

THE POLITICS OF ENMITY: DECONSTRUCTION AND THE NEW NEOCONSERVATISM

Robin MOOKERJEE¹

- **ABSTRACT:** *In Specters of Marx*, Derrida turns his attention to the “spectral” impulse in Marx and finds time to chide neoconservative theorist Francis Fukuyama for his “messianic” leanings. This episode highlights the problematic character of Derrida’s relationship to competing political persuasions. Since the writing of *Specters*, French theory, through its influence on discourses around identity and postcolonialism, has contributed to the increased polarization of America’s political spectrum. With Derrida’s notion of “messianism” as a starting point, this essay examines recent neoconservative works. Due to the tendency of academic intellectuals to eschew a clear subject position, conservative intellectuals have stepped out of conversation with the left and turned their attention to Europe. Their recent polemics either withdraw from Fukuyama’s messianic historicism, viewing it as the province of an endemically “fascist” left, or reclaim messianism with the diagnosis of a European “illness.” Through such a diagnosis, these authors have found a tangible enemy in Europe’s relatively traditional political culture. At the same time, they have projected the “moral relativism” of America’s deconstructive academy onto the Continental political establishment.
- **KEYWORDS:** Deconstruction. Politics. Neoconservatism. Messianism. Historicism.

Academic and literary practices such as deconstruction have little direct effect on political culture. However, the perceived moral relativism and the actual anti-subjective elements embodied in deconstructive thought became, over the course of the last two decades, assimilated into the diverse views of the intellectual left. It has contributed to an increasing detachment between progressive and conservative thought in spite, or because of the politically ambiguous nature of Derridean philosophy.

¹ Eugene Lang College. The New School for Liberal Arts. New York – NY – USA. 10011 - mookerjr@newschool.edu

Artigo recebido em 02 de junho de 2009 e aprovado em 20 de agosto de 2009.

Before turning to recent neoconservatism, it seems appropriate therefore to discuss one of the only face-to-face encounters between a neoconservative philosopher and a French poststructuralist. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, published during the movement's nascency, borrowed Hegelian progressivism from the left and drew criticism from Derrida in *Specters of Marx* for its "messianism." Derrida's critique was perhaps oddly located in an argument that Marx remains, in Christopher Wise's paraphrase, "trapped within in an ontology of presence" (WISE, 2001, p.57). In "Deconstruction and Zionism" Wise reviews this latest skirmish between Derrida and his Marxist critics, finding the critics largely peremptory or superficial in the dismissals collected in Michael Sprinker's *Ghostly Demarcations*. However, the question of messianicity remains troubling for Wise, and leads him to call Derrida's political affiliations, questioned often enough in the past, into question. The religious quality to which Derrida alludes should in no way be regarded as clearly understandable; Derrida (2002, p.234) admits as much in *Marx & Sons*. In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Derrida describes messianicity as a universal but elusive – and clearly religious – aspect of human experience: "As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future.... waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience" (DERRIDA; CAPUTO, 1996, p.22). In *Specters*, Derrida (1993, p.166) shows a straightforward respect for the religious, defined as a discreet experience and derogates the reduction of religion to ideology by the false messianicity of Marx, Fukuyama, or the Abrahamic traditions. It would be all too easy to conflate Derrida's criticism of Fukuyama with other leftist critics of liberalism. However, Derridean theology is incompatible with liberalism for the same reason that it is inimical to Marx's ontology of presence. It is not historicism per se Derrida objects to, but Hegelian dialectic which, even in its spiritual form, requires an investment in this same identity or presence. In a classic study, William Dean (1986, p.48) distinguishes Derrida from the "Yale school" and much of the deconstructive movement and allies him with the American pragmatists or process philosophers who "reject the Cartesian duality between the self and the world". Derrida's rejection of ideological historicism irrespective of political affiliation is an interesting note to those who continue to wring hands over the political uses or uselessness of his philosophy².

