Post-Marxism Versus Cultural Studies
Being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world.

Jacques Derrida,
*Of Grammatology* (1974: 63)
On the day of [The Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University’s] opening, we received letters from the English department saying that they couldn’t really welcome us; they knew we were there, but they hoped we’d keep out of their way while they got on with the work they had to do. We received another, rather sharper letter from the sociologists saying, in effect, ‘. . . we hope you don’t think you’re doing sociology, because that’s not what you’re doing at all’.

(Stuart Hall 1990: 13)

Introduction: Of Deconstruction into Politics

Post-Marxism and cultural studies both explicitly engage with and take on the question of the political, of political engagement, and of ethical, political and university responsibility. Both are interested in intervention. But their relationship is far from simple, and the intellectual and political costs of ignoring its complexity are high. This chapter will explain why. First, let us examine the usual view. In this, the importance of post-Marxist political theory for cultural studies is regularly affirmed (Morley and Chen 1996: 1–2; Hall 1996c: 40; Sparks 1996: 90–5; Daryl Slack 1996: 117–22). Rarely has anything like the reverse been suggested. However, the need for just such a revaluation, or inversion and subsequent displacement of this schema is great. The usual interpretation of the relationship between cultural studies and post-Marxism is regularly conveyed in works of or about cultural studies (it is rarely mentioned or acknowledged within post-Marxist scholarship), and it has several often problematic but nonetheless important dimensions. Jeremy Gilbert clarifies these, by noting firstly that:
During the 1990s a number of essays by key figures speculated as to the desirability of explicitly designating ‘post-Marxism’ as a theoretical paradigm for ‘cultural studies’. It might well be argued that this was always an unnecessary move, that both the de facto post-Marxism of Stuart Hall, along with all of those for whom ‘cultural studies’ only ever came into existence as a critique of Marxist economism, and the (closely-related) official ‘post-Marxism’ of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe had been so thoroughly absorbed by the mainstream of cultural studies that there was little point in bothering to formulate this position in any more explicit or elaborate fashion. (Gilbert 2001: 189)

Gilbert acknowledges the historical, intellectual and political scope of the influence of Marxist theory for ('new') left wing political thinking in general, and cultural studies in particular. The implicit impetus to and logic of the constitution of both cultural studies and post-Marxism in this account is that they both come as a response to perceived problems in Marxist economic reductionism and Althusserian structuralism. According to Jennifer Daryl Slack, both cultural studies and post-Marxism amounted to the ‘struggle to substitute the reduction that didn’t work’ – namely Marxist economic reductionism and structuralist theory’s reductionism – ‘with . . . something’. The problem with theories saturated in economic or structuralist determinism is that they are fatalistic or even anti-political in that they determine in advance that individuals, groups, agents, and indeed culture and politics in their entirety are epiphenomenal and in consequential. This, says Daryl Slack,

pointed to the need to retheorize processes of determination. The work of cultural theorists in the 1970s and early 1980s, especially the work of Stuart Hall, opened up that space by drawing attention to what reductionist conceptions rendered inexplicable. It is as though a theoretical lacuna develops, a space struggling to be filled . . . In theorizing this space, a number of Marxist theorists are drawn on: most notably Althusser (who drew on Gramsci and Marx), Gramsci (who drew on Marx) and, of course, Marx. Its principal architects have been Laclau and Hall. (Daryl Slack 1996: 117)

Daryl Slack finds it remarkable that ‘in spite of the importance of Laclau’s formulations, he has been excluded – as has Mouffe – from most of the popular histories of cultural studies’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 120–1). This work will consider more fully this aspect of the peculiar relation of post-Marxism to cultural studies, and Daryl Slack’s diagnosis of it, in the following chapter. But what is first to be emphasised
here is the importance of the post-Marxist theory of Laclau and Mouffe for cultural studies. Morley and Chen, for instance, begin their ‘Introduction’ to Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies by reminding us that ‘back in the mid-1980s, as an alternative to formalist and positivist paradigms in the humanities and social sciences, British cultural studies, and Stuart Hall’s work in particular, began to make an impact across national borders, especially in the American academy’ (Morley and Chen 1996: 1). Immediately after making this contextualising point, the very first point that they mention – the very first book, the very first problematic, and the very first orientating discussion within cultural studies – is Stuart Hall’s discussion of Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘seminal book, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (a key statement of postmodern political theory)’ (1). They conclude: ‘When we look at it retrospectively’, this engagement ‘can be seen as a starting-point’ (2), a constitutive cultural studies engagement with the ‘postmodern’ political theory of post-Marxism. However, and quite problematically, Morley and Chen are prepared to deem this encounter something ‘from which cultural studies moved on, through another round of configuration’ (2). But Stuart Hall himself is not prepared to do this. For him, the problematic established by this encounter with post-Marxist political theory is constitutive, and hence ineradicable. Indeed, Morley and Chen also deem Laclau and Mouffe’s theory to be ‘seminal’, like Stuart Hall. But Hall insists on the need to maintain fidelity and reference to this ‘starting-point’, arguing:

one cannot ignore Laclau and Mouffe’s seminal work on the constitution of political subjects and their deconstruction of the notion that political subjectivities [were hitherto thought to] flow from the integrated ego, which is also the integrated speaker, the stable subject of enunciation. The discursive metaphor [central to post-Marxist theory] is thus extraordinarily rich and has massive political consequences. For instance, it allows cultural theorists to realize that what we call ‘the self’ is constituted out of and by difference, and remains contradictory, and that cultural forms are, similarly, in that way, never whole, never fully closed or ‘sutured’. (Hall 1996d: 145)

Hall even declares, ‘if I had to put my finger on the one thing which constitutes the theoretical revolution of our time, I think that it lies in that metaphor’ (145): the metaphor of ‘discourse’. This work will keep returning to different dimensions of the possibilities, problems and problematics that ‘the discursive metaphor’ introduces for cultural
and political studies. But at this stage what is important to note is that, for Hall, something that is seminal, generative, or constitutive – a starting-point – is not something from which one can simply move on. For Stuart Hall, then, the question of the political, of intervention and responsibility that comes to light in the cultural studies engagement or encounter with post-Marxism is not something that will – or should be permitted to – simply go away. This is why, after some qualifications and caveats, Hall maintains that he remains ‘a post-Marxist and a post-structuralist, because those are the two discourses I feel most constantly engaged with. They are central to my formation and I don’t believe in the endless, trendy recycling of one fashionable theorist after another, as if you can wear new theories like T-shirts’ (Hall 1996d: 148–9). The problematic of post-Marxism is in fact central to cultural studies.

Before delving deeper into post-Marxism ‘proper’ or the constitutive encounter of cultural studies with it, though, it might reasonably be asked: never mind post-Marxism, what’s the problem with Marxism? Furthermore: if Marxism is or was such a problem, then why maintain any reference to it at all? As has already been seen, one prime problem with Marxism relates to reductionism in its theory of determination. In other words, in Marxism, the determination of more or less everything is related to something ‘essential’ about classes and the economy, viewed as a closed system (Daly 2002). For both Hall and Laclau, among others, class essentialism and economism are unsatisfactory simplifications that cannot explain everything, and that are, accordingly, suspect. Nevertheless, their quests to re-theorise processes of determination more adequately are therefore marked by and hence retain a constitutive reference to Marxism. According to Hall, it was Laclau’s rethinking of Marxism that offered a way out of Marxian dead-ends: ‘Laclau’, he argued, ‘has demonstrated definitively the untenable nature of the proposition that classes, as such, are the subjects of fixed and ascribed class ideologies’ (Hall 1996c: 40). Colin Sparks explains that ‘Hall’s road away from Marx lay through the writing of Laclau . . . Laclau provided a significant weakening of the rigours of the Althusserian version of Marxism “from within”’. The important feature here, according to Sparks, is that ‘Laclau was concerned to produce a “non-reductive” theory of ideology and the mechanisms by which it functioned in society’ (Sparks 1996: 89). So, by ‘adopting the formulations of Laclau’, Sparks concludes, ‘it became possible’ for Stuart Hall and cultural studies ‘to give equal weight to each of the members of the “holy trinity” of race, class and gender’
Indeed for Angela McRobbie, the post-Marxist theory of Laclau and Mouffe therefore actually provided ‘the theoretical underpinning for what has already happened in cultural studies’ (McRobbie 1992: 720). This is an observation that Jeremy Gilbert proposes ‘could actually be taken further’, to suggest that post-Marxism’s theorisation of discourse and ‘radical democracy is a theoretical formulation of the already-emergent practice of many diverse new forms of political/social/cultural practice’ (Gilbert 2001: 191).

Accordingly, the important status of post-Marxist theory for cultural studies may seem clear. This is what was termed earlier the ‘usual interpretation’ of the relationship between cultural studies and post-Marxism. Indeed, the validity of this is not something that this work will contest, in this obvious regard; for post-Marxist theory has been and remains indubitably important and enabling for cultural studies. However, the contention of this work is that this ‘importance’ is not straightforwardly unproblematic, nor is it straightforwardly ‘enabling’. This contention itself may hardly appear straightforward. But it can begin to be explained by noting that, as Gilbert observes, despite her celebration of Laclauian post-Marxism, nevertheless ‘what McRobbie is also looking for in Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism is an absence, a gap for cultural studies to fill, a work for it to do’ (Gilbert 2001: 191). In other words, that is, if post-Marxism is everything that cultural studies has deemed it to be – namely, a vital and vitalising paradigm for rethinking the political – then is it actually a ‘sublation’ of cultural studies? Now, ‘sublation’ is a Hegelian term, meaning to complete and surpass or supersede (Mowitt 2003: 175–88). So, to sublate something is not simply to affirm it. It is also a double-handed or double-dealing change. For, if cultural studies has been completed and thereby surpassed by post-Marxism, then what place is left for cultural studies? Where is there ‘a gap for cultural studies to fill, a work for it to do’? If post-Marxism is said to vindicate, justify, and (however retroactively) ‘underpin’ cultural studies, it also thereby trumps cultural studies, and usurps or obviates its role and position. So, one important set of questions is: Is cultural studies ultimately just more or less the same as post-Marxism? Should everyone involved in cultural studies simply ‘do’ post-Marxism? Is the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe in fact ‘better’ cultural studies than cultural studies? Does this post-Marxism provide a better way to do cultural studies than any other possible paradigm?

The Stuart Hall kind of answer would be: both yes and no (but
ultimately no). Hall’s specific problems with and relationship to post-Marxism will be examined in due course. But, it should be affirmed from the outset that what is most important in examining this debate is not simply to arrive at a decision about whether to prefer post-Marxism or cultural studies, but rather to explore the question of the political consequences of these – and of all – academic intellectual efforts. This refers us back to the importance of the Derridean injunction introduced in the Preface, to attend to the ‘political implication’ of institutional/intellectual ‘paradigms’, with which we began (Derrida 1992). In cultural studies, this problematic takes the form of theoretico-practical questions of political intervention: questions about how to intervene, and into what; questions about what political intervention is; questions about what and in what way academic work should and could intervene, etc. (Hall 2002). In deconstruction and broadly ‘Continental Philosophy’-informed work, these are formulated as questions of ‘responsibility’; and for Derrida, as also introduced in the Preface, as questions of ‘university responsibility’ in particular. However it is formulated, this problematic is crucial for cultural studies, because it is arguably the very question of how to do cultural studies, if anything like ‘responsible intervention’ is indeed an ambition.

This problematic immediately opens onto such questions as those of what cultural studies is meant to be and do, and on what justification – what it is meant to be for and how to establish the rectitude, validity and legitimacy of this or that answer. Of course, there is a logical or epistemological problem, an anachronism or tautology discerned, of inevitably relying on opinions already held in order to arrive at desired or expected conclusions – what might be termed ‘ex post facto rationalisation’ or retroactively ‘positing the presupposition’. Yet it nevertheless seems important to establish what cultural studies is supposed to be doing before it could be possible to determine what kind of paradigm or orientation it should adopt, even though such a verdict will have been arrived at by way of an already adopted paradigm and orientation. This is to acknowledge the disjointedness introduced into rationales by the inevitability of an ‘originary’ and ongoing bias. The problematic tautology or anachronism at play, Derrida (1977) calls the skewing work of the ‘nonconceptual order’ upon which concepts and preferences are established. Jeremy Gilbert puts it rather more bluntly: ‘everyone has a theory, they just don’t always know what it is’ (2003: 151). This is the same as saying that the determination of the point and purpose of anything is always-already
arrived at under the sway of a particular interpretive paradigm. Paradigms are what guide and perhaps even determine interpretations, values, the formulation of questions and the establishment of answers. Indeed, ultimately the paradigm adopted actually determines in advance the answer to the question of what ‘activity’ and ‘orientation’ are, could and should be. In other words, the problem is that every paradigm, insofar as it offers a different worldview from other paradigms, entails different conceptions of what is analytically relevant, a different model of causality and relation, and a different understanding of the status and effects of particular events, phenomena, institutions and activities (and indeed different understandings of what events, phenomena, institutions, and activities are). Constrained like this, there is clearly nothing outside of the paradigm; and each one – however conscious or unconscious of it one may be – always-already implies its own answers to the question of which activities, projects and orientations are ‘proper’, ‘right’ and ‘best’.

This problematic will not go away, and will inform Chapters 2 and 3. At this murky, opaque and indecisive moment, with the what, why and how questions of cultural studies clearly foregrounded, a consideration of the post-Marxist paradigm ought to be undertaken, not to sidestep the problematic of the paradigm of cultural studies, but actually to deepen it. For, when it comes to post-Marxist theory, one key question for cultural studies is: If post-Marxism were to be a – or the – paradigm of cultural studies, then what orientations, protocols, aims and objects would it oblige cultural studies to adopt? (Mowitt 1992) Post-Marxist political theory is a paradigm of and for analysis, and analysis that extends to embrace the cultural. But is it the paradigm of cultural studies? How can and should one adjudicate? This book is preoccupied with these questions, and with their ‘political implications’.

The following section clarifies the strong sense in which, and the compelling reasons why, Laclauian post-Marxist discourse analysis can be construed as a vital paradigm of cultural analysis, and why it has rightly been extremely influential within cultural studies. Its ‘influence’, as has already been indicated, extends from the explicit adoption of post-Marxist language, concepts, categories and frameworks by Stuart Hall from the 1980s onwards, to the contemporary proliferation of works not always but often called cultural studies, works that are increasingly carried out precisely as ‘discourse analyses’ and which are clearly extremely indebted to post-Marxist discourse theory. Indeed, the influence of post-Marxism as a paradigm
of cultural studies (and beyond) is extensive, and growing. And as this work will argue, it will always be extremely valuable for cultural studies. But this influence is not without its limitations, problems, or indeed its political implications.

To return to the Derridean question of the ‘political implication’, a crucial argument has been offered by John Mowitt (1992). Mowitt proposes that one key problem is that the concept of ‘discourse’ as used by post-Marxism tends to assume that ‘discourse designates how a particular type of phenomena presents itself such that it can become the focus of cultural studies’ (Mowitt 1992: 16–17). What Mowitt alerts us to here is a problematic that relates to that of ‘representation’, central both to and beyond cultural studies and post-Marxism, regarding the establishment of knowledge. Mowitt cautions against the making of any assumption that ‘phenomena’ ever as if naturally or neutrally ‘present themselves’ to the scholarly gaze. Indeed, he argues, things are never so simple. Accordingly, Mowitt’s concern is with the orientating role that paradigms play in establishing not only what we think we ‘know’, but also with ‘the way cultural research is designed, legitimated, and conducted’ (16) in light of this. This is a direct political implication of the work of paradigms. The political implications extend deeper and further than this. But for Mowitt, they all hinge on the institutional context of the establishment of knowledge. His worry is that the post-Marxist discourse paradigm actually occludes certain crucial dimensions of the problematics and political significance of academic intellectual practices, and their ability to think and to work towards or as ‘intervention’. For Mowitt, what is crucial for all politicised intellectual activity is to maintain a vigilant attention to the matter of the role that all institutions, including academic institutional contexts, play within what post-Marxism calls ‘discourse’ and ‘hegemony’. Such an institutional focus, which Mowitt is far from alone in seeing as being central to cultural studies – a focus that needs to be explicitly maintained and developed within cultural studies – is, he argues, distinctly lacking in post-Marxism. In terms of this argument, then, it is post-Marxism that would seem to have a lot to learn from cultural studies.

Now, if both cultural studies and post-Marxism share the ‘political’ problematic – as it were, sharing ‘Gramsci’, and sharing the concern for a non-reductive understanding of ‘ideology’ and a more complex grasp of cultural-political determination – then the relationship between the work of Hall and Laclau constitutes an important index of the relationship between cultural studies and post-Marxism in terms
of the question of intellectual orientation and of the political. As has already been indicated, the influence that Laclau’s work had on Stuart Hall, and the once central – and still strong – influence of Hall’s work on cultural studies, is considerable (Morley and Chen 1996). Thus, considerations of the work of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau and other key figures from cultural studies and post-Marxism will structure this work in terms of the question of responsible academico-political engagement, insofar as they can be taken to represent exemplary positions within and around which many problematics cluster and condense. Yet this work is not primarily ‘about’ Hall or Laclau, or indeed any named thinker. It is rather about the question of establishing responsible academico-political engagement or intervention, or indeed university responsibility. This is taken to be the key problematic of cultural studies. However, because the post-Marxist paradigm has already been introduced as being at once highly influential and somewhat challenging, both enabling and problematic, both to cultural studies and to the Marxism that was once so central to them both, it should now be established more fully what is meant by ‘post-Marxism’, what it is and does. The problems to be discerned within the post-Marxist paradigm will serve to enable a fuller consideration and clarification of what is to be understood by ‘cultural studies’, what it is and does; their relationship, and the importance of the problematic that their differences point to, not merely for them both but for all thinking of the cultural, the political, and the questions of responsibility and political intervention.

It is helpful to remember that, very much like Laclau (1999; 2000), Stuart Hall maintains that he is ‘‘post-Marxist” only in the sense that I recognize the necessity to move beyond orthodox Marxism, beyond the notion of Marxism guaranteed by the laws of history. But I still operate somewhere within what I understand to be the discursive limits of a Marxist position. And I feel the same way about structuralism’ (Hall 1996d: 148). It is helpful to remember this because one crucial relation between cultural studies and post-Marxism can be found in their respective post-Gramscian engagements with questions of politics, hegemony and ‘culture’, or ‘ideology’. What will come to be significant here relates to two key differences in the orientations of cultural studies and post-Marxism in the face of these questions. Where they are most different is, first, on the question of ‘culture’, which is deconstructed in cultural studies yet barely mentioned in post-Marxism; and second, on the question of ‘politics’, which is theorised rigorously in post-Marxism and is adopted – with reserva-
tions – by cultural studies. As will be explored below, post-Marxism works with a straightforward model of political causality and refers to normal (macro-)political phenomena ‘out there’. Cultural studies work often proceeds in this manner, too (something that is problematic in itself); but cultural studies moves away from reductive Marxism by way of a detour through questions of culture. What is significant about this ‘detour’, though, is that however much it could be said to have been enabled or theoretically justified by Laclauian theory, it can also have the effect of problematising to the extent of weakening and jeopardising the normal post-Marxist notion of politics. Now, as will become important, this is most palpable and comes most to the fore in the different deployments of ‘deconstruction’ in cultural studies and post-Marxism, as well as the way that deconstruction has been mobilised in John Mowitt’s critique of the post-Marxist discourse paradigm to forward a different (‘textual’) paradigm for cultural studies. Indeed, as will also hopefully become clear, deconstruction is to be viewed as irreducibly cortical to both cultural studies and post-Marxism – and nowhere more importantly than in the thinking of responsibility and intervention. In other words, for post-Marxism and cultural studies, there is no getting away from deconstruction. Bearing this in mind, this work will explore the key features of the post-Marxist discourse paradigm and convey its importance for cultural studies, before introducing the problematics for cultural studies that it poses.

The Discourse of Post-Marxism

As post-Marxism is an explicitly political theory, it may come as a surprise to some to learn that the post-Marxist political theory of Laclau and Mouffe is perhaps more indebted to putatively literary theory, Continental philosophy, deconstruction and semiotics than to political theory ‘proper’. But it was actually by applying deconstructive, literary theoretical, psychoanalytic and semiotic concepts and techniques to the analysis of the political that Laclau and Mouffe developed their self-proclaimed ‘radical’ version of Marxist political theory, which found its first thoroughgoing articulation in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). This work carried out a methodical historical critique and deconstruction of ‘classical Marxism’ (1985: 3), enabling them to claim to identify why classical Marxist theory could not predict, account for, nor adequately explain the behaviour of political struggles and socio-political or economic classes. This failure,
becoming increasingly apparent throughout the twentieth century, represented a severe challenge to both the (rhetorico-) political force and the intellectual validity and viability of Marxism; challenging its credibility as a political position and as an academically plausible paradigm. Even though many, including Robert J. C. Young, have rejected the need to call such Marxist theory post-Marxism, by arguing that ‘after all, capitalism transforms itself often enough without becoming “post-capitalism” (and, it might be added, enough capitalist states have collapsed without it being subsequently assumed that this signals the end of capitalism)’ (Young 2001: 7), nevertheless the apparent inaccuracies of Marxian predictions about the world have initiated something of a ‘crisis’ within Marxism itself. Its predictive and even descriptive failures ran entirely contrary to the claims that Marxism could be the objective science of history (2).

So Laclau and Mouffe orientated their analysis by identifying a discrepancy between Marxism’s claims about the socio-political world, on the one hand, and the ‘reality’ or observable development of actual societies, on the other (122). For, as ‘objective science’, Marxism aimed to predict the course history must necessarily take, culminating in the revolution of a universal class. In the face of the failure of this prediction, Marxism could most readily survive by recourse to a rearticulation of the emphasis of its claims; by moving away from claiming to be the declarations of an objective science (of the order: ‘This will happen’), and changing to those of injunctions made in the name of an ethical programme (of the order: ‘This should (be made to) happen’) (Laclau 1996a: 66; Devenney 2004: 125). However, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985), any move which entails abandoning the idea of Marxism’s apodicticity (absolute indisputability), and sees Marxism as merely ethical, was simply unsatisfactory – intellectually and politically (Laclau 1996a: 66–7).

Although they would not disagree that Marxism entails an ethical dimension, especially regarding the primary question of justice (or any claim regarding justice), which they argue is always in some measure at the heart of democratic struggles (1985: 174), and ultimately all politics (Laclau 2005), their analysis does not remove itself from the matter of the mechanisms governing social and political ‘reality’. However, where classical Marxism concerned itself with ‘objective reality’, Laclau and Mouffe see objectivity itself as only one part of reality. So, as objectivity is only one part of a social totality, it is not coterminous or coextensive with ‘reality’ as such, and any analysis of the totality should not therefore concern itself with only that one part
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(1985: 111). Accordingly, their emphasis moves from the objectivity of that which exists, ‘is’, or has being or presence (Spivak 1974: xiv), and focuses instead upon the ‘logic’ of the socio-political. They do not ignore ‘the objective’ and ‘objectivity’, but focus more upon the ways that ‘objective reality’ actually gains that status of being – or what they term ‘the conditions of possibility of any objectivity’ (Laclau 1989: xiii). But this logic is neither commonsensical nor metaphysical; not, that is, organised by notions of simple ‘identity’, ‘presence’ and the law of non-contradiction (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 124). It is rather a deconstructive logic, intelligible most readily in terms of the Saussurean semiotic notion in which the identity of any sign (or, in Laclau and Mouffe, any entity at all) is constituted on the basis of defining and asserting itself in terms of that which it is not – that is, on the basis of difference. (In fact, it is rather to be understood in terms of the failure or limits of this model of structure, in the move taken by Derrida from thinking structures of difference to thinking in terms of the ultimate impossibility of ‘pure presence’, and hence the failure of any structure, or ‘différence’.)

Their overhaul of Marxist theory constitutes an attempt to ‘save’ the project of Marxism – or its object, socialism – from obsolescence, whilst not abandoning its telos, the hope of egalitarian radical democratic emancipation for all from exploitation and subjection, whether that attendant to capitalist production or otherwise. Hence the term ‘post-Marxism’: the reference to the telos of Marxism remains in place, as a guiding idea, but the ‘post-’ signifies after, more than, other than Marxism (Laclau 1993: 329). They abandon the idea of some inevitable process of the unfolding of historical ‘necessity’, in favour of stressing the contingency of social-political organisation, and the belief in the need to struggle, politically, for emancipation. The ‘post-’ signifies the abandonment of axioms that they call essentialist (1985: 47).

Their deconstruction of these has caused much controversy among other Marxist theoreticians (Geras 1985; Forgacs 1985; Sim 1998), and in a sense this controversy exists actually because their analysis of the social, political, ideological and economic takes the form of a deconstruction. For, deconstruction itself remains controversial. Often, it is not deemed ‘political’ at all, or of any ‘use’ to political analysis – especially not before Laclau and Mouffe’s intervention (Bennington 1994: 6). As a tool for literary analysis, and occasionally for drawing out philosophical themes within texts, deconstruction is often construed as being worthwhile only insofar as it constitutes a
radical form of reading (Weber 1987). But Laclau and Mouffe use
deconstruction to read the texts of classical Marxism and the political
world, and to reassess everything according to what is suggested by
using this particular reading practice. So, already, post-Marxism is far
from being proper Marxism: the way that it apparently denies some of
the central tenets or mantras of Marxism and applies a form of
analysis often deemed anarchic and even irrational to political texts,
has led post-Marxism to be received as a transgression of Marxism, or
even as not Marxist at all. But, their critical analysis of Marxist
categories and their subsequent construction of a post-Marxist para-
digm (Mowitt 1992: 17) constitutes for them a reinvigoration and
radicalisation of the tradition, which they deem to be the only way to
keep open the possibility of the socialist objectives of the Marxist
project, as a valid and viable political force.

Let us briefly retrace the outline of their argument, as presented in
Hegemony, indicate some of its key subsequent development, and the
ways it has contributed to contemporary conceptualisations of the
nature of the political (Beardsworth 1996: xi), before opening the
question of its limitations. In the opening movement of Hegemony,
Laclau and Mouffe focus on the social conditions characterising
‘revolutionary situations’. Reading Rosa Luxemburg’s analysis of
these situations, they argue that:

in a revolutionary situation, it is impossible to fix the literal sense of each
isolated struggle, because each struggle overflows its own literality and
comes to represent, in the consciousness of the masses, a simple moment
of a more global struggle against the system. And so it is that while in a
period of stability the class consciousness of the worker . . . is ‘latent’ and
‘theoretical’, in a revolutionary situation the meaning of every mobilisa-
tion appears, so to speak, as split: aside from its specific literal demands,
each mobilization represents the revolutionary process as a whole; and
these totalizing effects are visible in the overdetermination of some
struggles by others. This is, however, nothing other than the defining
characteristic of the symbol: the overflowing of the signifier by the
signified. The unity of the class is therefore a symbolic unity. (10–11)

Here, the ‘literal meaning’ of an event is shown to depend on the
context in which it occurs, or in which it is interpreted and given
meaning. The literal meaning of anything cannot be divorced from
its ‘connotation’ (Hall 1980: 133), and both the connotation and
denotation of a signifier (or, more precisely, of its ‘articulation’) will
always be established within the confines of a certain context: the
same signifier will connote and denote very different things in different contexts, depending on the context in which it occurs, as well as the infinite range of possible contexts in which it could thereafter be reinterpreted (Derrida 1977: 1–25; Laclau 2005: 25). In the case of a revolutionary political situation, they argue, any particular event in that struggle will ideally attain a meaning in which it is equivalent to all other events in that struggle, no matter how different it might literally be. The meaning of any event will arise as a result of the ‘overdetermination’ of the context in which it occurs, and/or the context in which it is interpreted.¹

In the revolutionary situation, the event and its interpretation take place in the same context – that of the revolutionary situation itself. But the meaning of an event is open to the possibility/inevitability of being re-narrated in different contexts, so that it will mean – indeed, ‘be’ – something entirely different, elsewhere. In this example, though, they are concerned with the meaning of an event within the interpretive context of a revolutionary situation, and not with its meaning outside or after that situation. Later on, they consider the importance of the reiteration of an event’s meaning into different discursive contexts, as a key moment of articulating a certain desired meaning to any event, so that its meaning becomes relatively fixed within the socio-political imaginary, thus enabling it to (tend to) work for the purposes of a certain political project. So, in a non-revolutionary situation, were a group of workers to strike for better pay or better working conditions, then that strike would not necessarily symbolize any general cause or struggle. In a revolutionary situation, in which an entire society has become polarised into two opposing camps (say, ‘the people’ versus the aristocracy or ‘ancien régime’, as of the French Revolution), then when a particular group strikes, it will symbolize the entire struggle, the entire plight of the people. In Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, in such a situation or context, whatever the people do – however different each act is – it will be equivalent in status and meaning when considered in terms of the general struggle: it will be a symbol of and for it. For as long as the struggle persists, it will be immensely important to each side of the struggle to reiterate a certain meaning for these events, in order that, over time, and through the ‘regularity in dispersion’ of these reiterations, the meaning which best serves the cause will become consolidated and sedimented as ‘true’ in the mindset, or imaginary, of as many people as possible. The meanings which tend to become dominant in the social-political imaginary, and which work to strengthen a particular cause, political position, or
power structure, will, in their terms, have become hegemonic, working to constitute, represent, and perpetuate the dominant hegemony or dominant hegemonic political position.

It is important to note that processes of the overdetermination of meaning take place in all contexts. In fact, the tendency to establish (to ‘articulate’) certain meanings in certain ways can be viewed as one of the ways of defining or delimiting the notion of ‘context’ itself. For post-Marxism, then, ‘objectivity’ or ‘truth’ themselves are – and are permeated with – ‘floating signifiers’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 171; Laclau 1996: 36–46, 2005). They are not necessarily attached to any particular final or transcendental signified, or necessary referent. It all depends, for Laclau and Mouffe, on ‘precise discursive conditions of emergence’. In the discourse of what Laclau and Mouffe call orthodox or classical Marxism (as found in the likes of Plekhanov and Kautsky), the ‘truth’ of society lies with the economic base of any given society, where the putative real, fundamental, structural situation of human societies is that there are, first and foremost, material economic factors, determining everything important about that society. So, the location of a source of raw materials, along with the viability, presence, or possible presence, of the other factors of production (land, labour, capital, legislation, confidence, etc.), will govern the decision about whether to locate, say, a factory thereabouts, and hence constitute the conditions of possibility for a certain kind of society’s development there also. As such, it is by way of the dictates of the economic base that the presence and form of any social activity is determined. For such Marxism, then, it is true to say that the economy is determinant in the first and last instance of social relations, felt nowhere more profoundly than in a society operating under a capitalist economy, where population is displaced and located according to the dictates of profitability, and where the fate of nations is determined according to decisions made by capitalists.

In terms of this ‘truth’, then, some classical Marxism sees a distinction between the constitutive factor of the ‘economic base’, and the subordinate element of the ‘ideological superstructure’, or the lived relations and fantasy life of a society; its beliefs, practices, and relationships – the family structure, the educational apparatus, religious institutions, media, the whole infrastructure, and its attendant systems of values, truths, or ideology. But, immediately, post-Marxism points out, it is really quite impossible to maintain the distinction between base and superstructure, as they are symbiotic, overlapping, and non-separable, which is why they offer the term
‘discourse’, to indicate the entire open-ended structure, rather than maintain otherwise impossibly essentialist distinctions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 174) and/or any belief in the simple fixed identity of notions like ‘individual’, ‘class’, and ‘society’. For, instead of preserving the kind of thinking which takes an ‘individual’ to be a member of a ‘class’, a class which is itself a coherent part of a coherent ‘society’, Laclau and Mouffe focus on these terms themselves. What is an ‘individual’? What is a ‘class’? And what is ‘society’? They expose such notions as essentialist by inquiring into the relationship between the concept (for example, the concept of ‘working class’) and the referent thought to be signified by that term (in this example, the concept or signifier of ‘working class subject’ would be tied necessarily to some specific living person, exemplifying and representing the ‘working class’). The first essentialism is this kind of referential thinking: namely, that someone who occupies at certain times what is thought to amount to a (or the) ‘working class subject position’ is therefore a member of the working class’, purely, simply, and entirely. They argue that whilst it is true that at certain times in certain people’s lives, they may quite literally occupy what are deemed to be working class subject positions, it is equally likely that such a person will at other times occupy incommensurable subject positions, not consistent with being a ‘working class subject’. They argue that this is a theoretical ‘confusion’ of Marxist theory (119), which has led either to the ‘logically illegitimate conclusion . . . that the other positions occupied by these agents are also ‘working-class positions’’ or, alternatively, that these contradictions in the variety and inconsistency of subject positions occupied by ‘working class’ subjects are the result of some separating power of capitalism, working in the superstructure. That is to say, Laclau and Mouffe argue that it is never simply the case that there is an essential or substantial unity to the working class, a unity extending to all the possible subject positions occupied by all the ‘individuals’ who make up the class. Whereas earlier Marxist theory would consider ideological contradictions to be the result of the divisive power of capitalism, used in order to perpetuate the mystification and delusion of subjects who would otherwise be able to see the truth of their situation as the exploited, Laclau and Mouffe disagree. They argue that many of the problems of theoretical Marxism have been brought on by Marxism’s own manner of theorising: Marxism, they argue, theorises the ‘individual’ as a referent, ‘individuals’ as being the ‘origin and basis of social relations’ (115), and ‘society’ itself as actually being a ‘thing’, a referent.
However, as the passage quoted above reveals, Laclau and Mouffe contend that any class unity that might occur – a unity in which individuals see themselves as part of a class, and act as a class, in unity – will only be a symbolic identification, related to signification and not to some presumed innate properties of referents. Indeed, the so-called inherent properties of any referent are, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, produced in and through signifying practices – practices which are inherently contingent and therefore immanently political. Indeed, Laclau (2005) argues that the true or most salient ‘referents’ of political ontology and political force are political demands rather than ‘people’ or ‘groups’, because it is through the work of the shared political demand that identities are constituted (Laclau 2005: 224). This means, in this case, that it is the work of symbolic signification that has the power to make or break the notion of ‘class’ as a valid political force. What this also means is that, in stark distinction to traditional Marxist theories of political action and transformation, it is quite possible that members of many different socio-economic classes can identify with the symbol of a political struggle, and become identifiable as a consciously unified group, struggling for a particular political transformation. ‘Valid’ political groups need not essentially consist of members of the same class. Nor are political groups total, complete, or ‘natural’: they are not ‘naturally arising’ (or ontological referents); rather they are produced within discourse and signification: the ‘referent’ is produced – meaning that political identities and groups are partial and provisional identifications with a cause. Unity will not be complete, total, or permanent. As soon as the cause (the political antagonism) is lost, won, or dissipates, the group will effectively cease to exist, as the identity of the group has no essence outside of the antagonism, around, against, and in terms of which it constructed itself. Thus, they argue, one should not identify political agency with named referents. A political identity will be formed in relation to a political issue (an antagonism); that identity is not the whole or entire identity of the person or persons who hold it, even though some political antagonisms persist to such an extent that the identities of certain people and groups will be dominated and overdetermined to a massive extent by these political antagonisms.

Thus, a theory of the political should not theorise in terms of ‘individuals’. For the ‘identity’ of an individual depends on the discursive/contextual factors of its emergence. But this insight into the constitution of subjectivity does not constitute the totality of post-Marxism’s contribution to political theory. For it also explores the
roles played by the imaginary, fantasy, institutionalisation, legislations, and so on, within the political domain (Žižek: 1989), and thereby expands the conceptualisation of ‘the political’ itself, as well as transforming the nature of any consideration of the socio-political, away from simply thinking about ‘individuals’ in ‘society’. For, just as looking at individuals misses relevant discursive or structural elements (because the notion of the individual implicitly takes the identity of that individual to be set and already established, while Laclau and Mouffe argue that any individual identity will be constituted by factors such as the very fact of their involvement in a struggle or context), the post-Marxists also point out that the object of political analysis termed society, the social or the socius, is not only not pre-given, already-existing, established, unified and objectively real, but that, actually, society does not exist (Žižek 1990: 249). For ‘society’ or ‘the social’ is not a thing (or referent). It is a construct, or a ‘figure’, without a final signified. You cannot put your finger on any object and declare that it is society. There is no object which objectively is society. ‘Society’ functions as a signifier, but it has no final signified. Everyone ‘knows what it means’, although this meaning will differ in its representation, from context to context, but no one could put their finger on some thing that ‘is’ the essence or substance of the social. There are figures of and for the social/society (metonyms, metaphors, symbols, allusions, etc.), but ‘society’ is itself already a figuration or a construct for something that is constitutively absent (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125).

But, of course, ‘society’ or ‘the social’ does exist. (At least, as far as we’re concerned!) It is just that political thinking of what it means to say that something exists has to be reassessed (Derrida 1974; Spivak 1974: xiv). ‘Society’ does not exist as an essence residing somewhere, fully present and intelligible in any way. It is rather, according to the post-Marxists, an ideological fantasy. So, whenever a signifier of society or the social is presented as being the signifier of society – examples might include the figure of the monarch or a rebel, the results of a census or a table of statistics about a society, etc. – it is immediately obvious that this representation is not that society itself, that it in no way captures the ‘essence’ of the society, that there would seem to be so much more to it than that. This is because, as Laclau and Mouffe point out, ‘the totality is not a datum but a construction’ (1985: 144; Laclau 2005: 224), and always both less and more than any given signifier of it. They refer to this effect as that of the ‘surplus of meaning’, an effect resulting from the fact that because ‘identities
are purely relational . . . there is no identity which can be fully constituted’ (1985: 111). The production of any identity is contingent, partial, antagonised (to the extent that something ‘blocks’ it), and political.

This formulation applies not only to the identity of individuals, but also to that of institutions, and even of historical events. None of these identities are fixed, but rather are the effect or result of their relationships with other identities, and the relationships between identities (it being the relationship in which an identity is placed or articulated that determines the meaning and being of that identity) are established in what Laclau and Mouffe term ‘discourse’. To stay with the concept of the social or society, it can be said that, because it is intelligible, or because everyone ‘knows’ what it is, even though ‘it’ is a construct with no ultimate referent, this intelligibility has been constructed by discourse: discourses of value, which assert what society is like or should be like, using the term rhetorically (through analogy), and empirical discourses, using statistical constructs which take parts as indicators of the whole (metonymically). The features of rhetorical or value-based discourses and those of empirical discourses mark key coordinates of all discourses of the social. Historical, literary, anthropological, governmental and bureaucratic discourses, and so on, all incorporate the evaluatory and the ostensibly referential in order to suture the meaning of ‘society’.

The suturing of ‘society’, so that it means something whole, complete, knowable, etc., implies the ‘regularity in dispersion’ of certain articulations, their reiteration in many and varied discursive contexts (1985: 142); the signification of ‘society’ (or any term) becomes partially fixed only on the basis of its regular deployment in familiar ways, in everyday discourses (educational, governmental, familial, media, etc.), throughout time and space. Laclau and Mouffe invoke the Lacanian concept of the point de capiton, or ‘quilting point’, to explain the way that meaning becomes relatively fixed within different discursive contexts. These quilting points are overdetermined by their status within discourses (examples might include the idea of ‘Man’, the ‘Individual’, or ‘God’), and they prevent the slippages of meaning that would occur in interpretation were there no relatively stable terms to refer to in communicative or interpretive predication. Their stability is a result of the work of their regularity in dispersion throughout dominant discourses. But a deconstruction of the situations in which they are used to structure meaning reveals that, despite their putatively obvious intelligibility, or their putative transparency of meaning, it
remains impossible to identify a concrete signified or referent for them other than through connotation, metaphor, metonymy, symbol, and other literary or poetic devices. This leads to the peculiarity in which even the ostensible literality of speaking about ‘the individual’ reveals itself to be figurative. Thus, even the objectivity of objective language is itself a construction relying on rhetorical, textual, poetic, and otherwise literary techniques; or, as Laclau and Mouffe say, ‘all discourse of fixation becomes metaphorical: literality is, in actual fact, the first of all metaphors’ (111).

In a sense, all of this now runs contrary to discourses that claim to be objective (Devenney (2004) even claims this to be the key achievement of Laclau’s political theory: that ultimately it demonstrates the impossibility of positivism in the field of cultural and political study). It goes against such discourses, and rejects all claims made in the name of neutral or natural objectivity. Objectivity, for the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, is never neutral, but is rather contingent, contestable and political; and this subverts the notion of objectivity and challenges the authority of discourses claiming to be objective. Indeed, one of the key interests of post-Marxist theory is in exploring the conditions of possibility for objectivity: for post-Marxism, like a lot of so-called postmodernist thought, objectivity is not naturally occurring, but is rather something that is *forcefully established*; something that is, as such, contingent and variable.

