

# DERRIDA AND THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

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It is time for a political reading of the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's work, situated within a body of ideas variously described as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism, is important politically, in part because of a series of challenges that this body of theory generally and specifically presents to Marxism and feminism.

The first of these challenges consists in the relationship of the themes of postmodernism (and Derrida as a principal exponent of postmodern theory) to popular contemporary experience. It is the attunement of postmodern ideas to the experiences of cynicism and disillusionment, so common in the 1980s, that accounts in large part for its popularity. The 'optimism of the will' which **Gramsci** advocated for Marxist politics is absent from postmodern theory, as it is from much popular sentiment. The ability of postmodern theory to capture and express a popular mood of mistrust and defeatism therefore warrants consideration by Marxists and feminists. A second challenge of Derrida's work is that it cuts into the heart of many of the salient debates within Marxism, and within socialist feminist theory. To some Marxists and feminists, Derrida's work appears to provide a potential resolution to some of those debates, and raises the possibility of transcending them, through an alternative understanding of how we interpret reality, an understanding which seems ethically compatible with some of the concerns that those debates have raised.' Yet, despite the appeal that **Derrida's** work has found among Marxist and feminist scholars, the resolution that he offers is fraught with problems and contradictions which raise suspicions about its usefulness for political change. Finally, Derrida's approach to Marxist and feminist debates presents yet a further challenge insofar as it portrays a certain relationship between ethics, truth, and power, which is at odds with the classical understandings of Marxism and feminism. The challenge that Derrida presents to us at this level is a fundamental one, one which confronts us with a renewed demand to interpret reality in a way which can empower us to change the contemporary experiences which his work so well describes.

Locating his work politically requires more than categorizing him as either

Marxist or anti-Marxist, feminist or anti-feminist. Although Demda himself claims that he is a Marxist, it is obvious to any reader that his work does not fit neatly into the usual designations of either Marxism or **feminism**.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I will argue that understanding the politics of Demda's work, and understanding its implications for Marxism and feminism requires that we take seriously the challenges it presents to our interpretations of the world, and appreciate the circumstances in which those challenges have become insistent. Only then will we be able to confront the politics that both produce and are derived from postmodern theory.

### *Derrida and Postmodern Experience*

The themes of Demda's work are reflected in 'postmodern' theory generally, (including the work of Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, **Jean-François** Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze) with the label 'postmodernism' coming to suggest a variety of ideas, including both a radical continuation of modernism's rejection of all traditional beliefs, as well as a rejection of modernity's sense of itself as 'progressing' beyond those beliefs into some higher truths. Before analyzing Demda's philosophy in order to see precisely how it accounts for its principal themes, it would be useful to describe those themes, and to suggest how they may resonate with features of contemporary experience.

A central theme which is present in postmodern thought, and which underwrites Demda's theory, is a deep suspicion of power, and of the way in which power seems necessarily to **corrupt**. The optimism of the **Left**, in its aspirations for power, and indeed in its faith in the prospect of the withering away of the state, can only be held in scorn by postmodernists. Their cynicism is a result of the belief that power has its own mechanisms, which are not subject to the desires and determinations of those who are 'in power'. Instead, the structures of power itself will determine, if not the precise activities of those in power, then at least the effects of those activities. Those effects will be a reduction in individuality, in spontaneity, and in independence. Increasingly, the direction of all institutions and practices of power will be towards normalization and conformity.

Postmodern theorists, like feminists and Marxists, speak from an ethical resistance to this view of power. In Demda's case, this resistance comes from a view that power enforces sameness, that it attempts to deny and withstand differences as they appear between different people, and among different interpretations at a given point in time and across time, historically. The political practices of representation would necessarily impose a structure of 'sameness'; **i.e.** representatives are supposed to fix in one location and time those who elect them. So what Demda's work would seem to prescribe is the most radical form of democracy, one without representation, and therefore one in which even individuals' representations of themselves would be drawn constantly into question.

Unlike feminist and Marxist theories, therefore, **Derrida** seems to base the desire for democracy not on collective identities, and barely on the notion of identity at all. Moreover, at a fundamental level, his work denies the possibility of democracy ever being achieved, not only because of the radical requirements which his theory proposes, but because this desire for democracy can only fuel resistance, and cannot be 'powerful'. Power, per se, is anti-democratic.