Whether or not a radically skeptical philosophy can provide a blueprint for political action, it may still affect the political culture within and outside of the intellectual community. Derrida's uncharacteristic engagement with a contemporary political pundit may have reflected a prescient awareness that his influence was contributing to a polarized political culture. Damaged by De Man's and Heidegger's

² Most recently in Phing Cheah's *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, 2009.

ties to Nazism and upstaged by the neo-Marxist discourses around identity and colonialism, Derrida in the 1990s was in need of politicization. Figures such as Richard Beardsworth framed Derridean skepticism as an implicative critique of violent institutions, while Jon Simons and others did something similar for Foucault. In *French Theory* François Cusset (2008) tells the story of the astounding influence of theory on popular culture, consumerism, and worldwide academic discourse. He reports, also, on the concomitant and perhaps resultant separation between intellectual culture and mainstream political culture. While, in the tradition of Frankfurt School Marxists, cultural critics identified the authoritarianism and pathology evident in cultural products and texts, the philosophical tenets of poststructuralist theory were seen to undermine the real world relevance of this critique. This perceived irrelevance was a direct result of the Derridean avoidance of a Cartesian subject. Activists such as Todd Gitlin complained that without a belief in “people” or “peoples” there could be no political left. Political philosophers such as Michael Walzer deplored the pluralism of Derrida and Foucault, which threatened to rob politics of its object (CUSSET, 2008, p.188). Leftist politics deteriorated, Cusset writes, into a sort of atomism, a balkanized world of independent interest groups without a unifying ideology.

The cause to be championed, singular, complete, and irreducible, offers the comfort of constant recognition and gratitude, and mutual complicity, and contrasts with the alienation of the social market, foundation of the real-life world. This perspective favored a strictly culturalist reading of social struggles and international conflicts, casting it as a confrontation between essences, ahistorical realities among which cultural differences were seen as insurmountable and incommensurable – a notion that sometimes, paradoxically, came to pave the way for right-wing arguments from writers like Samuel Huntington about the “clash of civilizations. (CUSSET, 2008, p.189).

Huntington’s Manichean outlook, Cusset argues, was a mirror image of the multicultural vision of the world in which underprivileged “identities” were opposed to a white male norm. Since the minority groups made no claim of ontological presence, they lacked Gitlin’s sense of authenticity as “peoples” and lacked Walzer’s necessary “object”. Such a hybrid extension of Derridean theory with traditional leftist ideas was formulated in an attempt to remain true to the Heideggerian sense of the subject as described by William Dean (1986), one which never speaks of the subject *qua* subject, distinct from the other. The underpinning of French theory in New Left politics may have served as an assurance that its discourse would never give way to a false (i.e. collective) messianism. But its cultural influence set the stage for a collectivist and indeed Hegelian-historicist discourse on the right, one that was

hospitable to white males who, as Cusset writes, would be racist and sexist *by definition* from the perspective of multiculturalism.

Derrida has always been useful to critics on the right who detest the deterioration of traditional or liberal values in American culture. “Moral relativism” or “cultural relativism” are almost euphemistic references to Derrida and pursuant philosophers, worked to exhaustion by critics like Roger Kimball, who published *Tenured Radicals* the same year that *The End of History and the Last Man* came out. Over fifteen years after the term “culture wars” came into common usage, neoconservatism was widely understood to be failed political philosophy. Even Fukuyama, who based his paradigm on the widely accepted failure of communism, had distanced himself from neoconservatism’s political manifestation. As the Iraq war faced increasing criticism, Fukuyama’s descendants had few options. The Hegelian sense of an inevitable end of historical strife and a worldwide acceptance of democratic liberalism had failed to materialize. Like disappointed Marxists in the wake of World War I, they could turn their attention to the cultural factors that may have inhibited the march of history. Many authors turned their attention to Europe. Reversing Adorno’s model of *The Authoritarian Personality*, they saw it as a dispirited culture, incapable of exercising power when necessary. These thinkers saw a failure of Hegelian historicism to assert itself on the Continent. Others, returning somewhat to classical liberalism, rejected the Hegelian notion of evolution as inherently akin to fascism or totalitarianism. They rejected the notion that fascism was necessarily a phenomenon of the political right. While such a perspective was not overtly at odds with Derrida’s critique of Fukuyama, some authors found time to revisit deconstruction’s links to Nazism. One bestselling historian, Jonah Goldberg of the *National Review*, viewed Derrida’s intellectual lineage as inherently fascist.