This may sound – and indeed it is – controversial, especially when as a proposition it is brought into contact with that putative pinnacle of objective knowledge, *scientific* objectivity and truth. For ‘science’ is often taken as a signifier of our ability to *know* the truth. However, many scholars since Thomas Kuhn (1962) have argued that in any effort to produce truth, science constitutively requires the production of systems. This inevitably involves exclusions, reductions, the imposition of conventions and limits, and ultimately therefore the production of knowledge that, given its conventional, contingent, and limited requirements, has a peculiar status – the status of a kind of fiction. For, in a strong sense, even scientific systems too are irreducibly theoretical, speculative constructions, relying on paradigms, and hence subject to the kind of legitimation problems discussed above. Lynette Hunter, for instance, argues that scientific ‘models’ (paradigms) – scientific discourse’s ‘tautological worlds’ – acquired the status of ‘neutral fact’ only ‘in the late 18th to 19th century’ when science started to become increasingly hived off into discrete disciplines. Hunter’s argument is that although it may well be
that science has always desired to achieve the status of ‘neutral fact’, it is actually the demands of ‘technological application with its particular requirements for commercial exploitation that pushes the wider scientific discourses into claims of neutrality’ (Hunter 1999: 33). This is of course a litotes restatement of the condition or ‘crisis’ described most famously by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984). Apropos science and its relation to economics, technology and capital – or, in other words, on the subject of the conditions of possibility for objectivity, and relating the partiality and constructed character of objectivity to techno-capitalism – Lyotard offers this concise formula: ‘No money, no proof – and that means no verification of statements and no truth. The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right. An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established’ (Lyotard 1984: 45).

Lyotard’s rightly famous work elaborates at once the tautologies, circularities and aporias of legitimation, value and truth, as well as their reciprocal interimplication and socio-institutional imbrication or sedimentation – their reticulation or articulation with each other – within, throughout, and as, the entire hegemonic field of discursivity, or, that is, the entire social and cultural terrain. Objectivity is ‘produced’ by interested parties. Lyotard argues this in order to characterise what has now become generally known, following his own work’s title, as ‘the postmodern condition’; and he presents this condition as being one of a crisis beginning in the question of how to legitimate knowledge, and reciprocally therefore becoming a problem of how to establish any truth, including the truth of reality itself. The crisis consists of how to establish the reality of what appears to be reality and the truth of what claims to be truth, and its effects radiate and permeate the social in myriad ways. Lyotard infamously paints a picture wherein science, reliant on technology, is immediately beholden to the powers of capitalism. Thus, capitalism becomes for Lyotard something of an all-pervasive power, immediately ensnaring not just the means of establishing objective knowledge, but also the means and mechanisms of making ‘good’ judgements, ‘sound’ legal and moral pronouncements, and other prescriptives. He argues that:

since ‘reality’ is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all of these games by mastering ‘reality’. That is precisely what technology can do. By
reinforcing technology, one ‘reinforces’ reality, and one’s chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority.

This is how legitimation by power also takes shape. Power is not only good performativity, but also effective verification and good verdicts. It legitimates science and the law on the basis of their efficiency, and legitimates this efficiency on the basis of science and law. It is self-legitimating. (1984: 47)

Accordingly, for any discourses claiming to be objective, this anatomy of the inescapably biased ‘conditions of possibility’ for objectivity – an objectivity that henceforth becomes construed as constitutively contingent, even in its scientific variants – will be inadmissible. For, were it accepted, then it would enable the contestation of the authority of objective discourses and therefore also of sedimented structures of power and knowledge. This is precisely what Lyotard calls the ‘postmodern condition’, or ‘postmodern legitimation crisis’. In Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, this is now the terrain of antagonism (1985: 122).

‘Antagonism’ in Laclau and Mouffe is the limit of objectivity. In a paradoxical sense, in fact, it is for them the only objectivity, even though antagonism, in their thinking, cannot ‘be objective’. Rather, antagonisms arise in the face of putatively objective relations that are experienced as being contingent, unjust or wrong (1985: 125; Laclau 2005). Now, in discussing ‘antagonism’, Laclau and Mouffe explore the example of the development of feminism (1985: 154), in which the claims for the equal rights of women were articulated with reference to the ethos and telos of equality and democracy. But, they point out, ‘in order to be mobilized in this way, the democratic principle of liberty and equality had first to impose itself as the new matrix of the social imaginary; or, in our terminology, to constitute a fundamental nodal point in the construction of the political’ (154–5). Thus, it was the institution of ‘democracy’ as a point de capiton which paved the way for the possibility of the birth of feminism. In their terms, it was the democratic revolution which constituted the conditions of possibility for the emergence of many antagonisms as antagonisms and for the construction of, in this example, a democratic feminist struggle. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe locate, in the democratic revolution, and indeed in the concept of democracy itself, a profound transformation of the range of possibilities for politics, a radical extension of the entire political terrain, which moves the political into every relation and
institution which has a place (or does not yet have a place) in every aspect of every sense that can be signified by the notion of ‘society’. As they argue:

the ‘democratic revolution’, as a new terrain which supposes a profound mutation at the symbolic level, implies a new form of institution of the social. In earlier societies, organized in accordance with a theological-political logic, power was incorporated in the person of the prince . . . the radical difference which democratic society introduces is that the site of power becomes an empty space . . . The possibility is thus opened up of an unending process of questioning . . . (1985: 186)

The ramifications of this argument are significant. However, in discussing them, it is important to note that despite Laclau and Mouffe’s preferred choice of example (feminism, democracy), there is no necessary relation between antagonism and the experience of injustice in Laclau and Mouffe’s thought. Injustice might be an example of where antagonism happens, and Laclau and Mouffe do wish to tie their political colours to the mast of ‘justice’. But, even though ‘relations’ are not objective, it does not follow that they are ‘unjust’ or ‘antagonistic’. Non-objectivity is indeed the condition of antagonism for Laclau and Mouffe, but antagonism doesn’t necessarily follow from it. What is crucial for politics is that any actually existing relation or state of affairs has to be represented as ‘unjust’ or ‘wrong’ (Laclau 2005). In this sense, hegemony is the act of representation of non-objectivity in a particular way, and it may or may not succeed. So, just because discourses are not objective, just because their referents are constructed, it does not follow that they will actually be contested. In fact, in the vast majority of cases they are accepted (See also Ranciére 1999). As will be seen in the ensuing discussions in the following chapters, this is one of the key reasons why Richard Rorty (1996) rejects deconstructive post-Marxist theory, and indeed rejects all ‘high’ philosophical political theory. As will be clarified, Rorty’s ‘pragmatist’ argument is that there are enough pressing problems to deal with without getting involved in incessantly debating the fundamentals of ontology, or indeed their mirror opposite, the lack of ontological fundamentals. For Rorty, pragmatism is superior to all ‘deconstructionism’ and ‘high theory’ precisely because it is unconcerned with theoretical matters; Rorty’s reply to Laclauian theory is, basically, so what if there is no ground under our feet; let’s just get over it and get on with things! In general, cultural studies, like Slavoj Žižek, has always been very suspicious of this sort of argument,
and has taken it as evidence of the existence of ‘ideology’ – in which positions like those of Rorty, insofar as they appear content with the status quo, are deemed to be ideological. The Žižekian Marxist response to positions such as Rorty’s is to denounce them as ideological and as trying to cover over the ‘radical antagonisms’ of capitalism. Similarly, thinkers like Judith Butler mistrust any denials – such as may perhaps be discerned in Rorty’s position – of the political significance of cultural difference. The arguments, and the status and significance of the arguments, of these thinkers will be discussed more fully in the following chapters, especially Chapter 3.

What Laclau and Mouffe take to be vital here is that when society is no longer considered to be organised according to some theological or ‘natural’ hierarchy based on divine right or nature, then the members of that society must bear the responsibility for its (their own) organisation. If society’s hierarchies and institutions are deemed to be unjust, then democratic principles enable the contestation of that situation on the basis of appeals to justice and equality. In post-Marxism, then, democracy is deemed to be the best means of assuring that any injustice, exploitation, and oppression can be countered, and that all power be accountable, precisely because democratic principles contain within themselves the basis of their own critique and interminable contestation. Of course, the non-objectivity of society – its ‘always-constructed’ character – does not necessarily lead to the inevitable institution of democracy as a mode of organisation. Thus, it is clear that post-Marxism does have an ethical stake in radical democracy, because arguably bearing responsibility for the non-objectivity of society does not necessarily mean being democratic: it can just as easily mean blaming ‘the other’ (for example, ‘the Jews’ (See Žižek 1989)) for all of society’s problems. Indeed, the championing of democracy in this sense does assume that all subjects know that non-objectivity is the case. However, non-objectivity is the condition of what Laclau and Mouffe call hegemony and hegemonic politics, and this form is given a historical purchase with reference to modern democracy. The advent of this kind of politics, Laclau and Mouffe argue, enabled the proliferation of the political logic that they term ‘hegemonic’.

Their theory of hegemony and hegemonic politics clearly and avowedly takes its inspiration from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971: 181–2), but the key difference between Gramsci’s model and that of Laclau and Mouffe lies in the latter’s emphasis on the discursive construction of every political identity, in that identities
do not exist before their construction around antagonisms. This is the reason why the post-Marxists talk of subject positions or identification or interpellation as opposed to subjects, because they construe political identities and meanings to be partial, provisional, and constantly (potentially) in a state of flux. Accordingly, their emphasis is on the prime importance of the tendency: the tendency to represent certain issues or figures in a certain way, the tendencies by which certain issues are articulated as equivalent or different, related or separate, and so on. For it is the regularity in dispersion of manners of representation, modes of articulation, and conventions of interpretation, that govern the character of a political hegemony, and so any changes at the point of representation or articulation can effect changes throughout an entire hegemonic structure – a structure that encompasses all areas of the social, political and institutional make up of a society.

The Text of Cultural Studies

Strong criticisms of post-Marxism have come from within Marxist political theory itself, and these have been widely detailed (see, for instance, the summaries given by Lechte (1994: 191) and Sim (1998)). But one of the most challenging, yet widely unacknowledged critiques of post-Marxism actually comes from within the very field of literary, textual and cultural studies that post-Marxism mined heavily in its formation and development. As you will recall, post-Marxist political theory developed by way of recourse to literary theoretical and deconstructive techniques of textual analysis. Yet, in reading Laclau and Mouffe, the debt (Derrida 1994) that they owe to the theory of the text, as developed by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Sollers, and so on, is given little attention. John Mowitt argues that this inattention, coupled with post-Marxism’s championing of the notion of ‘discourse’ instead of ‘text’ (even though post-Marxism actually used the notion of ‘text’ to define what it means by ‘discourse’ (Mowitt 1992: 15)), constitutes a limitation of the radical political implications of the theory of the text, or of deconstruction – an innovation that was already, from the outset, profoundly political and subversive. It is therefore important to specify the core significance of the theory of the text, and why Mowitt insists that it has such a crucial status within cultural studies, and poses such a challenge to post-Marxism.

On Mowitt’s account, the importance of textuality or textualism on cultural analyses of all orders cannot perhaps be overstated. The
construal of objects of study as being textual – as being constructions whose identities, features, properties and characteristics are established through inter-textual reference of similarity and dissimilarity and through reciprocal relations with other objects, and whose meaning and status is at least influenced by con-text (the objects’ contexts and the observers’ contexts) – is a (broadly semiological) commonplace – in cultural studies, at least. However, the textual approach to cultural studies, argues Mowitt, should not stop at textualising the external object or field. Rather, what Mowitt sees as key here relates to the implications that the textual insight has for the understanding of the ways that disciplines themselves construct or establish their own objects of study. Crucial in the view that disciplinary fields are textual, ‘textile’, ‘woven’ (1992: 98), complexly inter-imbricated, is the point that therefore the ‘closure of [any] text can only be understood as a mutable effect of a social configuration that embraces language and its various actualizations, and not as an ontologically grounded formal property. In short, the closure of the text is coordinated with the socially constructed perception of its limits’ (1992: 7–8). In other words, the textual approach must insist upon the contingency of constructions not only externally (‘out there’), but also – and significantly – ‘internally’ (‘in here’). It is because of this that Mowitt argues that ‘the text thus appears as irreducibly entangled in disciplinary politics and not merely as the articulation of an effort to reorganize disciplinary boundaries ... but as a critical practice seeking to problematize the cultural work effected by the disciplines’ (14). Derrida calls this ‘the law of the text in general’: all interpretation ‘is only produced by simultaneously proposing an institutional model, either by consolidating an existing one that enables the interpretation, or by constituting a new model to accord with it’. Therefore, in this view, all interpretation constitutes something of ‘a new contract with an institution, between an institution and the dominant forces in society’. Interpretation is institutional: both institutionally constituted and operative within an institutional and ultimately political context (Derrida 1992a: 21–3). So, Mowitt’s (Derridean, deconstructive) argument is that, in more than one register, ‘textualism’ is something that can seriously problematise post-Marxist ‘discourse’.

Indeed, Mowitt contends that ‘the text emerges to name the alterity that simultaneously constitutes and subverts the context of disciplinary reason’ (Mowitt 1992: 25). It only does this, however, to the extent that it is deployed to ‘pose questions that bear on the institutional maintenance of the hermeneutical field as such – questions
which quickly center upon the political problems of how institutions are constituted, reproduced, and transformed’ (215; See also Weber 1987). If it is not deployed to pose questions about the establishment of the institutional maintenance of the hermeneutical field, however, then ‘we gain access only to the comparatively homogeneous tissue of intertextual references that constitutes the hermeneutical field of a particular textual example’:

These are not concerns which come after the particular text in question or which are properly ‘extrinsic’ to it – they are concerns which address the very definition of the textual artefact as an artefact. Insofar as the artefact is meaningful to a particular social group, it is because its members continue to support the disciplinary structures (many of which are not ‘merely’ academic) which read the artefact on their terms. (Mowitt 1992: 214–15).

Mowitt’s contention, in this regard, is that post-Marxist discourse does not – at least, hasn’t yet, and perhaps cannot – do this as thoroughly or adequately as what he calls the ‘textual paradigm’. (This is otherwise known as deconstruction. Mowitt prefers to keep explicit reference to textuality because of the foregrounding effect this has on the work of the institutional construction of what he calls ‘disciplinary objects’. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 2). The argument here is once again that disciplinary paradigms play a primary role in constituting precisely what disciplines think they know, what they think that they can know, and orientate what they think they can or should do and the way they think they ought to do it. For Mowitt, the emergence of the concepts of the text and textuality through the work of intellectuals associated with the Tel Quel journal, particularly Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes, and Sollers, represent a vital ethico-political advance, in that ‘the text gives academic intellectuals on the Left a way to conceptualize the link between the struggle to make sense of a particular artefact, and the struggle to transform the general conditions under which that construction takes on its cultural value’ (220). In this, a thoroughgoing textual approach to knowledge establishment or production would be one obliged to ‘confront the problem of disciplinary power as such’ (219–20).

What should be emphasised here is the sense in which Mowitt’s argument explicitly asserts ‘education’s role in the formation of cultural hegemony’. Indeed, one of his clearest calls is for academics to endeavour ‘to make education into an openly insurgent practice and break the hold that the vocational or professionally oriented
disciplines have had on the commerce between the university and society’ (218). So, Mowitt should in fact be read as endorsing a model of politics as institutional, disciplinary, and hegemonic, in a sense consistent with yet not limited to post-Marxist (particularly post-Gramscian) theory. This apparent proximity to post-Marxism, though, is not simple contiguity; but is rather a site of disagreement and conflict. Mowitt construes it as a conflict that plays itself out in the tension between ‘textual’ versus ‘discourse’ approaches to intellectual work. Attendant to his argument is the observation ‘that the historical institutionalization of textuality conditioned the emergence of discourse’ (15): that the development of the concept of ‘discourse’ relied on the ‘prior institutionalization of textuality’ (16). Mowitt draws attention to the fact that, in a relatively early essay called ‘Populist Rupture and Discourse’ (1980), Laclau specifies how the term ‘discursive’ is to be understood. He does so by characterising it entirely in terms of ‘textuality’. Laclau writes, ‘By “discursive” I do not mean that which refers to “text” narrowly defined, but to the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which the social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble which constitutes society as such . . . History and society are an infinite text’ (Laclau 1980: 87; quoted in Mowitt 1992: 15). Two things in Laclau’s orientation strike Mowitt as pertinent. The first is that the characterisation of discourse as text demonstrates the prior institutionalisation of textuality (‘why would one invoke a concept that was even more obscure than the one s/he is attempting to clarify?’ (16), he asks). The second is that talk of discourses ‘obscures an important tension between the discursive and the textual’ (16):

To specify what is at stake in this tension, it helps to begin by underscoring the fact that discourse is typically used, as is the case with Laclau, to characterize both the medium and the nature of sociality. Insofar as society is interpretable, it presents itself as an ensemble of discourses. In addition, all that is analytically relevant about society is that which can be interpreted. From this perspective discourse serves as a general name for the class of practices (what, in an older vocabulary, might have been called behaviours and institutions) that define the perceptible surface of society. Cultural analyses conducted from this angle tend to locate particular embodiments of discourse, that is, discourses whose properties and functions are then detailed. For example, all the various ‘moves’ defining a particular style of dress characteristic of a youth subculture might be read as an expression of resistance to the sartorial norms of the dominant class. However, what is clearly not emphasized here is the status of discourse as a
disciplinary object, a paradigm that organizes the way cultural research is designed, legitimated, and conducted. Instead, discourse designates how a particular type of phenomena presents itself such that it can become the focus of cultural studies. What remains obscured in the concept of discourse is its relation to an enabling paradigm – a paradigm which, I would argue, derives from the institutionalization of textuality as an interdisciplinary object. Laclau acknowledges this, but shifts the accent in his discussion onto the sociohistorical dimension which, implicitly rests underdeveloped within the concept of the text . . . This is a maneuver that harbors a problem . . . (Mowitt 1992: 16–17)

The problem with this manoeuvre is that, unlike encountering ‘discourses’ (‘out there’), wherever any discipline encounters textuality, this encounter is at once productive and yet threatening, disruptive, and (disciplinarily-speaking) dangerous. For, to construe any object as textual immanently draws the contingency of the constitution and limits of that object into sharp relief and, potentially, crisis. It is to transform and to risk ‘impossibilising’ the object, or at least the stable knowledge of it. The textuality of any object reciprocally thereby risks drawing the limits (and, hence, the very ‘heart’) of the discipline into question and, again, potential crisis, because the text constantly begs the question, the interrogation, of the determination of any object and any limit (Mowitt 1992: 5–6). The emergence of ‘text’, then, immanently confronts every discipline with the task of rethinking itself, rethinking its own protocols and limits (and reciprocally, once again, its very ‘heart’). To view everything as textual demands an account of that discipline’s determination of its own protocols and limits. On the other hand, Mowitt contends, something different takes place with the institutionalisation of ‘discourse’, or with the manoeuvre from a textual (anti-)paradigm to a discursive (disciplinary or disciplining) paradigm. For, quite the opposite of problematising limits, discourse preserves the integrity of the disciplinary subject-object divide, and as such ‘confirms’ the discipline in its security or legitimacy as being a subject that knows this or that field or object ‘out there’. For Mowitt, then, the political significance and resources of the text derive from what he calls its potential deployment as an ‘antidisciplinary object’, which may precipitate productive and ethico-politically consequential crises within and across disciplines and their institutions. The ‘discourse paradigm’ of post-Marxism, on the other hand, is ‘disciplinary’, and works to maintain established disciplinary organisations and relations. Textualism for Mowitt is therefore of prime value for what might be called the micro-political
perspective that is absent from post-Marxist work. However, not everyone within cultural studies views textuality as simply promissory or politically enabling, beneficial, or advantageous.

The Problem with the Text

Stuart Hall, for instance, does concur that ‘culture will always work through its textualities’; but asserts ‘at the same time that textuality is never enough’ (1992: 284). So it is important to establish what it is about textuality that Hall sees as never enough, and what it is that textuality is never enough for. Simply put, for Hall, the problem with the text relates to politics. In the most direct sense, the problem he discerns is that ‘if we are concerned to maintain a politics it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier’ (Hall 1996b: 258). In other words, Hall considers the text to constitute a – if not the (at least ‘theoretical’) – problem for cultural studies; a problem that devolves on the troublingly ‘infinite’ slipperiness introduced by the text. Of course, it is only if ‘history and society are an infinite text’ (Laclau 1980: 87), or in other words, if one already concedes that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (Derrida 1974: 158), that the problem arises of ‘an infinite sliding of the signifier’. In other words, Stuart Hall simultaneously acknowledges the veracity of deconstruction, but also nevertheless resists it, viewing textuality ambivalently, as a curiously necessary but unstraightforward enabling and frustrating problem for cultural studies (or, indeed, in Derrida’s sense, a ‘dangerous supplement’).

As will be seen in Chapter 2, Hall’s peculiar simultaneous subscription to and resistance of deconstruction and textuality is not evidence of any confusion. It is rather that Hall wants the text to remain a problem rather than develop into a problematic, because, for Hall, the important problematic for cultural studies to engage with is first and foremost always to work out how to intervene consequentially into mobile political problems (‘out there’). In other words, Hall sees it as important that cultural studies does not get too fixated on and involved with the theoretical question of the ‘infinite sliding of the signifier’ at the expense of involvement with real political problems. (In this regard, Hall has a strong pragmatic impulse, which relates him, at least ‘sentimentally’, to another of Laclau’s erstwhile interlocutors, Richard Rorty. Indeed, because of post-Marxism’s engagement with ‘pragmatism’, Rorty’s position will soon be taken as an exemplary rendition of the impulse towards establishing a ‘university
responsibility’ which does not digress into ‘over-philosophication’ and excessive theory, in Chapter 3.) As soon becomes apparent, Hall’s chief criticism of Laclau relates precisely to the perception of a subordination in Laclau of a proper concern with political issues and an excessive/digressive elevation of theoretical discussion about abstract political logics. Given Hall’s ambivalence about textuality (and, by extension, about deconstruction), and given post-Marxism’s use of deconstruction as its enabling gesture, as well as Laclau’s definitional recourse to infinite textuality as a synonym of the form, character and logic of ‘history and society’ or ‘culture’, coupled with Mowitt’s arguments about the text as offering an intellectual-political tool that not only challenges the post-Marxist paradigm but that might also be deployed politically, the text deserves further attention. It is worth remaining with Stuart Hall’s indication of both the necessity of the textual and the problems for cultural studies that he sees lurking within textuality. He argues that:

the refiguring of theory, made as a result of having to think questions of culture through the metaphors of language and textuality, represents a point beyond which cultural studies must now always necessarily locate itself. The metaphor of the discursive, of textuality, instantiates a necessary delay, a displacement, which I think is always implied in the concept of culture. If you work on culture, or if you’ve tried to work on some other really important things and you find yourself driven back to culture, if culture happens to be what seizes hold of your soul, you have to recognize that you will always be working in an area of displacement. There’s always something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace, of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased from cultural studies. (Hall 1992: 283–4)

As with so much of his work, Hall’s argument here is clearly saturated in deconstruction, representing cultural studies’ understanding of ‘culture’ in language that is clearly indebted to Derridean deconstruction, and arguably to a Laclauian understanding of discourse. (However, unlike Mowitt, and in a way that actually supports Mowitt’s argument, Hall somewhat conflates and collapses the textual and the discursive: for Hall, the ‘metaphor of the discursive’ is the same as that ‘of textuality’.) In other words, as deconstructive as Hall’s
depiction of the textuality and/or discursive character of culture is, there nevertheless remains a hesitation, an invocation of a sense in which cultural studies is not simply deconstruction and should, or must, be more and other than deconstruction. But the claim that cultural studies must locate itself and operate somehow ‘beyond’ or ‘after deconstruction’ seems deeply problematic, especially when one understands culture the way Hall represents it here: namely, as something pointedly textual and in différence (deferral, difference, delay, displacement). Given that Hall’s understanding of deconstruction (not to mention ‘culture’) is evidently far from naive, we should enquire as to where or what this ‘beyond deconstruction’, or ‘beyond the textual’ is that cultural studies should be. We should also work out how to make sense of Hall’s simultaneous acknowledgement of cultural studies’ deep and profound indebtedness to deconstruction, of its having to think questions of culture deconstructively, of textuality ‘always’ being ‘implied in the concept of culture’, with this assertion of the need for cultural studies necessarily to be ‘beyond’ deconstruction and textualism. As noted above, Hall’s concern relates to politics; that ‘if we are concerned to maintain a politics it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier’ (Hall 1996b: 258). For him, cultural studies is concerned with – indeed, is even a form of – politics: cultural politics, that is; not politics ‘proper’; not necessarily parliamentary or state politics. Rather, it is intimately interested in the fundamental contingency of culture, its changeability, its imposed-ness, and the alterability which attests to what is often termed culture’s constitutively political character (Arditi and Valentine 1999). Laclau and Mouffe, who strongly influenced Stuart Hall – at least in terms of providing a comprehensive, fluid and fluent-making post-Marxist paradigm and vocabulary of discourse analysis – regularly use such formulations. Jeremy Valentine explains why cultural studies tends to subscribe to such a perspective:

Because cultural studies maintains that action is meaningful, and is thus not simply behaviour, and that power is structured, and is thus not simply random, political action necessarily entails a cultural dimension. By the same token, because the referent of culture is by its nature limitless, the relation between culture and politics extends beyond the restricted domain of politics understood as the mechanics of a formal system so that culture entails a political dimension. One might say that cultural studies reaches the areas of politics that Political Science does not, and succeeds in this ambition to the extent to which a relation between meaning and power can be shown. I think that Stuart Hall and those influenced by his work have
incontrovertibly established the necessity of this perspective . . . (Valentine 2003: 191)

This sense of ‘cultural politics’ – that is to say, the understanding that institutions, beliefs, practices, and arguably even our very subjectivities and identities are contingent and alterable, the insistence on the political character and consequences of cultural formations, and the understanding that, as Hall puts it, ‘culture will always work through its textualities’ (1996b: 271) – clarifies why connections are claimed between the political (in this extended ‘discursive’ sense) and culture, and why representatives of cultural studies and deconstruction often feel themselves to be doing something political. This may strike many as either delusional (as in ‘but it’s merely academic!’) or controversial (as in ‘academia should not be politically motivated or tendentious!’). But it is based on an understanding of cultural, political, and social reality as discursive and hegemonic, meaning that even the ‘merely academic’ is an active part of the circuits, networks, relays and forces of culture (perhaps particularly in ‘making meaning’), and is therefore always already politically consequential. This is the cultural studies (and) post-Marxist answer to Marxian reductionism and determinism, of course. It also means that everything, including academia, is to be construed as inescapably politically motivated and tendentious (however ‘unconscious’ this may be). In this view, reality is at once material and textual, as Hall intimates, or as Laclau and Mouffe express it, discursive: constituted in both material and textual ways.

However, without denying materiality, the textual supplement to reality and to any understanding of it, arguably engenders something of a doubly deconstructive situation. For, even though ‘reality’ is also material, it is nevertheless discursive and therefore always either imminently or actually in deconstruction (Royle 2000: 11). In this sense, one will never be able understand, grasp, express or articulate ‘reality’ adequately without deconstruction. But, Mowitt explains, one problem here, as has been noted at least since Jameson in 1975 (Jameson 1988) is this:

On [Jameson’s] account, textuality is nothing but an intellectual expression of what [he] later calls ‘the cultural logic’ of the latest phase of capitalism . . . The point is not that textuality is simply ideological (Jameson accepts Marx’s and Engels’ discussion of ideology as the struggle for hegemony in the realm of ideas), but that in its putative bracketing of history (the referent), textuality cannot help but affirm those social
changes which condition its emergence. The model of the text is therefore problematic because it is incapable of either generating or sustaining a *critical* ideology. Here we have the deepest aspect of Jameson’s concerns about modernism and, for that matter, postmodernism. Obviously, insofar as textuality can be affiliated with modernism in this way, then it too can be reduced to sheer, that is capitalist, ideology. (Mowitt 1992: 12–13)

Jameson’s problems with textuality therefore also relate to politics, connecting with Hall’s problems with deconstruction and textual understandings, as apparently being unable to maintain a politics, or as being ‘incapable of either generating or sustaining a *critical* ideology’. So the question is what it is that seems to make deconstruction both so appropriate and so inappropriate, both necessary and insufficient, for cultural studies and for post-Marxism, intellectually and politically speaking. This question is particularly important if cultural studies is indeed construed as ‘a practice which aims to make a difference in the world’ (Hall 1992: 278). In this respect, then, the archive of explicitly deconstructive thought, deriving from the *Tel Quel* group (Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Sollers) who rigorously theorised and provided the now familiar, ubiquitous, and arguably indispensable concepts of text, textuality, intertextuality, and so on, seems to offer something singularly appropriate to Hall’s and cultural studies’ very conceptualisation of culture and the political. He insists that ‘culture will always work through its textualities – and at the same time that textuality is never enough’ (1992: 284). The answers to the immediately arising questions of ‘never enough of what’ and ‘never enough for what’ refer, as mentioned above, to politics, and specifically to the matter of establishing and maintaining a politics, to trying to make a difference that counts. For this, Hall argues, is the particular and acute obligation, orientation and defining aspiration of cultural studies:

That is to say, unless and until one respects the necessary displacement of culture, and yet is always irritated by its failure to reconcile itself with other questions that matter, with other questions that cannot and can never be fully covered by critical textuality in its elaborations, cultural studies as a project, an intervention, remains incomplete. If you lose hold of the tension, you can do extremely fine intellectual work, but you will have lost intellectual practice as a politics. I offer this to you, not because that’s what cultural studies ought to be, or because that’s what the [Birmingham] Centre managed to do well, but simply because I think that, overall, is what defines cultural studies as a project. Both in the
British and the American context, cultural studies has drawn the attention itself, not just because of its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development, but because it holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension. It constantly allows the one to irritate, bother, and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure. (1992: 284)

To argue that textuality is never enough is far from a straightforward call to ‘return to reality’ or to return to ‘real political practice’, as if there were a clear-cut choice between theory and practice, or a clear division between academic work and political work. Indeed, to conceive of culture and politics as complex discursive formations implies rejecting such distinctions as facile simplifications. (However, the theory/practice schema is not an easy metaphysical binary to step out of, as will be argued in Chapter 3.) Instead, what is at stake here might be clarified by making a distinction, between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ (Beardsworth 1996). In terms of this distinction, one could say that everything is contingent and alterable (the political), and that cultural studies desires to alter it, to intervene (politics). Thus, anything new or different, anything which might alter a state of affairs, might itself be or become ‘political’. But, invoking the possibility of politicality is not good enough when one’s concerns and aspirations are interventional, specific, pressingly present and real (whatever they may be). Maintenance of this ‘metaphysical’ desire could represent one difference between deconstruction and cultural studies, if cultural studies is something that understands culture and politics deconstructively but nevertheless desires the very thing that it understands to be ‘constitutively impossible’. That is to say, for Hall, what is definitional of cultural studies ‘as a project’ is the aim of definite, precise, certain, fully present and knowable, unmediated interventional power and agency in the present of the institutional terrain of culture and society. This desire is ‘impossible’ and ‘metaphysical’ because the institutional terrain of culture and society is never fully present, constitutively mediated, in deferral, relay, and referral (différance), prone to the ‘slippage of signification’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and dissemination (Derrida 1981). It should be noted, though, that in maintaining this frustrated tension as a tension, Hall thereby actually (paradoxically) remains impeccably deconstructive, insisting as he does upon the ‘double bind’ of this situation. This explains his assertions that cultural studies must operate on ‘two fronts at one and the same time’ (1992: 282), maintaining a deconstructive understanding of the political that problematises all metaphysical notions of politics, hand
in hand with metaphysical political desires and orientations that that
very deconstructive understanding would seem ‘logically’ or ‘neces-
sarily’ to forbid.

For Hall, a deconstructive understanding of culture (Laclau and
Mouffe’s ‘discursive terrain’) is the condition of possibility for estab-
lishing ‘the way things are’. As introduced earlier, establishing the way
things are is in a sense ‘necessary’ before one can possibly know how
to confront, engage with or intervene in reality properly (politics:
intervention). But a textual understanding actually makes the aim of a
(knowledge of) decisive intervention impossible. Moreover, as Hall
points out, in cultural studies this double bind runs deeper or more
palpably because, he claims, ‘it has always been impossible in the
theoretical field of cultural studies – whether it is conceived of in terms
of texts and contexts, of intertextuality, or of the historical formations
in which cultural practices are lodged – to get anything like an
adequate theoretical account of culture’s relations and its effects’
(1992: 286). Textual understandings (if this is not ultimately an
oxymoron) are not amenable to grand system-building unlike, say,
dialectical or positivist understandings: the only universally true
picture or system that deconstruction might claim to be able to draw
would be the picture or system that clarified how and why universally
real and true pictures and systems are impossible. As Derrida once put
it, deconstruction is not formalisable, but for reasons that can be
formalised (1981: 52); or, as Slavoj Žižek less hospitably argues:

the ultimate lesson of deconstruction seems to be that one cannot postpone
the ontological question ad infinitum, and what is deeply symptomatic in
Derrida is his oscillation between, on the one hand, the hyper-self-
reflective approach which denounces the question of ‘how things really
are’ in advance, and limits itself to third-level deconstructive comments on
the inconsistencies of philosopher B’s reading of philosopher A; and, on
the other, a direct ‘ontological’ assertion about how difféance and archi-
trace determine the structure of all living things, and are, as such, already
operative in animal nature. One should not miss the paradoxical inter-
connection of these two levels here: the very feature which forever prevents
us from grasping our intended object directly (the fact that our grasping is
always refracted, ‘mediated’, by a decentred otherness) is the feature which
connects us with the basic proto-ontological structure of the universe.
(Žižek 2001: 204)

Žižek’s arguments and position will be considered more fully in the
following chapters. Here what is salient is that Žižek’s claim is that
deconstruction (and ‘deconstructionist cultural studies’) can be construed as entailing ‘prohibitions’ against enquiring into the truth and reality of things (2001: 204–5), because such enquiry would be ‘metaphysical’, and because deconstruction and deconstructionist cultural studies claim not to trade in undeconstructed metaphysics. However, even if Žižek’s characterisation is appropriate or fair, which is doubtful, the problem is that Žižek never really pursues the question of why deconstructively orientated work might insist upon such ‘prohibitions’. To clarify what is at issue here, it could be noted that Žižek’s own (postmodern) bricolage of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelianism, and Marxism, amalgamated into a new paradigm, illustrates the universal problem of all paradigms: they offer a particular perspective/construction that masquerades as the way to see ‘how things actually are’. Accordingly, all different paradigms provide different versions of what proper intervention and political agency are: change the ingredients, and the answers change too. (This is the ‘decentred otherness’ that Žižek prefers to evoke as if some kind of irreducibly mysterious enigma). As Derrida apostrophised: ‘whence the abyss – that’s the whole problem!’ (1998: 9–10) That is to say, because all paradigms offer different answers, therefore certainty is the very thing that becomes dubious. This is what both Hallian cultural studies and Derridean deconstruction wrestle with. In this sense, Žižekian certainty is the antithesis of a deconstructive (or) cultural studies relation to questions of knowledge, orientation and agency. However, as a certain deconstructive understanding of the ‘undecidability’ of knowledge and effect (regarding political causality) might seem to apply equally to any articulation, to any statement, or to any act, then the question returns as to why cultural studies should exist in and as the kind of frustration that Hall seems to insist upon. If anything might be consequential, then mightn’t anything be an intervention? Why not be content to produce ‘extremely fine intellectual work’? What’s the difference, the specificity, the challenge, the task, for cultural studies?

Gary Hall argues that, ‘by definition, cultural studies is . . . a politically committed questioning of culture/power relations which at the same time theoretically interrogates its own relation to politics and to power’ (Hall 2002: 10). The reasons for the definitional status of this apperception relate to cultural studies’ construal of modern cultures and societies as being constituted in, on and as contingent institutional bases and relations, which means that they are fundamentally political. As John Protevi reads this, through a deconstructive
optic therefore *everything*, even ‘writing’, or any other act of ‘inscribing a mark to render it iterable, is a performative signifying and a meaningful performance – we could call it *making sense*. Making sense is the construction of a hegemonic formation of forces in which meaning or iterability is produced from the clash of force vectors’ (Protevi 2001: 63). This specifies further the deconstructive radicalisation of the politicality of the cultural: ‘the reading of marks is institutionally enforced. Reading strategies outside the institutionally enforced reading code make no sense, as anyone who reads the bewildered responses to deconstructive readings can tell you’ (Protevi 2001: 64). The impossibility of ever occupying a position or perspective *outside* of the contingent cultural-political terrain is precisely why cultural studies views itself as Gary Hall says it does, and as Stuart Hall implies it must. The justification for explicitly adhering to the double bind that Stuart Hall identifies relates to remaining frustrated with what seems to be merely ‘theoretical’ or entirely ‘academic’ work, but never deluding oneself that theory could somehow be *dispensed with*. To reiterate Jeremy Gilbert’s observation: ‘everyone has a theory, they just don’t always know what it is’ (2003: 151); or as Godzich renders this: ‘knowing is essentially theoretical’ (1987: 163). Accordingly, academic institutions and their productions do not amount to nothing. One is always in the ‘game of hegemony’ (Hall 1992: 281). And according to the implications of the deconstructive understandings of Stuart Hall and Gary Hall, cultural studies must never simply occupy either end of the binary that constitutes the parameters of, for example, Žižekian thought, which oscillates between two equally unsatisfactory positions: either an *academia-is-everything* position or an *academia-is-nothing* position. Žižek will be explored further in the following chapters, but Mowitt points out one relevant problem about such a reductive schema as Žižek’s. He argues:

> Once we acknowledge that what enables a reading to ‘make sense’ reaches well into the institutional field of the social, then it becomes possible to extend the range of what a reading ought to concern itself with . . . [As such, we should not believe] that ‘mere readings’ must give way to action when ‘real’ social issues are at stake. This perspective has already produced enough intellectual paralysis within the academic Left, and it is no more worthy of perpetuation than is the self-indulgent complacency that leads academic intellectuals to think that simply writing a textual analysis of a Hitchcock film is tantamount to the articulation of an oppositional politics. (Mowitt 1992: 217)
Indeed, Žižek often actually holds quite traditional understandings of the political, of agency and of intervention, when compared to deconstructive cultural studies or other post-Marxism: sometimes he advocates a ‘to the barricades!’ notion of political action, whilst at other times he seems to believe that revolutionaries ‘out there’ require academics ‘in here’ to be their teachers or consultants, providing academic texts as revolutionary pamphlets; or even at other times viewing academic work itself to be somehow revolutionary political action, _in and of itself_. (Because such assumptions and positions about the relationship of academic practice to the political are so widespread and entrenched, they shall be returned to and explored more fully, via readings of Žižek, Rorty, Butler and Laclau, in Chapter 3.) In this regard, Mowitt offers a much more ‘transgressive’ understanding of the political force and propensities of academic intellectual work, hinging on what he calls a politics of ‘antidisciplinarity’:

What antidisciplinarity . . . depends upon is a notion of reading that understands how its specificity as a practice derives from the institutional field which surrounds it. Since this means that all readings have institutional implications, isn’t it time that we began reading it so as to undermine the institutions of disciplinary power at the very points where they have typically reproduced themselves with the greatest efficiency? (Mowitt 1992: 218)

Mowitt’s injunction here amounts to a strategy of pressuring borders, boundaries, demarcations, conventions, limits, and established facts, values and proprieties, of all orders; a pedagogical-political strategy of transgressing norms – not simply for the (‘tactical’) sake of it, but rather, as John Protevi explains in his account of why anyone might ever feel the need to ‘deconstruct’ (Protevi’s account arguably characterises an impetus that is discernable equally in Derrida, Hall, Mowitt, Laclau and Mouffe, and others):

_why deconstruct . . .?_ In the name of what does deconstruction release its _forces of rupture_? Derrida answers: in the name of justice. Derrida’s political physics looks like a ‘might makes right’ position. And in one sense indeed it is, in the sense that might makes _droit_, that is, the fact that positive law can be analysed in terms of social power. Derrida reminds us, however, that might does not make justice. Instead, ‘Force of law’ tells us that ‘deconstruction is justice’. Institutions, or sets of positive laws (_drets_), are deconstructible because they are not justice. Deconstruction is justice, that is, ‘deconstruction is already engaged by this infinite demand of justice’. Deconstruction also finds its ‘force, its movement or its
motivation’ in the ‘always unsatisfied appeal’ to justice . . . We might want to say here that democracy is the future, the ‘to come’ of this transformation, intensifying itself to the point where instituted bodies that muffle or distort the calls of others are overflowed and reinscribed in other contexts. Deconstruction is democratic justice, responding to the calls from all others. (Protevi 2001: 69–70)

In this regard, deconstruction, as (strategic) infinite demand for justice, is another name for the radical democratic element of the project of post-Marxism, as well as arguably being very closely related to cultural studies’ much-invoked openness to alterity. (It is for this reason that Joanna Zylinska, for instance, argues that ‘a sense of duty and responsibility has always constituted an inherent part of the cultural studies project’ (Zylinska 2001: 177).) But such justifications notwithstanding, the Jamesonian objection keeps returning, which runs as follows: because capitalism itself might be construed as a radical form of ‘deconstruction’, therefore deconstruction might be a symptom of capitalism. In this spirit, Hardt and Negri famously argue that the dominant form of power today is itself deconstructive and anti-essentialist. Power ‘itself’, they say, chants along with anti-essentialists and post-modernists, ‘Long live difference! Down with essentialist binaries!’ (2000: 139) ‘Power’, they contend, ‘has evacuated the bastion [that anti-essentialist intellectuals] are attacking and has circled round to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference’ (2000: 138. See also Bewes 2001: 92). So, the problem remains the one that Mowitt says many have discerned in textuality (when textuality is taken as being exemplary of all that is problematic in ‘postmodernism’ or ‘deconstructionism’): that it appears to be ‘incapable of either generating or sustaining a critical ideology’ (1992: 12–13). In the face of this problem, the ‘solution’ that Mowitt proposes devolves on ‘what may strike some as the unlikely matter of disciplinarity’ (13): by ‘securing theoretically the text’s link to disciplinarity and . . . drawing the practical consequences of this linkage as they manifest themselves within the institutional domain of disciplinary power’ (14). Indeed, Derrida too connects deconstructive, ‘textual’ practice to the practical consequences of institutional and therefore wider discourse; for example when he contends:

If it were only a question of ‘my’ work, of the particular or isolated research of one individual, this [scandalised denunciation of deconstruction] wouldn’t happen. Indeed, the violence of these denunciations derives from the fact that the work accused is part of a whole ongoing process.
What is unfolding here, like the resistance it necessarily arouses, can’t be limited to a personal ‘oeuvre’, nor to a discipline, nor even to the academic institution . . . If this work seems so threatening to them, this is because it isn’t eccentric or strange, incomprehensible or exotic (which would allow them to dispose of it easily), but as I myself hope, and as they believe more than they admit, competent, rigorously argued, and carrying conviction in its re-examination of the fundamental norms and premises of a number of dominant discourses, the principles underlying many of their evaluations, the structures of academic institutions, and the research that goes on within them. What this kind of questioning does is to modify the rules of the dominant discourse, it tries to politicize and democratize the university scene . . . (Derrida 1995: 409–10)

The Institutional Articulation and Dissemination of Texts and Discourses

It is important to emphasise the often tacit but nevertheless significantly and clearly shared agreement among the post-Marxists Laclau and Mouffe, and Hall, Mowitt, Derrida, and beyond, about the interlinked institutional character of culture, society and politics and the conviction that institutions such as the university have a position and doubtless a role, or multiple roles, within hegemony and hegemonic politics (Readings 1996; Peters 2001). The shared conviction is of the ethico-political importance and consequentiality of university practices of the production of knowledge; that knowledge may affect institutional and ultimately ethico-political cultural practice more widely (Mowitt 1992: 27). Thus, the stakes devolve on what academic disciplines and practices do, how they do it, and how this relates, links, connects, or is articulated with other scenes.

