to appreciate the Marxist interpretation as one of many ways of understanding signs. This difference colours their view of the nature of a text.

Following Jameson (1982) one can describe a text in terms of a symbolic act. This means that a text is a cultural object which can only be adequately understood as part of a social process which provides the necessary context for the text. For Jameson this is a foundationalist move providing the interpreter with the class struggle as "the absolute horizon of all interpretation". Derrida can go along with the notion of social contextualisation. He talks of the social space which surrounds the text and of "the sociality of writing as drama" which needs to be explored. This move, however, does not lead to a closure of interpretation but to an opening up of the understanding in the direction of a broader textuality. Meaning is context-bound, but no context is saturated.

Thanks to deconstruction the meaning of the term *text* as literary text has been broadened to refer to any set of signs which has to be interpreted. If we apply the term "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur) to both Marx and Derrida, since both are willing to doubt the surface meaning of a text, we can still raise the question whether they do this in the same way. For the Marxist the surface meaning has to be explored in terms of the deep structure of

relations of production. For deconstruction, however, there is no deep structure but only the intertextuality of the signs which enables him to come up with surprises and with the enriching experience involved in a plurality of interpretations.

In some cases the difference between these two approaches to text is defined in the following way: for deconstruction the text is an intertextual event, for the Marxist it is a site of struggle. This is a useful distinction but does not tell the whole story. Important is that deconstruction can also use the Marxist description without reducing it to a class struggle analysis while the Marxist cannot allow for the open-endedness entailed in the intertextuality of text.

### 3 History

Both deconstruction and Marxism are concerned about history but in different ways. According to Marxism history is a dialectical process, "the experience of Necessity", the ultimate ground of all interpretations which enables us to construct a coherent story with a single fundamental theme. Jameson (1982: 19–20) formulates this position as follows: "Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past . . . . These (cultural) matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme – for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot . . . . It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity."

Crucial terms in this modernist view of history are the following: essential mystery, original urgency, continuity, single story, fundamental theme, uninterrupted narrative. This view of history assumes that if one succeeds in cracking the code of the essential mystery of the past the book of history can be decoded. There is only one book, one code and one final interpretation.

Deconstruction also takes history seriously, but views it in terms of the ongoing interweaving of signs. A final interpretation of texts is impossible since no master code is available to man who himself is a text which has to be interpreted.

### 4 Politics

A variety of accusations have been levelled against the non-political nature of deconstructive thinking. I quote a few examples. Foley (1985: 113): "Despite its adversarial rhetoric, deconstruction possesses questionable value as a radical political *praxis*." Lentricchia (1980: 186): the post-structuralist project is an "activity of textual privatization". Eagleton: "Deconstruction actually rejects an oppositional politics, for it 'provides you with all the risks of a

radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them” (Foley 1985: 113). Foley: “The ‘non-absolutism’ of deconstruction becomes vacuous if it *endlessly* accommodates everything . . . . In its non-absolute validation of ‘undecidability’ deconstruction offers no criteria for timely, historical choices” (Davis & Schleifer 1985: 8–9). Foley (1985: 132): “Each commitment possesses its own ‘pragmatic valence’ (to recall Lyotard), and none is guided by an overall (totalizing) strategy or plan adjudicating whether some activities are more necessary than others to the movement toward a general human liberation.”

Each of these statements could be explored within its own frame of reference and critically analysed in terms of deconstruction. However, I prefer to point out that the concept of politics plays a crucial role both in deconstruction and Marxism but in different ways. Because of a foundationalist reading of the book of history by Marxism politics refers primarily to the class struggle. According to the strategy of deconstruction this is but one example of political involvement. Politics is the practice of power relations and includes all kinds of domination whether hegemonic or oppressive. One of the contributions of deconstruction to philosophy is its exposure of the way in which patterns of domination are operative in discourse.

Another point of difference in this connection is related to the problem of the transition from politics in the sphere of discourse to politics in the sphere of action. Because of the foundationalist approach of Marxism the transition is prescribed since continuity is guaranteed. In deconstruction the transition is open-ended since freedom entails discontinuity.

