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Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at Large



Traces of Derrida in Latin America

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“DERRIDA TODAY,” the title of the conference of the homonymous association held at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in 2023, could be, without a doubt, deconstructed. In Derridean style, this title emphasized the power of the *name* and the *signature*, elements that point to the presence and absence of the philosopher, and of deconstruction itself, a promise that still floats here, among us, reaching us as a gift, as an un-payable debt, that has to do with the work of mourning and spectrality. The title also suggests (“today”) a concern about the temporal inscription of a body of work (a catachrestic figure of speech, to be sure) that evolves in a progressive, historical trajectory. The “today,” then, implied a momentary stop, a brief halt in the temporality of rational development, an in-between state, an uncertain, undecidable pause, an illusion, or perhaps, a delusion.

But this might only be true for Western epistemologies that conceive time as a progression that goes from past to future, the past being behind, and the future lying ahead in front of us. On the contrary, non-western conceptions of time, like those of Indigenous cultures in the Andean region, for instance, assume that what is in front of us is the past, since we know what happened and we can even “see it,” that means, revisit it, through memory. Then, what lies behind us is the future, a series of potential occurrences that have not yet materialized. The future, then, is always hiding in a temporal loop; we cannot know it or prevent it, although it follows us, as a threat, as a promise, wherever

we go. By contrast, the fleeting present is here, inapprehensible, at the same time concrete and ephemeral.

What I want to explore in these brief notes is rather a spatial dimension that involves interrogations of a geo-cultural and ideological nature. The question then, for me, is not *When Derrida*, but *Where Derrida*, and *why*. I am making specific reference here to Latin America as a point of arrival and as a point of departure; as a reading location, and as a locus of enunciation; as a site of reception but also as a site of production. Peripheral, decentered, and traversed by the specters of colonialism, Latin America is proposed here as a situational and as a relational space that at some point became permeated by a selective assimilation of Derridean theory. The object of an early and devastating colonization since the end of the fifteenth century, Latin America also experienced early emancipation, a process that, for the most part, took place in the first decades of the 19th century. For this reason, the region is not usually included in main elaborations on post-colonialism focused on processes of decolonization that took place in the 20th century mainly in the ex-colonies of Asia and Africa.

To concentrate on Latin America as a representative region regarding the articulation of Derrida's theories in postcolonial environments (also as partial representation of the Global South) is not an arbitrary proposition. Latin American societies constitute exemplary cases of postcolonial contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities, hybridity, hierarchical strata and phantasmagorical recurrences that offer rich material for deconstruction and re-signification. The tense convergence of Occidentalism and non-Western (autochthonous) imaginaries nurtured in Latin America the proliferation of binary conceptualizations that have been at the root of ethno-racial discrimination, genocidal politics, and devastation of natural resources, since the beginning of the conquest, until today. Dualistic categorizations inform formulations such as civilization versus barbarism, Old World versus New World, modern versus primitive, developed versus underdeveloped, modern versus pre-modern, center versus periphery, peoples with History versus peoples without History. These dichotomies qualify as necro-political conceptions, which lay at the basis of centuries-long processes of deprecation and persecution of the Other, super exploitation of human labor, exhaustion of the environment, infantilization and demonization of precolonial cultures. They function, indeed, as categorizations that tend to the naturalization of Western supremacy, and the erasure of the Other. Such a conceptual repertoire calls for deconstruction; but even more importantly, it exposes shocking social experiences that should trigger, by themselves, specific ethical and philosophical elaborations, for

which the Derridean philosophical apparatus provides an indispensable array of analytic and interpretive tools.

Paul Norcross pointed out that through the implementation of deconstruction, Derrida used the notions of excess, supplement and resistance to counter the apparent logic of binary and reductive propositions, to visualize everything that exceeds dualistic polarizations. Latin America productively assimilated this strategy for cultural analysis, with the purpose of bringing to the forefront ambiguous and undecidable contents previously relegated to marginal, interstitial and in-between spaces, where, paradoxically, true signification is being produced. The deconstruction of binary categorizations was extensively used in Latin America in the fields of anthropology, cultural theory, education, art criticism and political sciences. However, critics noticed that these have always been secondhand applications of theories created at the centers of theoretical production. Not by chance, the centers of intellectual development theorized by Edward Said, coincide with the nucleus of capitalism, always concerned with the need to deal with the risks of destabilization of political, economic and cultural hegemonies.