Thus a key concern should be that of establishing what disciplinary activity is to be, what it is articulated with, how and in what ways. For, what is an academic discipline or academic subject anyway? What is its hegemonic ‘position’, and what are its ‘structural’ limits, or what is the logic of its constitution within the university institution, itself within hegemony? This, the final section of this chapter, will explore these questions, but will do so – crucially, yet perhaps surprisingly – not primarily through reference to empirical examples (for which, see instead Readings 1996; Kilroy et al. 2004; Rutherford 2005); but rather by examining the deconstructive logic of dissemination, as proposed by Derrida in the book (or ‘text’) of that name (Derrida 1981), and as discussed by other deconstructive thinkers. The reason for taking this perhaps peculiar detour through an
apparently ‘quasi-transcendental’ moment in Derridean deconstruction is double: it is at once to reemphasise, performatively, the institutional articulation of text and discourse within hegemony, and to propose, again performatively, one way in which Derrida’s supposedly ‘philosophical’ readings of even the texts of ancient philosophy reveal and cast new light on political-institutional questions. Derrida himself always asserted ‘the necessity of posing transcendental questions in order not to be held within the fragility of an incompetent empiricist discourse’ (1996: 81); and, as Protevi makes clear:

That the basic problem of deconstruction, even in Derrida’s technically detailed readings of phenomenology, is thus basically political is clear: the names of philosophers as signatories are indices of texts which are indices of real history. The role of presence in the West is the target; philosophy texts are only paths to this target. The long-debated relation of philosophy and politics, the difference between the history of the West and the history of metaphysics, is thought by Derrida under the rubric of ‘force’. (Protevi 2001: 20)

To begin a deconstructive reading of cultural studies in terms of dissemination, it can first be noted that it is clearly like other proper academic subjects at least in that it putatively ‘takes’ external objects as its focus of study. It speaks of and for them (in what might be construed as something of an unethical opening of the ethical (Derrida 1995a: 67)). Arguably, it must always study ‘other things’, things ‘out there’ – even if the theory of the text immediately problematises and complexifies this – because to be an academic subject proper could be said to require as much. Textuality notwithstanding – or indeed, even as a consequence of the adherence to textuality as that which ‘emerges to name the alterity that simultaneously constitutes and subverts the context of disciplinary reason’ (Mowitt 1992: 25) – the specificity of cultural studies is said (by cultural studies, at least) to devolve on an openness to other topics. In one familiar respect, cultural studies is said to study objects hitherto excluded or not accorded any worth as objects of attention within the academy (popular culture, subcultural practices, marginalised and excluded identities, ‘trivia’, etc.). In another, related, respect, it is said to at least seek to revalue and to reappraise the knowledge that circulates as knowledge within other already institutionally legitimated subjects, disciplines and public discourses (Young 1999: 3–16; During 1993; Storey 1994; 1996). Both of these procedures might, of course, count as valid and important interventions; because, on the one hand, studying the different
is to bring into visibility things that had hitherto lacked representation, and, on the other hand, critiquing extant knowledge can again bring into visibility excluded differends, and thereby in turn come to influence or modify the production of knowledge about these things—knowledge that, as deconstruction, cultural studies, and post-Marxism all agree, must in some sense affect institutional and political cultural practices (Mowitt 1992: 27).

However, any such effort or orientation could be construed as making a difference, as ‘counting’, only if it, as it were, made any difference; only if it came to be counted—or could be made to count. Arditi and Valentine’s (1999) concept of ‘polemicization’ is important here; for it proposes a logic whereby relevance is established only through a rhetorico-political struggle. In other words, to evoke one of Spivak’s important questions, the vital question here is who will listen (Spivak 1993: 194)? What consequences will that listening have? As cultural studies predominantly takes place within or around the university context of the interdisciplinary arts and humanities, one should not ignore this scene, this location, and should evaluate its status as a political locus or site of potential antagonism. For the scene in which any interventions of cultural studies are to be staged, regardless of what anyone thinks they should be, is irreducibly related to the university, before and after any other form of publicity, publication or mediation. This is because it is the university, primarily, that confers any authority or legitimacy onto the identity and voice of cultural studies that it may have (although the subject itself will always make appeal to some little other object which also called it into being, as if in response to the question ‘how can you/we, the university, have excluded this?’). Its speech is directed to the university, all other intentions notwithstanding. It comes from and goes to the university, first (Derrida 1992; Godzich 1986; 1987). Its discourse is structured like that of the Greek theoria as described by Godzich (1986: xiv–v; see also Chapter 2), although it is not simply a discourse of a theoria, but rather a discourse that first and foremost appeals for recognition and legitimation as itself being of the same standing as the theoria that it implicitly addresses. According to Godzich, the archetypal ‘theoria’ was a hegemonic social institution within ancient Greek society, whose function was one of regulation, stabilisation, verification and legitimation. Godzich explains:

[T]he act of looking at, of surveying, designated by theorein does not designate a private act carried out by a cogitating philosopher but a very
public one with important social consequences. The Greeks designated certain individuals, chosen on the basis of their general probity and their general standing in the polity, to act as legates on certain formal occasions in other city states or in matters of considerable political importance. These individuals bore the title of *theoros*, and collectively constituted a *theoria* . . . They were summoned on special occasions to attest to the occurrence of some event, to witness its happenstance, and then to verbally certify its having taken place. (We may recall here the role of witnesses to the execution of death sentences in the American judicial system.) In other words, their function was one of see-and-tell. To be sure, other individuals in the city could see and tell, but their telling was no more than a *claim* that they had seen something, and it needed some authority to adjudicate the validity of such a claim. The city needed a more official and ascertainable form of knowledge if it was not to lose itself in endless claims and counterclaims. The *theoria* provided such a bedrock of certainty: what it certified as having seen could become the object of public discourse. The individual citizen, indeed even women, slaves, and children, were capable of *aesthesis*, that is perception, but these perceptions had no social standing. They were not sanctioned and thus could not form the basis of deliberation, judgement, and action in the polity. Only the theoretically attested event could be treated as a fact. The institutional nature of this certification ought not to escape us, as well as its social inscription. Indeed, it may be of more than theoretical interest, in our current sense of the term, to wonder how this social dimension of the certification of events, of the granting of something the discursive standing of ‘real’, came to be occulted . . . (Godzich 1986: xiv)

*Theoria*, then, denotes a collectivity or institution functioning as a ‘mediating instance invested with undeniable authority by the polity’ (xv). The point of evoking the Greek *theoria* here is neither allegorical nor analogical, but is rather to emphasise the fact that for cultural studies, like any other practice which seeks to be deemed to be speaking truth or reason, responsibility is double, divided, both in respect to the object and also to the institution. For, such an interlocutor must appeal for legitimating recognition that *it itself is of the requisite probity* (xiv) *in order to be* responsible to the other – a responsible witness of the other. Thus, its obligations are divided. And this is constitutively divisive. For, the very fact that cultural studies is an *academic* subject obliges or imposes some ‘distance’ from any other identity. In speaking of any object or topic it must not *simply* ‘be’ that other thing. It must first and foremost be academic discourse, operating according to precise protocols. This leads to the possibility that, were one to have become involved in cultural studies in order to do
justice to, say, ethnic or women’s or queer or whatever other concerns, one would also already have in a certain sense ‘transgressed’ them, or ‘hegemonised’ them, by subordinating them to other concerns (Derrida 1995a: 68; 1981: 137): academic protocols and demands such as particular versions of ‘rigour’, ‘logic’, ‘coherence’ and ‘rationality’, etc., which construct any efforts according to criteria alien and quite possibly illegible to the object ‘itself’. (In another respect, of course, the academic who valorises ‘working class’ themes cannot fail to remove themselves from the working class, if only by virtue of occupation and language.) It is first and foremost study (or, perhaps, invention, projection or fetishization); always possibly not connected to any other (‘real’) practice at all, and, if connected, the nature of the relation is far from determined in advance. (Marion Hobson (1998) takes this proviso of the ‘always possibly not’ to be a key moment of any deconstruction.)

In effect, disciplinary activity performatively mimes itself into existence and identity according to an interpretation not only of what it should do, but also an interpretation of what it should be like (Derrida 1981: 75; 1997: 7). For any subject must establish its identity through the double strategy of a polemical distancing or differencing and affirmative affiliation (‘I am like this and not like that’) which betrays, again, that disciplinary knowledge itself and paradigm formation is double and ‘out of joint’ (Derrida 1981: 15, 19; Mowitt 1992: 40–1), relying on an inauguration which has nothing to do with ‘it itself’, but which presupposes and conditionally imposes what it will, should, or must be (like), and will, should, or must know (like). Echoing Derrida, this is the same as to say that the inauguration of cultural studies is not a cultural studies event (Derrida 1992: 29–30). As Mieke Bal proposes, it is all too easy for ‘new’ disciplines to unwittingly smuggle and to fail to interrogate or critically revise extant ‘traditional’ values and protocols into their own constitution (Bal 2003). In Derrida’s (1981 and 1992) sense, cultural studies is a university modification, albeit also constituted and compromised by that something other, that figuration of something ‘outside’ the university: its objects of study. It must ‘respect’ them both. Its loyalties are divided, constitutively compromised, by a polemos with and an eros for the university and its knowledge (for, otherwise, why insist on being insinuated therein?), and an eros or cathexis with something other, that it must distance itself from in order to do justice to, and also therefore to transgress, by moving ‘away’ from that thing, not being with it ‘properly’, of it or as it. But this poleros (as Derrida (1998a) has
termed it) is dissymmetrical: preference always goes to the institution (Derrida 1997: 7, 17, 19–20).

It is important to reiterate that preference always (also) goes to the institution. But it is equally important to hasten to add that this is nothing to lament, for it actually enables a reconceptualisation of the character of academic, intellectual, political practice. Namely, that a primary object of cultural studies must always also be the supposedly secondary matter of the university institution. Now, increasingly, thinkers within cultural studies are explicitly coming to construe cultural studies as a – if not the – place to think the university, to make sense of the university and its relationship to culture, politics and society, locally and globally (Hall 2002; Wortham 1999). Rather than simply repeating such undeniably important arguments here, it seems necessary to address the issue not only of how cultural studies ‘knows itself’ (in both senses: i.e., the way it perceives objects and the way it thinks of itself), but also the issue of how cultural studies is itself known.

In this regard, cultural studies is perhaps most often referred to as ‘interdisciplinary’.5 Indeed, in the essay ‘Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies’ (1992) that has also informed this chapter, Stuart Hall clearly insists on the need for cultural studies to be excessive, in the sense of not retreating from any limits, borders or boundaries. Now, a deconstructive comprehension of multiplicity and excess – even and especially an excess of propriety such as this one advocated by Hall – is one that construes it as inevitably introducing alterity (Godzich 1987: 157). Derrida argues that ultimately ‘a monster of fidelity [becomes] the most perverse infidel’ (1987: 24); that too much fidelity becomes a form of infidelity or transgression. (The impossibility of unequivocal self-identity is perhaps among the key insights of deconstruction.) Indeed, if this is true for ‘excessive’ attention to any one thing, then it must clearly become even more palpable in the case of interdisciplinary activity. This is to say, in the eyes of supposedly ‘single’ disciplines, interdisciplines will appear to be less and other than ‘proper’ disciplines. For ‘proper’ mastery or ‘proper comprehension’ cannot and must not ‘comprehend’ too many things, or fold too many things together, too much (Derrida 1981: 159). What ‘too many’ and ‘too much’ are deemed to be will always, of course, be contingent, conventional norms; generally tacit and unarticulated, and more to do with what Mowitt calls a vague ‘feeling of appropriateness deriving from the matrix that bonds the disciples who see themselves as committed to the [intellectual] project that depends on their
cooperation’ (Mowitt 1992: 26–7), rather than something based purely in ‘reason’, ‘rationality’ or ‘logic’.

Accordingly, the excessive interdiscipline’s attempts to attain too much mastery will make it tend to appear (when viewed from the position of the established ‘proper’) as what Girard (1977) would term a ‘monstrous double’ of ‘proper’ academic practice. As such, it is always possible that the interdiscipline may become a viable scapegoat, or, as Lola Young says of the way cultural studies is often viewed, a ‘hate object’ (Young 1999: 3). Of course, any conflicts between the sedim ented, established or traditional disciplines and the new (such as cultural studies and other such ‘new’ interdisciplines) could be construed in many ways: Perhaps conflicts between the faculties amount to skirmishes in a more general conflict between an older and a newer ‘cultural logic’. In such a view, cultural studies may be construed as representing the capitalist postmodern logic of ‘performativity’, in which cultural studies’ success has arisen because, as Bill Readings (1996) contends, in a (university) world governed by the profit motive, it doesn’t matter what is done, taught or researched, as long as it is done ‘excellently’, that is profitably and auditably. Alternatively, or in addition, hostility to cultural studies may simply reflect straightforward resentment of its success, or be an inevitable expression of the problem of disciplinary knowledge saturation, wherein there is no object ‘out there’ that could not be said to be colonised, claimed, or even constituted by and as an object of a particular disciplinary gaze. The limitless academic panoptical injunction for disciplines to ‘know more’, to ‘find out more’ – indeed, to find out everything – could be said to have met its limit or saturation point when looking ‘outside’ immediately amounts to looking at the claimed ‘intellectual property’ of another discipline.

All of this in a sense reaffirms the Lyotardian problem of legitimation in polyvocal postmodernity: the problem of authority and authorisation. Without the validation of some form of recognised authority – as it were, of some kind of ‘father’ – then any entity, any identity, has a problem. To Derrida (commenting on Plato’s discussion of any new or unusual ‘supplement’ or ‘parasite’):

Not to know where one comes from or where one is going, for a discourse with no guarantor, is not to know how to speak at all, to be in a state of infancy. Uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country, [such an] almost insignificant signifier is at everyone’s disposal, can be picked up by both the competent and the incompetent, by those who understand and know what to do with it, and by those who are completely unconcerned...
Derrida is of course ‘literally’ only discussing the Platonic/Socratic specification of the problem with ‘writing’ here. But, as Derrida argues in *Dissemination* and elsewhere, and as seen from Protevi’s account of the politics of deconstruction, what can be understood by ‘writing’ should be massively extended, to include everything from marks on a page to speech, memory, and any form of ‘inscription’, up to and including institutions, their agencies, and therefore, of course, the institutions of disciplines and interdisciplines like cultural studies. In this sense, it is important to regard Derrida’s readings even of the texts of ancient philosophy as studies that uncover primarily political force and consequence (Protevi 2001). In Derrida’s deconstruction of phonocentrism throughout *Dissemination* (1981), that is, connections are established between a thing’s difference from or unintelligibility within a given hegemonic order, and the inevitability of disdainful judgements of it, as well as the tendency to classify the unintelligible/different as ‘unproductive’ (1981: 134). In this regard, Derrida’s deconstructions of phonocentrism, ‘phallogocentricity’, and the values of presence and proper productivity, are also political and politicising delineations of the figure and form of contemporary institutional political polemics, disagreements and antagonisms.

Of course, in *Dissemination*, Derrida reads Plato’s philosophy and his metaphysical mysticism, including discourses about gods discussing new technological inventions (such as ‘writing’). But there are ‘gods’ in the machine of the university; what Derrida calls ‘classical protocols’. These he regards both as potential sources of resistance to change (as in, ‘That’s not how it’s done!’) and as radical democratising’s best chance. As seen earlier, Derrida often optimistically appeals to the ‘classical protocols’ of intellectual rigour, competence, close and sensitive reading, openness to new thought, and so on, with a view to the institutional transformation of the extant status quo (1992; 1992a). Derrida’s optimism rests on a conviction that university protocols might always have a stake in or appeal to something ‘classical’, and that this might always possibly be (what he (1997) calls ‘teleiopoetically’) ‘polemicized’ so as to deploy the rigorous deconstructive questioning towards the democratising transformation of institutions within hegemony. Such a stake in the radical potential of ‘classical protocols’ is construed by Derrida as a force of leverage in the face of other, less than ideal forces, such as the corporate or
capitalist-performative protocols that the likes of Lyotard (1984) and Readings (1996) have famously directed our attention to.

However, in any eventuality, and whatever the form and values of the ‘gods’ of the university at any given time, the Derridean argument is that any *begemon* (leader, guide, prince (Vitanza 1997)) always demands a productivity that it can comprehend and make use of (Young 1992). In this sense, in what might be called the dominant hegemonic context of the contemporary university, it can be seen that if an interdiscipline lies across science, technology, business, or (supplementing Derrida) any permutation of managerio-info-tele-techno-scientific disciplines, then it might always prove its worth in terms of intelligibly worthwhile productivity (Lyotard 1984). As such, any scientific, productive, vocational, economically pragmatic or profit-making interdisciplinary development will tend to appear more ‘acceptable’. But if the interdiscipline is what is called a ‘discursive discipline’, producing nothing more tangible than its own discourse, then it will already be immanently contemptible in the eyes of the ‘properly’ productive disciplines (Young 1992). Furthermore, it should be noted that any ‘unproductive’ interdiscipline will almost automatically risk ‘disdaining’ those closest to itself, especially ‘in times of crisis’. This is because the arts and humanities that interdisciplines like cultural studies constitutively ‘poach’ from can themselves be construed as constituting a threat to the established lines of demarcation and organisation. So, the ‘structural’ position of any new (inter)discipline amounts to the almost automatic, inevitable, pre-programmed running of a gauntlet. ‘In times of crisis’, as far as the (properly productive) sciences are concerned, the excessive (and unproductive) interdiscipline can easily come to be taken to be exemplary or representative of everything bad about the arts and humanities (a ‘Mickey Mouse subject’); evidence of a transgression of their limited remit, of the exceeding of limitations, of posturing or ‘imposturing’—a dangerous or contemptible supplement, happily dispensed with. For the already-established traditional ‘discursive disciplines’, it will already amount to an agitator, or even an impostor, whose irritations could well be done without (insofar as they jeopardise stability). The immanent scapegoat-status of the un- or improperly-productive interdisciplinary might be said to be overdetermined here. As Derrida’s reading in *Dissemination* characterises the plight of such an entity:

That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it. Yet the representative
of the outside is nevertheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside. These parasites were as a matter of course domesticated by the living organism that housed them at its expense. ‘The Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two of these outcasts as scapegoats’. (Derrida 1981: 133)

In the face of the question of what ancient Athenian rituals have to do with cultural studies, it should be reiterated that Derrida is not *merely* discussing Athens or ancient rituals and mythology about ‘writing’, but is rather also delineating what might be called the quasi-transcendental form of the structural ‘reflexes’ pre-programmed into or overdetermined within an exemplarily metaphysical system, one that, to the extent that any contemporary context is similarly metaphysical, could still be said to be effective and pertinent. Or, in other words, Derrida delineates the rhetorico-political dialogical structure of the established vis-à-vis the new – the contexts of its ‘reception’. Accordingly, the minimal coordinates of this metaphysical structurality – coordinates that Derrida discerns again and again throughout his readings of western philosophers (see Protevi 2001) – are encapsulated by Derrida as designed overwhelmingly ‘to keep the outside out’, as ‘this is the inaugural gesture of “logic” itself, of good “sense” insofar as it accords with the self-identity of that which is: being is what it is, the outside is outside and the inside [is] inside’ (1981: 128). Thus, the unproductive or improperly productive inter-discipline can be blamed or hated for any number of crimes: for apparently being a poisoner, beguiler, defiler, free-loader or parasite; or what Derrida calls, taking up the ambiguous and ambivalent term used (doubly) by Plato, *pharmakos*: an ambiguous or ambivalent necessary evil, a corrupting element that necessarily intrudes into the body proper. ‘The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat’, Derrida tells us (130).

Now, such a supplement, such a new discipline or interdisciplinary entity, will only have been admitted into the institution because of what it promises: new knowledge, more knowledge – more of the same, but differently. The problem is that establishing new knowledge also introduces alterity and challenges the instituted norm. As such, the ‘challenger’ can be deemed sophist, equivocator, and simulator (Derrida 1981: 68), and always dices with expulsion (Derrida 1981: 130). This risk remains real and pressing until such a time as hegemonic transformations might consolidate its intelligibility or
validity, or that is, might make it come to be a representative or respecter of ‘classical protocols’ themselves. As Derrida puts it elsewhere, ‘stabilization supposes the passage through an ordeal which takes time’ (Derrida 1997: 15): ‘It takes time to reach a stability or a certainty which wrenches itself from time. It takes time to do without time’ (1997: 17). In other words, it takes time and effort to seem timeless, permanent, natural, proper, and enduring. This is the same as saying that the new might become hegemonic, part of the hegemonic structure, established as a ‘proper’ part of the establishment. The nature or orientation of this political transformation is undecidable. But it has little to do with ‘conscious intention’. It is a politicality effectively in excess of the subject, of intention, and of ‘political will’, related more to reiteration, to the ‘law’ of ‘repeating without knowing’ (1981: 75) virtual, ‘citational’ relations (1981: 98).

As such, it should be clear that the *de facto* politicality of knowledge production obliges that those subjects focused on matters of the political and of responsibility should proceed with an acute attentiveness to the matter of their own – knowledge’s own – constitutively political institution, in a sense just as thoroughly as political and cultural studies seek to attend to urgent acute or chronic political issues ‘outside the university’, ‘in the real world’. The ‘inside-outside’ relation is considerably more complex and consequential than is often acknowledged. As the ineradicable ground of any academic polemic or antagonism is the premise of the university, ‘our’ premises, so any account of cultural studies that disavows or forgets its perhaps hyper-academic obligations fundamentally misrecognises its institutional situation. That this bind to the academy seems to foreclose the possibility that cultural studies has any properly direct, correct, neutral, or immediate (and ethico-politically innocent or simple) relation to the ‘worldly’ may seem frustrating. Yet it enables engaged academics seeking the logic or orientation of ‘university responsibility’ to figure ‘the world’ as no longer somehow simply ‘out there’ to be ‘naturally’ known and ‘simply’ intervened in. This thereby enables cultural and politically-orientated work to grasp more adequately the location and relation of intellectual work, in a way that need not produce an ultimately disabling, totalising ‘theory of everything’. Such grand theories, as Jameson points out, tend to construe any and every ‘us’ either as being self-determining and heroic or (as is more usual) insignificant and unempowered in the face of the grand scheme of things and the forces operative in the world (Jameson 2002: 567). The post-Marxist theory of hegemony, however, when supplemented
further with Mowitt’s attention to the logic and role of disciplinarity and of the production of ‘disciplinary objects’ and with a thorough-going attention to the insights of Derridean deconstruction, rather opens up possibilities for a reorganisation of political and cultural studies’ interventional aspirations and orientations.

Acknowledging and attempting to proceed in the light of an awareness of the institutional basis of academia does not constitute an irrelevant digression into unrelated or narcissistic ‘theory’, but rather represents an important starting point to a much needed reconceptualisation of practice and intervention. The question of the way to conceptualise politics, political practice, political causality and consequentiality, focusing specifically on the question of what the relationship of academic discourse on the political and on intervention is to politics animates the following chapters. Chapter 2 develops and explores the theme of the tensions and conflicts between what Mowitt calls the textual paradigm of (deconstructive) cultural analysis and the discourse paradigm of (deconstructive) post-Marxism, expanding on the problems, possibilities, obligations and limitations of both approaches, when the aim is determining and establishing intervention. Clarifying this sets the scene for a discussion in Chapter 3 of the key influential and orientative theoretical paradigms, as exemplified by those of post-Marxism, of what the political relation of theory to practice actually is for post-Marxism and cultural studies. However, the word ‘and’ in the phrase ‘post-Marxism and cultural studies’ actually obscures the fact that the nature of their relation is far from simple, settled, or straightforward. What must now be clarified further, in order to interrogate the question of determining and establishing politically consequential intervention, are the ways in which the ‘and’ of cultural studies and post-Marxism is actually a ‘versus’. What relates them and draws them together is the very thing that separates them and draws them into conflict. The key locus of this conflict is deconstruction: post-Marxism and cultural studies are both overwhelmingly deconstructive, but each deconstructs differently, which overdetermines their different relations not only to Marxism and to politics, but also to the question of orientation and to the political implication of university responsibility.

Notes

1. Overdetermination is a term that derives from Freud which was used by Althusser (1970; 1971). Laclau and Mouffe deconstruct
Althusser by pointing out his simultaneous use and (problematic) limitation of ‘overdetermination’ and its implications for Marxian thinking. The sense in which overdetermination refers to a multiplicity of determining factors frustrates the classical Marxist belief in the singular determination of everything in the last instance by the economy. See also Laplanche and Pontalis (1988: 292) for its psychoanalytic and potentially socio-political pertinence.

2. This suggests, therefore, that potentially anything at all might well be or become political, according to one possible interpretation of this insight, wherein because the ultimate significance, consequences, status and effect of anything might always possibly turn out to have been ‘in the post’ (as the Derrida of The Post Card (1987) or Resistances of Psychoanalysis (1998a) might have put it, in the awkward-sounding future anterior tense: Derrida uses this tense because it cannot be known in advance what anything may in the future turn out to be, or to have been and to have done), therefore anything might at some point in the future come to constitute or to have constituted a political intervention. The reasons why subscription to such an interpretation is unsatisfactory are engaged in the following argument.

3. Derrida (1992) has deconstructed such arguments as this, pointing out that there is no simple ‘inside’ to the university. He undertakes this in order to destabilize certain basically Kant-derived or Kantian-esque forms of thinking (See Derrida’s 1992 reading of Kant 1979). Nevertheless, because Derrida’s argument can be appropriated as a shield, shelter or alibi deployable to avoid the task of auto-critique by those who accept it (as in: ‘we don’t need to worry about what we are doing, because Derrida has argued that academic work always already automatically and consequentially reaches beyond the university and out into the real world’), I want to resist accepting this in any straightforward sense. If Derrida unsettled a complacent element in thinking (‘this is merely theoretical, academic, and inside the university; other things are practical, real, reaching out, consequential and political’), it is important not to assume that anything and everything said and done in any context, such as the university, is somehow inevitably, equally, and predictably consequential.

4. I use the words ‘first’ and ‘primarily’, etc., here and throughout, not in ignorance of the deconstructive logic of the supplement, or the constitutive character of the secondary, but rather in order to pose as primary what is so often deemed secondary.
5. Derrida even once *equated* (or conflated) ‘interdisciplinarity’ and ‘cultural studies’, and provocatively deemed them to be ‘often’ somewhat ‘confused’ and ‘good-for-everything’ concepts: ‘This deconstructive task of the Humanities to come will not let itself be contained within the traditional limits of the departments that today belong, by their very status, to the Humanities. These Humanities to come will cross disciplinary borders without, all the same, dissolving the specificity of each discipline into what is called, often in a very confused way, interdisciplinarity or into what is lumped with another good-for-everything concept, “cultural studies”’ (Derrida 2001: 50).

6. For Sokal and Bricmont (1998), it is evidently ‘excess’ that they have the most distaste for, and this always – as they themselves keep saying – arises because they can’t comprehend it. At every step their argument runs: (a) this representation of ‘science’ is an abuse, which (b) we don’t understand, so (c) the author too does not understand it, therefore (d) it is ‘meaningless’. Despite their declarations about unintelligibility and meaninglessness, they nevertheless proceed to draw ‘meanings’ from this ‘meaninglessness’. (See Derrida 1978: 54; See also Lyotard 1988.)
Two Texts of Cultural Studies

As introduced in the previous chapter, ‘textuality’ is often regarded ambivalently, as a dubious achievement, one sometimes even pejoratively held to be directly related to sheer ideology (Bewes 2001; Mowitt 1992: 12–13). As was also seen in that chapter, Stuart Hall, too, views textuality extremely ambivalently. However, John Mowitt unambiguously embraces the challenge of this ambivalence, asking, ‘Would it not make more sense to acknowledge that the textual model is internally fissured by a conflicted relation to disciplinariness, and that the literary appropriation of this model which has indeed taken place in history has obscured, or at least contained, this conflictual relation?’ (Mowitt 1992: 14) For Mowitt, the text is ‘irreducibly entangled in disciplinary politics and not merely as the articulation of an effort to reorganize disciplinary boundaries . . . but as a critical practice seeking to problematize the cultural work effected by the disciplines . . . Or, put another way, the text must be made to oppose the discipline(s) that made it’ (14). In this regard, Stuart Hall’s position surely coincides affiliatively with Mowitt’s, because for Hall it is inestimably important that cultural studies maintain a ‘real critical and deconstructive edge’ in its awareness of its institutional context. For Hall, cultural studies must ‘remain a critical and deconstructive project [that] is always self-reflexively deconstructing itself’ (Hall 1996d: 150). In terms of the importance of a certain (anti)institutionally directed deconstruction, then, Hall and Mowitt are broadly in agreement. Furthermore, in terms of cultural studies’ relation to
post-Marxism, both Mowitt and Hall agree that there are important intellectual and political reasons for cultural studies to hesitate before entirely going along with the post-Marxist discourse paradigm of Laclau and Mouffe. Cultural studies and post-Marxism have significant disagreements, they contend, and both Hall and Mowitt insist that the nature and the stakes of the disagreements congregate around the matter of politics, intervention, orientation and its consequences. However, Hall and Mowitt’s criticisms of post-Marxism differ somewhat, as do their proposed solutions to the problems of post-Marxism. This chapter will therefore engage more fully with these disagreements and the intellectual and ethico-political issues that they open up, beginning first with Hall and then moving into Mowitt’s readings.

**Stuart Hall’s Closure versus Post-Marxist Discourse**

Stuart Hall largely subscribes to the post-Marxist deconstruction of Marxism’s class essentialism, economic reductionism and determinism; attesting that ‘I think, for example, it’s possible to get a long way by talking about what is sometimes called the “economic” as operating discursively’ (Hall 1996d: 145). His key problem with Laclauian post-Marxism, though, is this:

> The question is, can one, does one, follow that argument to the point that there is nothing to practice but its discursive aspect? I think that’s what [Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985)] does. It is a sustained philosophical effort, really, to conceptualize *all* practices as nothing but discourses, and all historical agents as discursively constituted subjectivities, to talk about positionalities but never positions, and only to look at the way concrete individuals can be interpellated in different subject positions. The book is thus a bold attempt to discover what a politics of such a theory might be. All of that I think is important . . . I like Laclau when he’s struggling to find a way out of reductionism and beginning to reconceptualize Marxist categories in the discursive mode . . . But in *Hegemony*, there is no reason why anything is or isn’t potentially articulatable with anything. The critique of reductionism has apparently resulted in the notion of society as a totally open discursive field.

I would put it polemically in the following form: [Hegemony and Socialist Strategy] thinks that the world, social practice, is language, whereas I want to say that the social operates *like* a language. (Hall 1996d: 146)

So, although Hall sees the work of Laclau and Mouffe as being ‘quite heroic’ (148) in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, nevertheless he feels that there are several problems with their approach. All of
these problems are said to relate to political consequence, and all relate to Hall’s perception of discourse theory’s ‘textuality’, or ‘textualism’. The first problem boils down to what Colin Sparks calls Laclau and Mouffe’s definitive and ‘radical break’ from ‘any notion of determination’ (Sparks 1996: 91) in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For, Laclau and Mouffe’s conclusions about determination are that:

It is not the case that the field of the economy is a self-regulated space subject to endogenous laws; nor does there exist a constitutive principle for social agents which can be fixed in an ultimate class core; nor are class positions the necessary location of historical interests . . . even for Gramsci, the ultimate core of the hegemonic subject’s identity is constituted at a point external to the space it articulates: the logic of hegemony does not unfold all its deconstructive effects on the theoretical terrain of classical Marxism. We have witnessed, however, the fall of this last redoubt of class reductionism, insofar as the very unity and homogeneity of class subjects has split into a set of precariously integrated positions which, once the thesis of the neutral character of the productive forces is abandoned, cannot be referred to any necessary point of future unification. The logic of hegemony, as a logic of articulation and contingency, has come to determine the very identity of hegemonic subjects. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 85; also quoted by Sparks 1996: 91)

As Sparks points out, in the face of this, Stuart Hall ‘has expressed hesitations about following this logic through to its conclusion’ (91). Indeed ‘Hall wished to continue to argue for the continuing relevance of the idea of determination’ (95). Daryl Slack paraphrases Hall’s problem: with the post-Marxist concept of discourse it becomes too ‘easy to leave behind any notion that anything exists outside of discourse. Struggle is reduced to struggle in discourse, where “there is no reason why anything is or isn’t potentially articulatable with anything” and society becomes “a totally open discursive field”’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 120). The issue central to all of this, for Hall, is precisely political:

the question of political inflection is a very real problem with a lot of people who have taken the full discursive route. But I don’t think I would advance that critique against Laclau and Mouffe. [Their work] *does* try to constitute a new politics out of that position. In that sense, it’s very responsible and original. It says, let’s go through the discursive door but then, we still have to act politically. Their problem isn’t politics but history. They have let slip the question of the historical forces which have produced the present, and which continue to function as constraints and determinations on discursive articulation. (Hall 1996d: 147–8)
The problem with Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism, then, is that ‘they tend to slip from the requirement to recognize the constraints of existing historical formations [because] they don’t reintegrate other levels of determination into the analysis’ (Hall 1996d: 148):

You don’t see them adding, adding, adding, the different levels of determination; you see them producing the concrete philosophically, and somewhere in there is, I think, the kind of analytic slippage I’m talking about. That’s not to say that it’s theoretically impossible to develop a more adequate set of political positions within their theoretical framework, but somehow, the route they have taken allows them to avoid the pressure of doing so. The structuring force, the lines of tendency stemming from the implantation of capital, for example, simply disappears. (Hall 1996d: 148)

The problems, however embryonic, that are discernable within Laclau and Mouffe, Hall argues, are actually very serious because their work is and will continue to be influential: ironically, their avowedly politicised political theory produces the possibility that future work (by others, at least) may easily cease to be politicised, in various ways, but particularly in losing an awareness and attention to the effects of the economy (however ‘discursively’ construed). Hall’s concern is that ‘discourse analysis’ might all too easily become totally disarticulated either from any sense of economico-political determination (however complexly reconceived) or from a post-Marxist or leftist political position. His concern is that post-Marxist discourse analysis lets us ‘off the hook’ vis-à-vis political responsibility. Such a disarticulation of discourse analysis from attending to ‘historical forces’ risks becoming what Hall calls ‘a reductionism upward, rather than a reductionism downward, as economism was’ (Hall 1996d: 146). Indeed, according to Daryl Slack, Hall views Laclau’s insistently theoretical and philosophical tendency to engage in ‘producing the concrete philosophically’ rather than through historical analysis to be a tendency that in foregrounding theory actually has a reciprocal and negative ‘backgrounding effect on the very politics that played such a crucial role in Laclau’s work to begin with’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 120). Indeed, such a divergence of orientation and interest can arguably be clearly discerned when Laclau argues for instance that once we are aware of the discursive constitution of identities and agencies we therefore should ‘move from purely sociologistic and descriptive account[s] of the concrete agents involved in hegemonic operations to a formal analysis of the logics involved’ (Laclau 2000: 53). This is quite a different kind of work to Hall’s advocated ‘adding, adding,
Laclau contends that we gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilization. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate. (Laclau 2000: 53)

For Hall, this is precisely not the ‘really important task’. For him, what is important is the ‘conjunctural analysis’ of the moment. As Sparks reminds us, ‘the analysis of the historical moment is the subject of Hall’s only major work published during the 1980s’, and although ‘the theoretical point of reference which Hall used to argue for this position [on Thatcherism] is explicitly drawn from Laclau’ (Sparks 1996: 95), the interest lies in understanding the conjunctural moment and working out how to intervene, rather than merely seeking out some perhaps universal logic of conjunctural formation. Thus, for Daryl Slack, ‘Hall’s model of strategic intervention is not then limited to a kind of theoretically-driven Derridean deconstruction of difference and the construction of discursive possibility, but a theoretically-informed practice of rearticulating relations among the social forces that constitute articulated structures in specific historical conjunctures’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 122). The problem with the post-Marxist discursive approach, then, is not only that, according to Hall, it sees ‘nothing to practice but its discursive aspect’ (Hall 1996d: 146), but also that it sees the ‘really important task’ of politicised intellectuals to be purely logical, formalising, and analytical. The problem or challenge, then, is to determine the status of this orientation, an orientation that claims that the need ‘to understand the logics’ is the task of the politicised intellectual. Perhaps there are good reasons and justifications for arguing that a proper or more rigorously thoroughgoing, exhaustive and complete cultural studies project should – ‘logically’ – constitute itself as distinctly different in orientation from the discourse analysis approach of Laclau and Mouffe.

In a similar respect, Gayatri Spivak discusses what she calls the ‘canny comment’ of Hindess and Hirst: that in theoretical and other such intellectual work there is always a risk that ‘concepts are deployed in ordered successions to produce [the] effects [of analysis and solutions, but that] this order is the order created by the practice of theoretical work itself; it is guaranteed by no necessary “logic” or
“dialectic” nor by any necessary mechanism of correspondence with the real itself’ (Hindess and Hirst quoted in Spivak 1999: 316). In other words, the problem with the purely logical approach is that it risks introducing the tendency – a tendency that Hall identifies in Laclau and Mouffe – ‘to slip from the requirement to recognize the constraints of existing historical formations’ (Hall 1996d: 148). Of course, Laclau has and would always dispute this criticism (Laclau 2005), especially given his argument that although he considers culture and society to be a ‘hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible decisions’, this ‘does not mean that any time everything that is logically possible becomes, automatically, an actual political possibility. There are inchoated possibilities which are going to be blocked, not because of any logical restriction, but as a result of the historical contexts in which the representative institutions operate’ (Laclau 1996: 50; see also Chapter 3). Accordingly, Laclau can dismiss this criticism, and claim that the discursive approach implies attention to variable historical forces of determination. However, the Hallian rejoinder would remain that such a nod in the direction of ‘historical contexts’ is a far cry from actually engaging in their analysis. In a sort of ironic reversal, one might say that whilst in the past Hall appropriated the Laclauian insight that cultural and political analyses should no longer be structured ‘around entities – class, class struggle, capitalism – which are largely fetishes dispossessed of any precise meaning’ (Laclau 2000: 201), now it has come to be the case that Laclau’s own logic could be said to have come to produce theoretical discourses that are perhaps ‘largely fetishes dispossessed of any precise meaning’ – endlessly talking about ‘position-alities but never positions’ (Hall 1996d: 146).