What is apparent from this description, and what perhaps accords with contemporary postmodern experience, are these two features. First, that power cannot be trusted, that it does not matter who is in control. And secondly, that collective identities cannot be fostered in trust, that individuals are unable to represent their own interests, even to themselves. Demda's theory reflects the experiences both of individualism and of powerlessness, experiences which Marxism and feminism attempt to counter.

A similar set of suspicions informs the Demdean view of ethics. It is clear enough, at least in a close reading, that Demda speaks from an ethical position, that he genuinely engages in his work in order to deconstruct, and hopefully disengage from systems of domination. Yet the ethics which inform his work are not something which he develops in his theory. He can, for example, demonstrate the 'false' nature of representation, and reveal the '**truth**' of non-identity, of the inability to represent anything (in language or in politics) **as** it actually is. This 'truth' then **corresponds** to an ethical position, in which he sides with the underdog, the oppressed, the powerless. But the oppressed, it seems, deserve his support, simply because they have no power. In other words, there are no inherent qualities of political underdogs to which he can attribute value, other than their existence as underdogs, **as** marginal to the power system. Obviously, this leaves all questions of values and ethics **terribly** undertheorized.

Nevertheless, several features of Demda's ethical position deserve emphasis for their apparent **correlation** with popular experience. First, Demda's consideration of ethics, like his theory of power, allows him to capture the popular sentiments of futility and powerlessness. His view of ethics serves to underline the degree to which the present system is felt **as** stable and unchanging, and **as** oppressive to the powerless. The oppressed are oppressed because the system will inevitably reproduce oppression. In addition to capturing this sense of the futility of ethical practices, Demda's view of ethics also demonstrates that the social structures of power are not justified by a common perception that the powerful are necessarily better people. On the contrary, contemporary culture, and **postmodern** culture, find the powerful to be no better, and possibly much worse than the oppressed. Because there are no standards for evaluating values or ethics, postmodern thought can hold that mass culture and any values and ethics which arise in it, are as valid **as** any alternative. That is, the values and ethics of popular culture are valued not because they are popular or democratic, but because

there are no standards for judgement which would permit ethical or value superiority to emerge. Finally, what is valued in his theory is the process which **Derrida** calls deconstruction. This process involves taking apart and analyzing the components of all previous thought, beliefs, and values, in order to discover within all of them the same tendency to try to become powerful through following certain practices which permit them to declare that they are accurate representations of reality. Through revealing this tendency, deconstruction shows the deception and the misrepresentation of reality on which all representation is premised.

The combination of Derrida's theory of ethics and theory of power leads to another theme of postmodern thought and experience, and that is the limited place that is given to freedom. There are no grounds for choice of action, and no way in which action can be made more effective through the theory. There is even a vague suspicion that whenever it is effective, then it may also become part of the normalizing and totalizing practice of power, and therefore that all effective action would have to be unethical. If freedom could be exercised ethically, then it is only through the highly intellectual practice of deconstruction. This theme of postmodernism too, appears to correspond well to people's actual experience of a lack of freedom in their lives, and the general despair that a different political system, or the possibility of acting politically in concert with others, could provide greater freedom in their lives. Most fundamentally, however, Derrida's deep concern with 'interpretation' serves to emphasize a common feeling that the world is becoming increasingly difficult, even impossible to comprehend. Even if we do not concur with him that all language is deceptive and dissembling, the sentiment that some language certainly is, is a strongly felt one and a frequent one in our lives. The challenge to interpret the world in a way which is both empowering, and in some way ethical, is becoming increasingly difficult.

The themes of postmodernism, its suspicion of power, its despair about a way in which ethics and power could be brought together, the lack of grounding for values or ethical positions, a bleak outlook on freedom, and a suspicion of all interpretation are among the most resonant themes in contemporary political experience. They are, as well, themes which Marxism and feminism have sought to **combat**. The challenge to rearticulate an optimism for politics and a trust in interpretation is an immense one, and must start with an ability to interpret in the hope of changing the very experiences that Derrida and the other postmodernists describe.

### *Derrida and Interpretation*

The resonance of postmodernist thought at the popular level today finds many Marxists and feminists in tow. Although we may be committed to political change, we are hardly immune from the despair that change may never happen, or such change as may come to pass may never be enough to create the society which we are working for. The pessimism and hopelessness of

postmodern theory have particular appeal for intellectuals, for whom at least **Derrida** seems to reserve some ethical space (although this space is severely limited in its effectiveness). But many intellectual feminists and Marxists have also found appeal in Demda's work for other reasons, specifically the promise of Demda's theory to surmount some of the basic conflicts which have emerged in Marxist theory and in socialist feminist thought.