Barbara Johnson highlights this tension between the two paradigmatic positions with regard to the problem of “the imperative to go further” than mere critical analysis. “Deconstruction, especially in the work of Derrida, has within it the creation of a feeling of imperative; that is, as a critical/analytical attack on the way discourse functions in patterns of domination, deconstruction produces as its necessary shadow or byproduct or forerunner, a feeling of increasing imperative, a feeling that if deconstruction can take you this far in the critique of power structures in discourse, then why not go further? Why not actually translate what deconstruction has done on texts into the realm of historical and political action? I think it is the merit of deconstruction to produce that as an inevitable question, and that the intersection between the deconstructive activity and the imperative to go further is where both good Marxist work and good deconstructive work can be done. That is not an easy passage, certainly, for either Marxists or deconstructors to make, and it may be that there is no meeting point, but the continuous worrying of the encounter is immensely productive.” (Davis & Schleifer 1985: 78).

It is important to realise that deconstruction cannot be criticised for lack of political awareness. It is capable of producing revealing analyses of the role of politics in discourse and in discourse analysis. But this valuable contribution does not solve the problem of “the imperative to go further”. Perhaps the concept of revolution can be more helpful in this regard. At this stage suffice it to say that no matter how one formulates the relationship between critical

analysis and commitment to a particular political action, neither can be viewed in absolute terms.

## 5 Revolution

The rhetoric of Derrida is characterised by the idiom of adventurousness and resistance. According to him: "In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the field" (Derrida 1982a: 7). In his exposure of the way in which we come under the spell of metaphysical closure he invites us "to locate these metaphysical holds, and to reorganize unceasingly the form and sites of our questioning" (Derrida 1981: 10).

But it is not only a case of reorganising the sites of our questioning incessantly and situating signs differently but also of escaping the enslavement within authoritarian discourse – the human being outwitting the police who expect him to be in a particular place. In "Living On: Border Lines" he states: "All organized narration is 'a matter of the police' . . . The narrative voice, on the other hand, would *surpass* police investigation if that were possible . . . . Now, the narrative voice . . . . has no fixed (*arrêté*) place. It takes place placelessly, being both *atopical*, mad, extravagant, and *hypertopical*, both placeless and over-placed . . . 'both as the place at which it . . . would always be missing . . . and as surplus space, always one place too many: hypertopia'" (Derrida 1979: 105).

Deconstructive analysis has an oppositional stance. Binary oppositions are not merely linguistic distinctions since "language is never innocent of the relations of power in which it is enmeshed" (Foley 1985: 119). Binary oppositions such as male/female, centre/margin, presence/absence, inside/outside, etc. are part and parcel of the politics of domination. Deconstruction is viewed as a "technique of trouble" which exposes the power relationships imbedded in language. This also applies to the institutional language of the university. "A politico-institutional problem of the University: it, like all teaching in its traditional form, and perhaps all teaching whatever, has as its ideal, with exhaustive translatability, the effacement of language. The deconstruction of a pedagogical institution and all that it implies. What this institution cannot bear, is for anyone to tamper with . . . language, meaning *both* the *national* language *and*, paradoxically, an ideal of translatability that neutralises this national language. Nationalism and universalism" (Derrida 1979: 93–94).

Derrida's primary concern is not with the signified content of view-points but with the discourse which structures a certain way of thinking. In "The Conflict of Faculties" he writes: "Precisely because it is never concerned only with signified content, deconstruction should not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic and should seek a new investigation of

responsibility, an investigation which questions the codes inherited from ethics and politics" (Culler 1982: 156). This search for a new investigation is not merely an exposition and criticism of the signified content but an undermining of the discourse which generates these meanings.

This political rhetoric with emancipatory overtones is more explicit in his use of revolutionary metaphors. The concept of revolution plays a crucial role in both Marxism and deconstruction. In Marxism the emphasis is placed on the overthrow of the ruling class by the workers with the purpose of utilising the means of production in an equitable way. The concept of revolution operates in deconstruction on the level of discourse analysis. In emphasising the importance of "overturning" relationships between signs Derrida (1981: 41) reminds us "that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition".