The issue here remains that of the question of the orientation (or paradigm) of analysis, what it can do, what the paradigm allows or obliges one to see, value, engage with; or where it ‘takes’ one’s work. For Hall, Laclauian post-Marxism takes work away from intervention and into what (in the next chapter) Richard Rorty will call ‘over-philosophication’. To reiterate Hall, this is ‘not to say that it’s theoretically impossible to develop a more adequate set of political positions within their theoretical framework, but somehow, the route [Laclau and Mouffe] have taken allows them to avoid the pressure of doing so’ (Hall 1996d: 148). Of course, Hall perhaps ought to concede that, as Daryl Slack argues, ‘when Laclau is read without losing grip on the ensemble of forces, by attributing to them something more like equal weight, without privileging the discursive, the [notion] of
[discursive] articulation has greater possibilities’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 121; see also Laclau 2005). What is distinctive about Hall, Daryl Slack adds, is that ‘by insisting on the specificity of practices in different kinds of relations to discourse, Hall contests the move that Laclau and other post-Althusserians have taken’ (122). In short, Hall questions the post-Marxist paradigm’s assertion that ‘there is nothing to practice but its discursive aspect’ (Hall 1996d: 146). The issue of ‘the discursive’, then, clearly constitutes a point of ambivalence for Hallian cultural studies. Hall wants to resist the potentially infinite slippage that the concept introduces, because of the debilitating effects he contends that this has on one’s political interventional abilities: recall his claim that ‘if we are concerned to maintain a politics, it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier’ (Hall 1996b: 258).

Hall’s solution to discursive drift of all kinds is strategically to stake an ‘arbitrary closure’ (1996: 264), to try ‘to return the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below’ (264). Rather than the theoretical fluency of post-Marxism, Hall wants cultural studies to strive to ‘connect’. He contends that:

The aim of a theoretically-informed political practice must surely be to bring about or construct the articulation between social or economic forces and those forms of politics and ideology which might lead them in practice to intervene in history in a progressive way – an articulation which has to be constructed through practice precisely because it is not guaranteed by how those forces are constituted in the first place. (Hall, quoted in Daryl Slack 1996: 122–3)

The question is, though, what is it to ‘construct the articulation’? What is it for ‘academic practice’ to ‘connect’, ‘interrupt’ or ‘intervene’? What is the logic, or what are the determinant conjunctural forces, governing the nature of the effects of cultural studies or post-Marxism, as political practice? In order to develop an answer, the next section will reintroduce and discuss John Mowitt’s concept of the ‘disciplinary object’ (first discussed in Chapter 1), in order to further analyse the issue of the political consequentiality of academic activity.

The Political Disciplinary Object

In order to elucidate the notion of the ‘disciplinary object’, it will be helpful to consider an example given in Glyn Daly’s edifying reading
of ‘Globalisation and the Constitution of Political Economy’ (2002). Therein, without ever actually using the term ‘disciplinary object’ (which is not yet a widely known term and concept), Daly nevertheless shows very powerfully what disciplinary objects are and do. He begins with a consideration of the putatively different perspectives of Marxist and liberal versions of political economy, observing that:

While the liberal and Marxist versions of political economy construct the ‘objectivity’ of the economy in characteristic ways, and are totally different in their prescriptions, they, nevertheless, share the same problematic. In both cases, the economy is an a priori unity whose internal logics, or laws, remain constant in every social formation. In other words, the economy exists as a conceptual model that can be specified in advance, an underlying structure of rationality around which a causal topography of the social may be logically constructed. Emancipation and moral progress were rendered dependent on a particular economic model: the free market (for liberalism); the socialisation of the means of production (for Marxism). In this respect, both types of political economy tend to be presented, by their respective advocates, as ultimate rational accomplishments embodying characteristic ends of history. (Daly 2002: 113)

This sharing of the same problematic, the problematic of political economy, amounts to sharing something of the same paradigm, because, as Mowitt explains, ‘disciples, that is, the members of a discipline, must have a framework within which even their intellectual differences take on significance, and this is what a paradigm puts in place . . . The point is that even for disagreements at the hermeneutic level to arise there must be an enabling framework that permits the disputing factions to quarrel over the same thing’ (Mowitt 1992: 26, 28). What Daly’s account of the sharing of the same problematic under the same organising paradigm foregrounds is the way that both Marxism and liberalism construct a notion of the economy as an objective entity, presupposing it, imposing it, constructing it, and imputing or projecting various values onto it. So this is the first sense in which ‘the economy’ can be said to function as a disciplinary object. Implicitly for Daly here, and explicitly in Mowitt’s account, such disciplinary objects are at once not necessarily ‘real’ but nevertheless they have real ‘effects’. As Mowitt explains, ‘the object of a discipline is not necessarily real, it is a regulative fiction that nonetheless really works to orient research within a particular field – research which may actually lead to interventions in the real that constitute reality as such’ (1992: 27). Now, this is not to be read as the claim that nothing is real,
or that academic knowledge is fictional, that truth does not exist, or anything of the sort. Rather, this is the invitation to recall that history is littered with countless real paradigms that have purported to study, understand or organise real objects in real ways. So, therefore, disciplinary objects are concepts, entities, identities, fields, and so on, that are not necessarily real, but that are held to be so, and that are as such socially, culturally, politically, commercially, etc., influential. Another way of grasping this is in terms of the Cartesian Ontological Argument, wherein the existence of the concept of something is taken to be proof of the existence of the thing conceptualised – such as, for instance, unicorns, fairies, God (as in Descartes), aliens, human nature, etc., or, as in the case of Glyn Daly’s study, the objectivity and logicality of ‘the economy’.

Regarding this ‘object’, and the related notion of the ‘economic structure’, Daly makes the classic deconstructive move of introducing an element of undecidability. He points out the impossibility of establishing a clear limit, a clear and pure ‘inside’ to a structure, and a clear and pure ‘outside’ to it. Thus, Daly reveals an undecidability right at the heart of political economy: namely, the forgotten oxymoronic character of the very formulation ‘political economy’, or rather, the exclusion of the political from the putative structure called the economy, in that ‘the notion of political economy (in all its variants) has tended to eradicate the dimension of the political’: ‘Through routine use, the notion of political economy has tended to become sedimented within a tradition in which it has been made synonymous with generalised ideas about objective interests and positivistic truth – thereby concealing the traces of its own philosophico-discursive origins’ (113). By unearthing this concealed oxymoronic aspect of the formulation ‘political economy’, and thereby revealing that an economic ‘structure’ is rather more the result of a (political) decision and is therefore the product of an imposition, first conceptual and then of real policy, rather than a neutral reflection of necessary objectivity, Daly is able to argue that the belief in the objectivity of the economy is actually a violent ethico-political imposition. He gives this striking example:

The liberal idealisation of the free market has been at the root of some of the most authoritarian and inhumane political measures taken against the poor and excluded. One of the most notorious examples is that of the Irish potato ‘famine’ where, under Whig prime minister, Lord Russell, and in accordance with market orthodoxy, food continued to be exported from
Ireland while a nation starved. While anti-Irish prejudice played a part in this disaster, it was underpinned by an economistic paradigm wherein a laissez-faire strategy was seen as the only ‘rational’ response. The overriding concern was to secure the long-term optimisation of prosperity and employment through a vigorous export-orientated economy. To depart from the ‘invisible hand’ approach would have been perceived as immoral and irrational. Far from a pathology of racist motivation, the tragedy of the Irish famine was, rather, the result of an economistic conception of the good.

The response of contemporary liberals to such issues as underdevelopment, genocidal conflict and global poverty is that more capitalist modernisation is required. This is indicative of the liberal economistic myth in which the free market is portrayed as a universal panacea and as the very foundation of a holistic and emancipated society – indeed, the foundation for the final society as the outcome of history . . . (2002: 116)

As compelling as this account is, however, one must nevertheless still hesitate before accepting this as (if) truth. For even paradigm-knowledge, or ‘knowledge of knowledge’ (Derrida 1992; 1987: 311), is no less contingent than any other knowledge. So even though any invocation of a paradigm might seem to imply invoking knowledge fully known (full ‘knowability’), the possibility of complete knowledge is menaced by a constitutive impossibility that is often overlooked, a fundamental contingency that scuppers the possibility that any paradigm simply does the job of ‘explaining’ anything in either a natural, neutral or a fully adequate sense. In other words, wherever one tries to signify a fully intelligible, fully present and self-present entity or system, this is enabled by something like a second ‘structure’, one that is never fully knowable. One might call it ‘unconscious’, ‘hegemonic’ or the ‘nonconceptual order’ on which the ‘conceptual order’ is articulated (Derrida 1977) – the constitutive outside, excess, or incommensurable excluded of ‘structure’.

Daly’s argument, interpretations, and conclusions are perhaps therefore necessarily contestable. Yet it is not the point or the intention to contest them here. For, vis-à-vis the problematic of the textual versus the discursive, or indeed cultural studies versus post-Marxism, John Mowitt insists that ‘the crucial point is not to challenge disciplinary readings simply by replacing them’. Rather, ‘antidisciplinary research requires that readings reach from within artefacts to the paradigms that govern their interpretation and beyond these paradigms to the structures of disciplinary power that support them’ (1992: 216). The first point to note is that paradigms, even those that include an acknowledgement of textuality, or which have
acquired the ability to ‘view things as texts’, nevertheless police their borders, delimit the potential political effects of rounding on their own constitution, and in effect work as an inoculation or vaccination against the radically deconstructive implications that a fuller unleashing or ‘application’ of a textual paradigm would precipitate (Derrida 1974: 7). Something immanent to the text constitutes the possibility for a politics of antidisciplinarity. It is this that must be scrutinised and worked upon if cultural studies and post-Marxism are to take on the political in a sense arguably more radical than post-Marxism has yet to acknowledge or attempt. Mowitt calls the politically enlivening antidisciplinary force of the textual paradigm ‘intratextuality’:

antidisciplinarity [seeks] to oppose disciplinary reason by linking the texture of an artefact to the institutionally mediated social forces that set its limits as a particular embodiment of textuality. The establishment of such a linkage presupposes the ability to gauge how social forces operate in the constitution of borders which, by definition, bring different practices and agendas into relation with one another. In the final analysis this is what is decisive about the notion of intratextuality. Without it we gain access only to the comparatively homogeneous tissue of intertextual references that constitutes the hermeneutical field of a particular textual example. With it one can pose questions that bear on the institutional maintenance of the hermeneutical field as such – questions which quickly center upon the political problems of how institutions are constituted, reproduced, and transformed . . . Insofar as [any] artefact is meaningful to a particular social group, it is because its members continue to support the disciplinary structures (many of which are not ‘merely’ academic) which read the artefact on their terms.

. . . What antidisciplinarity thus depends upon is a notion of reading that understands how its specificity as a practice derives from the institutional field which surrounds it. Since this means that all readings have institutional implications, isn’t it time that we began reading it so as to undermine the institutions of disciplinary power at the very points where they have typically reproduced themselves with the greatest efficiency? Those who insist that such an aim is better realized by mobilizing the disenfranchised fail to see that ‘we’ (Left academics) are to be counted among the disenfranchised – even if, by virtue of our professional status, ‘we’ stand further away from the centers of misery and suffering. Why not labor to make education into an openly insurgent practice and break the hold that the vocational or professionally oriented disciplines have had on the commerce between the university and society? In this way we ‘redeem’ (as Benjamin liked to say) the text, and we make its emergence worthwhile. (Mowitt 1992: 214–15, 218)
Now, Daly’s discourse analysis is particularly illuminating here, not just because it conveys in a clear sense the real effects of disciplinary objects in wider discourse; but also because it exemplifies the tendency within post-Marxism to engage with blatantly ‘serious’ macro-political phenomena. The question, though, is that of the work that such work, with such a focus, might itself do. Both Mowitt and Gary Hall (2002) problematise the necessity and indeed even the validity of cultural studies having to elaborate itself in and as serious and proper political analyses of the political dimensions of cultural discourses. However, there does seem to be a strong compulsion to equate ‘discoursing about politics’ or ‘the political’ with being political or being responsible, or with actually intervening or doing politics. This is a problematic conflation that, as will be argued in the conclusion, has skewed post-Marxism and cultural studies away from effective intervention.

**Textual versus Discourse Analysis**

Taking quite a different stance, and as first discussed in the previous chapter, John Mowitt demonstrates that it was textuality that enabled the post-Marxist notion of discourse. He shows, through a genealogy, ‘that the historical institutionalization of textuality conditioned the emergence of discourse’ (15) – that the development of the concept of ‘discourse’ relied on the ‘prior institutionalization of textuality’ (16). To clarify this, Mowitt quotes from ‘Populist Rupture and Discourse’ (Laclau 1980), in which Laclau specifies how the post-Marxist term ‘discursive’ is to be properly understood. At this point, the relevant passage deserves to be quoted in full:

> By ‘discursive’ I do not mean that which refers to ‘text’ narrowly defined, but to the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which the social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble which constitutes society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such. This means that the discursive does not constitute a superstructure (since it is the very condition of all social practice) or, more precisely, that all social practice constitutes itself as such insofar as it produces meaning. Because there is nothing specifically social which is constituted outside the discursive, it is clear that the non-discursive is not opposed to the discursive as if it were a matter of two separate levels. History and society are an infinite text. (Laclau 1980: 87; quoted in Mowitt 1992: 15)
Mowitt stresses that there is a lot that is of great value here, as there is throughout all of Laclau’s work; particularly insofar as Laclau’s approach attests to what Mowitt calls the ‘triumph of a hermeneutic (as opposed to a positivistic) approach to society’. This is an approach that bears ‘testimony to a development within cultural criticism, whose roots are often traced to the work of Michel Foucault, in which discourse is made consubstantial with sociality as such’ (16). The important advance over positivism in this position is that, ‘from the vantage point of post-Marxism people no longer simply communicate, they arise as “the people” within the practice of communication’ (16). This, Mowitt argues, is why Laclau ‘moves to dissociate this conception of discourse from the “narrow” sense of the text’: ‘he is explicitly attempting to evoke this constitutive aspect of the concept [of discourse] since the linguistic text is, after all, [too easily viewed as] something produced by a subject who precedes its production’ (16). However, aside from these important advances, Mowitt sees some problems attendant to the move from text to discourse. The most significant is the way that this ‘enabling gesture of post-Marxism’ at once clearly and constitutively relies upon and yet ‘appears nevertheless to subordinate the textual to the discursive’ (15). That is to say, in Mowitt’s words, Laclau’s ‘gesture at one level testifies to the prior institutionalization of textuality’, but it also ‘obscures an important tension between the discursive and the textual’ (16). The problem with post-Marxist discourse analysis is that ‘cultural analyses conducted from this angle tend to locate particular embodiments of discourse, that is, discourses whose properties and functions are then detailed’ as if ‘a particular type of phenomena presents itself such that it can become the focus of cultural studies’ (16–17). This approach is limited and limiting because ‘what is clearly not emphasized here is the status of discourse as a disciplinary object, a paradigm that organizes the way cultural research is designed, legitimated, and conducted’. The disciplinary object of discourse, contends Mowitt, derives from and reduces the interdisciplinarity but ultimately therefore ‘antidisciplinary profile’ (14) of textuality.

So, the political dimensions of textuality, ‘textual politics’, relate to less than consciously explicit matters of institution and institutionalisation. In one regard, then, this means that in reading or interpreting anything (which, because everything becomes textual once one starts to interpret/read it, means any text) (Derrida 1974: 158; 1981: 43, 328), it must be acknowledged that the literality of any ‘letter’ or any ‘message’ ever received and taken to be the ‘explicit message’, is itself
an effect produced and imposed by an instituted mode of reading (Derrida: 1987, 81; 1981: 75, 112, 203, 206; Godzich: 1987, 156; Mowitt: 1992, 17–18). Whilst the basic semi-semiotic interpretation of deconstruction, that one ‘final’ or ‘proper’ meaning is ultimately impossible (it is deferred, it differs, it keeps slipping, etc.) can be taken as read, it remains the case that final or proper meanings are attempted all the time. The deconstructive lesson that the condition of possibility for something is also, by the same token, the condition of its impossibility, and vice versa, must be remembered. So, the fact that final signifieds, proper meanings, etc., are impossible is what also necessitates and enables their constant attempted production, reproduction and attempted institution or imposition (Derrida 1981: 296). For, contrary to the common sense of the most popular kind of deconstruction – ‘deconstructionism’ – the impossibility of ever naturally, immediately, spontaneously and universally receiving anything like a stable set of signifieds or proper meanings does not mean that these things ‘don’t exist’, but rather that they must therefore be imposed, wherever such closure is deemed necessary (Derrida 1992a: 197–9, 204, 206; 1996: 84). John Protevi has expressed this in these Derridean terms, arguing that ‘everything’ is (in) a ‘general text’ of ‘force and signification’, meaning that ‘meaning’, sense, *making sense*, entail manipulating forces and exerting pressure and power: sense is *made* (Protevi 2001: 40, 63–5). It doesn’t just happen. The explicit message, the literal meaning, etc., is institutionally constructed: convention is constitutive, *institution* conditions interpretation. Without the imposition of some kind of stability (the post-Marxists call this facility the erection of nodal ‘points de capiton’ enabling predication (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112)), no one could ever agree or, indeed, as Mowitt makes clear, dispute. No phenomenon simply ‘presents itself’, replete with its natural, proper, unequivocal, inevitable interpretation, meaning, or truth. It is determined by what Derrida calls an institution; what Mowitt calls a paradigm.

Indeed, this is one of the key issues on which Laclau, Mowitt, Derrida and others all basically concur. Yet it nevertheless remains the locus or generative matrix of a key disagreement (in Rancière’s (1999) sense of using the same terms but meaning different things by them and therefore effectively speaking *past* each other). For, whereas on the one hand, for the post-Marxists, there simply are discourses ‘out there’ which present themselves to be known by us ‘in here’, for Mowitt on the other hand, the notion of ‘discourses out there’ is itself a disciplinary construction – and a reductive one at that, insofar as the
theory of discourse does not theorise itself as discourse. That is to say, perhaps all within cultural studies, deconstruction and post-Marxism might be able to concur on the contingent institutional-political point, but disagreements and differences arise between them, devolving on the extent to which the ramifications of this perspective are acknowledged and pursued. To reiterate, the point is that whenever anyone says anything explicit about anything – in short, whenever there is some kind of communally intelligible ‘explicit message’ or ‘signified’ at all – then this ‘message’, and at the same time the community which believes it receives it (Derrida 1987: 4, 5, 33, 81; 1998a: 40, 64), are both only possible by virtue of the institutional constructs through which both the message and the community reciprocally arise as such. At the every least these are conventions of a presupposed and imposed determination of what clear, proper or valid ‘communication’ is: what genre, mode or manner, protocols of clarity, of allusion, citation, reference, preferred ways of constructing or referring to referents etc., are acceptable, or even legible or intelligible (Mowitt 1992: 16–17; Readings 1996: 181–2). Invoking a related vocabulary, one might say this is what Wittgensteinian language-games also ‘do’: they produce communities. It is what Judith Butler (1990) or indeed Lyotard (1984) conceive in terms of the generativity or constitutive productivity of ‘performativity’. The institution of a community relates to the ‘reception’ (construction) of a signified. The question, then, is what this adds to the understanding of the orientations, relations and conflicts of post-Marxism and cultural studies.

In one important regard, the concept of the disciplinary object introduces a new dimension to any discussion. For, although as Mowitt observes, the text is an ‘appropriate term for what could conceivably have gone by other names’ (1992: 5), his concern is that the term ‘discourse’ as deployed in post-Marxism does not work ‘to name the alterity that simultaneously constitutes and subverts the context of disciplinary reason’ (25). The text, then, heavily connotes a crisis at the heart of knowledge-establishment, and works to foreground the cultural-political ‘work effected by the disciplines’ (their place and role in hegemony). On the other hand, the tendency with the term ‘discourse’ is to suggest that the studier of discourses is somehow exempt from or outside of discourse, or what Laclau will be seen, in the next chapter, to call the ‘ideological political field’. Chapter 3 will examine the way that Laclau’s categories attempt to preserve the academic discourse analyst from contamination by the ‘discursive’ (or what he calls the ‘ideological-political field’). So this, rather than being
an ‘academic discourse analysis’, will be an ‘academic discourse analysis’. Putting it like this will hopefully clarify that the contention here is not to do with the reality or not of discourse as understood by Laclau. The question is not something like: is discourse a property of the world or is it an analytical construct, which may or may not also be a property of the world, and is this analytical construct commensurate with its object, i.e. discourse? Mowitt and Laclau both begin from Derridean deconstruction. Mowitt’s critique devolves on the strictures and limitations of the discourse analysis paradigm, and the limiting reorientations that it places on cultural study. Indeed, as the next section will clarify, Mowitt’s argument is that the emphatically ‘macro-political’ tone and orientation fostered by post-Marxist discourse analysis may well be less political, less interventional, less consequential, than the apparently micrological textual analyses of certain kind of cultural studies.

In order to further clarify what is meant by this, one of Stuart Hall’s primary criticisms of Laclauian post-Marxism should be returned to, and read in the light of the attention that Mowitt gives to the question of the disciplinary object and the paradigm. To reiterate the Hallian criticism, then: Hall asks whether it is possible to accept the alleged post-Marxist claim that ‘there is nothing to practice but its discursive aspect’ (Hall 1996d: 146). Daryl Slack argues that, contrary to the post-Marxists, what is distinctive about Hall is that he insists ‘on the specificity of practices in different kinds of relations to discourse’ (Daryl Slack 1996: 122), and that Laclau remains valuable only if he is read ‘without privileging the discursive’ (121). Herein consists the disagreement between Hall and Laclau. Again, it is akin to a disagreement in Rancière’s (1999) sense: namely, both parties to it are using the same word, and arguing about its status, but they mean different things by it. For Laclau, there is nothing outside of the discursive, because this names the logic of all constitution. For Hall, there is more to ‘practice’ than its discursive aspect, because the ‘discursive aspect’ in itself does not refer to anything specific, and in talking about it one is not talking about anything specific. It seems to refer to everything, but it thereby refers to nothing, and – worse – actually seems to exonerate the cultural analyst from doing any specific analyses of specific ‘determinant forces’. Hall’s problem, then, lies in the reductivity of the post-Marxist paradigm in which, in Mowitt’s words, ‘discourse is typically used, as is the case with Laclau, to characterise both the medium and the nature of sociality. Insofar as society is interpretable, it presents itself as an ensemble of discourses.
In addition, all that is analytically relevant about society is that which can be interpreted [and] discourse serves as a general name for the class of practices . . . that define the perceptible surface of society’ (Mowitt 1992: 16–17). For Hall, post-Marxism constitutes a reduction, a move from concrete, complex and multilayered analysis of specific things, and a retreat into producing the concrete philosophically, through logic alone. However, it is the dimension added to this debate by Mowitt’s attention to the paradigm and the concept of the disciplinary object that is even more vital. For, it becomes clear that whilst what Hall is worried about is the reduction of purview so that the only things deemed to be analytically relevant are hidden fundamental logics, what Mowitt contributes is the argument that what needs to be added to any cultural or political analysis is not just more and more ‘analytically relevant’ factors or a greater enumeration of ‘levels of determination’, but the question ‘what kind of paradigm might support and legitimate the conjunction of these texts?’ (1992: 220)

Cultural Studies versus Political Analysis

What is clear in both Mowitt and Hall’s critiques of post-Marxism is that they are concerned that the post-Marxist analytical strategy and orientation itself might actually amount to a kind of avoidance of the political. So, the contentious issue is that of what is and what should be the orientation and foci (or paradigm) of cultural studies and/or post-Marxism. The (at least erstwhile) post-Marxist cultural analyst Slavoj Žižek weighs in on this debate regularly. According to him, one key and ‘well-known thesis’ within political theory and cultural studies is that ‘the very gesture of drawing a clear line of distinction between the Political and the non-Political, of positing some domains . . . as “apolitical”, is a political gesture par excellence’ (Žižek 2000: 95). He points to one possible conclusion to be drawn from this: that because political power can be shown to be at work even ‘at the root of every apparently “non-political” relationship’, therefore ‘the job of a critical analysis should be to discern the hidden political process that sustains all these “non-” or “pre-political” relationships’ (Žižek 2000: 234). Certainly, a great deal of cultural, political, and very many other kinds of ‘studies’ have been orientated by precisely such an aim; and discerning and denouncing hidden or unnoticed power structures, biases, exclusions and the multifarious ‘violences’ of different cultural institutions, processes and practices has been immensely influential
and orientative. So, it seems likely that many working within and around the contemporary interdisciplinary arts and humanities could be able to agree with Žižek’s assertion that the ‘job’, or obligation, and responsibility of such intellectuals is to reveal such hidden power relationships. However, as the critiques of Hall and Mowitt imply, it seems important to pause to consider further whether the task of discerning and revealing the political in the putatively non-political should actually be the job of cultural studies or post-Marxism.

Now, this should not be construed as a hesitation in the face of the view that cultural studies and post-Marxism should always aspire to be responsible politicised academic practices, but rather as an attempt to interrupt the smooth working of certain types of thinking and intellectual production, based on the proposition that it might be beneficial to interrogate further what taking on or engaging responsibly with the political actually means and obliges. For, ‘to always aspire to be’ should be understood in the wake of Derrida’s deconstructions of responsibility as meaning something very different from assuming that you already are that which you aspire to (be). The direct question, then, would be: should the ‘job’ of cultural studies or any critical analysis be to discern the hidden political process that sustains all . . . “non-” or “pre-political” relationships? In a certain sense, the answer is yes, of course; for, the revelation of exploitation, subordination, oppression, injustice, marginalisation, exclusion and ‘violences’ of all kinds, has been, and remains, an always justifiable political project. But what would be the effect of generalising this aim, of placing it as the aim of cultural studies? In a first sense, cultural studies would become orientated as a subspecies or strange variant of political studies; and, moreover, one whose tautological start- and end-point would merely be the assertion, as premise and conclusion, ‘all of this is political (right?)’. Arguably, the positing of such presuppositions is already in play in cultural studies and post-Marxism, especially because, as has often been argued, there are readily discernible tautologies silently circulating within and underpinning perhaps all systems, structures and institutions – tautologies of value, point, purpose, legitimacy, legitimation, justification, and so on (Hunter 1999). Such tautologies work as enabling and orientating assumptions, and are often the minimal (concealed) form of justification for an activity: the argument for something’s importance, for instance, whilst it may invoke many other things along the way, will always reiterate a (concealed) circularity of justification or of value (‘this is important/valuable because this is important/valuable (otherwise I
wouldn’t be doing it, would I?)’). This can be seen in arguments that attempt to justify a law or a status quo by basically asserting ‘the law is justified because it’s legal/the law’, ‘it’s legal (i.e., implicitly ‘just’) because it’s the law’, or ‘things have to be this way because this is the way things are’. (Richard Rorty terms these generally concealed points of argumentative circularity ‘final vocabularies’, by which he means that they are premises, beliefs, and ‘nodal’ points, which generally do not rise to the surface and present themselves as tautologies, but which constitute fundamental points beyond which those who hold them simply cannot ‘go’; points which, if pressured, can precipitate all manner of crisis for the subjects involved.)

So it is possible to see that as well as underpinning systems, structures and institutions, it is always possible that the ultimately tautological dimension of the basis of any institution’s justification might return – like the repressed – to haunt, to antagonise, and potentially to undermine it, too, wherever the shocking realisation of the circularity of point, purpose, justification or value becomes perceptible. The discernment of a tautological structure to legitimation threatens to precipitate ‘crises’ such as the revaluation and alteration of an institution, activity, practice or organisation, or the generation of cynicism, nihilism, or outright rejection. Particularly pertinent to note in this regard is that concealed tautological justifications do not only function ‘out there’, or ‘elsewhere’: they are discernibly at work underpinning academic and intellectual practices, across the board (See Hunter 1999: 30–57). So this is pertinent, indeed cortical, to questions in and of cultural studies and post-Marxism, and should not simply be a part of their critiques of other institutions. Rather, it should be applied as a question to, of and in post-Marxism and cultural studies. For, concealed tautologies, posited presuppositions, ex post facto rationalisations or other such circularities can work to reduce knowledge to ‘pure recognition’, to repetition, or to ‘the production again of what we have always known’ (Hall 1996: 267–8), related to a desire for ‘static self-confirmation’ (Mowitt 1992: 27), through the reiteration of one’s own rectitude by reducing the new to the known, and otherness to sameness. The possibility that cultural studies and post-Marxism might be involved in such a process is problematic indeed, and should be considered a fundamental problematic (in every sense).

Mowitt has even explicitly suggested that certain orientations which directly and explicitly seek to take on the political can themselves work as avoidance, denial, or even foreclosure of that very possibility.
This argument is that in the reduction of the aims and orientations of critical analyses to the mere discernment of political power, then ‘in the very worst of cases, this type of analysis sacrifices the texture of any particular production for a preemptory political evaluation of the cultural work performed by the discourse in which the production was realized’ (1992: 18). In other words, he suggests, under such a ‘political’ injunction or orientation, ‘Moby Dick [might be reduced to] little more than the articulation of the contradictions of entrepreneurial adventurism’ (18). Once again, he locates the risk in the post-Marxist concept of discourse: ‘Again, discourse serves here as the medium of exchange through which specific cultural productions are read as social communications’ (18): ‘Obviously’, he continues, ‘I am not opposed to the labor of political evaluation, which strikes me as unavoidable in any case. Rather, I am concerned that [the concept of] discourse often obscures issues that ought to be part of any thorough political evaluation’ (18). Mowitt’s most serious charge against such an approach arises when he claims, in this regard, that ‘implicit here is a certain phobic structure wherein the particular differences that might actually divide and/or galvanize reading constituencies are translated into pretexts for conducting literary interpretation at the level of social analysis alone’ (18). The fact that Mowitt singles out the concept of ‘discourse’ as being something potentially reductive or obfuscatory for ‘any thorough political evaluation’ is perhaps serious enough. For discourse is a notion that has become an absolutely central category both for post-Marxist social and political analysis and for much cultural studies work (McRobbie 1992; Mowitt 1992; Frow 1995; Gilbert 2001; Rojek 2003). Therefore, if discourse, either as a concept within analyses or as a notion that actually orientates analyses, is indeed in any way obfuscatory for ‘thorough political evaluation’ (that is to say, therefore, if the concept of discourse turns out to be the complete opposite of what it is generally deemed to be), then this is a problem as much for post-Marxist discourse analysis and political studies as it is for any cultural studies – or indeed any other studies – that seek to engage thoroughly with the political. But what should be made of this claim of a ‘phobic structure’?

In Derrida’s writing, deconstruction and writing are always (among other things) indissociably associated with the ‘democratic’ (Derrida 1981: 144). This has lead Protevi to conclude that: ‘Deconstruction is democratic justice, responding to the calls from all others’ (Protevi 2001: 70). On this note, regarding Laclau and Mouffe, it might be said that because of their use of deconstruction and their talk of ‘radical
democratic politics’, then it certainly seems unjust to suggest that their work may in any sense seek to avoid ‘responding to the calls from all others’. However, Mowitt is keen to remind us that there’s more to radicalising democracy than meets the ear and trips off the lips. What is vital, he argues, is ‘inscribing within one’s own position the possibility and necessity of a position which is obscured by what one opposes. Radical democracy ought to involve listening to those whose voices have been drowned out by the very voice of advocacy’ (Mowitt 1992: 221). With this, Mowitt cautions us to ‘hesitate suspiciously’ before Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, precisely because (among other things) it is a theory, with a particular, limited, limiting, institutional ‘reading code’ and ‘voice of advocacy’, which must, in a sense (and this is something that post-Marxism itself would argue about any such institution) constitutively drown out. Accordingly, Mowitt advocates ‘textual politics’ over ‘discourse analysis’ because even the avowedly deconstructive political theory of discourse analysis ultimately does not have the requisite deconstructive ‘problem’ with the institution – for Derrida, ‘Deconstruction is an institutional practice for which the concept of the institution remains a problem’ (Derrida 2002: 53) – and therefore with itself as institutional practice and institutional way of knowing. Post-Marxism sets itself up as if a subject that can be supposed to know, relying on a stable subject-object split – as in: ‘out there’ is the (political) ‘object’ which presents itself or is presented by discourse in such a way as it can be ‘known’ properly by us ‘knowing subjects’, ‘in here’, in the academy. In this immediate sense, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse analysis limits deconstruction, domesticates it, reins it in (or rather, sends it away), and protects itself from it. In Derrida’s words, ‘being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world’ (Derrida 1974: 63).

Furthermore, as Gary Hall (2002) has argued, what is not often acknowledged in all manner of ‘political’ analyses is the fundamental undecidability of the form, content and limit of the political anyway. (Similarly, Laclau 2005 is all about the different sorts of conceptions of the political. Recall also that Laclau and Mouffe 1985, like innumerable other such books, was also merely the advancement of a different theory of what politics is.) Accordingly, Hall relates the possibility of the undecidability of the political to the various conceptions of what the political has been deemed to be within cultural studies, and explores the ways that these determinations have orientated, or indeed skewed, cultural studies as a politicised practice. This
is clearly related to the attention that Mowitt has drawn to the general socio-political significance of the skewing, orientating, organising role that these determinations, concepts, notions, or paradigms and their objects play in intellectual, political, and cultural life – or, that is, disciplinary objects. In Mowitt’s sense, Gary Hall’s work is involved in the interrogation of the disciplinary object that is the concept ‘politics’ within desirously ‘political’ cultural studies. Hall makes this important observation:

To move away from theory because it is apparently not political enough is to subordinate everything to political ends. It is to imply that things are only worth doing if it can be established in advance that they will have a practical, political outcome; an outcome which is itself decided in advance . . . [However, even analyses that may seem] initially to be the most ‘theoretical’ of issues may eventually turn out to have more practical and political effects than the most apparently ‘political’ of political actions and debates . . . (Gary Hall 2002: 5–6)

Gary Hall’s argument in favour of hyper-self-reflexive theorisation as a condition of possibility for establishing the form and character of one’s own ‘conjuncture’ is in a sense an almost Laclau and Mouffian answer to Stuart Hall. Indeed Chantal Mouffe argues, like Gary Hall, that:

As Derrida stresses, without taking a rigorous account of undecidability, it is impossible to think the concepts of political decision and ethical responsibility. Undecidability is not a moment to be traversed or overcome and conflicts of duty are interminable. I can never be completely satisfied that I have made a good choice since a decision in favour of one alternative is always to the detriment of another one. It is in that sense that deconstruction can be said to be ‘hyperpoliticizing’. Politicization never ceases because undecidability continues to inhabit the decision. Every consensus appears as a stabilization of something irredcibly unstable and chaotic. Chaos and instability are irreducible, but as Derrida indicates, this is at once a risk and a chance, since continual stability would mean the end of politics and ethics. (Mouffe 1996: 9).

An important critique of this argument will be made by Richard Rorty in the next chapter. However, the point here is that Gary Hall’s position concurs with that of Stuart Hall in its insistence on the important role that deconstruction must play in keeping cultural studies self-reflexive and intellectually vital (when speaking of ‘theory’ Gary Hall basically means ‘deconstruction’). Nevertheless, what is not
made compellingly or persuasively explicit – in either of the Halls – is precisely the nature and status of any work’s ‘articulation’ with anything else. How is the theoretical work itself to ‘polemicize’ or be ‘polemicized’ (Arditi and Valentine 1999)? How might a theoretical work ‘turn out to have more practical and political effects’? How might this be decided or adjudicated? What is the nature, form, target or modality of its articulation to be? This problematic opacity is shared by post-Marxism. It is addressed by Mowitt, so his arguments should be examined further on the way towards a conclusion in which the post-Marxist theory of articulation and Mowitt’s thinking on the politics of antidisciplinarity will be combined into a new strategy of intervention.

The Object of the Subject

What all anti-essentialist, post-foundationalist or constructivist thinking (such as that dominant within and characteristic of cultural studies and post-Marxism) has in common is some version of the premise (or axiom) that humans have, in Mowitt’s words, a ‘deep constitutability’ (Mowitt 2002: 87; Laclau 1999). To perceive the contingency of subject formation means to conceive of identity not as innate but as a socio-political ‘achievement’. So, the form and ‘content’ of subjects, as socio-political products, will always (constitutively) be contaminated or supplemented by a context or contingency that means it is undecidable whether subjects could be said to be ‘free’, and whether ‘free decisions’ can be made. As deconstructive work regularly points out: any putative ‘decision’ might always possibly not have been a decision (implying as this does a certain ‘madness’ or radically undetermined freedom), as it can only be apprehended retrospectively and could always be interpreted as having been merely a programmed part of a calculable process. Did I, for example, ‘decide freely’ to write this book, or was my sense of freedom something of a fantasy, given that writing it was something determined or overdetermined by my ‘context’? When I or anyone seeks to evaluate the status of an event and to enquire whether it was a free decision or a programmatic inevitability, it might always be possible to construct a narrative or an account that arrives at either decision (‘Doing this was decided spontaneously and through free will’ or ‘Doing this was the inevitable result of the context’). As Hall might say, what are the determining forces at work in this or that conjuncture? Deconstructive reading shows them to be undecidable, and suggests that any decision arrived at is itself the end product of a contingent evaluation, which means that, first, even real
nonetheless really works to orient research within a particular field – research which may actually lead to interventions in [that which] constitute[s] reality as such' (27). In one respect, then, this is one more way of saying that there is no unmediated knowledge, no unconstructed knowledge (40–1), and so nothing other than ‘regulative fictions’, or indeed, nothing outside of the text.

But, not all texts are created equal: some are taken seriously; some are not. Experience is segmented in its very constitution, and there are institutions whose texts on whatever sanctioned experience are accorded a certain plausibility or respect in various centres of power and knowledge. This is as much as to say that experience must be sanctioned by an institution before it ‘is’ an experience. This is what Mowitt means when he asserts that it is ‘the production and circulation of knowledge that segments, correlates, and thus orders social collectivity around the experiential, but ultimately institutional category of the subject’. Furthermore, he continues: ‘the very segmentation of experience that facilitates and requires the coordination of knowledge production contributes immediately to the genesis of an object that is stable precisely to the extent that it is incessantly referred to the diverse, reciprocally legitimating authorities that define the disciplinary field’ (35). Experience itself requires institutional legitimation (however metaphorically construed the meaning of ‘institutional’ is) before it can be a legitimate experience, ‘known’ as such; and the production of plausible or reliable knowledge is also bound up with the production of legible forms of subjectivity. (This is also why Laclau (2000, 2005) views the contingent inauguration and organisation of any community and its objectivity, norms and values, to be irreducibly ethical.) Or, as Mowitt argues, what is ‘fundamental’ to the very possibility of ‘disciplines like sociology or psychology’ (i.e., disciplines oriented and ultimately authorised to know about human subjects) is ‘a level of social stability that derives from institutions capable of providing the requisite controls’. Such ‘knowledge production presupposes a certain saturation of society by disciplinary power’: ‘There is . . . a certain continuity between the internal organization of knowledge production at the level of academic disciplines and the institutional structure of society’ (34–5).

So, Mowitt undertakes a relatively thoroughgoing anatomy of hegemony. It is more detailed an account of the institutional basis of hegemony than one is likely to find in post-Marxist texts themselves, where ‘hegemony’ is regularly evoked, but mainly as a ‘complex unity’ or assemblage ‘of discourses’, and where it ultimately
remains expressed quite gesturally and metaphorically, without being specified or broken down in any great detail. It is through his more refined account of hegemony that Mowitt is lead to regard the problem of the intellectual paradigm and the possibility of antidisciplinarity to be acutely political. For him the point is precisely not that agonists and antagonists within disciplinary contexts such as those of academia merely keep knocking old paradigms down and replacing them with different but equivalent ones. Indeed, this reduces academic work to nothing more than a competitive contestation and an ultimately conservative jostling for position within an enduring institutional-political sameness – or an institutional discursive context from whose main workings and constitution (bureaucratic, economic, etc.) such academic jostling remains entirely disengaged and disarticulated. This is to specify the seriousness of the risk that such an orientation of activity will not adequately grasp the mode of its political articulation to any other context, scene or institution. This is why Mowitt is concerned more with the ‘micro-political’ dimensions of the question of political articulation: if the issue is that of how anything links with anything else, then for Mowitt, this issue should not leap out into the discussion of the macro-political, or ‘wider’ or indeed ‘proper political issues’, as if they are simply issues residing ‘out there’. The problem remains that of establishing how this (each and every ‘this’ of academic intellectual work) might already be ensnared within a complexly reticulated political context, and how it might thereby seek to make a difference to it, within it, and ‘beyond’ it. In order to explore further the political ramifications of this Mowittian textual refinement or sophistication of the hegemonic metaphor, it might be helpful to pose explicitly a general question which captures its scope: How does the deconstructive textual micro-political perspective or anti-paradigm relate to or articulate with the macro-political? What is meant by the term ‘macro-political’ is both the macro-political focus (on the out there) characteristic of the political/discourse analysis of post-Marxism and beyond, and also the ‘wider’, ‘serious’, ‘pressing issues’ ‘out there’ that are often evoked as the reasons to reject theoretical, textual, deconstructive work in favour of something called ‘direct engagement’ (whatever this is variously deemed to be).