The tensions and injustices expressed and naturalized in the binary approaches mentioned before, traverse Latin American history and cultural reality, and have their symbolic correlate at the level of language. Although Spanish is the official and most spoken language in Latin American Hispanic societies, more than five hundred and fifty languages are currently used in Central and South America, 33% of which are in imminent danger of extinction. More than twenty-five variations of the Maya language are used only in Guatemala, in addition to other Indigenous languages of a different origin, such as the ones derived from the Garifuna and Xinka linguistic families. Eight million people speak Quechua and Quichua in the Andean region; three million are Aymara speakers, 2.3 million speak Tupi-Guarani and half a million communicate in the Mapuche language. When we read *The Monolingualism of the Other* we do not only engage Derrida's cultural and epistemic problematics as a *franco-Algerian-maghrib postcolonial subject*; but also face the true meaning of euro-ethno-centric perspectives, deeply embedded in philosophical and political thought.

In the Latin American region, Derridean theory was far from being restricted to linguistic and textual analysis. In addition to the many contributions made by deconstruction, it is worth mentioning *in passim* elaborations on *identity and otherness*, the question of *the archive*, connected to the problems of collective memory, official historiography and social justice, topics related to interculturality, translation, feminism, mourning, literary criticism,

and many others. Since the early 80s, Derridean theory variably circulated in Latin America. Derrida visited Mexico, in 1982, together with Jack Lang, who would be Minister of Culture and Education in France. A few years later Derrida would accept invitations to lecture in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and Chile. When he returned to Chile in 1995, he had an illuminating dialogue with Franco-Chilean critic Nelly Richard and a group of philosophers at Universidad Arcis, an intervention published in the *Journal of Cultural Criticism* in 1996. He also lectured numerous times in Brazil, a country where his legacy is still solidly established.

Derrida knew (and was reminded) that Latin American history has always been haunted by the specters of colonialism: those related to colonial genocides, to Eurocentrism, and to the myths and pitfalls of modernization. Notions such as historical trauma, collective memory and collective oblivion, the discursive and ideological construction of the Other, the challenges of recognition and representation in postcolonial societies, were intrinsic problems in Latin America, and were also part of Derrida's personal trajectory. These issues resonated in his elaborations on psychoanalysis, democracy and cosmopolitanism, although it was obvious that his locus of enunciation was, at times, far removed from the circumstances of extreme multiculturalism, severe precariousness, and extreme ideological fragmentation.

Among the numerous areas in which Derridean theory constituted a notoriously productive approach, I would like to say a few words about topics of relevance in the 1980s and 1990s, when the presence of Derrida made its mark. Derrida's concept of democracy to come reveals his ideas about the situation of the Left after the end of the Cold War. The transition I am focusing on here, then, is the one characterized by the end of bipolarity and the advent of a nostalgic and at times apocalyptic feeling in the West. This feeling coexisted with the exhilarating and unsettling sense of triumphalism over socialism's dismay, which accompanied the implementation of globalization and the dissemination of neoliberal politics. Democracy to come became a signature concept of Derridean theory. Contrary to works that developed a much more abstract philosophical discourse, democracy to come seemed to propose a concrete intervention in the revulsive political and ideological landscape of the end of the century. Despite its unapologetic Neoplatonic and prophetic, or messianic, projection, which did not go unnoticed anywhere, at a time when utopian inclinations were suffering a spectacular defeat, democracy to come resonated as a simultaneous provocation for the Right and the Left. For the Right, Derrida's analysis, developed mainly in *Specters of Marx* (1993) and

Rogues (2004), presented an intense and almost lyrical conjuration of Marxism and of its thorough deconstruction of capitalism's economic and philosophical apparatus, a conjuration and call for a certain spirit of Marx that interrupted the neoliberal chants of glory in the West. *Specters of Marx* constituted, in fact, an effective and timely reminder that Marxism had managed not only to expose the *ethos* and the machinery of capitalism, but also to offer a concrete—even if still unattainable—alternative to its dominant operation. Nobody in the Right wanted to hear about Marxism's ghostly presence.