The conflicts which have emerged, and which persist, for Marxists and for feminists, **can** be depicted in terms of problems of interpreting experience in order to change it. How, for example, can the experiences described in the first section of this paper, the experiences of futility and despair concerning political action, **be** understood in order that they **can** then be altered? And what is the relationship between interpreting those experiences accurately, and actually being able to change them?

For Marxists, the problem of interpretation has been encountered in the debates concerning ideology and social change.<sup>3</sup> It is a central thesis of Marxism that human subjects cannot immediately understand the reality in which they are enveloped. Classical Marxism demonstrated that while the immediate level of experience would not be certain, attention to the deeper structures latent in that reality would reveal both an accurate understanding of phenomena and also reveal the internal processes of change. But the ensuing debates within Marxism have revealed inconsistencies and a certain vagueness in some of the early formulations.

For Marxists who stressed the power of human agency, ideology would be overcome through the practice of class struggle combined with Marxist theory. They have assumed that at some level, separate from ideological influence, workers have access to experience which would **correspond** to the truths revealed by Marx. But after a century in which the working class of capitalism has been mostly unmoved by analyses of their continuing 'false consciousness', the appeal of this approach has worn thin. It is increasingly difficult to argue that there are realms of experience untouched by ideology, which provide unmediated truths to those who look for them. And, if Marxism offers simply another ideology, then how can it be guaranteed that it is the '**correct**' one or that it would emerge the more powerful in a competition among ideologies.

Structuralist Marxism offered one alternative to the fading trust in human agency. The 'scientific' approach of structuralist thought demonstrated that humans did have access to a type of knowledge which would reveal reality, and at the same time explain the processes of ideological formulation and promulgation. But structuralism has been properly criticized for the ease with which it transposed all of the problems of the subject onto another level (where it then proceeded to ignore their problematic status). Society is granted its ability to occlude subjective understanding; subjects are understood as constituted ideologically by the society and thereby mystified by it. But the 'scientific' autonomy and vision of the structuralist who sees

beneath this cannot be explained by the theory itself, and the macro-subject of the economy which propels society forward appears to be divorced anyway from any connection to human agency or knowledge which would inform it. The interpretation which structuralist Marxism offered was limited by both its inability to explain its own recourse to correct interpretations which were generally unavailable, and at the same time, made the necessity of interpretation rather redundant to a society in which change was principally a property of the structures themselves. History, it appeared in the theory, had already been written, and interpretation was mostly incidental to it.

While many of the debates over interpretation within Marxism have focussed on this pole of agency vs. structure, the debates within feminist thought have had a different content, and have centred more on the question of foundation. Feminism, too, has had to explain the deep roots of sexist beliefs within society, and the concomitant experience of sex oppression. And it has had to explain the complicity of women in their own oppression, for which some of Marxism's understandings of ideology have occasionally appeared useful. Socialist feminists have had the additional task of explaining how capitalism reinforced and bolstered women's oppression, while not reducing women's oppression to the capitalist form of production, nor ignoring the real exploitation of all workers. More recently, feminist theory generally has been criticized heavily for universalizing its assumptions about women's oppression, and for not recognizing that the experiences in which the theory has been grounded have been only the experiences of white women.<sup>4</sup> There is an irony in this criticism. Feminism, which has had as a principal part of its critique of society the universalization of male experience as human experience, has been forced to confront its own tendency to universalize from a narrow and specific set of experiences. Feminism is now challenged with the task of trying to articulate common grounds for a feminist interpretation of reality, and for a women's movement aimed at freeing women from oppression, while simultaneously trying to be sensitive to the lack of commonality in women's experience of oppression, and in the forms of oppression that women face. The result has been a movement towards a celebration of women's differences, and a caution against the formulation of collective identities. Even the use of the term 'woman' has been declared problematic.<sup>5</sup> Recent debates within feminism have concerned just this question: how to create a common struggle without imposing commonality across class, race, sexual orientation, location, **culture**.<sup>6</sup>

Demda's work does not explicitly enter into these debates in Marxism or feminism, but the turn to his work witnessed in recent Marxist and feminist writings suggests that he has had some impact on **them**.<sup>7</sup> This impact can best be explained by concentrating on the central theme in Demda's work, the problem of interpretation. Through examining Derrida's theory of interpretation, we can see the way in which it intersects with, and proposes a resolution for the conflicts in Marxist and feminist thought.