Deconstruction versus post-Marxism

The textual (anti-)paradigm that Mowitt elaborates problematises every simple claim that ‘this is the way things are’ and ‘this is the
necessary relation between things’. Indeed, it is clearly neither simply micropolitical nor simply macropolitical, because it is the demonstration of the imbrication of both conceptual levels before (and the subversion of) their separation into putatively different ‘levels’; for such a separation is already a product of the taxonomical, orientating and effective work of a paradigm which differentiates and constructs objects as such. It is in this regard that anything, including the archetypal macropolitical paradigm of Marxism, could be said to be always already in – or in danger of – de- and reconstruction. Anna Marie Smith explains one of the ways that the de- and reconstruction of any such entity occurs. When it comes to making any essence-claim about any identity, she argues: ‘from the original moment in which an essence-claim is made, the essence-claim is already being undone’, because, as the very need for the claim itself and the possibility of alternative claims about the putative essence demonstrate, ‘there never was/never will be a pure’, stable, natural or essential identity to any entity, including such entities as ‘Marxism’ (Smith 1994: 173). Making any ‘essence-claim’ is simultaneously to establish or impose an identity and to sew the seeds or initiate the beginning of the deconstruction of that putative essence.

This is one respect in which Marxism, like anything else, is constitutively unstable. As Michael Ryan explains, even a cursory glance at a range of Marxist work and Marxist organisations reveals that ‘Marxisms abound’ (quoted in Peters 2001: 11). The reason why ‘there have always been multiple Marxs’ is, in Terrell Carver’s words, that the identity will always be constructed differently, so ‘each one is a product of a reading strategy’. Marxism is constitutively both possible and yet ultimately impossible by the same token: its contingently constructed character. Every object and identity is constituted through what Carver calls a ‘reading strategy’, or what we have been calling a paradigm; and ‘a reading strategy involves a choice of texts and a biographical frame, philosophical presuppositions about language and meaning, and political purpose – whether acknowledged or not’ (Carver, quoted in Peters 2001: 29). Accordingly, micropolitical firstly relates to the macropolitical insofar as the macropolitical could always be said to be determined in this or that way by the putatively micropolitical matter of interpretation. This understanding of the always-constructed character of the signified or supposed referent is the key deconstructive dimension to both the insights of the textual and the post-Marxist discourse paradigm. Indeed, in a slight twist of the 1970s feminist slogan ‘the personal is
political’, it could be argued that the micropolitical is macropolitical. This observation is, in a strong sense, a key factor linking deconstruction, cultural studies and post-Marxism. However, the name of this relation is also, to echo Derrida, the same as one of its terms. That is to say, what links and separates, equivalates and differentiates cultural studies and post-Marxism are their different relationships to deconstruction. Cultural studies and post-Marxism have different deconstructions. They deconstruct differently. Textual deconstruction differs from discursive deconstruction. And because each deconstructs differently, this causes each to have a different relation to ‘Marxism’, of course. But, as Peters (2001) is at pains to show, there is no simple disarticulation or opposition between deconstruction and Marxism – even though these two ‘approaches’ are often held to be opposed to each other. Rather, Peters insists, not only has Derrida often spoken ‘of himself as both a communist and a Marxist’ (11), but Marxism is always present, in some sense, in the work of all key poststructuralist thinkers: ‘postponed or deferred (as in the case of Derrida) or always implicit (as in the case of Deleuze)’ (26).

Now, Peters privileges and prioritises Derrida not for gratuitous or simply partisan reasons, but rather to draw attention to deconstruction vis-à-vis the question of Marxism. This is because, along with other work in the continental tradition, ‘Derrida’s deconstruction [has] changed once and for all how reading should be conceived’ (31). This is a change that may still appear to some as being only very trivial or secondary (as in the complaint: of all the important things in the world, what is the big deal about how ‘reading’ should be conceived?). But it should now be clear why it pertains directly to Marxism as well as to the ‘real world’ with which political thought is concerned. For, Peters reminds us, the ‘traditional order of Marxist texts is not the only possible one’ (31); the traditional order and ways (or ordering-ways) that such texts have been read is not the only possible one, nor necessarily the ‘correct’ one. Reordering makes a difference. Once more citing Carver, he argues that there has been, first, ‘a shift in what Marx is read; second, a shift in how Marx is read; and third, a shift in why Marx is read’ (31). The problem that deconstruction poses and engages (and the reasons why an explicit reading of Marx was deferred for so long by Derrida), boils down to Derrida’s ‘search for the correct protocols for reading [Marx]’ (35). So, despite having deferred a direct engagement with Marx and Marxism, what Derrida eventually came to claim haunts and enlivens deconstruction is, as Peters puts it, ‘a certain spirit of Marxism that
relates to deconstruction’ (37). In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida announces that ‘Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*’ (Derrida quoted in Peters 2001: 37). The sense of what this ‘spirit’ is or does is according to Peters implicitly shared by Derrida and Deleuze and poststructuralism in general. As he reminds us, Deleuze contended that ‘being on the Left’ has ‘nothing to do with governments’. Rather, ‘being on the Left is, first, a phenomenon of perception’ (33). This is far from the reduction of politics simply to individual perception, but it is rather to state the constitutive supplementarity or the ‘transformational’ (35) potentialities of perception, when this is understood as related to the institutional-political context within which perception is constructed, occurs and has effects. This is the significance and political implication of the paradigm, reading strategy, or institution.

In this respect, the key issues arising upon the introduction of deconstruction into political and politicised thinking are the introduction of undecidability into the question of university responsibility, and the problems of determining what proper politics actually is (including determining whether and in what way it might be ‘Marxian’, if this remains a concern). However, as this work has been arguing, it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these conceptual problems solely relate to the determination of the object ‘to be known’ whilst downplaying the ethico-political and institutional (hegemonic) status of the ‘knower’ and the interventional effects of ‘the knowing’ (the question of polemicizing articulation). Quite contrary to this, a textual approach insists on the necessity of not subordinating the one dimension to the other, and instead trying to make sense of intervention in terms of an awareness of the institutional basis and operations of society, or of disciplinarity, rather than in terms of what can be called the ‘soap-box’ conception of intervention. This is to evoke the way that, like any theory or approach, post-Marxism can rather easily make *pronouncements* about what is political and what the political interventions (of others: ‘political agencies’ or actors, out there) are or should be. Indeed, it is arguable that making such pronouncements amount to the sum total of its aim and aspiration, in one respect. But, the pragmatic question is, in terms of its own theory of discourse and hegemony, where does post-Marxism see itself? What is *its own* pragmatic, political, or interventional status? Is it, in itself, an intervention? Into what? Or is it not interventional at all? Is it simply, as Richard Rorty (1996) deems all
theory to be, ultimately merely a form of ‘kibitzing’ and ‘useless onlooking’? To assert this, must one rely on a simple theory (academia) versus practice (‘real political engagement’) schema, which would fly in the face of the basic tenets of the post-Marxist (and/or) deconstructive (and/or) cultural studies theory of culture and politics as hegemonic. The importance of considering these questions for cultural studies and any politicised intellectual activities should be clear. For this is the question of the way that academics think their own works might intervene. The next chapter more fully and directly engages these questions, on the way to a retheorisation of academic work as intervention.

Before turning to these issues, though, a certain controversy that continues to rage between textual approaches and more traditionally political approaches should be addressed. This will be done by looking at the way that the broadly post-Marxist theorist Slavoj Žižek conceives of and treats discourse, politics and textuality. As a stepping stone or segue, it should be noted that the schematic and simplistic but hopefully helpful distinction between ‘macropolitical’ and ‘micropolitical’ approaches that this chapter has used to discuss the different orientations and political implications of the textual paradigm and the post-Marxist discourse paradigm, is a distinction that would not be accepted as valid by many kinds of political studies. Indeed, it may be objected to on many grounds, such as through arguments that deny the political character of the cultural, private or personal, or through defining politics proper as being public and chiefly governmental (and solely ‘macro’), or by excluding the academic or otherwise merely institutional from the category of the political, and hence from political causality, entirely. In this sense, it is only from the perspective of the more extended understanding of the political – the understanding that as has been seen circulates characteristically within deconstructive, post-Marxist, and cultural studies work – that this doubling and extension of the political, from being something that is solely macro to being something this is both micro and macro could be accepted. Just as ‘the personal is political’, so is the paradigm and perspective.

As seen earlier, however, the avowedly but problematically ‘Marxist’ Slavoj Žižek indicates on the one hand that the importance of ‘the job of a critical analysis’ is to ‘discern the hidden political process that sustains all [supposedly] “non-” or “pre-political” relationships’ (Žižek 2000: 234). But on the other hand, even whilst Žižek acknowledges the important political potential of ideological and intellectual
conflicts within hegemony, he nevertheless refuses to follow the logic of the textual paradigm completely. In this sense, Žižek is perhaps exemplary of the stance of ‘official’ post-Marxism, in that he acknowledges the deconstructive insight embraced by cultural studies, but he nevertheless refuses or resists it, preferring instead to give drastically more attention to the perceived ‘out there’ of the macropolitical ‘field’ and basically none to the question of his own contingent position. In Žižek one sees a particularly acute post-Marxist acknowledgement and refusal of deconstructive textualism.

This refusal arises because Žižek claims to be so concerned with the macropolitical field. And when it comes to the macro-political, according to Žižek, unless one is working towards a total and complete revolutionary transformation (i.e., the mythical global anti-capitalist revolution), then what one is doing is what he calls mere ‘interpassivity’ (Žižek 2002: 170): chimerical (non)politics, that might or might not change all sorts of actual things, but which do not alter any fundamental thing – namely, the ‘fundamental horizon’ of capitalism itself. Thus, the textual paradigm elaborated earlier would indeed constitute for Žižek a complete abdication from politics. As opposed to such allegedly postmodern, deconstructive ‘resignation’, Žižek instead prefers to regularly and stridently call for revolution (2002, 2000: 101). Nevertheless, what is particularly interesting about his position is that, in being orientated vociferously and avowedly toward the macropolitical world ‘out there’, he simultaneously identifies and tries to tackle a crisis he perceives to devolve on the very possibility/impossibility of ‘Marxism’ today, and an identical wider crisis that he sees as having arisen throughout the contemporary academic and political intellectual world:

[The] fetishist fixation on the old Marxist-Leninist framework is the exact opposite of the fashionable talk about ‘new paradigms’, about how we should leave behind old ‘zombie-concepts’ like working class, and so on . . . [These are] the two complementary ways of avoiding the effort to think the New which is emerging today. The first thing to do here is to cancel this disavowal by fully admitting that this ‘authentic’ working class simply does not exist. And if we add to this position four further ones, we get a pretty clear picture of the sad predicament of today’s Left: the acceptance of the Cultural Wars (feminist, gay, anti-racist, etc., multiculturalist struggles) as the dominant terrain of emancipatory politics; the purely defensive stance of protecting the achievements of the Welfare State; the naïve belief in cyber-communism (the idea that the new media are directly creating conditions for a new authentic community); and,
finally, the Third Way, capitulation itself. Let us just hope that the present anti-globalization movement will introduce a new dimension by, finally, again conceiving of capitalism neither as a solution nor as one of the problems, but as the problem itself. (Žižek 2002: 308)

Thus, for Žižek, the normal, everyday conception of politics as pragmatic and piecemeal, or local and institutional, is in fact chimerical non-politics, or ‘interpassivity’. Academic textualism is even worse, to the extent that it does not insist upon the global dimension of ‘conceiving of capitalism neither as a solution nor as one of the problems, but as the problem itself’. For Žižek, indeed, only the ‘truly global’ political act of complete revolution against capitalism would constitute politics proper. Only total global anti-capitalist revolution would be a political intervention. But Žižek believes that he knows why the very idea of macropolitical revolution (and the Marxian call to it) seems so preposterous and untenable in the West today. As he sees it, any such call to revolution will always seem self-defeating. This he explains by recourse to an example used by Lacan:

Lacan developed an opposition between ‘knave’ and ‘fool’ as the two intellectual attitudes: the right-wing intellectual is a knave, a conformist who considers the mere existence of the given order as an argument for it, and mocks the Left for its ‘utopian’ plans, which necessarily lead to catastrophe; while the left-wing intellectual is a fool, a court jester who publicly displays the lie of the existing order, but in a way which suspends the performative efficiency of his speech . . . (Žižek 2000: 324–5)

The proposition that ‘anti-establishment’ positions might always seem foolish is something that deserves attention, no matter what one’s political position or intellectual paradigm. As seen earlier, Mowitt’s anti-disciplinary textual-political orientation could indeed be said to put little faith in the ‘performative efficiency’ of such calls to arms. Laclau, too, has confessed to ‘smiling at the naïve self-complacency’ of Žižek’s moments of ‘r-r-revolutionary’ rhetoric (Laclau 2000: 289; see also Laclau 2004 and 2005). Indeed, it should be asked: if Žižek himself thinks that this knave versus fool situation always obtains, then why does he keep making such ‘foolish’ calls to macropolitical arms (revolution)? The answer relates to the status and work of the micropolitical within hegemony. For, as Žižek argues in another context – in an evaluation the (then) embryonic public political debate about whether there is ever justification for torture – any ‘calls to keep an open mind’ on the issue [of torture], even and
especially when such calls ‘do not advocate torture outright, but just introduce it as a legitimate topic of debate, are even more dangerous than an explicit endorsement of torture [because] such legitimization of torture as a topic of debate changes the background of ideological presuppositions and options much more radically than its outright advocacy: it changes the entire field, while, without this change, outright advocacy remains an idiosyncratic view’ (Žižek 2002: 239). So, whilst it may at the moment seem idiosyncratic, Žižek sees his task as working to get the issue of revolution back on the ‘realistic’ political agenda by calling for it to be discussed enough times so that it stops sounding preposterous, starts sounding more legitimate, and as such ‘changes the background of ideological presuppositions and options’.

What Žižek both plays and erases, both relies on and rejects, then, is the belief and stake in the university institutions, articulated with publishing and media industries, and the political effectivity of the discursive output of this institutional articulation. Of course, this subscription to hegemonic articulation nevertheless reveals Žižek’s view of hegemonic politics to be rather undeconstructed and simplistic. For, even on a fairly elementary level, it is easy to see that in advocating this strategy and orientation what Žižek relies on and yet does not interrogate, in this macro-political argument, is the question of how and why certain voices, words, calls, messages, or events, could ever come to carry or lack anything like political ‘force’. Here political intervention is construed as being straightforwardly a matter of speaking and of being heard, whereupon what has been heard is somehow consequentially ‘acted upon’ in a predictable manner. Whilst this is a crude and undeconstructed notion of articulation, there are however more nuanced and deconstructed versions of it, in which the political is indeed formulated as a matter that is irreducibly one of audibility/intelligibility (Rancière 1999; Arditi and Valentine 1999). Herein, the political has everything to do with what anything – any event, signifier, mark, or speech act, etc. – is understood as. For, what things are ‘understood as’, the way they are understood, is, as Laclau and Mouffe insist, determined by the way articulations are structured within the hegemonic field. And this is again where the macropolitical meets the micropolitical; or, in other words, where the constitutive institutional, interpretive, hermeneutic dimension (traditionally or too easily overlooked, downplayed or deemed secondary), is seen to be primary, orientative and political.

Žižek acknowledges this, but is quick to assert the importance of
nevertheless remaining squarely within a crude Marxist formulation of the political. This is because he contends that without a demand for a fundamental and radical revolution, then no matter how ‘optimistic’ any political discourse may sound, and no matter how transformative it may appear, all political positions which lack a stake in or desire for ‘the revolution’ are fundamentally pessimistic. Even in apparently celebratory postmodern positions, or in any left, right, or neoliberal, pragmatic or even post-Marxist position, Žižek sees the pessimism of a resigned acceptance that ‘capitalism is the only game in town’ (Žižek 2000: 95). For Žižek, the macropolitical matter of revolution is the matter of the political itself. So, whilst post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe may feel that they remain faithful to a Marxist ‘spirit’ in trying to engender a radical democracy such that its emancipatory force antagonises and infects all relations (including economic ones) and constantly transforms them, Žižek sees Laclau and Mouffe as being unfaithful to Marxism because they are no longer going ‘directly’ after capitalism. Capitalism remains for Žižek the problem, and the ‘universal struggle’ against ‘it’, the solution. It is because of the fact that there is no one thing that is capitalism, however, because of the fact that capitalism is a complex and multiple discursive arrangement, that Laclau and Mouffe could not agree to oppose ‘it’. ‘It’, capitalism, is not ‘one’. Žižek’s object of attack is a signifier recruited to try to foreground a spectral logic as being the political problem, and to try to use this signifier as a rallying call to recruit and orientate the efforts of a political constituency. This may not sound too different from Mowitt’s call to ‘to make education into an openly insurgent practice and break the hold that the vocational or professionally oriented disciplines have had on the commerce between the university and society’ (1992: 218), but one can see in Žižek an orientation that exemplifies Mowitt’s account of ‘the very worst of cases’ of post-Marxism: namely, a type of analysis that ‘sacrifices the texture of any particular production for a preemptory political evaluation of the cultural work performed by the discourse in which the production was realized’ (1992: 18).

So the Mowittian problem with Žižek in this regard is not necessarily with his (macro)political perspective. The problem is with the reductivity of his work to ‘preemptory political evaluation’. His conviction that ‘university responsibility’ demands precisely this kind of political evaluation is bolstered by his holding a belief in what is surely one of the most traditional conceptions of political ‘performative efficiency’ that there is: namely, the belief in and reliance on the
notion of what can be called ‘political-will-formation’. Now, despite such an orientation holding fast to the dubious notion of ‘intentionality’, and the belief that political intention might directly cause the desired political results of that intention, it might nevertheless be said that the formation of political will is undoubtedly important – whether that be the political will of some universal revolutionary class or of any other kind of hegemonic or forceful agency. But – and even without entering into Laclau and Žižek’s ongoing polemic about all of this (Laclau 2000; 2004; 2005; Žižek 2000) – it can be argued that both of them miss the point that should be most important to them: namely, the question of the means or mechanisms by which their own particular message might possibly ‘catch on’, or make any difference at all, in terms of the things they claim to be working for. The trouble is (and this criticism could be generalised and directed to many academic scenes today) that they rely on a largely under-considered conception of the ‘intellectual function’. For, put bluntly, what they ‘want’ is this: Žižek wants to remove the blindfold of ‘false consciousness’, and Laclau wants to transform the hegemonic structure by transforming articulations. Both positions properly demand a utilisation of the intellectual function, or require not just understanding, but an ability to ‘use’ the transmission-, transfer-, relay-, discursive-power-, or communication-mechanisms available to any agency today2 (and, of course, to negotiate the fraught ethics and politics of such an aim). Yet, as has been argued so far, like many academics, they still concern themselves almost entirely with what should be said, without considering how it might possibly make any difference. Here again, deconstruction seems helpful, in that its inversions, reversals and displacements of focus allow us to see that the ‘primary’ question of what should be said is actually ‘secondary’ to that of its discursive status, including who might possibly (be able to) listen and what that listening might amount to.

Any implicit conception of the intellectual function (or whatever else one might choose to call it) as being something like one speaker holding one microphone addressing one assembled and desiring and attentive audience who listen and respond in programmatically predictable ways, is dubious. However, it might not be as dubious if we supplement our understanding of this conception with the implications of the post-Marxist theory of hegemony. For, with reference to such a perspective it might be argued that if there is, or to the extent that there is anything like an intellectual function, then it is clear that ‘we’ do not simply hold the microphone. Holding the microphone
would be the non-place of hegemony itself, albeit perhaps most
institutionally manifested in and as discourses directly articulated
to capital (technoscience, discourses of governmentality, those of
managerial performativity or efficiency, etc.). Taking a perspective
that acknowledges critical left intellectuals’ lack of possession of,
‘lack’ in the face of, and desire for, the intellectual function enables
the overturning, displacement and re-evaluation of what ‘university
responsibility’ may be and what orientations and strategies are con-
ceivable today.³ For a start, considering the contemporary condition
of the left in these terms enables not only the diagnosis of what needs
to be revalued, but also to work out what form the left’s reconstruc-
ition or reorientation could best take if ‘performative efficiency’ is
indeed at least a component of what it wants or needs, as it were, or in
the name of the political itself. That is to say that any ‘revaluation’
requires interruption, or what Derrida calls ‘de-railing’ (Derrida 1987:
20, 177). It requires interrupting the smooth flow or regular repeating
(and repeatability) of what is known and of what is done. For
arguably, as writers like Wendy Brown (2001) point out, the left
has itself been interrupted, unbalanced or wrong-footed, and actually
by nothing short of ‘the revolution of our times’ themselves. This
‘crisis’ means that something about the left itself needs to be inter-
rupted and revalued, by the left itself. In what could intervention
consist?

This talk of ‘interruption’ suggests that interruption itself should be
introduced as topic and a theme to work towards establishing an
ethico-political intellectual strategy of ‘interruption’. Such a strategy
would relate to deconstruction and to Marxism, in terms of both the
‘spirit’ and the ‘letter’ (albeit promiscuously) of the ethico-political
demand for responsible engagement and intervention. For arguably,
the battle of the emergence of the political, relates to audibility, to
intelligibility; and as such, politics itself could be said to come about
solely through and as interruption (Rancière 1999: 13, 17). ‘Inter-
ruption’ need not purely be construed in terms of pure positive
signification. As Laclau argues, to interrupt even without full coher-
ence ‘could be a first stage in the emergence of a truth which can be
affirmed only by breaking with the coherence of the existing dis-
courses’ (Laclau 2005: 27). Similarly, Derrida often intimated that the
key political strategy of deconstruction is to ‘derail’ established,
sedimented, becoming-invisible institutions of communication, sedi-
mented relay- and referral-systems and mechanisms (Derrida 1987:
20, 177; 2002: 53; Protevi 2001: 20). And Stuart Hall emphasises the
double importance of interruption (1996: 268): for him, theory, thinking and analysis must seek to interrupt the established, or the powerful other of the status quo. He views politics as interruption (1992: 282), and locates the value of ‘Theory’ primarily in and as its interruptive capacities, and precisely not in any ‘theoretical fluency’: comfortable fluency in a theoretical language implies for Hall stability and regularity – hence another dimension of the ‘problem’ with, or of, Laclau and Mouffe. (In other words, this is the problem of disciplining, of disciplinarity.)

The deconstructive post-Marxist Wendy Brown has called this the problem of how to construct ‘politics without banisters’ (2001: 91–120), now that what appears lost are all fixed certainties on which to hold and from which to construct ethico-political convictions, as well as anything like a clear and univocal sense of strategy or ‘action’. According to Brown, the contemporary conjuncture is one of a condition of great indeterminacy, perhaps a consequence of the intensity of capitalist deconstruction and reconstruction of all that seemed solid and fixed, profaning all that was sacred, melting it into air, up to and including Marxist certainties themselves. Now, for a Marxist or traditional leftist perspective, this capitalist ‘deconstruction’ is usually to be construed as an ethically, politically and culturally deleterious force, the driving force of which, as has been tirelessly documented, seems simply to be profit. But this simplicity is not unitary (nor self-present), and there appears to be no one locus or ground, but instead multiple mycelia, multiple hydra, multiple causes and effects, multiplying effects that become causes, in an intractable and multiple discursive soufflé.

So, according to Brown, the left cannot but either mourn or deny the demise of the adequacy of its means of measurement, its universals, yardsticks, certainties, paradigms and purchase. However, if the point remains ‘to change it’, then especially if what many never wanted to change has changed (Marxist certainties and the very status of Marxism), and if change is still nevertheless desired (the desire for radical/revolutionary emancipatory transformation), then, Brown argues, the modes by which we value, view, and evaluate, cannot stay the same. An ‘act’, a ‘revolution’, must change all coordinates, including those of its own measurement and evaluation (Žižek 2000: 121–2), and revaluation is part and parcel of any ‘revolution’. Indeed, the act of revaluation is arguably constitutive of change. In this view, an event is an event to the extent that it forces revaluation; and if revaluation is not required, then one might question whether there has really been
any change at all. Of course, partial or gradual changes, small pragmatic, progressive stages of improvement, might be the desire. In grieving the apparent demise of a realistic revolutionary imaginary, many have moved from talk of revolution, to talk of pragmatism. But partialism, pragmatism, ‘gradualism’ and the invocation of ‘progress’ are, Laclau contends, the first of all utopias (Laclau 2000: 198): they imply that we’re already on track, and that we know what the goal is, in advance of the change. Here politics becomes the banal implementation of a predetermined programme – administration. Partialism, gradualism, or progress, presuppose stability.

So, if Žižek’s point about the performative efficiency of speech acts applies to politicised (left) academia as having been knavishly rear-ticulated as ridiculous and ‘utopian’ today; if Derrida has a point when he claims that traditionally recognisable forms of politics are becoming obsolete (those of the party and of the nation-state, most blatantly) (Derrida 1994: 84–5, 102–3); if Hardt and Negri have a point in claiming that there is a global ‘we’ who are all the ‘multitude’ (we just don’t all know it yet); if capitalism and neoliberalism deconstruct, desediment or detrerritorialise all that once seemed sacred and solid; if the insights of the contemporary interdisciplinary academic formations, proceeding along deconstructive lines, have any ‘force’ or suggest any ‘law’ at all; then it may well be that this very monstrosity is in itself possibly also a bright light, a beacon. For there is certainly something in the proposition that the world is ‘in’ deconstruction, and this ‘something’ is certainly not the conclusion that therefore Derridean deconstruction is deleterious. I will not recount the list of wildly different things that deconstruction is febrilely said to exemplify (instead see Derrida 1992a: 206). Rather, it is worth reiterating that what deconstruction insists upon is that no thing is complete in itself, but always only needs supplementing (Derrida 1981: 304). The logic of the supplement is to be found everywhere. This is why it also exerts a force in deeply Marxian and even Leninist injunctions. Maley quotes Lukács to argue this point:

It cannot be too strongly maintained [argues Lukács] that the Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in
order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historical significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. (Lukács, quoted in Maley 2001: 78)

Žižek’s rhetorico-political ‘fast Leninism’ strategy can be seen to be prefigured here. But to aspire ‘to set forth before all’ one’s ‘socialist convictions’ and ‘democratic demands’ does not simply mean that one will be a Lukács or a Žižek. Rather, it might be said that it is through the interruptive reference to justice and responsibility that revolution, or politics, or that which would be revolutionary about any politics, seeks to occur. Encapsulating this, Benjamin Arditi mines the reserves and unearths the political logic of the famous slogan of the ‘events’ of May 1968: ‘Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible!’ (Arditi 2003: 85–9). Arditi reads this demand in terms of the deconstructive insight that states of affairs, institutions, and as Protevi adds, ‘sets of positive laws, are deconstructible because they are not justice. Deconstruction is already engaged by this infinite demand of justice . . . Deconstruction also finds its “force, its movement or its motivation” in the “always unsatisfied appeal” to justice . . . Deconstruction is democratic justice, responding to the calls from all others’ (Protevi 2001: 69–70). Thus, justice is the simultaneously realistic and yet impossible demand of deconstruction. However, it has been asked (Bewes 2001), isn’t capitalism itself a most radical form of deconstruction? A valid answer remains: of course, yes, in a way; but capitalism deconstructs institutions because they are not profit. To deconstruct that which is not just, not justice – either not based in justice or producing injustice – is something else. It is a revelatory and always antagonistic process that reveals the injustice of capitalist relations. One difference between deconstruction’s sense of justice and Marxism’s sense of justice is that a deconstructive understanding of justice asserts that justice can never be assumed to have arrived, because to make such a judgement would be to judge one particular state of affairs to be perfectly just, which is impossible, and unjust, in terms of the way this closes down the openness to alterity, to difference, change, and the future. The assumption that the present is just, or that justice is present, is, according to Derrida, always unjust. Any assumption that the just is here is demonstrably a part of the forceful exclusion of change. This is why Protevi calls deconstruction ‘democratic justice’: it is the interminable effort to listen and try to address and redress injustice. Deconstruction is the revolutionary demand for radical democratic justice, a demand for the impossible which nevertheless ‘displays the
lie of the existing order, but in a way which might readily circumvent suspending the performative efficiency of such revolutionary speech. It will not risk relinquishing this performative force, because it will not declare itself as such.

But what does this mean? In a word: reading. This may seem both preposterous and yet disappointing. For, objections to (and misunderstandings of) deconstruction abound. They include: Isn’t deconstruction therefore an opposition without opposition – a resigned, mournful, pessimistic abdication from fighting for a radical new world view? Again, it is possible to reply that this is not an abdication from responsibility. For, it is arguably the case that the ‘forcefulness’ of any demand or claim is substantially reduced, defused, deflated, or derailed when the demand is for something other. When the demand seems to come from some other place (such as the ‘other party’, ‘the opposition’, the enemy, or the oppositional ‘fools’), or to be infused with other values (their values, not our values, foolish values), it is arguably compromised. Oppositional speech is arguably, as Thomas Docherty puts it, ‘always already negated by the structure of the entity which it wishes to oppose’, and may actually even amount to ‘nothing more than an inoculation of sorts which allows the dominant political power in a social formation further to strengthen itself’ (Docherty 1993: 322). But the question still begs an answer: what about constructing utopian visions and calls for otherness, visions of and calls for a different and better (socialist) world? Or: Isn’t it only by forming some completely different model that a positive politics and political strategy might be constructed? Again, one can answer, no. This interpretation of ‘otherness to come’, when metaphysically construed, is often recruited as an argument against deconstruction – in the claim that deconstruction cannot found or propose a positive alternative or oppositional politics. Obviously there is something in this. For of course deconstruction can’t propose a ‘positive’ (metaphysical, ‘objective’) politics. What deconstruction does, though, is show the alterity, the impossibility, the lie, the lack, the inadequacy, at the heart of any putative positivity. Alterity does not come from ‘over there’. It is produced by the (constitutive impossibility of the) here and now. This is important, both micro- and macro-politically, and this work will return more fully to its strategic implications in what follows. As will become clear, it relates to nothing other than deconstructive reading as a force of interruption in another context.

The next chapter first examines some apparently very different, indeed apparently diametrically opposed positions on whether and
how politicised academic work might in itself be a form of political intervention. The positions taken to be exemplary are those of Richard Rorty, whose ‘pragmatism’ typifies the anti-theoretical animus within ‘engaged’ academia, whether left, liberal or otherwise; Slavoj Žižek, who exemplifies the impetus to ‘high-theory’ as politicised scholarship; Judith Butler, who attempts to negotiate and reconcile these two putative extremes; and Ernesto Laclau whose deconstructive post-Marxism seems to be striving to find a certain ‘completion’ apparently to be found in an ‘articulation’ with other paradigms: For, Laclau has at various times explicitly engaged with both the pragmatic Rorty and the high-theoretical Žižek, as if to try to work out precisely what the post-Marxist intervention itself consists of. The positions of Rorty, Žižek, Butler and Laclau are taken to be representative of more than one rift and impasse that divides and polarises the academy in general, and post-Marxism and cultural studies in particular, as well as political activism ‘proper’. Rorty and Žižek are arguably exemplary cases to be considered when analysing the matter of what political intervention is, and whether and in what sense academic or intellectual work is or could decidedly (or decidably) be intervention. This work examines these encounters, with a view to establishing what the post-Marxist construal of its own interventional status may be. For what has yet to be fully established, is the post-Marxist conception of intervention. In the next chapter, we will examine what it is, and see that it is less than complete or adequate, but that it nevertheless holds the kernel of a more adequate and consequential way to retheorise and actualise intervention.

Notes

1. Hall uses the terms text, textual, textuality, etc., interchangeably with and to clarify the properties of the term ‘discourse’; for instance when he argues that ‘The metaphor of the discursive, of textuality, instantiates a necessary delay, a displacement, which I think is always implied in the concept of culture’ (1992: 283–4). That there is a sense of an unproblematic interchangeability between the two terms for Hall suggests of course that he has not undertaken the genealogical analysis of Mowitt (1992), and indeed Hall’s tendency to use the terms interchangeably adds further weight to Mowitt’s argument overall.

2. In The Post Card (1987), Derrida provocatively conceives of this as a complex tele techno-institutional ‘communication’ or ‘postal’ network.
3. Lyotard reminds us that ‘radical’ work ‘is not thrust aside today because it is dangerous or upsetting, but simply because it is a waste of time. It is “good for nothing,” it is not good for gaining time. For success is gaining time’ (Lyotard 1988: xv).

4. Perhaps the very intelligibility of the question, ‘what is left of the left?’, indicates that much has been lost, that there may be much to mourn. Indeed, a crisis in the Marxist Left has often been declared, and diagnosed as a consequence of many things: capitalism’s triumph, or its default victory by the collapse of all actually-existing alternatives; postmodernist ideological relativism dividing and conquering the left; consumerism and the triumph of irony and irresponsibility; capitalism’s deconstruction of all values; Thatcherism, Reaganism, or some other politician-policy-ism; or because of the stupidity of people trading under the name ‘left-wing’, who have actually sold out to neoliberalism, identity-politics, or whatever. There are ever more diagnoses. Either way, it seems that with the words ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned’, Marx and Engels (1967) were just too right, also prophesying the evaporation of the traditional political certainties that they themselves established. Many elements of Marxism that were for so many and for so long taken to be axiomatic are now nothing if not contestable, contested, and suspect (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Brown 2001; Hardt and Negri 2000; Peters 2001). Hardt and Negri agree that today the old political certainties have gone, and add that even that most important of concepts, exploitation, ‘can no longer be localized and quantified’ (2000: 209); something that deals a paralysing blow to left political thought and action. For certainty about exploitation (what, where, how and why it ‘is’) formerly set up clear and stable coordinates for establishing what praxis and agency were. But, to Hardt and Negri, our political problem is now actually one of trying to establish ‘how to determine the enemy against which to rebel’ (211), even before confronting the question of what form rebellion or resistance should properly take. For, if the left has lost a singular, identifiable and determinable enemy because ‘we are immersed in a system of power so deep and complex that we can no longer determine specific difference or measure’ (211), then precisely what properly appropriate praxis should be becomes a tortuously deep and complex matter.
Social machines make a habit of feeding on the contradictions they give rise to, on the crises they provoke, on the anxieties they engender, and on the infernal operations they regenerate. Capitalism has learned this, and has ceased doubting itself, while even socialists have abandoned belief in the possibility of capitalism’s natural death by attrition. No one has ever died from contradictions. And the more it breaks down, the more it schizophrenizes, the better it works, the American way. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 151)

Gilles Deleuze and [Pierre-]Felix Guattari were both militants who fully supported the uprising of May 1968. Though very different characters with different intellectual interests as well as different perspectives on a number of key issues, they formed a formidable writing team, ‘Deleuze and Guattari’, which delivered two seminal works, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as a number of less well-known works including *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and *What is Philosophy?* Both Deleuze and Guattari were insistent that they were ‘materialists’ and ‘Marxists’ (Deleuze, 1995). Guattari also explicitly rejected the label ‘postmodern’ often attributed to them (Genosko, 1996). Yet for many commentators Deleuze and Guattari are the embodiment of postmodernism in their embrace of a ‘relativistic’ epistemology combined with a celebration of difference, multiplicity and indeterminacy (Callinicos, 1989; Best and Kellner, 1991; Sarap, 1993). There is also an explicit and frequently acknowledged attachment to Nietzsche, the mere mention of whose name is enough to convince many of the irrationalist, ‘postmodern’ character of what follows.

Yet their work has been highly influential for contemporary debates on the possibilities of resistance to neo-liberal globalisation and the development
of anti-capitalist alternatives. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s collaborative works *Empire* and *Multitude* draw heavily from their work. This is true both in terms of an analysis of the neo-liberal ‘Empire’ itself and, to a more questionable extent, in terms of the prescriptions they draw up for a counter-empire (‘exile’, ‘flight’). We could also mention in this regard, the work of Arjun Appadurai, whose essay on the character of globalisation borrows heavily from their conceptual apparatus (Appadurai, 1996). More generally, contemporary anti-capitalist literature is replete with terms borrowed consciously or unconsciously from their work. The concepts of the ‘rhizome’, ‘deterritorialisation’, of ‘nomadism’ and the ‘multitude’ – to name a few – have become part of the vocabulary of contemporary politics and left activism. This is particularly so in France where Deleuze and Guattari’s work has been central to the revitalisation of radical political thought and activity, one marked by the range of journals and newsletters such as *Chimères, Multitude* and *Recherches* that carry their distinctive imprimatur. Deleuze and Guattari’s work has also been highly influential in feminist debates, as for example in the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Dorothea Olkowski (Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994; Olkowski, 1999). In sum, their work has been an important resource for rethinking not only the theory but also the practice of radical politics ‘after’ Marx.

Despite the familiarity of the partnership, Deleuze and Guattari were very different characters with quite distinct intellectual agendas. Guattari, born in 1930, was a psychiatrist and political activist who helped set up the Clinique de la Borde at Courcheverny near Paris, an experimental psychiatric unit that implemented some of the more heretical ideas of the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement associated in the anglophone world with figures such as R.D. Laing, David Cooper and Robert Castel (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984 [1972]). A persistent theme of Guattari’s work is the necessity for challenging the expectations and assumptions of conventional psychiatry and psychoanalysis which set up a model of ‘normal’ human activity counterpoised to a subnormal or schizoid subject unable to be integrated into conventional to social relations. In an echo of Foucault’s work on ‘madness’, Guattari regarded such distinctions as essentially ‘political’, equating normality with conformity to the status quo. Guattari was always insistent on the underlying reality of psychic or unconscious structures and thus of the need to examine the manner by which unconscious forces would be harnessed in the cause of the ‘workers’ struggle’. It was this problematic that underpinned the first major work of collaboration, *Anti-Oedipus*. Beyond his collaborations with Deleuze, Guattari’s forte was the essay, some of which are collected in the neglected *Molecular Revolution*, a collection that spans his work of the 1960s and 1970s. A number of other important essays are collected in *The Guattari Reader* edited by Gary Genosko, who has also written an advanced introduction to Guattari’s work (Genosko, 2002). Guattari also
collaborated with Negri on *Communists Like Us*, and reflecting his ‘green’
turn towards the end of his life wrote *The Three Ecologies*, an attempt to
marry his political commitments to ecological themes (Guattari and Negri,
1990; Guattari, 2000).

Deleuze, born in 1925, built his early reputation through a series of original
and contentious readings of key figures in the philosophical canon: Hume
(*Empiricism and Subjectivity*); Spinoza (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*), Nietzsche
(*Nietzsche and Philosophy*), Leibniz (*The Fold*) and Kant (*Kant’s Critical Philoso-
phy*). As well as being important critical studies, there is a common theme or
*problematique* running through them, giving us some idea of Deleuze’s politi-
cal as well as philosophical orientation. What becomes evident is Deleuze’s
hostility to all forms of ‘transcendentalism’, which equates to the search for
the ‘true’ or ‘underlying’ structure of reality or being. Deleuze was in this par-
ticular sense animated by a similar suspicion to that found in Castoriadis’s cri-
tique of ‘identitary-ensemblist’ thought. This is the view that the philosophical
enterprise could be divided between those who thought that some special key
or code was needed by which to read the inner meaning or essence of the
world and those who thought of the world as immediately accessible, as in
empiricist approaches. The political ramifications were quite clear to Deleuze,
as they were to Castoriadis. What is intriguing is that Deleuze challenges the
view long held that empiricism is an innately conservative doctrine that tends
to support and sustain the status quo and thus that it is transcendental philoso-
phies that are ‘revolutionary’. The Deleuzian project as it developed in the
works such as *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* sought to reverse
these propositions. In such fashion it was to be a ‘superior empiricism’ that
was to be regarded as revolutionary, and the dominant transcendentalist – for
which read elitist and exclusionary – approach which was to be cast in reac-
tionary light. *A Thousand Plateaus* was perhaps the ultimate expression of this
philosophico-political manifesto, though Deleuze continued in his other works
to hone and refine his position.