To the left, *Specters of Marx* was also a challenge, because Derrida's advocacy for the need to establish a dialogue with the persistent specters of Marxism came hand in hand with his preaching on *democracy*, a concept and a practice solidly naturalized in the West but rather discredited and eroded, by then, by authoritarian deviations and corruption. In fact, undeniably, despite its political failures and shortcomings, democracy continued to be a rhetorical common place in traditional politics, as well as in populist and demagogical political discourses. The reference to the unreachable essence of democracy sounded in Latin America predictable and uncreative, since it had been an argument frequently present in liberal discourses at least since the beginning of the century. What Derrida announced for a certain but undetermined future did not really qualify as *an event*—as some critics noticed—since the reappearance of democracy was already pre-(con)figured, expected, and announced in a variety of formulations and political contexts. Besides, couldn't the same prediction be formulated about other concepts such as emancipation, sovereignty, revolution, modernity? Concepts whose implementation clearly departed from the essence we perceive behind their historical realities.

Finally, from the perspective of socialism, the insistence on democracy in political spaces revisited by the specters of Marxism, could only constitute a warning against the excess of authoritarianism, Stalinism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, bureaucratization, doctrinarian orthodoxy and exclusionary partisanship. In other words, democracy to come sounded to many like a concept that was too ambiguous and difficult to unpack, given the blurry and revulsive atmosphere of the times. The emptiness of the concept of democracy and, at the same time, its usage as a political legacy to be transmitted (and implemented) through the messianic mission of the United States' international politics, (that means, as an ideological and demagogical device utilized to channel and legitimize international control) did not help. The hope that the essence of democracy would surface and come to fruition in future implementations was not felt as a sufficiently robust proposition, able to counter

the general mistrust of the people in constitutional solutions in a continent still traversed by authoritarianism and political persecution. Besides, if that was not enough, the radical transformations of the world since the middle of the 20th century seemed to require a profound revision of political categories, economic structures and ideological orientations. It could properly be said that, in this new century, “Time is (still) out of joint,” as stated in the motto of *Specters of Marx*, a notion that was brilliantly discussed, in my opinion, by Ernesto Laclau.

The fall of the socialist world, the advancement of globalization, the resurgence of religious and civilizational fundamentalisms, the erosion of Western hegemonies, the dramatic processes of deterritorialization and the increase of precarity and violence, seemed to be signaling to the need—well analyzed in the fields of philosophy and political science—to decolonize democracy. Such is the title of several recent books and articles on this topic, where Derrida is often quoted in reference to the ideas he elaborated in *Specters of Marx*, *Rogues*, and other works. The first task in this direction points to the need to redefine the political realm and to re-signify the notions of political subject and political agency, concerns that were not part of Derrida’s books thematic repertoire. But that was not the only element lacking, according to some, in the philosopher’s otherwise brilliant analyses.

For some critics, Derrida’s approach to political issues assumed a conceptual, philosophical, culturalist and ethical perspective, obvious in *Specters of Marx*, leaving behind the economic analysis of late capitalism and globalization, something that Marxists were not ready to let go. Such an option was interpreted as if a new form of historicism could be constructed through the elimination of economic materialism. By leaving out of the analysis the binary proposition of infra/super-structure without a proper, explicit deconstruction of those categories, political processes seemed to remain dependent on their own autonomous dynamics, that is, on the perpetuation of ideological legacies, and on the trans-historical and trans-cultural transmission of classical ideals related to issues of social and political organization. In this manner, *Specters of Marx* did not allow for the perception of an outside of political culture. This led some critics to disapprove of Derrida’s recourse to philosophical eschatology (*hauntology*) and to reject his emphasis on hermeneutical analysis, strategies that ended up recognizing in the scene of writing the only materiality worth of being deconstructed.

