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Politics of Friendship

Has Derrida taken a political turn? After his frustrating re-reading of Marx many will no doubt rush out to buy "The Politics of Friendship" in the hope of finding clarification on Derrida's politics—if such a thing could ever be said to exist. Deconstruction supposedly laid bare the problematics behind the grand political projects. It announced a period of skeptical reflection, a gap between action and justification which rendered political activity impossible. It contributed to the groundlessness of contemporary political beliefs. It placed "'truth' in quotation marks". (p. 44)

If deconstruction gave reasons to suspend judgement, to distrust the choices available, it also created an atmosphere of apathy and frustration. Ironically, Derrida has now turned to re-assess politics to see if it is now safe to go back to some of the secure notions of responsibility, commitment, and political allegiance that have so been missing.

Of course we should know better. While theorists like Baudrillard and Lyotard at least offered the promise of a controversy, Derrida will not be reduced to a soundbite theorist. He will not carry the can for Post-modernism, will not write a book that sums up the journey so far and shows us where to go next; which is exactly what post-modern theory needs right now, if it is not to be relegated to history as a temporal blip. Instead Derrida has done what he always does: produced yet another exquisite and rarefied book, polished and hermetically sealed.

Derrida is no doubt aware of the pressure on him to act as seer and leader for those left floundering in the wake of Post-modernism. He is unlikely to succumb to such a temptation, and warns again and again in "The Politics of Friendship" against such 'hasty' readings of his work. Throughout the book he chastens the reader to have patience. As always his work is a multiplication of questions. Of course we should by now expect to be frustrated by Derrida, to not reach a conclusion, to undergo his endless deferrals of meaning. Derrida's digressions are not errors in logic, but a necessary strategy which tries to prove his own theory that meaning is differential—interpretation infinite.

As with all of Derrida's work "The Politics of Friendship" starts with a quotation, and proceeds to lay it open to a multitude of interpretations. In this instance the quotation is one attributed to Aristotle by Montaigne.

"O' my friends, there is no friend."

The book is an enquiry into the meanings of the words "friend" and "enemy". The aim is to focus on: "the political problem of friendship." To do this Derrida traces the chain of this quotation from Aristolte to Kant, Blanchot, Montaigne, Nietzsche and through to the Catholic political theorist Carl Schmitt.

Derrida's method is to set in motion the contradictions and imbalances behind each attempt to define "the friend" and "the enemy". Through this he unearths a convincing array of aporias: gaps, divergences of meaning—contradictions which have nonetheless been acted upon throughout history.

"The Politics of Friendship" chastens the zeal of those who have sought conceptual clarity and acted in its name. It is possible to read from this book that the entire concept of "fraternity", as enshrined in the French revolution, was based upon a confused notion of "brotherhood" which sought universality and the eradication of the enemy, but which nonetheless depended upon the enemy for its existence.

Throughout the book Derrida follows the shifting positions of "the enemy": The enemy as the other, as the brother, as the alibi for the self and finally as the self itself. A reading could be as follows: if fraternity always posits an enemy, if the existence of the enemy is what constitutes not just the identity of the friend, but also of the self, then is it possible to reject the opposition friend/enemy, on which "the self" is based? And finally to reject "the self" and the western philosophical tradition that rests upon it? This is the question which Derrida leaves us with. The possibility of a different way of conceiving of the self—a self without a centre, without parameters—the decentered self.

We will recognise this critique of "the self" from the 1970s. From Foucault and his announcement of the death of the subject. As such, "The Politics of Friendship" is another contribution attesting to the end of humanism, and which ushers in something else: Post-humanist theory?

It is surprising really that the coming of the decentered self has been announced for so long, and yet we still know so little about how we can cope with being "decentered selves".

Who is this decentered self, this deconstructed subject, this person with no fixed identity, with no fixed principles, without a basis for ethics or politics? The person who lives deconstruction. The major question which has haunted Derrida (and Foucault's work) is just how a society comprising such Post-humanist subjects might operate. How we live with our decentered selves is one question that post-modern thought has always left hanging.

The simple reduction is to see deconstruction as a historical moment and to see the decentered self, as an event in advanced capitalism. Deconstruction is then seen as being symptomatic, or descriptive of the breakdown of western values. The decentered self, from this perspective is a social, political disaster, a retreat from the enlightenment project. The shifting values of the post-humanist subject, are said to map directly onto the fragmented self which is the consumer. Inevitably, deconstruction is forced to face what might be the political implications of the theory of the decentered subject.

"The Politics of Friendship", is a long awaited but tentative attempt at doing just that. But what would such a project be—a sociology of the deconstructed subject—a political study of post-modern man? Of course for Derrida such a project would be impossible. He cannot use a grounded methodology to critique deconstruction. However, the question of the political, of how individuals act in society haunts this book, and tries to assert itself, albeit in hidden forms.