In 1966, at a conference at Johns Hopkins University, the French literary critic Jacques Derrida introduced the term “Deconstruction” — a term coined by Nazi ideologues — into the American intellectual bloodstream. Deconstruction, a literary theory which holds there is no single meaning to any text, caught fire in the minds of academics and students alike who hoped to be liberated from the dead weight of accumulated history and knowledge... Derrida hoped to snatch the veil from the Enlightenment and reveal the tyranny of “logocentrism” (another word with fascist roots). This, too, was a replay of the pragmatic spirit which had sought to liberate humanity from inherited dogma. Pragmatism inspired Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Benito Mussolini, as well as their court intellectuals, to discard the ‘putrefying corpse’ of classical liberalism... As one progressive reformer put it, ‘We were all Deweyites before we read Dewey. Many in the academy were deconstructionists before they read Derrida. (GOLDBERG, 2009, p.149).

Where progressives had sometimes viewed Derridean thought as undermining the object relations necessary for political thought and action, Goldberg sees it as an overtly political revolutionary gesture. This makes sense, since, as an essentially “negative” perspective which proposes nothing and yet clears the way for a messianic openness to experience and the future, it is resistant to any formulation, whether traditional, liberal, or progressive. Goldberg sees deconstruction as Roger Kimball and others did: as a hostile gesture towards already-established truths, and a deeply antinomian perspective. His concern is with intellectual lineage, and philosophical pragmatism, in his book *Liberal Fascism*, is the shared root of Italian fascism, Nazism, Wilsonian progressivism, and Roosevelt’s authoritarian politics. It is not merely that pragmatism views “truth” as to some extent contingent. As in the case of deconstruction, for Goldberg, it is the pernicious and cynical uses to which pragmatist philosophy can be put that are powerful. Both Mussolini and Hitler, Goldberg writes, viewed themselves as creating a pseudo-religion. Inspired by the success of Bolshevism and understanding the power of a Darwinian and Hegelian model of social progress, Hitler, influenced by Nietzsche and William James via Georges Sorel, also understood that “truth” could be manufactured. From Mussolini, whom he despised as much as he did the Bolsheviks, Hitler learned that it was the emotive content of political discourse that made it effective, not its philosophical coherence. For Goldberg all forms of state-centered progressivism possess this pragmatist cynicism and Hegelian historicism. They are manufactured pseudo-religious ideologies, extremely resistant to alternative perspectives (such as libertarianism or conservatism). Deconstruction in America was, during the upheaval of the 1960s, merely a way of jettisoning those perspectives from academic discourse.

A popular misuse of the word could serve to label Goldberg “deconstructive” rather than messianic. He decries Hegelian historicism in all its forms, and, like Derrida, appears to find fault with them for their false claim to religiosity. However, Goldberg, whose neoconservatism resembles classical liberalism or libertarianism, does not defer to traditional, institutional religion. He is, however, to some extent an anti-messianic organicist, one who views most or all progressivist theories as false contrivances. Their roots in pragmatism may be an indication that they are fabrications, the product of a relativistic view of truth, but Goldberg, engaged in a broad partisan critique, does not question his own epistemological assumptions. Where Goldberg sees Hitler’s philosophy as fundamentally anti-intellectual, Derrida, in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, seems to view Nazism as an inevitable consequence of the philosophical tradition.

We have here a program and a combinatory whose power remains abyssal. In all rigor it exculpates none of the discourses which can thus exchange their power. It leaves no place open for any arbitrating authority. Nazism was not

born in the desert. We all know this, but it must be constantly recalled. And even if, far from any desert, it had grown like a mushroom in the shadow of big trees, in the shelter of their silence or their indifference but in the same soil. (DERRIDA, 1991, p.138-139).

