

## Deconstruction, Critique, and Praxis: Towards a New Culture of Politics

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In the mid-twentieth century, continental modernist philosophy came under attack: underlying assumptions that the 'truths' inherent in totalizing, essentialist, and foundational concepts were absolute, stable, and unproblematic were challenged, as were the humanist concepts of man that had been developed by the Enlightenment and idealist philosophy. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida argued that subjects are culturally and discursively structured, and that they are created through their interaction as situated, symbolic entities. As such, instead of being absolute, reality is fractured, diverse, and culturally specific. In addition, these thinkers argued that we live in a linguistic universe in which discourse governs our knowledge, which in turn makes reality into only a mediated form. Thus, language, discourse, and ideology structure our sense of being and meaning.

Poststructuralist theory, based primarily on the work of Jacques Derrida, directs us towards a (re)reading of philosophical texts as deconstructions that point to the historical and cultural process in which they are rooted, and to the institutions and conventions of writing in which they are contained. As such, deconstruction has been instrumental in showing that thinking, and Western thought in particular, is not as controlled or certain as many would like to believe, and that knowledge is always elusive. In articulating this point, Derrida noted that "if there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to that extent that stability is not neutral, essential, or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as a method of critique, deconstruction provides a way of bringing scholarship beyond traditional ways of thinking.

It should also be understood that while deconstruction allows for other forms of knowledge, it also creates a disjunction between critique and practice. This disjunction takes the form of the political relevance that deconstruction creates within praxis, but which is either omitted or discounted in traditional thinking as completely impractical because it represents neither a technique nor method that can be applied as such. In this way, deconstruction offers a political space where the inter-sectionality of ideas and practices shapes the way we think, and where new and radical philosophical positioning can help to move us away from merely empirical claims about 'truth' to an understanding of how knowledge can be practically applied to relevant social contexts.

In this issue of In-Spire, we move beyond critique and deconstruction and towards a realm of praxis that attempts to realize how easy it is to slip from critique to norm. A review of Howard Felperin's book, *Beyond Deconstruction*, offers a starting point by looking at developments in contemporary literary theory. Felperin offers a survey of developments in critical literary thinking that attempt new and practical criticisms, or which go 'beyond deconstruction' to a balanced and lively enquiry dispossessed of technicalities. In his view, this leads to the emergence of a new culture of politics which applies new ways of defining the world as not merely post-modern, but also culturally and discursively determined. The remaining articles in this issue, while they may at first appear disassociated by topic and analysis, in fact approach deconstruction from their own distinct perspective but with an eye

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<sup>1</sup> Hall, 2007

toward practice political applications. This too is offered as a challenge to the reader to see conjunctions as well as disjunctions in deconstructed spaces.

The first featured article, which is offered by Jon B. Adams and titled “Regional Dispute Systems Design: Challenges and Potentials”, rethinks how regional dispute resolutions function as systems. Here, Adams argues that structural design and cultural needs must be seen as working together in a manner that acts to destabilize the hierarchical conditions through which dispute resolution systems are designed. Adams calls for a new way of thinking about regional dispute resolution that allows for the inter-sectionality of culture and identities. This, he argues, is a horizontal process where culture and identity interact in particular ways to allow for flexible and creative solutions. While he acknowledges that there are always difficulties associated with dispute resolution models, Adams suggests that horizontal relationships between design and culture allow for the process to break away from the dominant ideologies that surrounds it in an effort to fashion more inherently stable and practical solutions. Implicitly, this leaves Adams outside of traditional Western thinking about these processes that assumes that they are static and determined by institutional design.