In one passage, notably one of the most awkward in the book, Derrida implies the question of the social repercussions of the dissolution of self.

"If we were not wary in determining them too quickly, about precipitating these things towards an excessively established reality, we might propose a gross example, among an infinity of others, simply to set a heading, since what a naive scansion dates from the "fall of the Berlin wall" or from the "end of communism", the "parliamentary-democracies—of-the-capitalist—Western-world" would find themselves without a principal enemy. The effects of this destructuration would be countless: "the subject" in question would be looking for new reconstitive enmities; it would multiply "little wars" between nation-states: it would seek to pose itself, to find repose, through opposing still identifiable adversaries—China, Islam? Enemies without which, as Schmitt would have said—and this is our subject—it would lose its political being; it would purely and simply depoliticise itself." (p.76)

This is an important point, but it is couched in terms which are elusive. This is classic Derrida. The idea he puts forward is "naive"—"a gross example", "it exists among an infinity of others", "these are questions we must mutter to ourselves." He cites "we" "ourselves" and as "Schmitt would have said." Hiding what he wants to say behind a series of disclaimers, each one distances the statement from any authorial intent. This is however, the one passage from which the entire book gains its urgency and direction. Derrida echoes the point throughout the book, with reference to Schmitt:

"A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy."

"For Schmitt losing the enemy is losing the political self." p.83

"A crime against the political—the death of the enemy." p.88

These points from Schmitt, reinforce what we already know to be Derrida's own theories about "the subject". What they do though is situate the deconstructed subject at a point in history. Deconstruction has long laboured in breaking down the binary oppositions which it presupposes that western culture is based upon. A reading of Schmitt would suggest that society itself is moving towards the breakdown of the opposition between friend and enemy, political right and left. But at what cost?

What happens when society itself moves towards the dissolution of opposites? This can only be a pressing question for Derrida, as his entire theory is based upon the negative critique of the role of opposites in western thinking.

Derrida however cannot admit to the issue of the "social relevance" of his theory. By his own method cannot be seen to be making a statement or looking for evidence to support a statement. Therefore what we are left with in this text is this endless apologising, this infinity of disclaimers, this slow sensitivity in approaching the possibility of actually saying something, this way of hiding his intent behind the voice of others. Derrida's work has always had such suggested or inferred meanings, which he can usually pass on as "the reader's interpretation". However, never before has such an important suggestion played so pivotal a role in one of his books.

There is a vampiric quality in Derrida's writing. It saps the life out of that which it quotes, while at the same time exalting the original for its valour, its arrogance, its naive certainty. His love of controversial and powerful texts is exemplified here by his use of Nietzsche, Schmitt and Victor Hugo. But while Derrida draws these powerful and important quotations together he can only hint at his reasons for doing so, and cannot thread them together into an argument which might make sense.

There must be a frustration at heart here for Derrida. By his own method, he can never make a bold statement, neither can he explore a subject analytically, or systematically. He can only deconstruct each quotation, rendering them unstable, unverifiable, problematic. Neither can Derrida assess theory against facts, or found opinions upon empirical observations, as writers like Schmitt do. Derrida has through his work systematically problematised such attempts by others to jump from fact to theory, to seek proof of their ideas in reality. He does however want to imply to us that the text has some importance to the period in which we live. How can he do this though? Through vague allusion, and through saying the opposite of what he means.

Throughout the book Derrida makes repeated attacks on Schmitt's "historicist's" discourse. In typical deconstructive method, Derrida looks for the one "undecideable" which undermines their entire discourse. For Derrida, Schmitt's theory hangs upon the existence of a possible "concrete"—a phrase which bridges the gap between Schmitt's theory and the facts he claims to observe: a reality which is nonetheless contingent—an absolute which is temporal.

"What are the political stakes of this figure? On the other hand, the unending insistence here on what would be the opposite of spectral—the concrete; the compulsive and obsessional recurrence of the word concrete as the correlate of 'polemical'—does indeed provide food for thought. What thought? Perhaps that the concrete finally remains in its purity, out of reach, inaccessible, indefinately deferred, haunted by its spectre." (p.117)

So Derrida effectively undoes the concrete terrain on which Schmitt, the "modern political expert" has built his discourse. But does Schmitt not in turn haunt Derrida in the form of the necessity to address Schmitt in the first place? In the form of the question of the political relevance of theory?

There is undoubtedly something about Schmitt's prediction of a post-cold war world, fragmented into struggles for identity that troubles Derrida. What if a world without binary opposition (friend/ enemy, left/ right) is a world without meaning. Perhaps it is that Derrida sees in the post-cold war struggles of small nations and ethnic groups, a metaphor for the "decentered subject" in which the old binary oppositions no longer apply.

How often has deconstructive theory been used to undermine the "binary oppositions" of imperialist culture? Since the '60s there has been a tacit understanding that although deconstruction did not have an overt politic, it was of use in theoretically destabilising oppressive hierarchical structures. This has been the implied ethic behind the use of deconstruction. Deconstruction would take us beyond the rigidified culture of entrenched opposition—it would be a radical cultural force.