In *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* Peter Baker (1995, p.127) interprets this poetical passage. “The ‘impossible’ ethics of deconstruction, however, demands that one continue to think about the issues in their full, abysslike complexity that denies any firm ground on which to maintain one’s own lack of involvement in the issues raised by the inquiry”. Derrida describes Nazism in organic terms; far from being an anomalous mutation, it is inseparable from a vast tradition of philosophical tradition. Unlike the Abrahamic religions it is *not* the result of a revelatory birth in the desert. The “abysslike” complexity of Nazism, as well as its abysslike attractive power, so troubling to Frankfurt School Marxists, does not free individual interpreters or contiguous philosophical traditions from ethical responsibility, particularly not in the case of their “silence” or “indifference.” Goldberg, perhaps revealing a conservative tendency toward scapegoating, sees post-World War I politics as the advent of a viral authoritarianism that is now reaching epidemic proportions. Derrida, to extrapolate a bit from the passage quoted above, may see Nazism as an extreme and messianic extension of the “ontology of presence.” The confident propositions of Fukuyama have given way to a negative theology that rejects all non-Enlightenment formulations as leading to tyranny. Both Derrida and Goldberg reject the authority of most philosophical traditions; however, Goldberg (and Fukuyama) retain their faith in those that affirm the primacy of the subject or the individual in society. In this they are fundamentally more consistent with Todd Gitlin or Michael Walzer, both of whom see the need for a subject-object relationship in liberal or progressive politics.

As we’ve seen through the juxtaposition of Derrida with Goldberg, Derrida’s own negative theology, so described by a variety of commentators, is elusive enough that it cannot be easily opposed to other traditions. There is some irony in this, since Goldberg’s very argument, once made by Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, is that communism and fascism are more like contentious siblings than nemeses. As a component of academic leftist discourse, French theory tends to prevent that discourse, heavy-handedly moral as it often is, from playing a role in an ideological relationship. While “culture wars” appear to take place on the cultural playing field, they are characterized more by professed bewilderment on the part of the right and, often, *ad hominem* attacks on the part of the left. They may make one nostalgic for the relatively engaged quality of Cold War-era debates, encounters between more-or-less clearly defined intellectual positions. Bewildered, perhaps, by their domestic enemies, neoconservatives have turned their attention to Europe. Goldberg’s thesis

may constitute a confession of the failed messianism, or triumphalism, of his creed, leading him to project these Hegelian tendencies onto the left and demonize them. In this way, he views America and Europe as similarly corrupt progressive/fascist societies. By contrast, widely-read authors like Robert Kagan and Marc Steyn maintain the Hegelian or right-wing progressive framework, and view America and Europe as starkly opposed.

If there is a stylistic opposite to deconstructive prose in contemporary discourse it may be found in the influential writings of neoconservatives such as Kagan and Steyn, whose bestselling pleas for the public to adopt a commonsensical neorealist position embody the forgotten tones of the American Oxbridge intellectual: measured, exasperated, allusive, factual, anecdotal – the voice of the Last Reasonable Man. Commentators who responded to Steyn's *America Alone* with *ad hominem* dismissals as quaint as his witty prose seemed to resent his acerbic charm as if it represented a kind of old world sorcery. And Kagan's *Of Power and Paradise* concealed its defense of the Bush Doctrine in the kind of analytical, "objective" tones Roger Kimball identified as the paradigm of scholarly professionalism lost by 1980s academics with the rise of French theory. Due in part to his poker-faced presentation, Kagan won positive reviews from the "left-leaning" press worldwide.