Since metaphors are never innocent we should pay attention to the political metaphors used by Derrida: opposition, peaceful coexistence, violent hierarchy, govern, overturning of hierarchy, conflictual structure, and strategy. These metaphors clearly illustrate the revolutionary nature of the deconstructive strategy.

Johnson suggests that this rhetoric of political intervention provokes two different kinds of reaction: the literary establishment suspects something dangerous to be going on while political activists comment: "all rhetoric and no action". Whatever way one looks at it the revolutionary potential of deconstruction should not be ignored. "If discourse has the kind of formative power that deconstruction seems to indicate that it does, then there is something very fundamental about questioning structures of discourse and how they operate. It is not as much of an exaggeration as it seems to say that something about authority structures could be subverted by an analysis of this type, if an analysis is enough to operate a subversion" (Davis & Schleifer 1985: 85).

In this context the question can be raised again: what about the shift from a revolutionary reading strategy to revolutionary political action? Here again deconstruction would say that there is no necessary connection between revolution in the text on the pages of the book and revolution in the text on the streets of the city. Both cases are examples of texts that have to be interpreted and in both cases deconstruction would signal a warning against all forms of domination, whether totalisation in the practice of thinking or totalitarianism in the practice of politics.

In 1968 Foucault was asked the question: "Why aren't you out there on the barricades? Why aren't you more politically active?" He said: "Well, I want to be very scrupulous and keep myself open for a kind of plural future which will be without the kind of groundings that I fear will occur where we simply substitute one sort of mastery, one sort of traditional metaphysical thinking for another" (Davis & Schleifer 1985: 96).

This answer has some affinity with deconstruction. It assumes that philosophy has a more important role to play than merely rationalising the status quo or formulating the program for a revolution. It has continually to guard against human beings being enslaved in both discourses.

## 6 Conclusion

Important differences between deconstruction and Marxism can be expressed by the oppositional terms irony and explanation, pluralisation and totalisation, transformative strategy and program for revolutionary action.

The strategy of irony enables the deconstructionist not to absolutise his interpretations. It resists complicity with closure. In contradistinction to this strategy the method of explanation enables the Marxist to produce "the absolute horizon of all interpretation". This difference is expressed as follows by Foley (1985: 124) in her summary of Ryan's adaptation of deconstruction to suit his own kind of Marxism: "For Ryan, Marx's discourse is privileged to subvert the logocentrism not only of bourgeois rule but also of Leninist and post-Leninist socialism. In place of the authoritarian category of 'representation', it proposes the radical discursive mode of 'metaphor', which, Ryan claims, always denies definitive (and therefore totalitarian) closure to the propositions it entertains."

Ryan (1982: 213) summarises the positive characteristics of deconstruction as follows, emphasising the critical stance of this strategy: "It projects certain recognizably new leftish traits: an emphasis on plurality over authoritarian unity, a disposition to criticize rather than to obey, a rejection of the logic of power and domination in all their forms, an advocacy of difference against identity, and a questioning of state universalism."

—This distinction between deconstruction and Marxism utilises the following preferences: irony rather than explanation, metaphor rather than representation, and criticism rather than obedience. The second point of difference is the opposition between pluralisation and totalisation. Because of its emancipatory interest deconstruction is a form of emancipation without totalisation. It allows for a plurality of *teloi* instead of one *telos* which determines all actions. According to deconstruction the many forms of domination cannot be subsumed under the heading of the class struggle and it cannot be assumed that these forms will necessarily come to an end with the arrival of the classless society. Foley (1985: 129) describes this pluralism in terms of an anti-historical bias set on blocking "the possibility of resolution or synthesis" and of an antipathy towards centralism and totalisation — an antipathy which is based on a valorisation of heterogeneity. Authoritarianism in thinking and acting is threatened by this "opening onto a plural diffusion of powers" (Ryan 1982: 215).