But what if the end of binary oppositions (black/ white, gay/ straight, left/ right) does not spell a positive future, in which the old oppositions end, but one in which chaos rules, and in which the form that instability takes is violence—violence beyond reason. There are only vague allusions to these concerns within the book, but it could be that Derrida has started to become anxious about "the social relevance of deconstruction". Naturally no one has marched into battle carrying a deconstruction banner, but culturally the infiltration of deconstruction into our institutions has meant a filtering through into culture of some of its inherent attitudes. Was Deridda wrong to give up on the enlightenment project, the left? These questions haunt this text, but Derrida cannot ask them.

Is there an unwritten politic behind this book without conclusion? Through each of his works Derrida has repeatedly told us that every philosophy is haunted by the spectre of its opposite. What then is the opposite that haunts deconstruction? What if not linear discourse—the statement—the need to adopt a subject position. Could it be that Derrida is haunted by what it is he really wants to say?

"Who could ever answer for a discourse on friendship without taking a stand?" (p.229)

In the Politics of Friendship we see a Derrida trapped in his own method, unable to articulate the real questions that concern him without threatening the credibility of deconstruction itself.

Politics of Friendship
Jaques Derrida

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Creative Music in a Plain Brown Box

David Thompson

"Those who compose because they want to please others, and have audiences in mind, are not real artists. They are merely more or less skilful entertainers who would renounce composing if they did not find listeners."

Arnold Schoenberg, 1946.

As the music industry seems enthralled by the shrinking circular logic of its own marketing NewSpeak few small organisations remain pleasingly unmoved by the makeover imperatives of packaging. As one company's name suggests, the Unknown Public shows scant regard for audience demographics and makes little concession to the music media's appetite for modish imagery and sound bites. If the company's motto "Creative Music in a Plain Brown Box" qualifies as a sound bite of sorts, it's also a perfectly reasonable summary of what the Unknown Public does.

Conceived as an irregular audio journal of contemporary music, and with a loyal and growing audience of subscribers in 51 countries, the Unknown Public (UP) catalogue spans an enormous range of sounds and sensibilities, presenting as standard: a breadth of frontier innovation few conventionally structured record companies could hope to match. The UP aesthetic accommodates an encyclopaedic sweep of compositional possibilities, whether conventionally scored, electronically rendered or configured by some other means. As so many labels, festivals and publications adopt elaborate territorial postures that define audiences by exclusion, UP's open-ended blueprint seems subversive, simply by default.

In the space of six years, UP founders John Walters and Laurence Aston have given an artistic home to more than 250 composers and performers, presenting exclusive or neglected work from figures both known and unfamiliar. A hasty scan of the UP archives reveals contributions by Gavin Bryars, Sheila Chandra, Steve Reich, Trevor Wishart and Frank Zappa. Each subtitled issue offers a loose and often abstract theme, around which the featured recordings gravitate. With no underlined sleeve-note connections to follow the listener is free to fathom whatever associations their own listening may inspire.

The ninth collection, subtitled "All Seeing Ear" circles around notions of synaesthesia and music's potential for rich visual suggestion and metaphor—a personal cinema experience for the ears and imagination. The featured pieces include the automotive agitation of Rob Elli's "Black Bullet Fiesta", Andrea Rocca's playful cartoon cut-ups and the gorgeously hesitant cellos of Richard Robbin's "He Meets His Mother". Also making appearances are the Polish Radio and TV Symphony Orchestra and a brief, febrile extract from Michael Brooks' "Albino Alligator" soundtrack.

The imminent tenth UP anthology takes solo performance and solitude as points of departure. Linked by the title "Naked. Music Stripped Down", thirteen pieces of audio erotica reach from improvised jazz and classical forms to live electronica and clouds of atomised ambience. Amidst the popular assumption of music as an incidental soundtrack to collective leisure activity, neither warranting nor rewarding significant attention, the pieces curated here invited a more serious and intimate consideration. From Helen Chadwick's slow sparing rendition of Osip Mandelstam's poem "Words" to the data glove-directed electronics of Walter Fabeck's "Les Astronautes" and Julian Argue's gorgeously discreet saxophones, the sense of detailed intent and introspective absorption is difficult to resist.

Rather than adopt the conventional strategy of reinforcing boundaries and generic familiarity the diversity of the UP collections quietly encourages the audience to investigate each piece with little of the prejudicial baggage that is fostered elsewhere. Irrespective of size and musical orientation, many record labels now employ marketing to prescribe an audience response that is more or less uniform, typically patronising and entirely premature. In effect, the listener is told how he or she should feel about the music before it can be taken home and scrutinised. In marked contrast, the UP's plain brown boxes invite their listeners to browse the music and to find out for themselves.