**Anti-Oedipus: ‘desire is revolutionary’**

As mentioned above Deleuze and Guattari collaborated on a number of key
works. It is generally acknowledged, however, that the most important of
these is the two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. For the purposes of
explicating the key features of Deleuze and Guattari’s contribution we will
concentrate on these texts beginning with *Anti-Oedipus*. We will also stick
rather closer to explication here than in other chapters, since without some
account of the two projects and the concepts associated with them, it will
be difficult for the reader to make much headway in assessing the contribution
of Deleuze and Guattari to critical thought and practice generally.
Thinking about the context giving rise to the work it is evident that *Anti-Oedipus* can be read as a direct response to the key issue that animated French radical intellectuals in the wake of 1968. To put the matter in the terms with which the issue was expressed, why is it that people often desire their own enslavement as opposed to liberation? Marxian answers to the question attribute causal primacy to material factors, so that any answer to such questions had to take account of prevailing material conditions. People would rebel because economic conditions make rebellion ‘rational’ or necessary; an answer has to be found to the ‘riddle’ confronting them. On the other hand, Marx himself took seriously the vexatious nature of the ‘subjective’ problem of the ‘how and why’ of rebellion, and his political writings in particular are fascinating analyses of the issue generally. He certainly saw nothing mechanical about the relationship between economic crisis and the emergence of a widespread revolutionary consciousness, even if certain correlations could be detected. The problematic in the France of 1968 was that those who initiated the uprising were largely middle-class students, not the working class, the ‘subject’ of the Marxian schema. Here was a rebellion built not on class ‘interests’ but on the desire for a different world from the one people found themselves in.

How the argument develops in *Anti-Oedipus* is that desire cannot be regarded as a mere ‘effect’ of the superstructure, something that reflects a governing logic or ideology. Desire should be regarded as in some sense primary and constitutive – part of the ‘base’ in turn underpinning consciousness. In this sense desire is a cause and not an effect. It is itself constitutive of the social world. Changes in desire in turn produce changes in that world. The existing system survives therefore not because desire reflects the governing order, but because the governing order shapes desires in ways that are affirmative of it. We are made to want our repression instead of our liberation.

In trying to make the case Deleuze and Guattari trod on the toes of not one but three orthodoxies or ‘transcendentalisms’. As well as the tacit critique of ‘official’ Marxism, the text is explicitly anti-Freudian and anti-Lacanian in structure as well. With regard to psychoanalytic orthodoxies, the title of the book *Anti-Oedipus* gives us a sense of the argument to be pursued. In their view Freudian psychology was fixated with the Oedipal triangle reducing the dramas and intensities of feeling to a ‘theatrical’ battle between Subject, Father and Mother (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 55). The search for the meaning of human life had, according to Freud, been resolved in favour of this primitordial tussle with Father for the attentions of Mother. What was implied was that there was no outside or beyond of this disabling *ménage à trois*. We are doomed to suffer, doomed to be disappointed, doomed to have our deepest needs and desires channelled and rechannelled into this never ending cycle of competition which could only be made bearable with the help of the Analyst as ‘interpreter’ of the struggle – as the one who could *represent* what...
Freud drew notoriously conservative conclusions from his observations of the struggle, seeing human civilisation as a history of the containment of the dark urges lurking beneath the surface of conscious existence (Freud, 1973). The best we could hope for, he argued, was a relatively ‘civilised’ existence in which the sublimation of our deepest and most destructive impulses made daily life possible and bearable for the majority, though a neurotic minority are unable to subject themselves to the rigours and disciplines needed to cope.

With regard to Lacan, the dominant figure in the French Freudian renaissance, the prospect for an emancipatory reading of the potential of ‘unlocking’ the unconscious looked even bleaker. As we have already noted, for Lacan the subject is marked by ‘lack’ – not just lack of the mother, but of the Thing, whether it be personal, sexual or linguistic. ‘Desire’ is in this sense read as stemming from lack, and could not be made sense of in any other way. We desire things that we do not have, and as soon as we have them we desire something else. In an echo of Hobbes, lack and scarcity are thus seen as constitutive of subjectivity and social life more generally, rather than as contingent, historically situated facts, as Marx argued. We struggle for things we do not have, objects we cannot possess, goals that escape us, meaning that lies beyond us. Human life is alienated, and antagonistic, and the sooner we realise this – with help from the Analyst of course – the better able we will be to cope with it. Society too is like this, in the sense that there can be no resolution of antagonism or alienation at the level of social life. Utopias might give witness to the need for reconciliation; but this reconciliation or ‘fullness’ always eludes us (Stavrakakis, 1999).

Anti-Oedipus repudiates this approach, offering in its place a different animating principle for understanding human subjectivity and thus a different reading of its ‘potential’. What Deleuze and Guattari proposed is a rereading of the structure of desire on the basis of a ‘vitalist’ reading of the kind associated with Nietzsche, Bergson and Reich – or, to put the matter differently, from the point of view of an autonomous life force as opposed to an underlying ‘drama’ mediated and shaped by the specificities of human needs and wants. Reference to Nietzsche may well be useful at this point.

To Nietzsche, the ‘will-to-power’ characterises life generally, not just human life. All life strives to keep itself in being, and it is this striving that he terms ‘the will-to-power’. In the hands of Deleuze and Guattari, will-to-power translates as ‘desire’. In this sense desire is anterior to ‘lack’ in the Lacanian sense, where it is lack that creates desire (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 26). Here desire is, on the contrary, constitutive of the subject and social life more generally. Thus, like Nietzsche they want to avoid the notion that it is the subject herself who ‘creates’, who ‘desires’. This is getting matters back to front, and loses the specificity of the claim they are making in Anti-Oedipus. Desire is the element from which ‘molar’ subjects such as the ‘individual’ and ‘society’ means. Freud drew notoriously conservative conclusions from his observations of the struggle, seeing human civilisation as a history of the containment of the dark urges lurking beneath the surface of conscious existence (Freud, 1973). The best we could hope for, he argued, was a relatively ‘civilised’ existence in which the sublimation of our deepest and most destructive impulses made daily life possible and bearable for the majority, though a neurotic minority are unable to subject themselves to the rigours and disciplines needed to cope.

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are created and recreated. This in turn echoes Nietzsche’s analysis in *The Genealogy of Morals* where the subject is famously rendered an ‘effect’ of the cause: ‘will-to-power’ (Nietzsche, 1956: §13).

Reinforcing the point, they write, notoriously, in terms of ‘desiring production’ or ‘machinic desire’ rather than ‘desire’ as such. Behind – or within – the subject lies a ‘material’ process of production that creates subjectivity. In this sense desire cannot be reduced to something outside of itself, but is itself constitutive and primordial. The ‘machinic’ quality of desire, that desire connects and is connected to things, reinforces the sense that ‘the individual’ is itself produced and producing, as opposed to the figure of liberal theory: a fully formed autonomous entity. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, instead of the model of the theatre with the subject acting out the Oedipal drama, the subject is merely one kind of ‘factory’ producing ‘flows’ of varying intensity and form (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 1). It is, we can note, in this highly idiosyncratic sense that their analysis is ‘materialist’. For Deleuze and Guattari ‘materialism’ means the primacy of ‘production’ over the individual or social domains of existence, though at the same time they dissolve the sense in which the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’ are in any meaningful sense differentiated from the economic, as they are in Marx’s materialism. They are aspects of the singular ‘socius’ or body to which these elements all belong. The identification of the analysis as ‘materialist’ is nonetheless important in that they claim to provide a *refinement* of Marx’s analysis of the process by which capitalism becomes ‘machinic’ and ‘abstract’, obliterating the distinctions and hierarchies of production in favour of a complete integration of labour into production.

Here also is a clue to their account of resistance, for as Deleuze and Guattari put it, ‘desire is revolutionary’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 116). This is to say that desire exceeds and outstrips that which can be desired. It is ‘desiring-production’ that is inventive and creative, not the system of social production which is merely parasitic upon the latter (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 36). This is signalled in the continued creativity we see in the domains of art and science in particular, both of which are tolerated forms of ‘creativity’ in the capitalist socius (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 378). Desiring production is not derivative or ‘representative’ of something outside of itself, such as the Oedipal triangle or ‘lack’ more generally, but is rather fully creative and autonomous. It is, however, the very fluidity and plenitude of desire that creates the necessity for class and state repression, and for the ceaseless channelling of desire into socially reinforcing behaviour, such as consumerism.

Here they are happy to endorse the earlier conclusions of Wilhelm Reich. Without the creation of the necessary ‘libidinal investments’, society would explode under the force of desire (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 118). Thus desire is continually made to turn in on itself, to become reactive, instead
of becoming active and affirmative of life. For capitalism to ‘work’ we have
to desire our own repression and by extension the repression of those who
will not or cannot conform to the logic of capitalist reproduction. This is just
one example of ‘micro-fascism’, a channelling of desires and suppressed feel-
ings in ways that support and sustain repression rather than overcoming it
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 104–5). However, as they make clear, all social
structures require this shaping, funnelling and blocking of desire, in turn
reinforcing the divisions, classes and stratifications of a given social order.
‘Fascist desire’ is not the ‘same’ as capitalist desire; but it operates in similar
fashion, encouraging modes of identification with reference to ‘out-groups’
and ‘minorities’ that need to be suppressed in order to maintain the whole.
The operation of a society requires that we want it to operate and this in
turn means replicating and identifying with the ‘micro-fascisms’ without
which it would collapse.

**Anti-Oedipus and the end of ideology**

One of the key points that emerges in their analysis is the necessity for
abandoning the Marxian theory of ideology as ‘false consciousness’, and
thus of oppression as the operation of class interests that are in some way
hidden from view (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 104). Class interests do not
explain why it is that people accept a given state of affairs. This would be
to ignore the role that desire plays in repression. Desire is active, not pas-
sive, in systems of oppression. Oppressors must ‘convince’ the subject of
the ‘desirability’ of a given state of affairs, rather than rely on mere acqui-
escence or ‘silence’, which is a much weaker basis for social governance.
Here their analysis complements the cultural Marxism of figures such as
Antonio Gramsci. The latter argued that the struggle for political control
was a struggle for ‘hegemony’, which in turn is seen as a positive commit-
tment on behalf of the ruled to the ruling class. Thus the problem is not that
people are duped into thinking that fascism (for example) is in their class
interests; it is that the fascists are able to get people to want fascism at a
deep enough level to sustain a fascist political order. One can condemn the
means that were used by the fascists in order to promote itself, the mythol-
gy, pageantry, symbolism etc., but this only reinforces the point, which is
that the fascists understood that they had to get people to want fascist rule
if they were to establish an effective political and social order.

Looking at the matter from the point of view of revolutionary struggles,
Deleuze and Guattari insist that it is not enough for revolutionaries merely
to assert that they understand human need better than the fascists; they
have to challenge fascism (and capitalism) on the ground of desire itself.
What is noticeable, then, is how irrelevant class and by extension ‘class consciousness’ becomes in their definition of capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 252–3). From the point of view of value there is only one class: the bourgeois. In an echo of Marcuse’s analysis in *One Dimensional Man* they assert that

there are no longer any masters, but only slaves commanding other slaves; there is no longer any need to burden the animal from the outside, it shoulders its own burden. Not that man is ever the slave of technical machines; he is rather the slave of the social machine. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 254)

From this point of view the ‘revolutionary’ impulse is not a quality ‘possessed’ by a distinct class, but is – as we have seen – internal to desiring production, and thus something that lies within every ‘subject’. The middle-class student was from this point of view just as potentially revolutionary as a worker in the mines of eastern France. Both are created under a regime of desiring production that in turn creates its own revolutionary subject: the ‘schizo-revolutionary’ of May 1968.

Here of course is another departure from ‘official’ Marxism and from the Leninist theory of the Party as articulated in *What is to be Done?*. For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Castoriadis, ‘class consciousness’ is a cover for the elaboration of a strategy in which ‘representatives’ of the oppressed are able to substitute themselves and their interests for those of the latter who in turn are said to be able to develop only a ‘trade union consciousness’. A properly revolutionary politics cannot be built on such ‘micro-fascisms’, but on the recognition that as a facet of desire itself, we are all potentially at least ‘revolutionaries’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 344). In place of the revolutionary party, with its hierarchies of professional cadres they follow Sartre’s analysis in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* in positing revolution as an active creation of ‘subject groups’ (Sartre’s ‘groups-in-fusion’) as opposed to ‘subjected groups’ (‘pledge groups’). Subject groups are flat, horizontal groups of like-minded individuals united by bonds of affect, affinity and alliance, as opposed to loyalty to a particular person or set of texts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 348). The schizo-revolutionary gesture is one of ‘fleeing from’ preconceived projects, entities and visions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 277, 286). They thus proposed a rethinking of the party as a necessarily contingent, temporary and shifting ‘crystallisation’ for ends and purposes that are themselves constantly reviewed and reviewable. This is a politics of participation and direct involvement by those who desired change, not representation and the abstraction of power in the interests of an ossified or ‘molar’ subject (‘the working class’).

The significance of the shift in the sense of ‘materialism’ to desiring-production is felt in other ways too. One of the unstated conclusions drawn
in *Anti-Oedipus* is that a revolutionary politics has to be looked at less like a means to an end, than as an end in itself. This is to say that the object of revolution cannot be seen in terms of the creation of a different regime of social-production. To recall, desire is *itself* revolutionary, creating its own excess that exceeds whatever it is that could be produced to satisfy it. Desire as we have seen is not produced by 'lack', but rather the other way around (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 26–7). So from this point of view, creating a system in which all lack (as 'needs') could be satisfied would not 'realise' or consummate 'the revolution', as Marx and many anarchists argued it would. There is no resting place for desire and thus there can be no 'end' to the revolutionary process as such. Liberation is always a 'liberation from' the constraints of social life, social production, social morality. Indeed, if liberation is to have any meaning at all it is in terms of the generation of greater intensities, as opposed to the realisation of some settled norm or blueprint. Such intensities cannot be legislated for, they cannot be produced by changing the system of distribution, or by reconfiguring power in ways that seem more 'just' or rational. To Deleuze and Guattari intensity can only be measured with reference to what they term the 'body without organs' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 328–9). Such a body would be freed from the obstacles and blockages that create the neurotic, sanitised subject of contemporary life. It would revel in its own existence, and the existence of others similarly freed from the neurotic form of life represented by 'capitalism'. It would quite literally be an escape, a fleeing from the axiom of capitalism (value, profit, the commodity). The 'new earth' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 382) would be one in which it is not just the capitalist axiom but any and all axioms that are resisted and thus where the social body remains unencoded, flowing, contingent.

### A Thousand Plateaus: from desire to multiplicity

To move from *Anti-Oedipus* published in 1972 to *A Thousand Plateaus* published in 1980 seems at first to be catapulted into a radically different conceptual project. Not only is the form of the latter very different to that of the former, we are confronted at every turn with a battery of new terms and reformulations that make it at first difficult to imagine that the work has very much to do with *Anti-Oedipus*. What, however, does become immediately noticeable is that the transposition of the object of critique from 'desiring production' to 'multiplicities', of how it is that entities combine and recombine. We move from an analysis whose primary focus is the subject and subjectivisation (the coming-to-be of subjects – whether individual or group) to the analysis of combination and recombination of complex pluralities – though the distinction is less clearly cut than this image allows.
‘Schizo-analysis’ moves towards the search for a ‘nomadic’ outside of the hierarchies and asymmetries of contemporary existence.

Before attempting to unpack some of the key arguments we need to say something about the form of the work. One of the bemusing aspects of _A Thousand Plateaus_ is the mode of presentation. _Anti-Oedipus_ is not a ‘conventional’ work in most respects, but it does present an argument in a recognisably linear narrative with what can be taken for a beginning, a middle and an end. As the title implied, however, _A Thousand Plateaus_ presents its ‘findings’ in terms of layers or ‘plateaus’. The intention is that readers are able to read the plateaus in any order one chooses, to skip plateaus if they fail to ‘say’ something to the reader, and in all other respects to use them as seems appropriate. Each plateau comes with a date of an event or occurrence that in some sense illustrates or marks the appearance of the particular intensity to be found within. Thus ‘Plateau 3’ is called ‘10,000 BC: “The Geology of Morals” [Who does the Earth Think it is?]’, ‘Plateau 4’ is ‘November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics’, and so on. There is no ‘whole’, no totality and certainly no ‘story’ that could be retold in some unproblematical way – which is precisely the point. A perhaps more useful way of rendering the matter is to note that each plateau presents an exposition and/or demonstration of a concept or group of concepts [majoritarianism/minoritarianism; smooth/striated etc.], which together represent something like a system of thought – or perhaps an ‘anti-system’. The presentation in this sense mirrors the intention of the authors to counterpose the linearity and unity of occidental thought with the ‘rhizomatic’ alternative they hope to displace it with. So what exactly is one to make of the text? What can we divine by way of core themes, if not core arguments?

What becomes apparent is that _A Thousand Plateaus_ presents a dazzling critique of Western rationalism, and with it the various props and devices which have been used to maintain the ‘statist’ practices that emerge from and are sustained by it. As we noted above, if it is possible to isolate a particular thematic or problem within the text then this would be the question of how it is that ‘multiplicities’ come to be combined or configured in particular ways. For Deleuze and Guattari, multiplicities – whether composed of people, of musical notes, of animals or atoms – can be arranged in one of two ways. They can be arranged either asymmetrically or symmetrically, in hierarchical or non-hierarchical terms. Hierarchies or asymmetries require some principle of origin, some mode of differentiation by which to arrange the various points/atoms/people in ways that allow the hierarchy to be maintained. It is the search for this point of origin, this basic principle by which order can be imposed on the multiplicity, that Deleuze and Guattari term ‘arborescent’ (or ‘arboreal’) thought. A ‘seed’ is ‘planted’ which then grows tree-like, establishing all the basic connections between the multiple elements governed by thought. Arborescent
thought in this sense equates to the search for a ‘governing’ principle by which to think thought itself.

Deleuze and Guattari refer here and elsewhere to the ‘Cartesian’ moment as being one such example. ‘I think, therefore I am’. Once it is possible to trace the origin of thought in thought itself, then in a sense all else follows: it is to thought itself that we must look for the basis of understanding. But the Cartesian moment is, as the analysis in A Thousand Plateaus makes clear, just one ‘moment’ among many similar moments. Indeed, as the dates of the plateau suggest, they read civilisation as the history of moments of a similar kind: moments in which ‘seeds’ are ‘planted’. Each moment implies its own regime, its own ‘order’ that is not only abstract or philosophical, but directly ‘political’ in the sense that each legitimates a particular conception of how multiplicity should be perceived, how elements should relate to each other, how the unity of any given system is to be maintained and reinforced. ‘Arborescence’ concerns thought and also the mechanisms by which order is created (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 16). A Thousand Plateaus can be read as a set of successive attempts to undermine the view that there is no ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ of ‘arborescence’ and thus of ‘order’ more generally. In asserting the connection between the regime of truth and order, they echo not just Nietzsche, but of course Foucault whose analyses they share up to this point. But here the similarity tends to fade. Deleuze and Guattari are insistent that there is indeed a genuine ‘outside’, as opposed to the fragments, glimpses or moments of hope associated with the Nietzschean perspective.

Resting with the vegetal analogy, they contrast arborescence as an organising principle with the figure of the ‘rhizome’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: intro.). A rhizome is a kind of plant that grows underground, and is hidden from view. It shoots roots outwards, randomly and without ‘logic’ or ‘sense’ rather than in terms of a predictable pattern or hierarchy. The root is thus a ‘line of flight’, an ‘escape’ as opposed to the branches of the tree which are supported by the trunk. Here we can hear the echo of Anti-Oedipus and the idea of desiring-production as, optimally, an unhampered molecular ‘flow’. The rhizome is a direct analogue for desiring production in that it embraces the principle of embodying flow as ‘escape’ or ‘flight’. Here it is the flow of thought, of music, of art, of science, of nature. So what, for example, would rhizomatic thought be like? In a sense, thought that disrupts the creation of order, that disrupts ‘foundation’ around some ‘truth’ or point of origin. It is thought that remains molecular, that is fluid, mobile and unhampered. From this point of view they see Nietzsche (for example) as a quintessentially rhizomatic thinker: a thinker who disrupts, as opposed to laying the basis for order and rationality. Deleuze and Guattari want to establish that there are two different forms of combination or multiplicity, one rhizomatic, the other arborescent; one that is ‘immanent’ to a multiplicity itself, and another that is subject to an external ‘principle’ that
domesticates it, rules it, creates and recreates it in conformity to the transcendental point of origin – that acts as ‘a General’, as they put it (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 21). Understanding this core distinction facilitates not only following the arguments of the various plateaus, but also getting a clearer sense of the political dimension of Deleuze and Guattari’s work. How then does the arborescent/rhizomatic distinction play out in terms of the latter?

Trees and rhizomes: generals and nomads

Arborescent forms of thought give rise to arborescent forms of organisation. The point of origin or first principle allows multiplicity to be ‘segmented’, organised and delineated in accordance with a ‘valid’ molar principle. A segmented multiplicity occupies ‘striated’ space, meaning space that has been organised into discrete units that interweave in a predictable or ‘rational’ fashion (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 474ff.). This is contrasted with forms of multiplicity that are, like the rhizome, open, flowing and ‘deterritorialising’. In place of striated, segmented space there is ‘smooth’ space, a space without boundary, linearity, edges. But what does all this mean? Imagine a typical school playground. Before the whistle goes for class, the children run round in a free-flowing, spontaneous fashion, each child following his or her own inclinations. Some want to run, some want to talk to others, others want to wander by themselves. The impression we get is of a blur of random activity, a constant weaving and interweaving of discrete ‘molecules’. But then the whistle goes: the children are made to line-up in neat queues waiting to be called to their classrooms. The free-flow of bodies is transformed into lines, into ‘segments’ obeying a particular ‘logic’. The ‘smooth’ space of play has been transformed into the ‘striated’ space of organisation, rank and rationality. ‘Molecular’ flow has given way to ‘molar’ segmentation – organisation around a transcendent or ‘normatively valid’ principle.

The example is overly simplistic, but what it is intended to illustrate is that, despite the apparently abstract and analytical manner in which the terms emerge, the question of agency is a very real one – though the immediately ‘political’ character of the analysis sometimes has to be searched for according to the context. Striated space is space that has been created by someone or something, whether it be a logic, an argument or a practice. There is an intervention in the ‘anarchic’ flow imposing ‘order’ on the multiplicity, order which itself obeys a particular logic or principle. The school ‘needs’ to be organised, it needs to be regulated in accordance with known and fixed principles, and all this is signalled in the whistle. Of course the school is a mere microcosm of the ultimate ‘apparatus of capture’: the state.
It is the state that imposes and maintains striated space, ‘transcendence’, ‘territoriality’, ‘overcoding’ and ‘majoritarianism’. All of which is to say that within a given territorial space the state functions through axiomatising social life, making it conform to a certain principle or ‘truth’, whether that be of the market, of theocratic belief, of an ideology. The axiom ‘overcodes’ everything within; it makes everything obey its own logic, and that which does not is regarded as a threat to it. The state is ‘majoritarian’: it stands for and ‘represents’ that which is dominant, that which is ‘true’ or rational. It is in this sense that the state is regarded as an ‘apparatus of capture’. The ‘multiple’ is captured, annexed, trapped in a space or territory over which it has, despite the contractarian rhetoric of contemporary liberal states, minimal control.

If arborescence underpins the apparatus of capture and the creation of striated space, then rhizomatic thought and activity underpins what they term the ‘nomadic war machine’ which in turn creates smooth space. Smooth space is space without structure or organisation, without foundations, pre-existing or always-already known rules and principles. The smoothness here should not be thought of in tactile terms so much as a description of space without contours, or rigid boundaries. Deleuze and Guattari suggest as an analogy the sea – though of course even the sea is now territorialised by international treaty [Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 479]. But think of the sea as it was perceived in medieval times, that is the ‘high seas’: a lawless, rule-less, infinite space traversed by those who hold no allegiance to anyone but the band or ‘pack’ of which they are a member. That the sea was portrayed as a ‘dangerous’ place illustrates the logic of capture under which states operate: smooth space will always appear ‘threatening’ and ‘lawless’ precisely because it has not been ‘captured’ and annexed to known and fixed principles. But of course to those who wish to escape the despotic overcoding and majoritarianism of the state, smooth space appears like a haven of safety.

Smooth space is not therefore a geophysical attribute of a given territory, as the term might intuitively suggest. The ‘smoothness’ of the sea or the desert is not an innate quality, but rather the effect of a particular relationship between people. Where the terms and conditions that unite people are ‘immanent’ to that group we see a nomadic multiplicity, as opposed to a set of relations organised by something like a state or authority that lies outside those terms and conditions. Since ‘nomadic’ multiplicity does not capture space, it becomes a deterritorialising force, a force that counters and overcomes that which captures – the state. This is what intrigues Deleuze and Guattari about nomads and nomadism. The latter describes a form of multiplicity, or combinatory dynamic. By contrast with ‘sedentary’ peoples whose relations to others are determined by fixed and known rules guaranteed and enforced by the state, nomads interact with others on their own terms. Nomadic combination is without ‘force of law’. Quoting Arnold
Toynbee, they observe that nomads do not have to move to be regarded as nomads (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 381). What makes them nomads is that combination with others is not based on law or coercion, but on practices that are contingent, flowing, negotiable. The nomadic war machine is ‘immanent’ to itself. It disavows in its very being the logic of territoriality, coding and majoritarianism. Nomads are ‘minor’, which is to say that they embody the logic of the rhizome: of escape, flight, flux, flow, never ‘stopping’, even when they do not ‘move’.

A distinction that emerges here (and one that will become the focal point of the critique articulated in Kafka) is that between ‘minoritarianism’ and ‘majoritarianism’. As we have noted, the apparatus of capture is one that proceeds via the assertion of the validity of what is termed a denumerable set, that is a set with a molar identity that can as it were be ‘counted’ (and counted upon). ‘The majority’ is a denumerable set in that it represents the figure ‘more than 50 per cent’. When we hear a politician say that ‘the majority wants x’ this rules out the rationality or desirability of other outcomes, possibilities or end states. Statist politics operates via the mobilisation of denumerable sets whether it be ‘the majority’ or ‘the black community’ or ‘youth’. Similarly, radical politics has traditionally operated via the mobilisation of different sets, ‘the working class’, being the classic formula. This operation (‘majoritarianism’) is in their view a silencing not only of those who remain outside the set, but of those who lie within, those who are ‘represented’ in the claim articulated. It is one that transforms molecular flow into the stasis of a molar subject position to which one is subject.

One of the most persistent themes in the work of Deleuze and Guattari is the insistence that a revolutionary politics is and must be ‘minor’. This means accepting that ‘the people are not present’; there is no ‘people’. There are only ‘singularities’. A singularity that is unable to speak for itself is not a singularity, but only part of a set. As they state in Plateau 13, ‘ours is becoming the age of minorities’ and by extension of singularities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 469). Whatever purchase molar identities once had is in the process of dissipation, not least due to the deterritorialising effect of capitalism itself (‘all that is solid melts into air’). As we noted with respect to Anti-Oedipus, ‘the working class’ has no reality for Deleuze and Guattari, displaced as it is by the class of ‘slaves’. It follows that there is no working-class ‘subject’ as such, merely those who fall outside the logic of identity itself, which may in numerical terms be the vast majority. When they invoke ‘the proletariat’ it is in the sense of a non-denumerable and hence molecular set, ‘the outside’ or ‘margin’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 472). As they put it, the proletariat is the ‘becoming-revolutionary’ of all minorities rather than the crystallisation of the working class via the transformation of class consciousness. This in turn necessitates a reorientation of the kind signalled in Anti-Oedipus away from the revolutionary group as apparatus of capture.
or state-in-waiting, towards a multiplicity of ‘war machines’ which could maintain and embody ‘the pure becoming of minorities’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 471). A revolutionary strategy cannot affirm the identity of one or other oppressed groups, but rather has to ‘become everybody/everything’ that is minoritarian. It is to adopt the stance of the ‘universal’ figure thereby dissolving the axiom of identity and identities altogether.

Where then does this analysis leave critique? What is the politics of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* considered in the round? To say that what they offer is ‘anarchistic’ is a truism. What is more interesting perhaps to note is the way in which what they are offering is rendered. What is stressed at all times is the necessity for flight, for flow, for escape. This differentiates their thought strongly from classical anarchism, which like its rival ideologies, often sought to construct an image of a future Good Life as a contrast to capitalist modernity. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* can be read as a rejection of the narrative construction of other worlds based on ‘insight’ into human rationality, need or nature. It is this mode of theorising to which they are objecting in their delineation of rhizomatic as opposed to arborescent forms of thought. The point is to escape from fixed or permanent ‘constructions’, however well-meaning or rational they may seem. It is to stop thinking that the voice of the Philosopher or the Analyst can ‘represent’ complex and multiple singularities. In particular it is a move away from the notion of space as something to be ‘captured’. They seek an escape from the suffocating character of spatial thought, and the insistence that it is the task of philosophy to legislate. The point is to reject thought that insists that we have to construct boxes, that systems have to be created, that ‘justice’, ‘equality’, ‘democracy’ emit of some universal or transcendent definition. Life, they want to argue, is ‘outside’ the box. It is flight from normative and utopian schemas, no matter how ‘just’ they may seem. It is anarchy – but not as we ‘know’ it.

**Nomadism and/or Marxism?**

As should be apparent even from this abbreviated account, *A Thousand Plateaus* is an important complement to *Anti-Oedipus*, helping us to see more clearly the import of ideas that would otherwise have remained suggestive or undeveloped from the earlier work. What may still be useful to discuss is the degree to which their self-description as ‘Marxists’ is merely a provocation or something more substantial. What in short is ‘Marxist’ in Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Marxism’?

To classical Marxists such as Ebert and Callinicos the suggestion that Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis is Marxist is absurd. To begin with an obvious point, despite the insistence on the ‘materialist’ nature of their analysis, this is, as far as Marxist critics are concerned, a materialism that seems a
long way from the reassuringly ‘scientific’ analysis of objective macro-economic developments of the form we get in Capital. This equates to the charge that they abandon the ‘primacy’ of production in social and historical development thereby in turn abandoning the necessity for the close study of economic trends and tendencies as a basis for elaborating a meaningful resistance to the dominant class. In effect ‘materialism’ is turned on its head so that instead of referring to the ‘objective’ process of production that in turn creates and shapes social life, it refers to an ahistorical or primordial ‘force’ that shapes production and subjectivity, collapsing the two into the category of ‘desiring production’. It is from this point of view that Callinicos and Ebert regard Deleuze and Guattari’s work as a form of ‘irrationalism’ or ‘ludic’ vitalism that reduces reality to ontological categories rather than the objective economic categories that are the sine qua non of any authentically Marxist analysis. Ebert, in particular, spares little in her assault on the pair accusing them of constructing an ‘alibi’ for the bourgeois class. In displacing ‘production’ with a discursively driven approach, they reduce analysis to a ludic post-materialist theory the effect of which is to ignore the needs and interests of the global poor [Ebert, 1996]. Zizek echoes Ebert in arguing that the project of ‘multiplicity’ is a cover for global capitalism where ‘lifestyle’ differences are held up as evidence of the possibility of self-definition and self-creation (Zizek, 2004).

We could add to the charge sheet by noting that a ‘Marxism’ that rejects inter alia the theory of ideology as ‘false consciousness’; that displaces the analysis of class struggle in favour of a ‘schizo-analysis’ in which it is non-denumerable ‘multitudes’ who compose the subject of analysis; that denies the desirability or the necessity for a revolutionary Party, either in the transformation of capitalism or in the ‘transition’ between capitalism and communism; that turns its back on dialectics in favour of a self-declared ‘empiricism’ (albeit of a ‘superior’ form); that displaces production for ‘need’ with ‘nomadic distribution’ and communism with ‘crowned anarchy’ would be a ‘Marxism’ deeply foreign to many of those who have gone under its banner. Why not simply accept that this is an ‘ex-Marxism’, if not a ‘non-Marxism’?

The question is an acute one because what is implicit in the query is whether a heterodox position of this kind can still articulate an oppositional politics. This seems an odd point to make, until one remembers that when theorists get called ‘postmodern’ it is assumed that what they are criticising is ‘modernity’ or the Enlightenment ‘project’, in turn equating to the idea of the availability of a better, more emancipated world. Yet the notion that Deleuze and Guattari are turning their backs on the Enlightenment and thereby dissolving the idea of a better world, that consequently we are unable to find a politics, radical or otherwise, is curious. This is not the same as arguing that what they offer is necessarily compelling or useful, or that it is...
better than the competing anti-capitalisms on offer, including more orthodox visions of Marxism. It is merely to note that they frame their own project in terms of the necessity for overcoming capitalism, and they do so on terms that are familiar to Marxists. One of the suggestions in *Anti-Oedipus* is that it is only with an acceleration or a full working-out of capitalism that a ‘post-capitalist’ order could be contemplated. As Deleuze and Guattari ask:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist ‘economic solution’? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialisation? (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 239)

Here, in other words, they seem to share some of Marx’s wariness towards anti-modernists and romantic anti-capitalists who argue that the revolutionary transcendence of capitalism could have been effected at any stage in the evolution of modern society. As we noted above, Deleuze and Guattari see capitalism as a process of revolutionary ‘deteritorialisation’ that prepares the way for alternatives to traditional society. It is a crushing process that transforms and undermines all ‘transcendentalisms’ and archaicisms in the extension of the law of value. Capitalism is pure ‘flow’ washing away everything that presents an obstacle to its own progression. From this point of view there is no possible accommodation with capitalism. As they state often enough, ‘reformism’, social democracy, even socialism affirm capitalism because they represent the attempt to live within the law of value. Only a complete break with value and the capitalist axiomatic will permit the generation of meaningful alternatives (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 373).

These are sentiments of a classically Marxist kind. They also suggest that they may well be closer to Marx than many of the other thinkers we consider at least in terms of invoking a *narrative* of revolution. The narrative is not teleological; but we are confronted in passages like these with the idea of having to break through capitalism to reach the ‘other side’. The complicating element here is that by contrast the analysis of *A Thousand Plateaus* suggests that there is in effect *always* an outside of capitalism, or indeed any other axiom of social life – the nomadic ‘smooth’ space that forms the counterpoint of the analysis there. Another way of putting the same point would be to ask whether the actualisation of the latter is necessarily post-capitalist, or whether the trope of smooth space represents a valid reference point of an ahistorical kind. The analysis in *Anti-Oedipus* would point towards the necessity for overcoming capitalism as a prelude to the creation of a post-representative space, whereas the analysis of *A Thousand Plateaus* seems to point in the opposite direction, i.e. towards the ideal of nomadism as a figurative and historical practice that is ‘always’ with us.
The uncertainty or 'undecidable' nature of the analysis would seem to suggest that revolutionary theory or strategy is itself undecidable or ambivalent, in turn creating serious issues to be confronted at the level of social movements and practice. Should radicals sit back and wait for the full 'determinitorialising' force of capitalism to take its course; or should they set their face against any kind of accommodation with capitalism in order to accentuate the necessity for a 'break'? That one could be posing such questions illustrates one of the elusive qualities of Deleuze and Guattari's approach. Yet at the same time it is one that mirrors the dilemmas faced by Marxists over the previous two centuries. A certain historical teleology is a key component of historical materialism, and without it Marxists would argue that revolutionary theory loses its foundation in the analysis of the trends and tendencies of any given social horizon. But Marx was equally insistent that revolutions are not made by crises, but by individuals acting together in common cause ('Men make their own history ...'). What if that common cause is pursued before 'the time is ripe'? Here in microcosm the dilemmas that are utterly familiar to students of Marxism in action. When to act? When to act legitimately and with prospect of success? Act too 'early' and revolutionary praxis becomes 'ultra-left' voluntarism, one that is always searching for the revolutionary 'outside' and thus discounting the need to build opposition in a concerted fashion as opposed to one that relies on the spontaneous and thus fleeting energies of today's enragés.

On the other hand, if desire really is 'revolutionary' or capable of exploding extant structures and boundaries then it would be inconsistent not to be looking for an 'outside' for fear of affirming capitalism as opposed to confronting it. The answers to such questions would, however, seem to be concrete or 'micro-political' issues rather than ones that can be resolved by reference to causal determinants lying beyond desire itself. They are questions concerning the nature and form of the 'molecular' forces at work in any given setting. Capitalism may appear solid, indeed 'natural', in one location and be teetering on the brink of fundamental crisis in another. In one place or at one moment to act against 'capitalism' will appear ludicrous in the extreme, at another wholly rational and indeed necessary on these terms. In 1989 Fukuyama can write of the triumph of liberal-capitalism to be followed within a decade by the eruption of a global 'anti-capitalist' movement that made his sentiments seem bizarrely inappropriate. Such perhaps are the modalities of 'schizo-analysis' and the 'question of capitalism'. But on the other hand, they show how their account of desire renders 'history' contingent and open in a way that is familiar to other writers considered here, not least Castoriadis. It is in turn one more manifestation of the 1968 'effect'. The desire to overturn capitalism can come from anywhere and be lodged in anything. Economic 'crisis' may enter the equation, but it does not of itself determine it.
Towards a new (anti-)politics?

What of the ‘after’ of capitalism? Here Deleuze and Guattari’s critics differ only to the extent that they are determined to demonstrate the degree to which their ‘vision’ differs from that of Marx. We have heard from Ebert and Zizek, both of whom insist that their approach serves to sustain rather than undermine capitalism. To Laclau, on the other hand, their radicalism is a new form of ‘nihilism’, celebrating with Nietzsche the impossibility of a better world, and thus of the necessity for the reduction of politics to the narcissistic pursuit of an individual ‘aesthetic’ existence [Laclau, 1996]. To Best and Kellner, their approach is by contrast too redolent of Marxism, being essentially ‘productivist’ in character and thus wedded to an essentialist ‘imaginary’ of alienation from some core ontological model of the non-alienated self [Best and Kellner, 1991: 106–7]. That we can get such different assessment shows that we need to think past the question of their relation to Marxism and on to the issue of what kind of politics is on offer here.

As should be clear from the brief account of *A Thousand Plateaus* in particular, their concerns are obviously libertarian in character, even if their libertarianism is that associated in Leninist terms with the ‘infantile’ disorder of ‘Left-wing communism’. This is to say their analysis concerns the preservation and enhancement of autonomous thought and action as an end in itself. That which excludes, subordinates or oppresses the singular is rejected irrespective of whether some ‘greater good’ is likely to be produced by it. Their approach is thus resolutely anti-utilitarian. Indeed, it is anti-utilitarian to the extent that they reject many celebrated ‘anti-utilitarian’ positions (most noticeably Kant’s) as too compromised by the requirement that such a position has to be grounded in a transcendental or foundational principle, such as the principle of autonomy itself. On their reading a ‘principle’ of autonomy cannot by definition be ‘autonomous’ as it implies that autonomy is obedience to a law, rather than something embodied or practised. Autonomy is ‘flight’, or becoming minor, and is thus the condition of those who have turned their face against ‘principles’ and legislations, which for Deleuze and Guattari are invariably majoritarian and exclusionary.

Their approach also means that they have an innate suspicion, frequently aired, of the idea that a libertarian form of life has to be crystallised or ‘grounded’ in institutions or organisations. Thus they are notoriously wary of ‘organised’ politics generally, seeing resistance as ‘lines of flight’, a much more spontaneous and fluid notion than that implied in the language of parties, if not of ‘movements’. This is not to say that they think that politics is impossible *per se*. Rather they argue that there is a frequent – if not permanent – danger of the emergence of ‘micro-fascisms’ in any attempt to ‘organise’ or ‘institutionalise’ that ‘crystallisation’ of a ‘becoming-minor’ they see as the basis for a revolutionary politics.
For Deleuze and Guattari smooth space cannot be created by institutional fiat or constitutional act. It is not legislated for or enshrined in ‘fundamental principles’ that are then preserved or upheld by judicial apparatuses. It is a mode of being with others, not a set of laws, norms or regulations that are enacted and upheld. In this sense the revolutionary body, the nomadic war machine, is both the means and end of revolutionary practice. It does not so much create and maintain smooth space like a gardener maintains a lawn; rather smoothness is the effect of nomadic combination. Nomadism is not a system of governance, but a form of combination, a form of multiplicity, in which what happens to any given group remains ‘immanent’ to that group. Moreover, there is no appeal to what ‘the majority’, actual or fictive wants. ‘Nomadic’ assemblages are minoritarian: they are constructed by reference to the particular, specific needs, wants and desires of each singularity. What should be acknowledged therefore is that Deleuze and Guattari’s critique goes well beyond the more utopian moments encountered in orthodox and heterodox Marxism, such as that of Castoriadis. They reject permanent, standing structures no matter how ‘democratic’ or participatory in structure. Smooth space is not obviously ‘democratic’ space, nor space that has been rendered more ‘transparent’ or ‘accountable’. It is space that exhibits a complete lack of segmentation or striation, of hierarchy and ‘organisation’, even of a ‘popularly’ run or ‘auto-poietic’ kind. ‘Radical democracy’ of the kind described by many Post-Marxists may well be radical at one level; but it will never be radical enough for Deleuze and Guattari.

Such an observation in turn leads to lively controversy (see, for example, Patton, 2000; Protevi, 2001; Thoburn, 2003). The question is often posed as to whether there is in fact a ‘politics’ in their work, that is, whether there are resources not merely for the critique of governance, but for creating a different kind of governance – one that might be germane to our lives in modern or perhaps postmodern times. To put the matter bluntly, what is the object of their critique: a world without government or a world with more democratic and egalitarian government than at present? Is this an anti-political politics or a politics that at one level represents the full working out of the narrative of the Enlightenment, one pointing towards ‘immanent’ self-governance?