Meaning, according to Demda, is a result of an originary 'differance'. 'Differance' is a play on the French verb '**différer**' which has two meanings: both 'to differ' as in to distinguish, and 'to defer' as in to postpone, or put off. Demda uses this term to highlight an originary condition of meaning, that it is always part of a system of making distinctions, and of refering beyond the object in its temporal and spatial existence. The 'a' in differance is significant, because it can only be seen when the word is written; it cannot be distinguished in sound from the word 'difference' with an '**e**'.<sup>8</sup> Demda makes this distinction, which may seem facile, because he is making a point about language generally, and about the order of language. The system of language is what we use to understand the world, and the traditional belief about it has been that language is, in some way, able immediately to reflect the world in words, and that it is secondary to that which it reflects. The relationship between writing and speech acts as a metaphor for this. Speech has been considered to be the major part of language, and writing its subordinate partner. Writing has been historically believed merely to reflect speech, hopefully to be an accurate enough account of speech, just as language's relation to the world has been understood as a mere reflection, an accurate enough account. And what Demda finds significant in these hierarchies is the assumption of immediacy in the representation of the world in language, and particularly in speech. Speech, he says, is considered to be the dominant partner in language largely because the presence of the speaker is equated with the supposed presence of meaning in language's relation **to** the world.

Demda's point regarding how to discover the basis of meaning is that these traditional beliefs must be inverted. First of all, he states that language does not reflect the world; it conditions and creates all the meanings that we find in the world, and we have no access to any interpretation of the world that is separate from language. Secondly, writing is a more accurate metaphor for this condition of language than speech is. Writing makes clearer both the absence of the speaking subject, and of the referent or object. And this absence is crucial to any understanding of interpretation, since words of necessity contain meanings and references which are unintended by the subject, and which extend beyond the object. Words and language, when examined, spill forth these 'traces' of other meanings, or 'supplements' which indicate the way in which interpretations actually exceed reality, not (as was traditionally thought) fall short of it.<sup>9</sup>

All meanings, therefore, and all interpretations of reality, are what Demda calls 'texts'. The use of the term 'text' is deliberately extended to include not only written works, but also all ideas, beliefs, practices, and even institutions. The extension of the notion 'text' was designed, according to Demda, to put into question the traditional divisions between texts, on the one hand, and reality on the **other**.<sup>10</sup> It was to spoil this separation so that we would come to see the degree to which we have no access to reality other than through our sets of interpretations and beliefs. Interestingly, the word 'texte' in French

is also the word for 'script', and therefore emphasizes the degree to which language **predetermines** our actions in and our relation to the world. Further, we should examine those 'texts' to disclose the ways in which they participate in dissembling their own relation to reality.

The process of reading texts for their moments of dissemblance is what Demda calls 'deconstruction'. Demda's own work is focussed on the deconstruction of the major works of Western philosophy. In these works, he suggests, the structures of Western thought have been laid down and eloquently defended. Key among these structures are certain beliefs about interpretation of the world. These beliefs depend upon **the** ideas described above, that language is secondary and inadequate to reality, and that therefore interpretation always falls short of what it attempts to understand.

Demda's inversion of these beliefs is not intended as merely an exercise in logic. It is also ethical and political. He sees the referential aspect of language, and its subordinate relationship to reality, as intrinsically totalitarian. This totalitarianism is due to the drive for interpretation to refer immediately in a complete, sufficient way to reality. The drive to interpret the world is also, he thinks, a drive to control it, and to form of the world and our relation to it, a closed totality. **Derrida** inverts the relationship of interpretation to the world to show both the impossibility of interpretations of the world ever being complete and immediate in relation to their objects, and also to demonstrate the dangers of attempting to achieve a total, seamless **interpretation**.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship of this theory of interpretation to the impassés described in Marxist and feminist thought should now begin to be clear. In the Marxist debate between structure vs. agency, the structuralists give an analysis of ideology which separates knowledge from the process of social change, without fully explaining their own privileging of 'scientific' knowledge as non-ideological. The humanists retain faith in the importance of human agency in class struggle, and in the capacity for understanding experience in a way which will fuel that struggle. Demda's theory of interpretation is reminiscent of structuralism in its denial of human agency, and therefore serves as a critique of humanist Marxism's confidence in human perception, experience, and action. All we have access to, according to Demda, are interpretations of the world which are necessarily already distorted and untrue. Moreover, our actions in the world are less significant than the powerful nature of the relationship of language to reality which predetermines our understanding of the world, and even predetermines the possibility of changing the way in which power operates. While some of these features of his thought may resemble structuralism, Demda's theory is emphatically also a criticism of structuralism. Because of his theorization of 'the trace' and 'the supplement' which imply that there is always an excess, and an unpredictability in any system, he can criticize the ways in which structuralism works always with the idea of a closed totality, in which the structure, or form, is always