Both authors view America as monolithic and unique in its ability and willingness to wield military power against looming threats. Each bemoans the "post-nationalism" and pacifism of the EU, Steyn attributing it to a low birthrate and general effeminacy, Kagan seeing it as the inevitable result of military weakness. Steyn sees a rising tide of Islam, supported by increased violence and demographic trends, which threatens to transform European culture in a generation or two. Kagan sees the EU as dwelling in an admirable but essentially factitious paradise, Kantian in that it proposes a universal state, eschewing national divisions. America, meanwhile, having provided Europe with military backing throughout the Cold War and in more recent flare-ups, remains in a Hobbesian world, and, by continuing to defend the West against clashing civilizations, makes Europe's paradise possible. Kagan makes no distinction between Democratic and Republican administrations, viewing all administrations since World War II as essentially guided by the exigencies of power politics. Indeed, a recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece discusses the "neo-realism" of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The unapologetic *raison d'état* promoted by both authors would appear to represent the opposite of the critique of power developed by academics in the Americas and the UK over the past three decades. It is not simply an affirmation of power, but a complaint against those who refuse to acknowledge its usefulness and efficacy. Although, seen from a global perspective far removed from textual ambiguities, America retains an undivided character for both authors, they still feel

the need to assert America's identity as ineradicably distinct from that of Europe. Writing in a tone of good humor under duress, Steyn occasionally decries the "moral relativism" of progressives or socialists in Europe. He writes to convince a liberal-dominated public too caught up in the brain fog of relativism (or, in his words, the "blancmange of relativism") of some pressing realities. Yet this public in its American form, the one he knows will be unsympathetic to his narrative of imminent Muslim domination, is barely acknowledged in his or Kagan's books. Surely the America they describe, the last refuge of unreflective action (and a healthy reproductive drive), would know itself without the need for description – if it fit that description.

Possibly reflecting American parochialism, the authors' vision of Europe seems to be largely a projection of homegrown preoccupations across the Atlantic. In spite of their assumption of American homogeneity, the weak and relativistic Europe they describe, hobbled by political correctness and an intrusive, semi-totalitarian bureaucracy, resembles nothing as much as Jonah Goldberg's, Dinesh D'Souza's, or Robert Levin's view of the United States. American civil libertarians are more likely to be concerned about London's culture of surveillance, an over-zealous measure to curb terrorism, than a Labor government that panders excessively to the sensitivities of Muslims. Transplanting American debates about language and political correctness seldom heard overseas, Steyn notes that French news outlets referred to Muslim automobile arsonists as "youth," neglecting to mention their religious affiliation (GOLDBERG, 2009, p.34). However, a moment's reflection should suffice to remind us that neutral terms are nearly always used in reports of crime worldwide. Echoing the classic conservative complaint that American Democrats are "soft on crime," Kagan (2004, p.46-49) reports that NATO preferred negotiation to the use of force during the multilateral war in Kosovo. Just as John Kerry was regarded as weak during the 2004 presidential election for recommending increased reliance on diplomacy, NATO's reluctance to use decisive force is read by Kagan as the natural consequence of military weakness, rather than as a strategic option. The EU's failure to build a substantial military over the course of the 1990s, in spite of a GDP exceeding that of the United States, was a matter of consideration, not a failure of courage.

The neoconservative construction of Europe reflects the tendency to create an antipodal "other" in the absence of a domestic opponent who fully inhabits the subject position. Both Steyn and Kagan describe America as "alone," irreversibly separate from Europe, its former companion, just as Jonah Goldberg sees conservatives as criminalized and excluded in a worldwide progressive conspiracy. They are describing a domestic situation: the loss of an interlocutor with whom one can have a relationship. Steyn maintains the progressivism and messianism of Fukuyama, using a common tactic of authoritarian statesmen. He declares that the

Western world faces unprecedented changes, and only America is in a position to fight these changes. He describes Europe much the way Hitler described Germany in the 1930s: as weakened and humiliated, on the verge of being deprived of its ethnic integrity. Kagan sees in Europe a historical necessity for liberal Democrats to exercise power; but the Hegelian progress foretold by Fukuyama refuses to assert itself due to some sort of illness infecting Europe. Again, this position is a reversal of the Frankfurt School contention that those in opposition to progressivism suffered from a sort of pre-fascist psychological illness.

Cusset goes some way toward explaining this reanimation of Cold War oppositions through his perception that, in spite of the popularity of French theory in America, the UK, and Australia, the intellectual culture of Europe retained a distinct and opposable flavor.