That such a fundamental question can be posed (politics or anti-politics) shows the ambiguous nature of the analysis offered, and beyond that the difficulty of making it ‘work’. Both positions bring their own problems. If the object is the dissolution of governance and governed spaces then there may be a danger of what has been termed the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (Freeman, 1970). If there are no rules or procedures for governing relations between individuals then it is not difficult to imagine that outcomes and decisions will become distorted in favour of the strong, the well organised or the most vocal, leaving minorities powerless and without means of making themselves heard. The continual references to nomadic and barbarian hordes in their work may have a certain rhetorical appeal, but historically such forms
of ‘collectivity’ are hardly noted for tolerance, openness and inclusivity of the kind that many associate with a progressive politics. Nor are they noted for their ability to maintain complex, diverse or industrialised societies.

Should we therefore conclude that a ‘nomadic’ politics is not merely figuratively pre-modern but actually pre-modern? If so, then this would of course undermine the claim referred to earlier that what is on offer is a quasi-Marxian position that sees the traversing of capitalism as a necessary prelude to the generalisation of smooth or nomadic space. If, on the other hand, such a perspective is intended to complement modernity and industrial production then we need to be able to see how modern society could operate on such a basis. With Deleuze and Guattari we learn a lot about what a ‘smooth’ world will not be (‘over-coded’, ‘axiomatised’, ‘isomorphic’ etc.). What becomes more difficult is to imagine how collectives might organise themselves without lapsing into ‘sedentary’ ways. Will there be markets? Will there be commodity production, divisions of labour, work? If not, how (for example) is production to be organised in such a fashion that it does not immediately proliferate markets, accumulation, the division of labour? To invoke ‘nomadism’ is of course a provocation; but is it just a provocation – or is there some substantive critique of capitalist modernity behind it that encourages us to imagine the availability of a post-capitalist modernity – or post-capitalist modernities?

It may be, on the other hand, that the object is a form of democratic governance or ‘immanent structuring’ (Protevi, 2001: 192). In this case we still need to know how this will differ from existing forms of democratic governance. Deleuze, for example, was struck by the difference between jurisprudence and constitutional law – the former rendering the nature and indeed form of law contingent on immediate ‘immanent’ conceptions of the just.1 The British system of justice would seem on this reading to fully conform to such a model of immanent structuring, even more so given that it is Parliament that is the repository of sovereign power, in turn implying that there is no block to legislation and re-legislation on terms dictated by the people (or rather their representatives) as there is in constitutional systems. Is this to say, by extension, that the UK ‘constitution’ can be regarded as providing the basis for an immanently structuring social order? If so, we need to ask what is particularly radical about such an account. Does it not simply echo Burke’s defence of ‘the rights of Englishmen’ as opposed to the abstract ‘Rights of Man’ outlined by Tom Paine and Enlightenment progressives? Burke’s point was that social orders need to develop in accordance with their own needs, wants, habits and prejudices – as opposed to the ‘transcendental’ imperatives dreamed up by the Men of Reason. In the terms being used here, they need to be ‘immanently structuring’. As Paine later argued, in Burke’s hand this is code for elite rule untrammelled by considerations relating to the needs of ‘Everyman’; yet as the example of Burke highlights, there is nothing particularly radical about the idea of
social orders governing themselves in accordance with ‘immanent’ needs and preferences as opposed to ‘transcendental’ or ‘universalist’ ones. What we need to know is whose needs and preferences are to form the basis for such an evaluation and how they are to be translated into policies and decisions. One searches in vain in Deleuze and Guattari’s work for a democratic theory supplying answers to such questions, or even suggestive models of the kind we see in the work of others considered here.

In their defence, however, it might be argued that to pose such questions and to demand models is to remain within the very imaginary that their work is designed to unsettle. Political theory is a question of thinking about how we get from where we are now to some other place. How do we imagine that our world could be reconfigured in a way that is more just or democratic? It is this way of conceiving the role of political theory that, arguably, is the object of the critique offered by Deleuze and Guattari. Foucault is surely justified on this view in arguing that what they offer is less a political theory than an ethics that has as part of its objective the transformation of ‘the political’ into an ongoing and permanent war against ‘fascism’ in all its guises and manifestations [Foucault, in Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: xii]. It is for this reason that the ‘politics’ on offer seems to be thin and underdeveloped. For Deleuze and Guattari there is an outside of hierarchy and subordination and thus of ‘rulers and ruled’. But to maintain such an outside requires a practice of the self in relation to others and in relation to the categories of representation that have traditionally been the mechanism of democratic governance. In this sense the figure of the ‘nomad’ or the schizoid subject is not itself an unattainable figure. As sympathetic commentators such as Todd May and Saul Newman point out, it is like Max Stirner’s insurgent self-owned ‘ego’, which is to say an image of rebellion in ‘everyday life’ [May, 1994; Newman, 2001]. Or to put it in Deleuze and Guattari’s own terms, it is an image of permanent war on the stasis of representation, of roles, of authentic ‘being’, whether individual or collective.

From this point of view Deleuze and Guattari are not political theorists: they do not have firm answers to questions such as ‘who gets what?’ What they ask us to consider is what is the basis of the ‘deciding’? Is this deciding for others; or is it deciding between others. Is it deciding on the basis of a system of hierarchy that allots the task of decision-making to one class, one caste, one group – or is deciding a function of and immanent to groups and collectives? Deleuze and Guattari ask us to decide whether this is political theorising. If it is, they are political theorists; if not then they are antipolitical theorists, that is theorists whose raison d’être can only be understood in terms of the overturning of politics and all it ‘represents’.

In terms of Post-Marxism, this will as we shall see create something of a difficulty. Post-Marxism can at one level be viewed as the response of radicals to the lack of a developed democratic theory in Marx, and in terms of the
wider problem of substitutionism and vanguardism to which Marxist political practice was, they thought, prone. The answer, according to many thinkers considered here, is either to radicalise existing democracy, or to generate normatively valid models that will in turn highlight the deficiencies of current democratic theory and practice. With Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, we see something quite different: the thinking beyond or ‘after’ of democracy and all systems of governance. Yet the grounds of this move are clearly in sympathy with many of the themes that are otherwise articulated amongst those we consider: the rejection of determinism and transcendentalism in all its forms; the suspicion of politics as ‘theory-led’ and thus as an intellectual practice as opposed to a practice stemming from individual and collective desire; the stress on the historicity and contingency of human action. It is on this basis that we think the Post-Marxist label may well be valid in describing their contribution even whilst, at another level, it problematises the equation of Post-Marxism with ‘radical democracy’.

Summary

• **Their aim:** initially to interrogate the reasons for the events of May 1968 which they held refuted the basis of both orthodox Marxian and structuralist accounts of social action. This lead to the development of a new ‘materialism’ based on the analysis of desire (Anti-Oedipus) and an examination of the basis of collective combination and recombination (A Thousand Plateaus). More generally they aimed to generate a superior account of social reality and historical development and, by extension, a new politics built on the figures of the schizo-revolutionary and the nomad.

• **Background:** abandonment of the dichotomy between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ and seeing production as a continuous ‘machinic’ process between the individual and the social. This in turn necessitated overcoming the Lacanian insistence on the split in the subject, and the subject’s alienation from the social.

• **Critique of Marxian account of ideology and ‘false consciousness’** on the grounds that desire is active, not passive, even in systems of repression (people desire their own repression).

• **Revision of the theory of the party on the basis of Sartre’s analysis of revolutionary groups.** Stress on the necessity for avoiding ‘micro-fascisms’ and the ‘pledge group’ mentality associated with Marxian sectarianism.

• **Notion of revolution as a continuous process of confronting blocks and obstacles to the liberation of desire.** Need for break with orthodox model of the militant in favour of the ‘schizo-revolutionary’.

• **A Thousand Plateaus:** radical revision to form as well as content of earlier work. Argument presented as non-linear ‘plateaus’ of varying intensity,
developing a range of new concepts and arguments. Focus on possible forms of interaction and ‘multiplicity’ – more generally a critique of Western rationalism including Marxism. Transcendentalism attacked and supplanted by ‘rhizomatic’ forms of thought, action and organisation.

- Contrast between ‘smooth space’ and ‘striated space’ intended to demonstrate the possibility of radically reconstructing social life along ‘nomadic’ lines, i.e. avoiding ‘capturing’ space by subjecting it to ‘overcoding’ by the imposition of an ‘axiom’. Critique of capitalism develops as a critique of ‘isomorphy’ imposed by the axiom of the law of value, necessitating a nomadic ‘determinationalisation’.

- Revolutionary machine reconfigured as ‘nomadic war machine’ – a rhizomatic ‘assemblage’ of a pack-like kind that evades capture.

- Key distinction between ‘majoritarian’ and ‘minoritarian’ politics. Critique of politics that builds from the positing of an imagined fixed identity (e.g. class), in favour of one that sees each singularity as distinct or ‘minor’.

**Assessment**

- **Strengths**: conceptual innovations helped to reinvigorate debates over the nature of ‘materialism’ and the place of ‘ontology’ in social and historical explanation. Sought to develop a fundamentally libertarian account of both transformative politics and ‘post-capitalism’. Re-emphasised the role of creativity and possibility in human action, and thus the possibility of theorising radically different ways of living and acting.

- **Weaknesses**: the dazzling array of concepts and neologisms can hinder understanding, particularly by those who are supposed to be the target audience. Lack of clarity in relation to certain key questions: the relation between resistance and social organisation; the applicability of the model of ‘nomadism’ to contemporary politics; whether there is a political theory in their work – or a resistance against incorporation into the ‘political’, however defined.

**Sources and Further Reading**


**Endnote**

‘The clearest statement of this kind is offered in response to the ‘G comme Gauche’ section of the ‘Abecedaire’ interviews filmed with Claire Parnet. Deleuze complains about the left’s fascination with the ‘rights of man’ which he regards as ‘abstract’ and irrelevant to progressive struggles. As he explains, ‘fighting for freedom is to engage in jurisprudence’, meaning to change specific laws, practices, procedures – not to invoke one conception of law against another. For an English transcript of the interviews see http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/.'
Jacques Derrida: Deconstructing Marxism(s)

We would be tempted to distinguish this spirit of the Marxist critique, which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system ... and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State or Workers’ International. (Derrida, 1994)

Strictly, Derrida (1930–2004) could not be categorised as a ‘Post–Marxist’. He never labelled himself as such. And he never was a Marxist. Yet he demands inclusion here, not merely because of his enormous influence on the ‘Post-Marxist’ canon, especially on Laclau and Post-Marxist feminism, but also because the ‘event’ that many sympathetic and not-so-sympathetic to the Post-Marxist idiom had been waiting for finally arrived: Derrida’s explicit settling of accounts with Marx and Marxism (or: ‘Deconstruction finally meets Marxism!’). The ‘event’ happened in April 1993 when Derrida gave two lectures at the University of California, Riverside, entitled ‘Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International’. This provided him with an opportunity to showcase his deconstructionist approach and clarify his relationship with Marx (and Marxism) – to demonstrate how these two theoretical (and perhaps practical) registers overlap, yet remain distinct. He held that ‘deconstruction has never been Marxist, no more than it has ever been non-Marxist, although it has remained faithful to a certain spirit of Marxism, to at least one of its spirits ...’ (Derrida, 1994: 75; see also Derrida, 1987: 63; 1989: 221). After outlining precisely to which ‘spirit[s]’ he remained faithful, we examine the most critical Marxist responses, and his reply to them.
Apart from demonstrating how an author is unwittingly implicated in the very thing they are trying to exclude (in this case Marx and ghosts), Derrida’s deconstructionism manifested itself at an obvious level in looking closely at the structures and processes of language and meaning, to demonstrate how unstable they are, how they mutate and how supposedly clear distinctions are far from clear. Among other things Derrida constantly shows in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 1994) how even translations of Marx’s works into different languages often involve slippages of meaning. What also becomes quickly apparent in the process of reading *Specters* is that the title of the text itself is set up for deconstruction: ‘Specters of Marx’ – most obviously the word ‘specters’ evokes the opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*: the ‘specter’ of communism ‘haunting Europe’. More than this: the whole phrase refers to the images of, and feelings/attitudes towards, Marx(ism) evident in Fukuyama’s *End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama, 1992) which celebrates the ‘death’ of Marx(ism), as well as raising the question of how progressives ought to ‘receive’ the Marx(ist) inheritance through the ‘work’ of mourning, deciding which of Marx’s ‘spirits’ to avow or disavow. And this in turn involves exploring the semiotic permutations of the term ‘spirit’ itself, ranging from the living dead or the dead living of the ghost and its constant returning, from virtual representations created by ‘television’, from false images of the present and future (derived from Marx’s teleological conception of history), to ‘truer’ incarnations of ideals in the present and future encapsulated in the notion of a ‘promise’. ‘Specter’ also refers to the spectral dimension in Marx’s writings, often overlooked by Marx’s commentators, involving not merely an evaluation of his treatment of spectrality in the broadest sense, but also speculations about his feelings towards matters spectral, especially ghosts.

The name ‘Marx’ too can be deconstructed, especially in terms of what it means to be a ‘Marxist’. In ‘The State of the Debt’ Derrida discusses not only ‘our’ indebtedness to Marx, what ‘we’ should choose to inherit from Marx, but also the nature of the contemporary state and issue of Third World debt. ‘The Work of Mourning’: this refers not only to work itself, central to Marx’s preoccupations, but also to the activity of mourning, especially in relation to the supposed ‘death’ of Marx and Marxism. Lastly, the ‘New International’: this term is in one sense the least ambiguous in that Derrida does not explicitly deconstruct it (although the ‘old’ International of International Communism is at least gesturally deconstructed). Yet precisely what it might mean concretely remains far from clear, perhaps deliberately so, summoning ‘us’ to invest it with meaning.

Derrida gives added force to the multiplicity of meanings in *Specters* by weaving into it many allusions to Shakespearean texts, especially *Hamlet* as well as *Timon of Athens*. He does so partly in order to introduce his own philosophical preoccupations, especially with the concept of time and the
role of metaphors in the constitution of concepts. This is encapsulated in Specters’ post-face: ‘time is out of joint’ (Hamlet) – a concept/metaphor susceptible to much deconstruction (Derrida, 1994: 16–19). But partly in order to point up parallel, spectral themes in Shakespeare and Marx (perhaps not surprising in the light of Marx’s well-known love of Shakespeare’s writings), which in their ghostly form well and truly put time out of joint. Moreover, Derrida wants to draw a symbolic parallel between the dead, murdered father of Hamlet and the ‘death’ of Marx(ism), which raise questions of inheritance and mourning. Perhaps more importantly, Specters alludes to a rich and dense theoretical undergrowth that marks the whole deconstructionist enterprise as developed by Derrida, which can only be telegraphed here, yet constantly informs the text.

Briefly put, Derrida’s version of deconstruction, following Heidegger, aimed to explore and assess the presuppositions underpinning the whole Western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Husserl, by demonstrating that its founding assumption and aspiration, its ‘metaphysics of presence’, was deeply flawed. Plato’s model of truth consisted of a ‘soul’ in silent ‘dialogue’ with itself, of a pure, self-identical ‘presence’. The object of this dialogue was the pursuit of eternal, timeless truths, or ‘transcendental signifieds’, based upon such things as essence, reason and spirit. Such a dialogue, of course, could only include others through speech. Yet ‘presence’ persisted because the speaker could hear him/herself speak and spoke what s/he had on their mind. For Derrida this notion of ‘presence’ was doubly problematic. In terms of time, ‘nowness’ is hard to pin down, since it is somewhere between the ‘otherness’ of past and future, or between such mental states as memory and desire. And just as important: language is used to represent ‘present’ thoughts, inscriptions supposedly identical with them. Yet words or ‘signifiers’ assume their meanings through difference, that is, by what they are not, as do indeed, the concepts or ‘signifieds’. Meaning, then, involves not just the ‘present’ identity of signifier and signified, but the absent ‘other’ ones of difference. Thus, for Derrida, language as an expression of ‘present’, ‘pure’ subjectivity was impossible, and an ‘ontology’ that supposed a ‘pure’ being could be identical with itself was illusory. He therefore wanted to blur the distinction between ‘being’ (as presence) and non-being (as absence, difference, as past or future). Such distinction blurring was central to his political project: to expose the violence of institutional categorisation, whether linguistic (the act of naming), or phenomenological (the perceiving of the ‘other’).

The term ‘spectrality’ helped capture his objections to the notion of ontology-as-presence, since it referred to something that was neither being, nor non-being, neither body nor ‘soul’, associated the whole gamut of human sensibilities, imaginings, memories, hopes, fears, desires, repressed traumas and so on, all those things that are both present and absent. And the term
‘differance’ (combining to differ and defer), a neologism coined by him and sounding the same as pronounced in French, summed up his argument that meanings of signifiers were unstable in the sense that they could always mean something else in another linguistic juxtaposition or historical context. Finally, we should note that the term ‘presence’ does not in Derrida’s writings simply refer to epistemology as perception, but is connected to ontology, especially in its psychoanalytically conceived form involving different kinds of repression that affect the ‘present’, and lastly to ethics in terms of our obligations to absent ‘others’.

‘Specters’: the key themes

Derrida places his deconstruction of Marx(ism) within a wider framework of what it means to ‘learn’ to live ‘finally’ and the role of what it means to be a scholar within this process [Derrida, 1994: xix–xx, 176]. Crucially for Derrida this means learning to live with ghosts and spectrality in general, which he terms ‘hauntology’ – all things that are neither fully present nor fully absent, neither living nor dead, that occupy the borderland between the perceptible and imperceptible (which for him includes almost everything!) [Derrida, 1994: 51]. This form of ‘learning’ entailed an analysis of interweaving what we might term ‘psycho-ontological’, epistemological and ethical themes, especially in relation to time (as if there could ever be a ‘finally!’) – psycho-ontological, because ghosts and spectrality in general are part of our ‘being’ – who we are, particularly in the face of death, [either our own or what or whom we might hold dear – or hate], or stemming from other fears or hopes for the future or as a result of the things we repress (the product of trauma); epistemological, because these feelings (along with external ideological mechanisms) generate perceptions/representations/apparitions of things non-substantial (for example, the living dead or the dead living); and ethical because ‘we’ have a responsibility [justice] to those not present: the dead and the not yet living. Spectrality in its many guises serves to disjoint time, by making the very category of the ‘present’, or ‘now’ or contemporaneity slippery (e.g. ‘living in the past’ or ‘living in the future’, or both) and by reminding us of our obligations to past and future generations. Derrida held that scholars in general, with their analytical propensities, sharply distinguishing between real and unreal, being and non-being, did not ‘do’ time and spectrality [Derrida, 1994: 11]. On this score Marx fared better than most, but still fell short. And of course to ‘do’ time and spectrality properly you needed to be a deconstructionist, which was still one of Marx(ism)’s [self]critical ‘spirits’ [Derrida, 1994: 92]! learning to live with ghosts (= ‘hauntology’).
Within this broad, ‘hauntological’ framework Specters can be broken down into three elements: first, Derrida’s avowal of a ‘certain’ spirit(s) of Marx(ism); secondly, his rejection of certain ‘spirits’ in this ‘work’ of mourning, involving a critique of Marx’s treatment of spectrality; and thirdly, his affirmation of his deconstructionist project which could at least affiliate to Marx(ism)’s self-critical spirit, and help in the ‘repoliticisation’ of Marxism.

Always a little suspicious of naming, Derrida declared that he was not a ‘Marxist’, as indeed Marx himself had stated (Derrida, 1994: 88). Still, now that the Marxist ‘dogma machine’ was disappearing, he held that there was no excuse not to read (and reread) Marx in such a way that goes beyond scholarly discussion. Not to do so amounted to theoretical, philosophical and political irresponsibility. ‘Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits’ (Derrida, 1994: 13). What emerges is Derrida’s preparedness to endorse quite a few of Marx(ism)’s spirits, although he is fully aware of the possibility that he might offend some Marxists because he has no wish to license a seek-and-destroy mission of all specters. We need to recognise, he says, ‘untimely specters that one must not chase away but sort out, critique, keep close by, and allow to come back’ (Derrida, 1994: 87).

He most obviously affirmed Marx(ism)’s analysis and critique of capitalism in all its forms, its superstructures and its self-justifying ideology (Fukuyama’s being the most recent). For example, the non-dogmatic Marxist tradition could usefully analyse the contemporary problems, of international trade wars, overproduction and Third World debt (Derrida, 1994: 63) [just some of the ten ‘plagues’ of the New World Order; Derrida, 1994: 81–4]. At the superstructural level Marxism would be important in re-elaborating the concept of the state, national sovereignty and citizenship, as well as exposing the limitations of ‘juridical formality’ in relation to national and international law. In particular, one can find inspiration in the Marxist ‘spirit’ to criticise the ‘presumed autonomy of the juridical and to denounce endlessly the de facto take-over of international authorities by powerful Nation-States, by concentration of techno-scientific capital, symbolic capital, and financial capital, of State capital and private capital’ (Derrida, 1994: 85, 58–9, 94). All in all, capitalist political and economic institutions had caused sufferings unparalleled in human history (Derrida, 1994: 85). In other words, the Marxist critique could demonstrate how liberal-capitalist democracy is unable to live up to its ideals. Equally, it could usefully question these ideals themselves, which would include an economic analysis of the market, the laws of capital, of types of capital, financial or symbolic (therefore spectral), liberal parliamentary democracy, modes of representation and suffrage, the determining content of human rights, women’s and children’s rights, the current concepts of equality, liberty, especially fraternity (the most problematic
of all), dignity, the relation between man and citizen (Derrida, 1994: 87). Furthermore, one could in the ‘spirit’ of Marxism analyse the novel, spectral effects of ‘techno-mediatic power’ which was allied to the ‘political class’ and involved academics and which severely restricted the democratic space (Derrida, 1994: 52–3).

More significantly, however, he enthusiastically approved of Marx(ism)’s self-critical spirit, as a result of the ‘irreducible historicity’ of Marx’s ‘theses’ in the Communist Manifesto the inevitable by-product of unpredictable ‘new knowledge, new techniques and political givens’ (Derrida, 1994: 64, 88–9). Marx(ism) was able to recognise the need for its own self-transformation. At the most general level this form of self-criticism involved breaking with ‘almost everything’ (Derrida’s emphasis) in orthodox Marxism associated with its systemic, metaphysical, or ontological totality, especially its dialectical method and materialism, as well as its concepts of labour, mode of production, social class, all of which in turn underpinned its political organisation of internationals, proletarian dictatorship, single party and the state (Derrida, 1994: 88).

In others words it had to break with its usual account of, what we could term, the ‘onto-political’ relation. More specifically, the ‘new techniques and political givens’ that Marxism had self-critically to adapt to stemmed from the emergence of a new political landscape shaped by the ‘tele-techno-media’ that made the traditional political party less effective and which had implications also for traditional conceptions of the state and the role of trade – all of which demanded ‘new modes of representation’ and new forms of struggle (Derrida, 1994: 102; original emphasis).

More significantly, the ‘new knowledge’ – deconstruction – that Marx(ism) had to self-critically embrace involved an analysis of Marx’s treatment of spectrality. Derrida argues that Marx reduces spectrality to a specific religious model, to mysticism, and is explained (and explained away) by socio-economic factors (e.g. commodity fetishism), thereby ignoring psychological factors (Derrida, 1994: 148, 173). Marx both believed in and wanted to abolish all spectrality through the creation of a communist polity. This simplistic approach to spectrality stemmed from a fundamental theoretical inadequacy: Marx assumed that spectrality was merely a problem of the ontology of ‘presence’, as ‘actual reality and as objectivity’ (Derrida, 1994: 105). Although Derrida did not dismiss this ‘pre-deconstructive’ approach to spectrality out of hand, he held that it ignored the historicity of ‘man’s’ being – the relation between being and time – the instability of presence or ‘nowness’, the product of past and future creating an ‘out-of-jointness’ or lack of contemporaneity. And if we add the impulses uncovered by psychoanalysis that help structure human experience – fear (especially of death), trauma, repression, conscience of the super-ego, the spectral effect of feeling watched by the father (Derrida, 1994: 7) – and less fear-driven ethical impulses, then the only conclusion we can reach is that spectrality in one
form or another is here to stay (p. 164). We have to learn to live with ‘certain spirits’ (pp. 174, 176). This desire to eliminate spectrality in general, according to Derrida, was the product of his own fear of ghosts, something with which he was obsessed (p. 105):

Marx does not like ghosts … He does not want to believe in them. But he thinks of nothing else. He believes rather in what is supposed to distinguish them from actual reality, living effectivity. He believes he can oppose them, like life to death, like vain appearances of the simulacrum to real presence. (Derrida, 1994: 46–7)

Thus, Marx could be deconstructed: he was unwittingly implicated in the very thing that he was trying to exclude. His obsession with ghosts entailed their constant conjuration (Derrida, 1994: 140).

Derrida demonstrated in a number of Marx’s texts just how obsessed he was with chasing ghosts away, beginning with his doctoral dissertation, his discussion of money or ideologies (Derrida, 1994: 45–6), and in his sparring with Stirner in the German Ideology. In his confrontation with Stirner Marx argued that Stirnerian methods of exorcism would be ineffective and that Stirner himself was still haunted. Derrida proposed that Marx himself was wrestling with his own specters and that Stirner in effect became a ‘bad brother’ because he was a ‘bad son of Hegel’ (Derrida, 1994: 122–32). Ghost-chasing also revealed itself in his discussion of the nature of a communist revolution that would be a revolution in the revolution itself, no longer hiding its revolutionary (socio-economic) content in the trappings of the past (Derrida, 1994: 113–19). Finally, Derrida highlighted how Marx in Capital hypothesised that commodity fetishism would vanish as soon as objects and activities lost their exchange value (Derrida, 1994: 113–15). Derrida attempted to show in deconstructive fashion how the use/exchange-value distinction is not necessarily clear-cut, that transition from use to exchange value is an ‘impure’ one, and that use values were ‘haunted’ by the possibility of exchange at some future time. This ‘impurity’ stemmed from the ever-present possibility that a good (object or labour) will be exchanged because of its very usefulness. This ‘corruption’ was even more likely because of the possibility of different types of exchange other than money.3 Both use- and exchange-value concepts are ‘haunted’ by each other, although he did not reject the analytic usefulness of this distinction as such (Derrida, 1994: 160–2).

Crucially, this strong desire to chase ghosts away had harmful effects on the Marxist political tradition and was in part responsible for the creation of totalitarianism in the 1930s in the Soviet Union and in Germany and Italy that led to the Second World War. Both sides in this period were ‘equally terrorized by the ghost, the ghost of the other, and its own ghost as the ghost of the other’ (Derrida, 1994: 105). Moreover, this ‘ontological’ belief that ghosts could be chased away meant that Marxists mistakenly believed that
a fully transparent, ‘present’ society could be established which would eliminate that need for the ‘political’ altogether (Derrida, 1994: 84, 171).

What also had to be deconstructed was Marx(ism)’s ethico-political dimension. He insisted on remaining faithful to, heir to, its emancipatory aspirations. Although the Holy Alliance of ‘old Europe’ attempted to banish the ‘specter of communism’ (as did Fukuyama), communism, Derrida invoking the ‘messianic’, like democracy and justice, could not be erased because these values were part of the ‘universal structure’ of human experience (Derrida, 1994: 167). Communism, like democracy and justice, was always ‘to come’, always subject to ‘différance’ (Derrida, 1994: 28, 64–5, 99–100). Marx(ism) represented, ‘a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation’ (Derrida, 1994: 89; original emphasis), which meant that we should not ‘give up every form of practical or effective organisation’ however poor Marxist practice had been in the past, and that we should work for a ‘new international’ (Derrida, 1994: 89).

In effect the value of deconstruction, which involved a ‘radicalisation’ and ‘re-politicisation’ of Marxism, for progressive/radicals lay in the fact that the emancipatory project would not end up in a totalitarian cul-de-sac. ‘Difference’ always meant, echoing Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the bleak prospects for revolution in the 1930s, that the ‘messianic’ ‘promise’ of democracy, justice and communism to ‘come’ recognised that both the past, present and future could always be invested with unpredictable and new meanings. The emancipatory road by definition always had to be an open one – full of aporias, whose resolution/irresolution could not be predicted in advance. The lack of a ‘hauntological’ avowal in Marxism, the corollary of its ‘binary’ (being/non-being) ontological approach, meant that in establishing a new society it did not leave room for uncertainty and openness to further ‘events’, new forms of justice, democracy, communism. These terms represented the ‘messianic’ in general ‘that other ghost which we cannot, ought not to do without’ (Derrida, 1994: 168) – a ‘weak’ or quasi-transcendental messianism, a non-deconstructible category that through time can undergo infinite mutations, but presumably increasingly ‘enlightened’ ones. The messianic appeal belongs

properly to a universal structure, to that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future, therefore to experience itself and to its language (expectation, promise, commitment to the event of what is coming, imminence, urgency, demand for salvation and for justice beyond law, pledge given to the other inasmuch as he or she is not present, presently present or living, and so forth) ... (Derrida, 1994: 167, 59)

Justice, Derrida held, was non-destructible-associated with ‘desert-like messianism’ without content and non-identifiable – and based upon a necessary ‘disjointure’, which was a ‘de-totalising’ condition because of the need to be open to ‘alterity’, ‘singularity’ and so on (Derrida, 1994: 28). There was the
need for a ‘real’ historicity, allowing for an opening to ‘event-ness’ that was not possible within the orthodox Marxist historical framework of ‘ontological or teleo-eschatological program or design’ (Derrida, 1994: 75, 59). Indeed, the teleological and eschatological elements had to be separated in order to employ the latter element in a deconstructive fashion (Derrida, 1994: 90). Such predictability embodied in the teleological account of history denied openness to ‘alterity’, and therefore in effect denied the ‘emancipatory promise’, grounded on undecidability and responsibility.

Although Marxist internationalism, from Derrida’s viewpoint, had been a failure, it crucially signalled the unfulfilled ‘promise’ of world-wide forms of social organisation (Derrida, 1994: 91), which could presumably attempt to solve the major issues facing humankind outlined by Derrida as: unemployment, immigration, trade wars, problems of free markets (cheap labour/deteriorating social welfare), foreign debt, arms trade, nuclear weapons, inter-ethnic wars, international gangsterism, weaknesses of international law, especially in its enforcement (Derrida, 1994: 81–2). Thus, he called for a ‘New International’ which would transform international law, its concepts and scope of intervention, consistent with democracy and human rights, and applied to the socio-economic sphere, beyond the control of nation states (Derrida, 1994: 84). He conjured up the idea of an international alliance ‘without coordination, without party, without country, without national community … without citizenship, without common belonging to a class’ (Derrida, 1994: 85), which should be involved in a theoretical and practical critique, especially of international law, and the concepts of the state and nation (Derrida, 1994: 85–6). We should note that his idea of a critique involved a ‘messianic’ affirmation and a ‘promise’ that entailed the production of ‘events’ and ‘new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth’ (Derrida, 1994: 89). Breaking with party or state forms did not mean that we should ‘give up on every form of practical or effective organization’ (Derrida, 1994: 89).

In sum, we can see how Derrida as an ‘heir’ to Marx(ism) in his work of ‘mourning’ put it through its deconstructive paces, which enabled him to remain ‘faithful’ to, and yet consistent with, its self-critical spirit. We are now in a position to review the Marxist response to these deconstructive attentions.

**Marxists respond**

Although there were different reactions from the Left to *Specters*, we focus on the sharpest points of disagreement between self-proclaimed Marxists (Ahmad, 1999; Eagleton, 1999; Lewis, 1999) or those who had strong Marxist affiliations (Spivak, 1995) and Derrida’s explicit response to them. We should note that both Eagleton and Ahmad’s animus against Derrida’s overtures
towards Marx(ism) partly stemmed from the anti-Marxism of his academic
deconstructionist followers, especially in the United States, and also per-
haps from his unwillingness – as a man of the Left – to disassociate himself
from them (a demand for a ‘responsible’ decision’?) (Eagleton, p. 84; Ahmad,
p. 102). Common to all these Marxist critics was an explicit or implicit defence
of Marx(ism)’s account of what we have called the ‘onto-political’ relation of
full ‘presence’. As noted earlier, Derrida’s deconstruction involved breaking
with ‘almost everything’ [Derrida, 1994: 89; original emphasis] in orthodox
Marxism associated with its

supposed systemic, metaphysical, or ontological totality [‘dialectical method’
and ‘dialectical materialism’], … its fundamental concepts of labour, mode of
production, social class … the whole history of its apparatuses [the
Internationals of the labour movement, dictatorship of the proletariat, the
single party, the State]. (Derrida, 1994: 88)

In other words, Derrida seemed to reject everything associated with the
Marxist ‘onto-political’ theory/practice couplet. Thus, although Eagleton noted
that Derrida was prepared to use Marxism as a critique, he was unwilling
to identify with its ‘positivity’, its demand for an ‘effective’ socialism that
stemmed from its materialist analysis [Eagleton, p. 86]. In effect, Derrida’s
ethical stance, divorced from any kind of Marxist-informed ontology, pro-
duced an ‘empty, formalistic messianism’ that had little concrete to offer in
terms of political action and organisation [Eagleton, p. 87].

Similarly, Lewis complained that Derrida dismissed out of hand Marx(ism)’s
claims to ‘provide a viable knowledge of history capable of grounding an ade-
quate practice of social transformation’ [Lewis, p. 139]. All Marxist concepts
are disavowed, especially class as an analytical instrument and agency
(Lewis, p. 149), as are important illustrations of the theory/practice tradition
in Marxism, such as the role of Bolshevism in 1917, Luxemburg on the mass
strike, Lenin on the national question, and so on. Indeed, apart from failing
to make any theoretico-practical distinctions within Marxist tradition [Lewis,
p. 137; Eagleton, p. 87], he buried ‘every core concept of Marxist theory and
practice’, except the spirit of self-critique [Lewis, p. 139]. Couching this argu-
ment slightly differently, Ahmad queried Derrida’s separation of the teleological
(the aim of history) from the eschatological (the victory of ‘good’ – commu-
nism – over ‘bad’ – capitalism) in order to rescue the ‘messianic’ element in
Marxism. Hence, socialism had no material grounding. Derrida had renounced
the idea of socialism ‘as a logical possibility arising out of the contradictions
of capitalism itself, and push[ed] it into the voluntaristic domain of acts of faith’
(Ahmad, p. 95). Thus, Derrida’s attempt to ‘reconcile’ Marxism and decon-
struction was deeply problematic.
From the absence of this Marxist ‘onto-political’ position in *Specters*, that strongly linked socio-economic structures and processes to political action in order to achieve the ‘good’, Lewis in particular drew more specific conclusions concerning the rise of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union. He rejected Derrida’s psychological argument that Stalinism arose from Marx(ism)’s ‘ontological’ fear of ghosts in general ([Derrida, 1994: 104–6]), and offered a socio-economic and political explanation based on Tony Cliff’s theory of ‘bureaucratic state capitalism’ ([Lewis, pp. 145–6, 153–7]). From Derrida’s interpretation of Stalin, Lewis deduced that he was attempting to ‘discredit revolution both as a political strategy for the present and as a social aspiration for the future’ ([Lewis, p. 145; original emphasis]). Spivak too had problems that implicitly derived from Derrida’s onto-political stance, which, first, impinged upon his ignoring women’s issues in general. Thus, he did not discuss the effect of Post-Fordist global homeworking on ‘subaltern’ women, nor new forms of socialisation of women’s reproductive labour, relating to such things as population control and surrogacy ([Spivak, 1995: 66–7]). Further, he did not use Marxist methodology (presumably a ‘political economy’ approach) to make any systematic connexions between the ‘ten plagues’ that affected the New World Order ([Spivak, p. 68]). Finally, Derrida’s own notion of the ‘onto-political’ meant that he failed to spot how Marx in *Capital*, in his analysis of value, is attempting to show ‘rationally’ for the worker the socialist ‘ghost’ in the capitalist present of commodified labour ([Spivak, pp. 75–7]).

Different conceptions of the ‘onto-political’ also led his Marxist critics to take exception to Derrida’s idea of the composition and function of a ‘New International’, ‘without party, ... without class’ and the like ([Derrida, 1994: 85; cf. Macdonald, 1999: 165]). Ahmad wondered about the precise form that his called-for critiques of nation, state and international law would take, and who apart from the writers of these critiques would be in this International ([Ahmad, pp. 104–5]). Moreover, since it was ‘anonymous’ and without ‘community’ it seemed to be composed of ‘monadic individuals’ ([Ahmad, p. 105]). And if we add the ‘religious cadences of ‘desert-like experience’ and ‘waiting for the other and for the event’ this International seemed more like a ‘Masonic order’ ([Ahmad, pp. 105–6]). Lewis objected to Derrida’s New International in a slightly different if predictable way. It was a manifestation of a new ‘true socialism’ criticised by Marx in the *German Ideology*, which separated politics and ideology from economics and socialism from class needs and interests at a particular time. Thus, instead of ‘class-struggle socialism’, we have a struggle of universal, abstract human rights, involving cross-class alliances and leadership by ‘intellectual elites’ ([Lewis, p. 149]). Such rights, whilst desirable, could only be achieved, Lewis argued, through proletarian revolution. All this indicated that Derrida was pessimistic about the working class’s capacity to fight for a better society ([Lewis, p. 157]), and was a ‘reformist’ rather than a revolutionary ([Lewis, p. 158]).
There were three other specific criticisms that did not spring directly from different conceptions of the ‘onto-political’. Ahmad wondered what exactly Derrida was mourning, given that he had despised Stalinism in all its manifestations and had been critical of Althusser’s recasting of Marxist theory (Ahmad, p. 92). In effect, Derrida seemed to be mourning not the death of the ‘Father’, but the fact the ‘kingdom’ had been inherited by right-wing usurpers, rather than deconstructionists (p. 93). And Lewis questioned whether the Marx/Stirner debate should be framed exclusively in psychological terms. Derrida took little account of its context. Stirner’s *The Ego and His Own*, emblematic of the Young Hegelian movement, was published (1845) just when Marx (and Engels) were working out their new, materialist conception of history. Finally, Spivak suggested that Derrida, in focusing on the treatment of money in *Capital*, had failed to notice Marx’s distinction between commercial and industrial capital (p. 65). This point served as a back-drop to her general theme that Derrida ignored the ‘ghostly’ significance of the commodified labour process and especially how it impacted on contemporary women.

**Derrida replies**

Derrida’s retort, ‘Marx and Sons’ (although it is not clear where this puts Spivak!) [Derrida, 1999] sees him keeping his deconstructionist theme running in its psychoanalytic register. He continued to probe these self-proclaimed Marxists about what it meant to be a ‘Marxist’, or at least what Marx(ism) meant to them. He stated that he had always had an explicit indifference to preoccupations with ‘legitimate descent’, and had analysed this ‘fantasy’ in its phallogocentric mode in order to ‘throw it into crisis’ (Derrida, 1999: 232–3). This, he hoped to do ‘performatively’ by challenging the value of ‘full presence’ of one ‘true’ interpretation of Marx(ism) (Derrida, 1999: 224). This ‘descent’ in its inheritance/proprietorial form raised more questions than it answered: where are the ‘presumptive property deeds’? Has their title deed been ‘duly authenticated’? ‘Who ever authenticated this property right’? (Derrida, 1999: 222). Indeed, the suggestion that hovers over his response is that their very proprietoriality about Marx, as the ‘true’ heirs, or the rightful or ‘proper’ inheritors of Marx’s ‘legacy’ led them to misunderstand, misread and mislabel Derrida (and what does it mean to ‘inherit? And how ought we to inherit, by being faithfully unfaithful or unfaithfully faithful?) (Derrida, 1999: 219).

This misunderstanding as already suggested was, Derrida argued, at the basic level of not comprehending his intention, which was not to claim the right to be the ‘true’ heir of Marx. More substantively, his concern was with the Marxist conception of what we have termed the ‘onto-political’, which
in one of its ‘spirits’ called for a deconstructive ‘repoliticisation’. The
standard Marxist theory/practice version ‘welded’ the ‘political’ to the ‘onto-
logical’, that is, to a notion of the ‘present-being’ of the universal as the
state, and cosmopolitan citizenship, or the International as the Party. This
conception of the ‘onto-political’ relation led, Derrida suggested, to Marxism’s
‘disastrous historical failures’ (Derrida, 1999: 221; original emphasis). What
Derrida seemed to be saying was that an acknowledgement of what we
might term the ‘hauto-political’ relation would enable self-proclaimed
Marxists to avoid driving up the totalitarian cul-de-sac by resisting giving
single, ‘true’ political meanings to the ‘being’ of the ‘universal’ and the like.
His Marxist critics failed to respond to his attempt to articulate psycho-
analysis and politics in a ‘new way’ involving the spectralisation of death
and mourning, along with fetishism and narcissism. He wanted to develop
a ‘new logic’ of the relations between the unconscious and politics (Derrida,
1999: 259). Marxists hitherto had failed to deal with the psychoanalytic
dimension in a ‘convincing and rigorous manner’ (p. 235). And contra Lewis
this approach would enable a better understanding of the Gulag (rather
than the state capitalist substitution of the bureaucracy for the bourgeoisie)
and political assassination, as well as the ‘spectral’ causes of bureaucracy
(Derrida, 1999: 243, 235).