theorized as being completely adequate to the content which it **shapes**.<sup>12</sup> There is a random quality which Demda reintroduces to the debates in structuralism, an unpredictability to all structures. So, in the structure vs. agency debate, Derrida attempts a resolution by abandoning both structure and agency, thereby drastically limiting the explanatory value of the theory. Given his beliefs about interpretation, the loss of an explanatory function for theory is, in fact, his point.

Demdean interpretation has a different, but also interesting, relationship to the struggles and concerns of feminist theory. As feminist theorists attempt to theorize without any stability in any of the concepts they use, even the concept of 'women', they move quickly into an affinity with the non-universalization, and non-foundationalism of Demda's **work**.<sup>13</sup> The choice, increasingly, is to pursue only those studies which are extremely specific in their attention to the class composition, race, culture, location and sexual orientation of those who are studied. Increasingly, the emphasis adopted in feminist writing is to emphasize the differences between women's experience, rather than the similarities. This development marks an important transition in feminist thought, for which Demda's work initially appears to provide theoretical confirmation. His insistence on difference, and on the non-representability of differences, justifies a stance toward which feminism was-already moving. The **difficulty** for feminism of transposing that understanding of difference into collective struggle is not, however, a difficulty for which Demda's work, with its suspicion of collectivities, offers a solution.

Some of the appeal of Demda's work, then, for **Marxists** and feminists is the way in which his ideas intersect, at an intellectual level, with the theoretical dilemmas of Marxism and feminism. For feminists, his work offers a theorization of the treacherous problems of interpreting and representing difference. For Marxist theorists, the rejection of the structure vs. agency problematic can **come** as a relief to what seemed like an insurmountable impasse between different versions of theoretical foundations. In both cases, the acceptance of Derrida's ideas is facilitated by the sense that his work shares many of the ethical sensibilities of Marxism and feminism, in particular a resistance to all forms of domination and oppression.

### *Interpretation and Experience*

Although Demda's work can be understood as having a certain appeal, at the popular level, in its sensitivity to contemporary experience, and at the intellectual level, as a way of approaching feminist and Marxist problematics, the contradictions and limitations of his work confound any direct application of it to politics or to progressive political theory. The contradictions between progressive politics and Demdean philosophy emerge around several themes. These problems can be recognized in the

undertheorization of ethics in his work, in certain logical contradictions in his presentation of the 'truth' of 'differance', and in the implications of his theory for interpreting power. In each case, a serious difficulty in **Derrida's** work has to do with the distance that the notion of 'text' imposes on his analysis.

This difficulty **can** be witnessed first, for example, in his theorization of ethics. Despite Demda's apparent political alignment with the left (broadly understood) and with the oppressed generally, there is no clear motive to his analysis why this value system should be so. Instead, what we find is an analysis of the oppression that exists in philosophical dualisms (such as nature/culture, **reason/passion, subject/object, masculine/feminine**). In each case, according to the form of interpretation which has been predominant in Western culture and language, the lesser term in the dualism will succumb to the former. This is because Western thought has privileged those terms which offer the possibility of mastery of the world through interpretation and representation of the world in language. It was always in the 'lesser' term of the dualism that one could sense the chance for subversiveness, for escape from this desire for mastery, or the impossibility of it. Demda's inversion of the dualisms of philosophy, and his valorization of these lesser terms, is designed to restore **that knowledge** of the impossibility of mastery. And he demonstrates its undesirability as well in the movement toward 'totalitarianism' which is implicit in the privileging of those terms. There is, however, no reason why one side of a philosophical dualism should be celebrated over another; both of them can be deconstructed equally, to show how the existence of one is dependent upon the existence of the other, and to show that they are most dependent on the way in which meanings generally belong to a system of domination in language. The theory of deconstruction reveals how the lesser term of the dualism is repressed within the system; it brings the form of that repression to light. But no value belongs to that term. What deconstruction demonstrates is the necessity of both terms, and the inevitability of the privileging of the dominant term in all language and representation.