There are several important features that *distinguish* the latter from its American counterpart when it comes to French theory: a more extensive history of public intellectuals, less of a tendency to innovate for the sake of innovation, a greater measure of clout held by Marxist academics, and, in a broader sense, the new sociopolitical paradigm of social class that exists in France. (CUSSET, 2008, p.289).

The ontology of presence had never entirely gone out of fashion in the UK and, to a greater extent, on the Continent. Todd Gitlin had declared that the American left was in need of both a sense of its own “peoples” and an “object,” which may be either a goal or an enemy. European intellectuals, who resembled the traditional American left, had overcome their separate national identities and achieved an economic renaissance of sorts. They no longer depended, as Robert Kagan notes, on the United States for military protection from the Soviet Union. Themselves in need of an object, they directed their animus at the United States. American conservative intellectuals, many of them descended from the old anti-Stalinist left, in turn found an object or enemy in the EU, one which embodied the familiar Marxist and anti-liberal philosophies. Partly due to the skeptical leanings of French theory, American intellectuals, for all their cultural influence, were left out of the “real” political equation.

MOOKERJEE, R. A política da inimidade: desconstrução e o novo neoconservadorismo. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v.49, n.2, p.277-287, jul./dez., 2009.

- **RESUMO:** *Em Espectros de Marx, Derrida dedica sua atenção ao impulso “espectral” em Marx e encontra tempo ainda para censurar o teórico neoconservador Francis Fukuyama por suas tendências “messiânicas”. O episódio ajuda a evidenciar o caráter problemático da relação de Derrida com convicções políticas concorrentes. Desde a redação de Espectros, a French Theory, por meio de sua influência sobre os discursos a respeito de identidade e pós-colonialismo, vem contribuindo para aumentar a polarização do espectro político da América. Tendo por ponto de partida a noção de “messiansmo” como em Derrida, este artigo analisa trabalhos recentes de tendência neoconservadora. Devido à tendência dos intelectuais acadêmicos de se esquivar de uma clara posição individual, os intelectuais conservadores abandonaram o diálogo com a esquerda e voltaram sua atenção à Europa. Suas polêmicas mais recentes ou bem se afastam do historicismo messiânico de Fukuyama, que consideram como o reduto de uma esquerda endemicamente “fascista”, ou reabilitam o messianismo sob o diagnóstico de uma “doença” européia. Esse diagnóstico permite que tais autores encontrem um inimigo tangível na cultura política relativamente tradicional da Europa. Ao mesmo tempo, eles projetam o “relativismo moral” do pensamento americano acadêmico de caráter desconstrucionista por sobre o establishment político do continente.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Desconstrução. Política. Neoconservadorismo. Messianismo. Historicismo.*

References

- ADORNO, T. et al. **The Authoritarian Personality**. Ed. Samuel Flowerman. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.
- BAKER, P. N. **Deconstruction and He Ethical Turn**. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995.
- BEARDSWORTH, R. **Derrida and the Political**. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- CUSSET, F. **French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- DEAN, W. **American Religious Empiricism**. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- DERRIDA, J. **Marx & Sons**. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002.
- _____. **Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International**. New York: Routledge, 1993.

_____. **Of Spirit:** Heidegger and the Question. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

DERRIDA, J.; CAPUTO, J. **Deconstruction in a Nutshell.** Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1996.

_____. et al. **Ghostly Demarcations:** A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx. Brooklyn: Verso, 2008.

FUKUYAMA, F. **The End of History and the Last Man.** New York: Free Press, 1992.

GITLIN, T. **The Twilight of Common Dreams.** New York: Holt, 1996.

GOLDBERG, J. **Liberal Fascism:** The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Change. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

KAGAN, R. **Of Paradise and Power:** America and Europe in the New World Order. New York: Vintage, 2004.

KIMBALL, R. **Tenured Radicals:** How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

SIMONS, J. **Foucault and the Political.** New York: Routledge, 1995.

STEYN, M. **America Alone:** The End of the World as We Know It. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2008.

WISE, C. Deconstruction and Zionism: Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx. **Diacritics**, Baltimore, v.31, n.1, p.56-72, 2001.