The second featured article, authored by Ewa Chomicka and titled “In Search of ‘Anthropological Concreteness’ Individual Narratives in the Context of Anthropological and Literary Relationships”, explores anomalous anthropological writings, and considers how in the process of writing anthropologists and their subjects break away from a scientific writing model and its traditional textual form. This is what Chomicka identifies as making the ‘anthropological concrete’, which derives from a cultural narration wherein narrative practices are interpreted and ‘subjectivized’. This provides two very important insights: that literary work is a dialogical project, as well as a way of bringing fractured identities into the intelligible world, and that as a dialogical project anthropological writing needs to be aware of the creative nature of the dialogue between the researcher and subject. Thus, during the process of researching the researcher grafts meaning onto what they’ve discovered and bring them to their writing. Conversely, subjects will discuss certain things that they feel are either relevant, or will leave out things they think to be irrelevant (whether this is the case or not), or will recount what it is they think the researcher wants to hear. Additionally, modes of information that appear to be inconsistent with traditional methodologies, such as question and answer or interview techniques, should be considered as valid ways of gaining insight into the discourses that are at work in forming the subject - here one might think of jokes, letters, and gossip as ways of relaying information to the researcher. Chomicka also demonstrates that by understanding identity as something fractured, an anthropologist can through their writing make identity intelligible without forcing it into a pre-determined mould that is based solely based on essentialist characteristics that serve as absolute identifiers. This offers the reader an insight into the world of the researcher and an opportunity for continuing human interaction, with identity understood as a work-in-progress and a characteristic with multiple faces defined by individuals as individuals and by communities within communities.

The third featured article, authored by Oishik Sircar and titled “The Marginality of Liminality: Fragmented Notes on Sexualizing University Spaces”, defines what an “open space” is. Using the concept both literally and metaphorically, he argues that people create, destruct and re-create in “open space”, which is a liminal space and concept located as an “in-between”, “indeterminate” and “transient” process. Sircar explains how open spaces are sexualised by analysing the context of sexuality and sexual practice in university institutions, and how this creates opening and closing of space in a process of creating “sanctioned space”, as it occurred in his workshops with university students in India, where he found that all spaces are inherently sexualized, gendered, classed casteised and abled. The workshops

themselves were spaces where sexual hierarchy was re-discovered, which he describes as “hierarchisation”, when society is confused by sexual identity and sexual behaviour. Students in the workshops were challenged to rethink their own positions about sexual behaviour and identities, and open space reached its liminal potential when students confronted their own discomfort with sexuality. This forced them to re-think their own approach, and as Sircar concludes, allowed the open, sexualised, liminal space to challenge their mental hierarchies. As a general conclusion, Sircar’s article shows us the tensions in the society with the urge to move beyond deconstruction.

The issue concludes with an interview by In-Spire ethics editor Rebecca Shah with activist Emma Dowling, who was a participant in the World Social Forum (WSF) in 2006. WSF regards itself as an open space where global civil society groups can discuss important issues of the day, using the motto “Another World is Possible”, with the assumption that WSF is a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan organisation. As such, it parallels deconstruction by declaring itself to be an open space where the nature of the world order can be clarified and move beyond protesting. The purpose of the interview is to explore the difficulties inherent in creating open space without falling into the trap of moving towards the structures that excludes participation, and reflects the tension that develops within the attempt to move beyond deconstruction.

Deconstruction highlights a diverse and culturally specific fractured reality. This helps us to rediscover certain facets of history and to re-examine our almost forgotten philosophical tradition by allowing thought to move past the conformity of the structures of traditional metaphysical thought. “Beyond deconstruction” offers a balanced and lively overview that steers clear of technicalities as it explains and explores the ways in which discoveries made through deconstruction are linked to practice in the contemporary world. As the articles featured in this issue will endeavour to show, if we look beyond deconstruction and towards the realm of practice, what we find is the emergence of a new form of praxis. This new praxis is seen in regional dispute resolutions that follow horizontal processes through which culture and identity interact in particular ways to allow for flexible and creative solutions to disputes; It can be seen in the process of anthropological writing that breaks away from a scientific writing model and its traditional textual form; It can be seen in the acknowledgment of liminal space through the process of creating, destructing and re-creating open space and using that space to challenge everyday norms and perceptions, or; it can parallel deconstruction by declaring itself as an open space where the nature of the world order can be clarified and a movement beyond protest can be made. Finally, beyond deconstruction can take the form of something like the World Social Forum, which attempts to act as an open space where global civil society groups can discuss important issues of the day. By using the motto “Another World is Possible”, coupled with the assumption that WSF is a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan organisation, WSF parallels deconstruction by declaring itself to be an open space, which as we will see, displays its own problems and difficulties in the attempt to manage such a space.

## **Bibliography**

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