The totalising tendency not only withholds Marxism from appreciating deconstruction's opposition to the violence of all kinds of hierarchies but also misleads Marxism in reducing the politics of intertextuality to the tubular vision of a theory/practice dichotomy. Wood (1979: 27), for example, is mistaken in suggesting that the deconstructive strategy is the implementation

of Lenin's view of "the class struggle at the level of theory". It is a mistaken view since deconstruction does not use the class struggle as principle of explanation. It operates on a more basic level, guarding against all forms of domination – also in the discourse of Marxism itself. It wants to keep democracy alive with regard to both the proposed end and the means towards the end – the road to substantive justice is the practice of procedural justice.

Furthermore, deconstruction has crossed the boundary between theory and practice. Theory is a form of practice and practice is theory-informed action. Politics is very much alive in both theory and practice, that is to say, politics as interplay of pressures which means, not the destruction of the opponent, but the negotiation of meaning; not the compartmentalisation of genres, disciplines, theory and practice, areas of life, but the politics of intertextuality which entails a network of language – literature – politics – sexuality – history. Marxism has difficulty in accommodating this weblike structure of signs.

The third point of difference concerns the opposition between transformative strategy and the program for revolutionary action. Deconstruction is set on cultivating a sensitivity for the weight attached to signs, on transforming hierarchies in our thinking, on overturning power relationships in discourse, and on amplifying the marginalised voices of the ruled and excluded. According to Foley (1985: 114), however, this rhetoric does not provide us with criteria for historical choices and no "program for proletarian revolution". She is not convinced by Spivak's suggestion that "deconstruction can aid in the transformation of that materiality upon which transformed consciousness will operate" (Foley 1985: 23). Only Marxism is capable of doing this, for Marxism is set on transforming, in theory and practice, the binary oppositions capital/wage-labour, and ruling class/proletariat since they are viewed as functions of historical processes that can be changed. Marxism believes in a decisive revolution while deconstruction works with the idea of a perpetual revolution based on the strategy of transformation – a strategy without finality.

According to Ryan (1982: 8), who works with the assumption that "there is a necessary relationship between conceptual apparatuses and political institutions," deconstruction has radical political implications and one should not merely emphasise the transformative nature of its strategy. He states: "The deconstructive critique of absolutist concepts in the theory of meaning can be said to have a political-institutional corollary, which is the continuous revolutionary displacement of power toward radical egalitarianism and the plural defusion of all forms of macro- and microdomination."

In his discussion of some possible political implications of deconstruction he mentions, first, it undermines the legitimacy of categorical thinking, therefore allowing politics to be interrelated with economics, sociology and law. Secondly, it deconstructs the opposition mental and manual facilitating a socialist view of politics. Thirdly, it implies that "authority should be conceived (and practised) as a function, rather than as an instance" (Ryan 1982: 40). The replacement of instantial authority by functional authority is a democratic move and it enables us to deconstruct absolutes into situational relations. In functional authority the responsibility is placed and kept in the hands of the participants.



On the basis of various readings of deconstruction from a Marxist perspective one is left with the impression of the absence of homogeneity with regard to both deconstruction and Marxism. However, one point of difference which has come to the fore and is worthy of further critical attention, is the Marxist search for a foundation which is assumed to be prior to interpretation and which can therefore act as the basis of interpretation. For Jameson (1982) it is the class struggle epitomised in the statement: "History is what hurts". Wood (1979) refers to an "extra-textual struggle". Ryan opts for "the need for sustenance" and "work for survival". Foley isolates "the proletarian revolution" as foundation of interpretation.

Deconstruction, on the other hand, assumes that interpretation is the only ball game in town and that there is no way in which we can bypass the textuality, the contingency, the historicity, the temporal predicament of all understanding. Deconstruction helps us to hold off all gods and tyrants. For this purpose it remains critical of the following claims: one book that contains the truth (whether a book of writing, the book of nature, or the book of history); one authority who speaks the final word; one key to unlock the meaning of history; one interpretation which enables us to terminate controversy; one program that justifies authoritarian rule; and one revolution to end all forms of domination.

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