It is clear from this that the hierarchy of philosophical dualisms stays undisturbed despite deconstruction's revelation of the internal interdependency of its terms. What is obvious as well is that Demda's attention to texts, and to the functioning of texts, as the root of oppression, distances his work from the understanding of oppression beyond intellectual questions of interpretation. Oppression only appears as such, within his work, when it is a question of meanings, and interpretations which are denying other meanings, or which are being hidden themselves. There is no opportunity to evaluate interpretations or meanings, much less to condemn oppressive practices, other than through the limited operations of deconstruction. There is no place to understand oppression, other than as interpretive oppression.

The limitations placed on theorizing ethics are equally evident in the untangling of Derrida's theorization of the truth of 'différance'. Under the process of deconstruction, Derrida demonstrates how all texts reveal their participation in 'the metaphysics of presence' (i.e. in the unfounded assumption that language is complete and adequate in the present with what it refers to). As a result, the meanings that come to light through deconstruction are not arbitrary or random; they are predetermined by a truth that deconstruction has discovered. Accordingly it seems that Derrida is advising that the workings of 'différance' should be **understood**, recognized, valued, because they contain a certain accuracy about the world. What **Derrida** appears to be doing, in this case, is not dismissing all logic and rationality (as he is sometimes purported to do), but registering an alternative form of rationality and logic. What is curious is that in many ways, this logic of Derrida's (the 'logic of the supplement' or the 'logic of deconstruction') parallels the 'metaphysical logic of presence' which it is supposed to **replace**.<sup>14</sup> What is the logic of deconstruction if not Derrida's own attempt to get through to some sort of truth behind meaning, albeit a truth that declares the near impossibility of accuracy of meaning? When Derrida indicates that our interpretation of the world requires that we suspend belief in our interpretations to some degree, and that in doing so we should attend to the play of language, the differences that emerge and tend to be suppressed in our attention to objects, the contingency and arbitrariness of all our attempts at meaning – what is this if not some reference to some real correspondence between thought (his thought) and its objects (the real relationship we have to the world).

Several features of this logic are clearly troubling, to put it mildly. First, there is the issue of its own dissemblance. If deconstruction is a logic which depends upon some correspondence with reality, then how can it account for its own self-presence, or immediacy, while renouncing the possibility of either? And if it does accept that at some level it constitutes a reflection of the world which is primary and determinate, then surely it would have to concede that the same logic (the metaphysics of presence) which it denounces would also have to be capable of acknowledging this foundation, or even ultimately arriving at this realization itself.

Secondly, there is the problem of the theory's inability to move outside of itself. Deconstruction, discovered, appears to be stuck at rediscovering itself. Despite Derrida's insistence on the importance of a lack of closure, his work reiterates the same general ideas, no matter which texts it explores. The revelation of the truths buried in the text, and the repetitive undermining of each text's self-assurance of presence amounts to the discovery and elaboration of a system whose logic does appear closed.

A third difficulty in accepting this logic as a political logic arises from its tendency to leave the existing system in place. The radical nature of

dewnstruction seems very quietistic when one realizes that the political impulse **within** it dictates only the practice of **deconstructing** texts. And in that dewnstruction, discrimination among or **between** texts (except concerning the degree to which they reflect the 'logic of the supplement') appears impossible.