The call for a decolonization of democracy that is currently on the table of political debates constitutes an attempt to revisit the meaning and applicability of this concept to the current conditions of globalization. This objective

converges with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's proposal for a redefinition of the political, as well as with the need to re-conceptualize political subjectivity (political subjects, agency and agendas). The integration of new notions such as infrapolitics, as well as the redefinition of modern and outdated concepts such as those of citizenship, sovereignty, civil society, nation and nationalism, expose the complexity of a political landscape impacted by the debilitation (but not the disappearance) of the nation-state, and the consequences of massive migratory movements that constitute today an undeniably effective intervention in the political make up of globalization. These dynamics have altered the basis of national configurations, whose ideological pillars were the notions of identity, territoriality, sovereignty and the principle of human rights, where the rights of the citizen and the rights of human beings were considered, for a long time, the terms that expressed a unitary notion, and not just the display of antagonistic positions.

In closing, I would like to refer to other scenarios in which Derridean theories are being revisited, at least in connection to issues of substantial importance in Latin America, that I have analyzed in some depth in the last section of my book *Jacques Derrida, el ex-centric. Deconstrucciones*. One of these issues concerns the projects of *epistemic decolonization*, a notion that refers to the critique and praxis oriented to dismantle the power relations perpetuated even after formal independences, and to question the values, hierarchies and models of economic, social and political organization originated in the realm of colonialism. Decolonial theory also advocates for an epistemic abandonment of European and Anglo-Saxon paradigms related to knowledge acquisition and knowledge dissemination, through the recuperation of local social and intellectual experiences that were ignored and rendered invisible in modern times, due to their assumed irreducibility to Western categories. Derrida's deconstruction of binary propositions and his general implementation of hermeneutic suspicion have been instrumental in the understanding of processes of meaning construction, and in the valorization of language as a complex materialization of subject positions.

Two other areas of current inquiry are also revisiting Derrida's work. One of these areas focuses on issues of anthropocentrism and animality. The other area of inquiry is oriented toward the integration of deconstruction in the distinctive fields of Amazonian thinking, on the one hand, and of Caribbean Philosophy, on the other. In these two fields, issues of identity, regionalism and territoriality take their own course and cannot be assimilated to the way in which these questions are being discussed in other contexts. In the case

of Amazonian thinking, elements traditionally pertaining to the field of anthropology acquire undeniable relevance. At the same time, the radicalization of certain dualistic assumptions requires to pay particular attention to the specificity of the region from the points of view of living conditions, linguistic interactions, beliefs, traditions and epistemic particularities. In the case of Caribbean cultures, one of the issues to be analyzed is the role of diasporic and archipelagic thinking as alternatives to fixed territorial conceptions of culture, citizenry, nationhood, and the like. In Caribbean societies, these notions combine their original dominant meanings with a diverse social and political experience resulting from fluxes of populations, ideas, values and beliefs that emerged from the imposition of colonialism in the region and from the conditions derived from its territorial fragmentation and its hybrid cultural constitution.

Finally, Derrida's critiques of anthropocentrism need to be integrated into the evaluation of his cultural and political ideas. His elaborations on the centrality of Man open, in fact, multiple possibilities for the redefinition of topics such as the notion of political subject, hospitality, logocentrism, otherness and humanism. His ideas converge with theorists such as Sylvia Wynter on the "overrepresentation of Man" (267) and on the need to expand the scope of Western imaginaries in order to encompass all living and even all existing beings, entities or elements that constitute the environment in an organic conception of life.

In this manner, Derridean theories do not remain restricted to the limits of writing, textuality or even language. The always-contested political implications of deconstruction connect with different forms of cultural action, with new agendas and new interdisciplinary articulations that situate deconstruction at the very core of globalization. The domains of biopolitics and ethics, the approach to topics such as posthumanism, migration, alterity and even life itself, as well as the redefinitions of citizenship, sovereignty and territoriality, find in deconstruction strong foundations for the destabilization and radical critique of traditional categories of analysis and interpretation, and for the emergence of new ones, specifically related to the challenges of the present.

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