If texts are understood to be interpretations of reality, Demda's theory makes it clear that every text which claims an interpretation, is in fact a misinterpretation of reality. There is an irony involved here. **Derrida's** claim is that reality can only be misinterpreted, and the particular ways in which it is misinterpreted constitute a form of totalitarianism. Specifically, a misinterpretation which claims not to be, which claims to be a true and complete representation of reality, is a form of totalitarian belief. And additionally, a misinterpretation which claims only to be a partial explanation of reality, and which, in doing so, participates in the movement toward a total explanation (historically, structurally, etc.) would also participate in totalitarian politics. Only a misinterpretation which claims its status as such, and which considers itself to be (or knows itself to be) creative of reality could be anti-totalitarian. (This willing, conscious misinterpretation would be one way to account for Demda's portrayal of his own work.) But the creative aspect of interpretation, in this case, would not involve control or predictability. The interpretation deconstruction offers of reality (or more logically, the specific misinterpretation it provides – since accurate interpretation has been declared impossible) could be anti-totalitarian only in the sense that it understood itself to be excessive to, and extensive beyond reality, and without any intentional or predictable control over reality. And the irony is that if only this form of 'misrepresentation', and non-deliberative dissemination of texts is anti-totalitarian, then all that practically separates this form of misrepresentation from previous ones is one's consciousness of it, since the theory predetermines that both will be misrepresentations, and both will produce effects over which they can have no intentional control. Politics, it appears in this analysis, could **occur** only in the mind. And to intend anti-totalitarianism is never necessarily to produce it.

This irony is a direct result of the reduction of all experience to texts, and therefore of all political theory to interpretations of texts, or better put, interpretations of interpretations. Truth is withheld by **Derrida** and reserved for those who speak from a specific vantage point, which allows them temporarily to step outside the representational system and view both its roots and its downfall in the originary condition of 'difference'. Moreover, the truthfulness of any interpretation is separated from experience. Experience is reduced completely to interpretation, such that there is then no basis why any interpretation would be believed over any other. The accuracy or truthfulness of various interpretations of experience can never be measured, since experience itself is not permitted in a theory which exclusively concerns itself with texts.

These considerations of the problems with **Derrida's** theory of ethics and his theory of the truth (of the originary condition of 'differance' and its necessary distortion in language and representation) make it evident that both theories have implications for his theory of power. It should be clear in a political reading of Demda that truth (if truth is 'differance') is continually undone by power. Power is on the side of deception. Meaning is meaningful only within the belief in the 'presence' of meaning. Therefore, all intentional practices, and the exercise of power on the basis of certain understandings of the world, with a view to changing it, must always participate in the construction of, and desire for, 'totality'. Language and practice which retain faith in the possibility of interpretation are always, according to this theory, totalitarian. This view of power is not only profoundly negative, but it also suffers from an inability (paralleling the difficulties with his views of truth and ethics) to distinguish between one form of exercise of power and another. The exercise of power which would meaningfully desire to create a society of equality and freedom is as subject to **deconstructive** criticism as the most restrictive military state. In the theorization of power, the problem again appears to be that Demda's interpretation is limited to the interpretation of other interpretations, and we are caught in a circle of texts.

### Interpretive Challenges

From the preceding discussion, it should be apparent that Demda's work does not, in fact, provide the solutions which are required for the theoretical dilemmas raised in Marxist and feminist thought. What an examination of his work does do (and this is where it may be politically valuable to pay attention to it) is introduce further challenges to our theorization and interpretation of reality.

One challenge that Demda offers is a call for a reinterpretation of our understanding of texts. His extension of the notion of texts to the point where they are coextensive with all experience is clearly flawed. Taken to this extreme, the analysis of texts loses all contact with reality, except some originary reality of the relationship of language to the world. Yet his work does serve to draw attention to the importance of the interpretive moment in all experience. It raises questions concerning the reasons why some interpretations or meanings do have more resonance than others, and it suggests the necessity of investigating areas which **Derrida** leaves untouched, such as areas where interpretations are nebulous and changing, where their political effects in practical terms are made clear, or areas where force supersedes interpretation. Answering this challenge requires introducing again the sticky questions of ideology, and inquiring into social relations and institutions. In order to discover the relationship between interpretation and reality, more than 'texts' are needed; one

must attempt to evaluate interpretations of reality based on what they reveal and conceal, what they put into effect, and what they inhibit. To accomplish this, what may in fact be required is a criticism of the **structure/agency** debate in Marxism, and the attempt to move toward some of the directions taken by feminist theorists, that is, theorizing with a sensitivity to a higher degree of contextualization, the necessity of relating and linking different forms of ideological mystification, and types of oppression, and a general caution against the effectiveness of any grand theory, such as **Marx's** theory of capital, in adequately interpreting specific historical circumstances. What this means for Marxists is that the foundational character of the 'economic' realm, and the corollary privileging of the category of 'class' in political analyses, must be continually drawn into question as a sufficient programme for useful political interpretation.

Another challenge, therefore, must be for Marxists and feminists to restate the relationship between power, **truth** and ethics. In Demda's writing, truth is aligned with ethics, but in such a way that the powerlessness of the ethical position is assured. The need to understand power, and understand the empowerment that is possible in a truthful interpretation of reality, offers a particular challenge in present political circumstances to feminist theorists, in our attention to real differences among women and the necessity for a common struggle which does not deface those differences.

Finally, **Derrida's** work presents a challenge to interpret popular experience in an empowering way. One problem with most of Marxist theory of ideology is that it tended to deny, either by attributing it to 'false consciousness', or by the 'non-scientific, ideologically interpellated' consciousness that structuralism identified, the validity of most people's experience of their lives. Feminism, also, has been accused of this in its interpretation of women's reality, based on a very limited understanding of what most women experience. Ironically, postmodern thought with its denial that experience is anything but metaphysical, and with its denial that there is experience that is separate from interpretation, has directed more attention to those experiences, even while denying that that was its intent. It may be that Demda, for all of his denial of experience, has expressed most eloquently the general sense of futility and despair about the possibility for good social change. Specifically, his theory may be felt to be most accurate in its interpretation of the relationship between power and ethics; people experience that what is right is also relatively powerless. What is frightening in his depiction of the experience of futility is his confirmation of it, his portrayal of powerlessness as a truthful account of the human condition, rather than as contingent to particular historical and alterable circumstances. Part of the challenge of Derrida's work, then, is to reinterpret these experiences of reality

in order to give more space for, and more sensitivity to people's real sense of powerlessness. Can we find a way to transform that understanding into one which is empowering? That is the real challenge for Marxists and feminists today.

## NOTES

1. See for example Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Speculations on Reading Marx' in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington and Robert Young, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 35.
2. One of Demda's references to himself as a Marxist can be found in James Kearns and Ken Newton 'An Interview with Jacques Demda', *The Literary Review*, 14 (18 April - 1 May 1980), p. 22.  
'Though I am not and have never been an orthodox marxist, I am very disturbed by the antimarxism dominant now in France so that, as a reaction, through political reflection and personal preference, I am inclined to consider myself more marxist than I would have done at a time when Marxism was a sort of fortress.'
3. A useful summary of the debates concerning ideology in Marxism can be found in Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, London: Hutchinson and Co., 1979.
4. For an introduction to these debates, see Hazel Carby, 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Feminism', *The Empire Strikes Back*, Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982; Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' *Feminist Review*, 17, Autumn 1984; Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', *Feminist Review*, no. 20, Summer 1985, pp. 23-47; Carolyn Ramazanoglu et al. 'Feedback: Feminism and Racism - Responses to Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh', *Feminist Review*, 22, Spring 1986; Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, 'Transforming Socialist Feminism: The Challenge of Racism', *Feminist Review*, 23, Summer 1986; and Jane Lewis, 'The Debate on Sex and Class', *New Left Review*, No. 149, Jan.-Feb. 1985, pp. 108-124.
5. For an example of these arguments, see Michele Barrett, 'Introduction to the 1988 Edition', *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter (Revised)*, London: Verso, 1988.
6. See Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davies, 'Contextualizing Feminism - Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions', *Feminist Review*, No. 15, Winter 1983, pp. 62-75; and Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, New York: Long Haul Press, 1984.
7. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, London: Methuen Press, 1987; Meaghan Moms, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, London: Verso, 1988; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Oxford, 1987; Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation*, Maryland and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982; Derek Attridge et al. (ed.) *Poststructuralism and the Question of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; Linda J. Nicholson, (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
8. For a close formulation of 'difference', see 'Difference', *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 1-27.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

10. Jacques Demda, 'Living **On/Border** Lines', *Deconstruction and Criticism*, New York: **Seabury** Press, 1979, pp. 83-84.
- 'What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text', of what I still call a 'text', for strategic reasons, in part - a 'text' that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some **content** enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.'
11. Jacques Demda, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: **Athlone** Press, 1981, and *Of Grammatology*, trans. **Gayatri Chakravorty** Spivak, Baltimore: Johns **Hopkins** University Press, 1976.
12. See Jaques **Derrida**, 'Force and Signification' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
13. See Spivak, **Weedon**, Morris, op. cit.
14. Demda discusses the 'logic of the supplement' in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: **Routledge** and **Kegan Paul**, 1978, pp. 278-293.