Yet, his critics were wrong, Derrida held, in concluding that this ‘haunto-
political’ perspective meant that he had done with the ‘ontology’ of class
(and class struggle). He had taken ‘very seriously’ the existence of some
‘thing’ called ‘social classes’ and their struggles (Derrida, 1999: 237). Rather
he had problems with orthodox Marxist analysis in this area which applied
concepts in an undifferentiated manner, and more importantly identified
class as ‘homogenous, present and identical to itself’. Nevertheless, this lack
of heterogeneity did not exclude social struggles and antagonisms. Seemingly,
his quarrel with the orthodox Marxist base/superstructure approach was its
presumption that a ‘simple opposition of dominant and dominated’ existed,
or that the ideas of the economically dominant class transparently aware of
its interests always ultimately prevailed, or that ‘force’ was always stronger
than weakness [presumably because this excluded the moral dimension
from politics] (p. 238). He maintained that theories of class and class strug-
ger had to go back to the ‘drawing board’, which would also have to take
account of the ‘new realities of the techno-scientifico-capitalist “modernity”
of world society’ (Derrida, 1999: 239).

Derrida’s call for a ‘New International’ not based upon class solidarity
also led his critics to think that he had abandoned class as a significant polit-
ical consideration. His response was to say that he was concerned with
‘another dimension of analysis and commitment ... that cuts across social
differences and oppositions of social forces’ (Derrida, 1999: 239). He had no
wish to deny or eliminate affiliations to class or party. Rather, he aimed to
make ‘an appeal for an International whose essential basis or motivating force would not be class, citizenship or party’ (p. 252). And one could not determine, \textit{a priori}, in ‘singular situations’ what kind of ‘decision’ would be made in the light of different, ‘undecidable’ considerations of class, nation, party strategies, citizenship and so on (Derrida, 1999: 239–40; original emphasis), although he thought that class and party were ceasing to be ‘dominant paradigm[s]’ (p. 252). Moreover, there was nothing utopian about a ‘New International’ which was in the process of coming into existence. Lastly, his critics were not clear about whether they thought that international alliances could be forged \textit{only} out of a ‘common belonging to a class’ (p. 240).

There were also other misunderstandings. In answer to Ahmad’s question as to what Derrida was mourning, he replied that he himself was not mourning anything. \textit{Specters} was more a study of mourning, especially the relation between the unconscious and politics (Derrida, 1999: 259). Moreover, it was not about ‘reconciling’ himself with Marx(ism), since he had never been in battle with Marxism. In any case, with which Marx(ism) was he meant to reconcile? One of the basic themes in \textit{Specters} was to problematise the very process of identification, including self-identification, of what it means to be a ‘Marxist’ (pp. 226–7). Additionally, there was at least one elementary misreading of Derrida by Spivak, who held that Derrida was against ‘repoliticising’ Marxism (p. 223). Derrida also noted that Eagleton and Ahmad had failed to detect his playful and ironic tone (Derrida, 1999: 234). More seriously, he objected to Ahmad’s charge that his writing had a ‘quasi-religious’ tone. He failed to note his messianic/messianism distinction. The first term was associated with a ‘certain irreducible religiosity’, which he held later in the text to be part of the ‘universal structure of experience’ (Derrida, 1999: 248), and which was a discourse about the promise and justice and included the revolutionary commitment of Marxists. The second term he associated with religion and presumably superstition, which was not consistent with his call for a ‘New Enlightenment’. He did, though, admit that this distinction was not always clear-cut.

As for being mislabelled by his Marxist critics, although he did not give explicit reasons, he claimed that he was not a ‘post-structuralist’, nor a ‘post-modernist’, nor opposed to ‘meta-narratives’ (Derrida, 1999: 228–9). He also held, contra Lewis, that he was not a ‘pessimist’, whatever his wish to complexify issues of class. Rather, his notion of ‘messianicity’, like the ‘experience of the impossible’, involved a pessimist/optimist composite, a necessary requisite for a revolutionary approach to politics (Derrida, 1999: 245). Indeed, he claimed that his Marxist critics were the true pessimists in wanting to reproduce the ‘obsolete forms of organisation’ represented by the state, Party and International (p. 245). Relatedly, he did not wish to be categorised as either ‘reformist’ or ‘revolutionary’, because he did not want to be presented with an ‘abstract choice’ (p. 242).
Thus, Derrida insisted that his ‘statutory’ Marxist critics had by and large misread him, that in effect their ‘proprietary’ about Marxism meant that they preferred not to listen to him and interrogate their own affiliations towards Marxism as they understood it. Moreover, this ‘proprietary’ suggested that they were not prepared to acknowledge the significance that psychoanalysis might have not only for their own Marx-affiliation, but also for the Marxist theory of ideology based on an ontology of presence, or what we have called ‘onto-hauntology’. Finally, in their quest to paint Derrida into a non-Marxist corner they wrongly interpreted him as disavowing any Marxist account of the ‘onto-political’ relation associated with class and class struggle.

Assessment

So what was the outcome of this meeting between Marxism and Deconstruction? We have to remember that although both sides were committed to democratic socialism in some form and wanted to see the end of liberal-democratic-capitalist hegemony, their starting points were different. Marxists began (and perhaps finished) with Marx. Derrida’s intellectual layering, however, was far more complex and eclectic, embracing phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, ethics and linguistics as expressed in the writings of Husserl, Heidegger, Kant, Hegel, Freud, Saussure, Blanchot, Levinas and others, and his understanding of Marxism as a ‘scientific’, non-ethical theory seemed shaped by his close proximity to Althusser. Nevertheless, Derrida in his own way was reaching out to Marxism – maybe as the ‘other’ of liberal-capitalist democracy – not only at a declaratory level. He also embraced some of Marxism’s ‘onto-political’ motifs, especially in its understanding and critique of liberal-capitalist democracy. Further, he did not reject such notions as class and class struggle, provided that they were in some way re-conceptualised (presumably making the link between objective, social location and consciousness far more problematic). Additionally, in ‘onto-political’ terms he wanted to attach far more significance to the spectralising role of what he termed the ‘tele-techno-media’, its effects on consciousness (‘presence’) and its encroachment upon the democratic space (presumably its role in opinion formation at the expense of political parties). Yet, there could be few compromises concerning his deconstructionist stance, which worked at different levels in order to destabilise meaning, create doubt and uncertainty.

On the other side the Marxists were unwilling to enter into the deconstructionist game, although they did so inadvertently, acknowledging that there were a variety of Marxisms – wrongly assuming that this was a point against Derrida! Thus they were not prepared to discuss the nature of political
commitment generally or their particular Marxist affiliation except in purely theoretical, or ‘onto-political’ terms. Could they have made any concessions without abandoning any of their core tenets? They could at least have recognised the significance of psychoanalysis, not only for their own political beliefs, which may be ethically and theoretically grounded, but nevertheless may be an expression of a ‘singular’ subjectivity with all sorts of ‘spectral’ resonances. They could also have admitted that psychoanalysis might be important for understanding systems of power (especially [male] ‘leadership’ and the need for ‘security’), something which the Right have always instinctively grasped. And within these systems rhetoric often has a crucial role. Here a couple of crude examples might suffice: during the Cold War the US Right in effect held that the Communists were preventing the full realisation of the American Dream, and now it is the Terrorists. The question of the structural impossibility of everyone becoming affluent under any capitalist system is thereby evaded. We might also raise the question whether the emerging Soviet ruling class in the 1920s could have consolidated its power without playing on the fear of invasion from the West. Admitting the importance of what we might term the ‘affective’ dimension of politics does not mean that the rationalist, ‘interest’ account has to be jettisoned, since political decisions may require both kinds of explanation. One final point on the significance of psychoanalysis and its analysis of human instinctual drives: Marxists from the Frankfurt School, especially Erich Fromm, Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich and Habermas embraced this mode of human understanding to help explain such things as Nazism/fascism and the (pathological) internalisation of cultural norms. In other words, psychoanalysis has not always been an alien paradigm for Marxists.

Then there is the ethical angle which is at the centre of Derrida’s preoccupations. Even if they wished to reject his ethical position (cf. Soper, 1996) they could have at least admitted that the ethical issue at least had ‘haunted’ Marxism, that it was ‘repressed’ in Marx’s works (Geras, 1985). So, for example, although Marx held that he was giving a ‘scientific’ account of ‘exploitation’ by analysing the labour process that produced surplus value, the term ‘exploitation’ itself carries unmistakable ethical weight. And of course Marx’s communist ideal was nothing but ethical, however historically ‘inevitable’. Yet at a deeper level we could say that although Marxists could admit that capitalism could be denounced in ethical terms, they might also have to admit that their own motivation – their commitment to constructing a society which they will not see or benefit from, and which involves all sorts of personal sacrifices – is profoundly ethical. And although Derrida in order to maintain an ‘openness’ to the ‘other’ was loath to endow his notion of justice or democracy with any content, there is in a sense a common notion of justice as a ‘gift’, that in the struggle for socialism nothing is expected in return.
Marxists might also have to admit that Derrida, in remarking that their standard notion of the ‘political’ was in need of some criticism, was not far off the mark. The classical Marxist view was that the essence of the ‘political’ could be reduced to class struggle. Hence, a classless society meant the ‘end’ of politics. Yet to embrace Derrida’s notion of ‘differance’ and its democratic-political implications does not mean the ‘end’ of Marxism. Conflict within a classless society could be admitted without in any way conceding that the need for economic, social and political equality remains an overriding goal. Indeed, at this point we might even say that the ‘political’ and the ‘ethical’ conjoin in the sense that arriving at the ‘truth’ together, at the heart of the democratic principle, often involves the deconstructionist ‘doubt’ ethic associated with the instability of meanings. ‘Différance’ might also help various Marxist parties to remain democratically honest. Furthermore, on the question of the rise of Stalinism, although there is much to be said for the structural/historical explanation offered by Lewis, we still have to ask the question as to whether there was a democratic deficit in the thinking of the ‘best’ Marxist Bolsheviks in the pre-Stalin period, who understood themselves to be fully armed with the certainty that ‘history’ was on their side. This suggests the need for a powerful check against so-called ‘substitutionist’ tendencies, with the Marxist Party, or its Central Committee, or its leader claiming the right to speak on behalf of the whole proletariat (and ‘history’). Thus, whatever ‘dirty-handedness’ might be involved in real politics it should be made much clearer when democratic lines are crossed.

Yet even if these Marxists could have regarded Derrida more favourably this does not mean that his answers to all their objections, both large and small, were completely satisfactory. Although there seemed to be a space for some kind of Marxist version of the ‘onto-political’ with the suggestion that the Marxist analysis of class and class struggle ought to go back to the ‘drawing board’ and that he had no wish to deny class and party affiliations in relation to internationalism, we get little sense of how this might be cashed out in means/ends, strategic terms at the heart of the Marxist theory/practice concern. Indeed, whilst it is true that Marxists have not really explored the whole issue of how working-class interest becomes translated into something far more moral and universalistic at the internationalist level, we get little indication of how the ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ might be integrated. Although Derrida sees the need for ‘practical and effective organization’ (Derrida, 1994: 89), his own practical suggestions concerning Internationalism amounted to no more than a call to like-minded scholars to criticise the capitalist dispensation, especially its legal forms. This *de facto* undervaluing of concrete activity also seemed to be too hasty in his reluctance to commend Marxist forms of Internationalism which has included
numerous successful anti-imperialist struggles (e.g. Vietnam, Cuba and Angola in the 1960s) and countless acts of international trade union solidarity. True, we might agree that the current anti-capitalist movement is not obviously class-based, but the big strategic question is whether in the long term such a movement can hold together without some kind of class anchoring, albeit on a contingent basis, and whether a movement that has no sense of itself as a class can ultimately overthrow capitalism. Of course we might want to endorse Derrida’s criticisms of standard Marxist assumptions about classes being ‘identical’ with themselves, but anti-capitalist alliances without any recognition of the strategic significance of class, or party, may prove to be politically ineffective (Critchley, 1999: 166).

We might also want to query the value of Derrida’s ‘ad hominem’ charge that these Marxists were ‘proprietal’ about Marx. Even if this were true, does this necessarily invalidate the truth claims they are making about Marx(ism)? Interestingly, he did not enter into any further discussions of Marx’s texts raised by these Marxists. So Lewis’s point, politically and intellectually contextualising the German Ideology, is ignored, as is Spivak’s about how Capital’s analysis of value seeks to demonstrate the socialist ‘ghost’ in the capitalist present of commodified labour. Although a deconstructive approach can show how difficult it is to separate exchange and use-value in practice, in one register at least the effects of the commodification of labour on the ‘singularity’ of the worker would be relevant even to a Derridean critique of capitalism. The ‘abstract’ labour that haunts ‘living’ labour has palpable effects. Indeed, although Derrida does not spell out what he means he does admit that ‘we must grant this to Marx and take account of the analytic power this [use/exchange value] distinction gives us’ (Derrida: 1994: 160–1).

We might wish to go further and ask how valuable, from an emancipatory viewpoint, is asking ‘ad hominem’ questions about Marx. True, he may have been obsessed with ghosts (aren’t we all?), but the desire for transparency is surely part of a process of freeing ourselves from ‘bad’ ghosts, from William Blake’s ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ – consistent with Derrida’s call for a ‘New Enlightenment’. And true, Marx’s explanation of ideology might have ignored its psychoanalytic and phenomenological ‘being/time’ sources, yet this should not mean that he was wrong in focusing on the fetishising effects of commodity exchange that helps to ‘naturalise’ capitalism. Here again one could suggest that perhaps Derrida is ‘supplementing’ Marx. Thus, Derrida states that ‘pre-deconstructive’ defetishising through the ontology of ‘actual reality’ of ‘presence’ [labour, production and exchange] ‘does not mean false, unnecessary, or illusory’ (Derrida, 1994: 170). Rather, these insights are limited because they assume a stable knowledge, and cannot take into account ‘seismic events that come from the
future’ the product of the ‘unstable, chaotic, and dis-located ground of the times’ (Derrida, 1994: 170).

This brings us finally perhaps to the most difficult issue of all. Derrida affirms a good deal of Marx(ism)’s ‘pre-deconstructive’, onto-political analysis [if not its political party/state incarnations], especially its critique of liberal-democratic capitalism. Yet, how do we combine it with his conception of the ‘haunto-political’, underpinned by an array of critical techniques that affirm his deconstructive ethic, which he hoped would ‘repoliticise’ Marxism? Although he seems to want some kind of theory/practice relation and calls for ‘practical and effective organisation’ (Derrida, 1994: 89), this remained gestural throughout his ‘contretemps’ with Marxist orthodoxy. Although he insisted that his notion of ‘justice-to-come’ was not justice deferred, his questioning stance at the heart of deconstruction seemed to suggest that in any practical incarnation of ideals there would always be something missing, and that ‘something’, that ‘other’, was somehow more important than anything that is ‘present’. Yet maybe his message is far simpler: the democratic ‘promise’ means that a radical egalitarian’s work (even that of ‘mourning’) is never done. Marx would have agreed. But for a different reason: he did not seek to question the Western metaphysics of ‘presence’ by demonstrating its congenital ‘impurity’. Rather, his notion of ‘impurity’ stemmed from a notion of praxis always open to revision in the light of new kinds of experience (knowledge, material situation, needs, and the like). Derrida may have identified Marx as an anti-philosophical brother. Yet we may still ask: did Derrida really follow Marx in wanting to stop talking to philosophers? All the same: should not self-proclaimed Marxists avow at least one of Derrida’s ‘spirits’?6

Summary

- Deconstructing the book’s title.
- The meaning of deconstruction.
- Key themes in *Specters*.
- Learning to live with ghosts [= ‘hauntology’].
- Affirmation of Marx(ism)’s analysis and critique of capitalism in all its forms, its analysis of the ten ‘plagues’ of the New World Order.
- Approved of Marx(ism)’s self-critical spirit.
- Deconstructs Marx’s treatment of spectrality, Marx(ism)’s ethico-political dimension, and teleological and eschatological elements.
- Affirms the ‘messianic’ ‘promise’ of democracy, justice and communism to ‘come’.
- Calls for a ‘New International’ which would transform international law.
Marxist criticisms

- Lack of relation between theory and concrete practice.
- Lack of material basis for socialism.
- Inadequate account of rise in totalitarianism in the Soviet Union.
- Question composition and function of Derrida’s ‘New International’.

Derrida replies

- Meaning of ‘Marxist’ and ‘Marxism’.
- The value of the ‘haunto-political’ relation – avoidance of totalitarianism, and a ‘new logic’ of the relations between the unconscious and politics.
- Misunderstanding about class, and misread.
- Need for non-class-based International.

Assessment

- Their starting points different, shared anti-capitalist/anti-liberal democracy positions. Yet Marxists need to reconceptualise class and class struggle.
- Marxists need to explore nature of political commitment generally or their particular Marxist affiliation, and could admit that psychoanalysis might be important for understanding systems of power.
- Ethical issue has ‘haunted’ Marxism, and was ‘repressed’ in Marx’s works.
- Justice as a ‘gift’.
- Standard notion of the ‘political’ in Marxism in need of some criticism.
- Against Derrida, little strategic thinking, and superficial concern with theory/practice relation.
- Problem of integrating the ‘universal’ and ‘particular’, and big strategic question of whether transformative internationalism possible without some kind of class anchoring.
- Limitations of Derrida’s ‘ad hominem’ charge that these Marxists were ‘proprietorial’ about Marx.
- But Derrida not opposed to ‘pre-deconstructive’, ‘onto-political’ analysis.
- Problem of combining the ‘haunto-political’ and the ‘onto-political’.

Sources and Further Reading


**Endnotes**

1 This bracketing of ‘ism’ as in Marx(ism) is our own bracketing, and not Derrida’s, and is used to capture the idea that the discussion often slides between Marx, the relations between Marx and his followers, and Marxism as a fixed doctrine.

2 His coruscating deconstruction of Fukuyama will be omitted here, because as far as Marxists were concerned this was not a contentious area. In all probability they fully sympathised with Derrida’s visceral rebuttal.

3 Elsewhere he seemed to speak favourably about this ‘corruption’ by exchange value: ‘what would the Enlightenment be without the market? And who will ever make progress without exchange value?’ (Derrida, 1994: 152).

4 Although other Marxists, or writers with strong Marxist sympathies, also criticised him: for example, Callinicos (1996), Soper (1996) and MacDonald (1999). Jameson’s ‘Marxist’ discussion is not dealt with here mainly because his sympathetic, constructive criticism was something that Derrida broadly accepted. See also Laclau (1995).

5 Another version of ‘performativity’ consists of taking responsibility for changing the very thing that it interprets, that is presumably Marxism (Derrida, 1999: 219).

6 See Terry Eagleton’s passionate defence of Derrida against his British detractors, upon Derrida’s death, clearly affirming the progressive, political side of his version of deconstruction (Eagleton, 2004).
Derrida and deconstruction

Chapter 2

Derrida and deconstruction

Introduction

Deconstruction, which has attained widespread recognition as one of the most important avant-garde intellectual movements in France and America, is essentially post-phenomenological and post-structuralist. In the history of contemporary deconstruction the leading figure is Jacques Derrida, who published three influential books in 1967: Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena and Writing and Difference. Among other things these texts contain powerful critiques of phenomenology (Husserl), linguistics (Saussure), Lacanian psychoanalysis, and structuralism (Lévi-Strauss).

In this chapter I give an exposition of Derrida’s thought. Beginning with an outline of his view of language I give an explanation of what he means by phonocentrism and logocentrism. I then present his arguments against the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. There are also sections on his ‘predecessors’ Freud and Nietzsche and an account of how they have influenced Derrida’s thinking on reading texts and the nature of metaphor. After that I examine some metaphors in common use. Finally, after situating metaphor in the context of political and ideological struggle, I discuss the relationship between deconstruction and Marxism.

The instability of language

In trying to understand Derrida’s work one of the most important concepts to grasp is the idea of ‘sous rature’, a term usually translated as ‘under erasure’. To put a term ‘sous rature’ is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. The idea is this: since the word is inaccurate, or, rather, inadequate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary it remains legible. This strategically important device which Derrida uses derives from Martin Heidegger, who often crossed out the word ‘Being’ (like this: Being) and let both deletion and word stand because the word was inadequate yet necessary. Heidegger felt that Being cannot be contained by, is always prior to, indeed transcends, signification. Being is the final signified to which all signifiers refer, the ‘transcendental signified’.

In Derrida’s view of language the signifier is not directly related to the signified. There is no one-to-one set of correspondences between them. In Saussurean thought a sign is seen as a unity, but in Derrida’s view word and thing or thought never in fact become one. He sees the sign as a structure of difference: half of it is always ‘not there’ and the other half is always ‘not that’. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations, thus revealing the inadequacy of Saussure’s model of the sign, according to which the signifier and signified relate as if they were two sides of the same sheet of paper. Indeed, there is no fixed distinction between signifiers and signified. If one answers a child’s question or consults a dictionary, one finds that one sign leads to another and so on, indefinitely.

What is the implication of this? That the projected ‘end’ of knowledge could ever coincide with its ‘means’ is an impossible dream of plenitude. No one can make the ‘means’ (the sign) and the ‘end’ (meaning) become identical. Sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other as
Phonocentrism—logocentrism

Derrida is mainly concerned with the role and function of language and is famous for having developed a procedure called deconstruction. This is a method of reading a text so closely that the author's conceptual distinctions on which the text relies are shown to fail on account of the inconsistent and paradoxical use made of these very concepts within the text as a whole. In other words, the text is seen to fail by its own criteria; the standards or definitions which the text sets up are used reflexively to unsettle and shatter the original distinctions. Derrida has used this technique against Husserl, Rousseau, Saussure, Plato, Freud and others; but the method can be applied to any text.

The method of deconstruction is connected with what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'. It is Derrida's contention that Husserl, along with almost all other philosophers, relies on the assumption of an immediately available area of certainty. The origin and foundation of most philosophers' theories is presence. In Husserl's case the search for the form of pure expression is at the same time a search for that which is immediately present; thus implicitly, by being present in an unmediated way and present to itself, it is undeniably certain.

Derrida, however, denies the possibility of this presence and so doing removes the ground from which philosophers have in general proceeded. By denying presence, Derrida is denying that there is a present in the sense of a single definable moment which is 'now'. For most people the present is the province of the known. We may be unsure of what took place in the past, of what may take place in the future, or of what is taking place elsewhere, but we rely on our knowledge of the present here and now – the present perceptual world as we are experiencing it. By challenging access to the present Derrida poses a threat to both positivism and phenomenology.

Husserl made an important distinction in The Logical Investigations between expression and indication. The expression, linked to the speaker, is what we might call the pure meaning of the signifier and signified in turn. For Derrida the sign cannot be taken as a homogeneous unit bridging an origin (referent) and an end (meaning), as semiology, the study of signs, would have it. The sign must be studied 'under erasure', always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such.

In addition, language is a temporal process. When I read a sentence its meaning often does not emerge until the end of the sentence; and even then the meaning can be modified by later signifiers. In each sign there are traces of other words which that sign has excluded in order to be itself. And words contain the trace of the ones which have gone before. All words/signs contain traces. They are like reminders of what has gone before. Every word in a sentence, every sign in a chain of meaning, has these traces in an inexhaustible complexity.

Meaning is never identical with itself; because a sign appears in different contexts it is never absolutely the same. Meaning will never stay quite the same from context to context; the signified will be altered by the various chains of signifiers in which it is entangled.

The implication of this is that language is a much less stable affair than was thought by structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss. None of the elements is absolutely definable; everything is caught up and traced through by everything else. Eagleton explains: 'Nothing is ever fully present in signs. It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails my meaning being always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but I myself: since language is something I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction.'

Phonocentrism—logocentrism

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Husserl made an important distinction in The Logical Investigations between expression and indication. The expression, linked to the intention of the speaker, is what we might call the pure meaning of the sign, and as such is distinguished from indication, which has a pointing function and could occur without any intentional meaning. Now, Derrida has argued that pure expression will always involve an indicative element. Indication can never be successfully excluded from expression. Signs cannot refer to something totally other than themselves. There is no significated which is independent of the signifier. There is no realm of meaning which can be isolated from the marks which are used to point to it.

Having argued that a realm of the independent significated does not exist, Derrida concludes, first, that no particular sign can be regarded as referring to any particular significated and, second, that we are unable to escape the system of signifiers. In combination these conclusions imply that there can be no unqualified presence.

Now, it is because of the assumption of presence that a priority has been given to speech over writing. Derrida calls this phonocentrism. Speech has been regarded as prior because it is closer to the possibility
of presence. It is closer because speech implies immediacy. In speech
meaning is apparently inherent, above all when, using the inner voice
of consciousness, we speak to ourselves. In the moment of speech we
appear to grasp its meaning and are thereby able to capture presence, as
if the meaning was decided once and for all. Thus, unlike writing, which
is hopelessly mediated, speech is linked to the apparent moment and
place of presence and for this reason has had priority over writing. For
Derrida, therefore, phonocentrism is one of the effects of presence.
Derrida’s attempt to deconstruct the opposition between speech and
writing is linked to the uncovering of the metaphysics of presence as a
whole.

Derrida has also criticized Saussure for prescribing that linguistics
should be a study of speech alone rather than of speech and writing.
This is an emphasis shared by Jakobson, by Lévi-Strauss, indeed by all
semiological structuralists. Derrida suggests in *Of Grammatology*
that this rejection of writing as an appendage, a mere technique and yet a
menace built into speech—in effect, a scapegoat—is a symptom of a
much broader tendency. He relates this phonocentrism to logocentrism,
the belief that the first and last thing is the Logos, the Word, the Divine
Mind, the self-presence of full self-consciousness.

Derrida suggests that Husserl found evidence for self-presence in the
voice (phone)—not the ‘real’ voice, but the principle of the voice in our
interior soliloquy: ‘When I speak I hear myself. I hear and understand
at the same time that I speak.’ Husserl’s model of meaningful speech
is the silent conversation of consciousness with itself in solitary
mental life.

Speech is thought of as remaining closer to psychic interiority than
writing which symbolizes interiority only at one remove. When I speak,
I seem to be truly myself. My spoken words seem to come from me, my
true, or real being. Writing does not seem to be so direct, so natural or
sincere. Compared with speech writing seems mechanical, second­
hand, a transcript of speech. Writing can be seen as deriving from
speech because it is thought of as purely phonetic transcription. Derrida
argues that from Plato to Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss, the Western
philosophical tradition has downgraded writing as if it were artificial and
alienated compared with the immediacy and vividness of the human voice.
(This will be discussed in the next section when we consider Derrida’s
examination of specific texts by Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss.) Behind
this bias is a particular view of human beings; it is assumed that they can
spontaneously express themselves and that they can use language as
if it were a transparent medium for an inner truth about their being.
What this theory fails to see is that speaking could be just as much said to
be a second-hand form of writing as writing is said to be an inferior form
of speaking.

One of Derrida’s main concerns has been this privileging of voice as
the medium of meaning and the consequent dismissal of writing as a
derivative form of expression. Western philosophy has focused on
speech, it has emphasized the voice. In this tradition the phenomeno­
logical structure of the voice is regarded as the most immediate evidence
of self-presence. Besides being ‘phonocentric’, Western philosophy is
also ‘logocentric’. Derrida uses the term ‘logocentric’ as a substitute for
metaphysics in order to foreground that which has determined
metaphysical systems of thought: their dependence on a *logos*. Western
philosophy assumes that there is an essence, or truth which acts as
the foundation of all our beliefs; hence there seems to be a disposition, a
longing, for a ‘transcendental signifier’ which would directly relate,
correspond, to a secure stable ‘transcendental signified’ (i.e. a *logos*).
Examples of such signs include: Idea, Matter, the World Spirit, God,
etc. Each of these concepts acts as the foundation of a system of thought
and forms an axis around which all other signs circulate. Derrida argues
that any such transcendental meaning is a fiction.

There are certain signifieds or meanings attached to such signifiers as
Authority, Freedom, Order which are highly valued in society.
Sometimes we think of these meanings as if they were the origin of all
the others. But it could be argued that for these meanings to have been
possible, other signs must already have been in existence in the first
place. Whenever we think of an origin we often want to go back to an
even earlier starting point. But these meanings are not always seen in
terms of origin, they are often seen in terms of goals, towards which all
other meanings are advancing. Conceiving of things in terms of their
orientation towards a *telos* or end point—teleology—is a way of
organizing meanings in a hierarchy of significance.

Derrida calls ‘metaphysical’ any thought-system which depends on a
foundation, a ground, or a first principle. First principles are often
defined by what they exclude, by a sort of ‘binary opposition’ to other
concepts. These principles and their implied ‘binary opposites’ can
always be deconstructed.

Derrida argues that all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics
have for ultimate reference the presence of a present. (He often uses the
word ‘metaphysics’ as shorthand for ‘being as presence’.) For Derrida
the binary oppositions of metaphysics include: signifier/signified, sensible/intelligible, speech/writing, speech (parole)/language (langue), diachrony/synchrony, space/time, passivity/activity. One of his criticisms of the structuralists, as we shall see, is that they have not put these concepts 'under erasure', that they have not put these binary oppositions into question.

What are binary oppositions? They are a way of seeing, rather like ideologies. We know that ideologies draw sharp distinctions between conceptual opposites such as truth and falsity, meaning and nonsense, centre and periphery. Derrida suggests that we should try to break down the oppositions by which we are accustomed to think and which ensure the survival of metaphysics in our thinking: matter/spirit, subject/object, veil/truth, body/soul, text/meaning, interior/exterior, representation/presence, appearance/essence, etc. Derrida's importance is that he has suggested a method whereby we can subvert these oppositions and show that one term relies on and inheres within the other.

Derrida argues that phonocentrism–logocentrism relates to centrism itself – the human desire to posit a 'central' presence at beginning and end. He states that it is this longing for a centre, an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions. The superior term in these oppositions belongs to presence and the logos, the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall. The oppositions between intelligible and sensible, soul and body, seem to have lasted out 'the history of Western philosophy', bequeathing their burden to modern linguistics with its opposition between meaning and word. The opposition between speech and writing takes its place within this pattern.

Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss

Derrida writes that many philosophers throughout history use the opposition nature/culture. It is often stated that archaic man, living in an innocent state of nature, comes upon a danger or insufficiency of one sort or another bringing about a need or desire for community. In the evolution of human beings from nature to society the latter stage of existence is pictured as an addition to the original happy stage of nature. In other words, culture supplements nature. Before long culture comes to take the place of nature. Culture, then, functions as a supplement in two ways: it adds and it substitutes. At the same time it is potentially both detrimental and beneficial. The structure of the nature/culture opposition repeats itself in other traditional polarities: for example, health/disease, purity/contamination, good/evil, speech/writing. The first term in each opposition traditionally constitutes the privileged entity, the better state.

Derrida argues that when Rousseau describes an event or phenomenon he invariably ends up relying on the supplement. Although nature is declared to be self-sufficient it needs culture. (In a similar way for Rousseau aids the insufficiencies of the untrained intellect.) It is suggested by Derrida that there is no original, unsupplemented nature but that nature is always already a supplemented entity. This device, sous nature, indicates the equivocal status of the term erased, warning, as I suggested earlier, the reader not to accept the word at face value. The marks of erasure acknowledge both the inadequacy of the terms employed – their highly provisional status – and the fact that thought simply cannot manage without them. Similarly, Derrida has a mistrust of metaphysical language but accepts the necessity to work within that language.

Rousseau believed that speech was the originary, the healthiest and the most natural condition of language; writing was merely derivative and somehow debilitating. What Derrida does (by a close analysis of Rousseau's texts, particularly the Essay on the Origin of Languages) is to show that Rousseau contradicts himself, so that, far from proving speech to be the origin of language – and writing merely a parasitic growth – his essay confirms the priority of writing. In other words, Rousseau's text confesses what he is at such pains to deny; his text cannot mean what it says or literally say what it means.

The theme of lost innocence is also to be found in the work of Lévi-Strauss, to which I now turn. However before I outline Derrida's criticism of Lévi-Strauss, it may be useful to go over the main features of the latter's structuralist approach. Structuralism, an attempt to isolate the general structures of human activity, found its main analogies in linguistics. It is well known that structural linguistics performs four basic operations: it shifts from the study of conscious linguistic phenomena to the study of their unconscious infrastructure; second, it does not treat terms as independent entities, taking instead as its basis of analysis the relations between terms; third, it introduces the concept of system; finally, it aims at discovering general laws.

What are Derrida's criticisms of structuralism? Firstly, he doubts the possibility of general laws. Secondly, he questions the opposition of the
subject and the object, upon which the possibility of objective descriptions rests. In his view the description of the object is contaminated by the patterns of the subject's desire. Thirdly, he questions the structure of binary oppositions. He invites us to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not, after all, an accomplice of the other.

The structuralism of Lévi-Strauss can be characterized as a search for invariant structures or formal universals which reflect the nature of human intelligence. This approach lends support to the traditional idea of the text as a bearer of stable meanings and the critic as a faithful seeker after truth in the text. Derrida suggests that when Lévi-Strauss describes the life of the Nambikwara and their transition to civilization he takes upon himself the burden of guilt produced by this encounter between civilization and the 'innocent' culture it ceaselessly exploits. Lévi-Strauss gives expression, like Rousseau, to an eloquent longing for the lost primordial unity of speech before writing. Writing for Lévi-Strauss is an instrument of oppression, means of colonizing the primitive mind. In Derrida's view there is no pure 'authenticity' as Lévi-Strauss imagines; the theme of lost innocence is a romantic illusion.

Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss follows much the same path as his deconstructive readings of Saussure and Rousseau. Once again it is a matter of taking a repressed theme, pursuing its textual ramifications and showing how these subvert the very order that strives to hold them in check. The 'nature' which Rousseau identifies with a pure, unmediated speech, and Lévi-Strauss with the dawn of tribal awareness, expresses nostalgia for lost innocence, an illusory metaphysics of presence which ignores the self-alienating character of all social existence.

Derrida situates the project of Lévi-Strauss (like those of Saussure and Lacan) in logocentrism. One of the central problems of anthropology is the passage from nature to culture. Derrida argues that Lévi-Strauss regularly and symptomatically ends up privileging the state of nature over culture. He appears sentimental and nostalgic, trapped in a Rousseauistic dream of innocent and natural primitive societies. Beneath the guilt and nostalgia, endemic to the field of anthropology, lies a Western ethnocentrism masking itself as liberal and humane anti-ethnocentrism.

As for writing, Lévi-Strauss conceptualizes it as a late cultural arrival, a supplement to speech, an external instrument. Speech is endowed with all the metaphorical attributes of life and healthy vitality, writing with dark connotations of violence and death.

Derrida and deconstruction

Derrida has made similar comments on Saussure. He has criticized Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* for the sharp distinction which it maintains between the signifier and the signified, a distinction which is congruent with the traditional opposition of matter and spirit, or substance and thought. (Traditionally, this opposition has always been elaborated in ways which privilege spirit and/or thought as something that precedes matter or substance.) Derrida suggests that the distinction between signifier and signified can only be maintained if one term is believed to be final, incapable of referring beyond itself to any other term. If there is no such term, then every signified functions in turn as a signifier, in an endless play of signification.

Derrida, in short, is critical of Saussure's notion of the sign and argues that the traditional concept of signifier and signified rests firmly within the phonocentric–logocentric episteme. One of the characteristics of the logocentric epoch is that there is a general debasement of writing and a preference for phonetic writing (writing as imitated speech). There is, then, a rooted Western prejudice which tries to reduce writing to a stable meaning equated with the character of speech. It is widely held that in spoken language meaning is 'present' to the speaker through an act of inward self-surveillance which assures a perfect, intuitive 'fit' between intention and utterance.

Derrida demonstrates that in Saussurian linguistics privilege is granted to speech as opposed to written language. Voice becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity, a source of self-present 'living' speech as opposed to the secondary, lifeless emanations of writing. Writing is systematically degraded and is seen as a threat to the traditional view that associates truth with self-presence. This repression of writing lies deep in Saussure's proposed methodology and shows in his refusal to consider any form of linguistic notation outside the phonetic-alphabetical script of Western culture. Against this view Derrida argues that writing is, in fact, the precondition of language and must be conceived as prior to speech. Writing is the 'free play' or element of undecidability within every system of communication.

It should be pointed out that for Derrida 'writing' does not refer to the empirical concept of writing (which denotes an intelligible system of notations on a material substance); writing is the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace. This broadening of the term, Derrida argues, was made possible by Sigmund Freud.
Derrida argues that it is no accident that when Freud tried to describe the workings of the psyche he had recourse to metaphorical models which are borrowed not from spoken language but from writing. (This, of course, raises the question of what a text is and what the psyche must be like if it can be represented by a text.)

At first, from about the time of ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (1895), Freud used mechanical models, but these were soon discarded. As Freud moved from neurological to psychical modes of explanation he began increasingly to refer to metaphors of optical mechanisms. Then, in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Freud thought it more appropriate to compare dreams with a system of writing than with spoken language. In order to suggest the strangeness of the logico-temporal relations in dreams Freud constantly referred to alphabetic writing as well as non-phonetic writing (pictographs, rebuses, hieroglyphics) in general. Dream symbols, he wrote, frequently have more than one or even several meanings and, as with Chinese script, the correct interpretation can only be arrived at on each occasion from the context.

Later, in ‘Note on the Mystic Writing Pad’ (1925), Freud used a writing apparatus as a metaphor for the working of the psyche. A child’s toy had come on the market under the name of the Mystic Writing Pad. You may have come across a modern version of it. Basically, it consisted of a celluloid covering-sheet which rested upon a wax slab. One could write on it with a pointed stylus and the writing could be erased by raising the double covering sheet by a little pull, starting from the free lower end. The pad, cleared of writing, is thus ready to receive fresh messages. Freud argued that its construction was very much like that of the perceptual apparatus. It had an ever-ready receptive surface and could retain permanent traces of the inscriptions made on it; the wax slab, in fact, represented the unconscious.

In short, Freud found in the Mystic Writing Pad a model that would contain the problematics of the psyche - a virgin surface that still retained permanent traces. The Freudian argument is that the establishment of permanent traces in the psychic apparatus precludes the possibility of immediate perception. In other words, we have ‘memory-traces’, marks which are not a part of conscious memory, which may be energized into consciousness long afterwards and so affect us.

Derrida’s chief interest in Freudian psychoanalysis lies in the fact that it teaches and uses a certain method of deciphering texts. Freud lists the four techniques used by the ‘dream-work’ of the psychic apparatus to distort or refract the ‘forbidden’ dream-thoughts, to produce the pictographic script of the dream: condensation, displacement, considerations of representability and secondary revision. Condensation and displacement may be rhetorically translated as metaphor and metonymy. The third item on the list refers to the technique which distorts an idea so that it can be presented as an image. Secondary revision is a psychic force that smooths over contradictions and creates an apparent connectedness.

Freud suggested that the verbal text is constituted by concealment as much as by revelation. Freud suggests that where the subject is not in control of the text, where the text looks very smooth or very clumsy, is where readers should fix their gaze. Derrida develops this further: he suggests that we should fasten upon a small but tell-tale moment in the text which harbours the author’s sleight of hand and which cannot be dismissed simply as contradiction. We should examine that passage where we can provisionally locate the moment when the text transgresses the laws it apparently sets up for itself, and thus unravel - deconstruct - the very text.

Freud’s greatest contemporary interpreter is Jacques Lacan. Let me briefly remind you of the key features of Lacan’s thought before outlining Derrida’s critique of it. Like Freud, Lacan denies that there is a difference in kind between ‘the normal’ and ‘the abnormal’. Moreover, he rejects the work of those American psychologists who stress that the ego is the primary determinant of the psyche. In his view ‘the subject’ can never be a total personality and is forever divided from the object of its desire. Lacan goes on to define the unconscious in terms of the structure of a language. This extends Freud in a direction that Derrida would endorse, but, nevertheless, the relationship between these thinkers is an uneasy one.

It would seem to an outside observer that Lacan and Derrida have a lot in common: they are both deeply concerned with anti-positivist theories of language and are highly aware of language’s metaphoricity. Secondly, both thinkers have been influenced by Freud’s theories of the unconscious and the dream as a text. This means that they are interested in (ways of) ‘reading’ and (styles of) ‘writing’. Thirdly, they both draw attention, as did Freud, to the relationship between nature and culture.

And so, why is there an uneasy relationship between them? Derrida argues that the goal of Lacanian analysis is to draw out and establish ‘the
truth of the subject, and it appears to him that in spite of giving to the unconscious the structure of a language Lacan has entrenched some of Freud’s (metaphysical) suggestions by making the unconscious the source of ‘truth’. Derrida believes that Lacan sees himself as unveiling ‘the true’ Freud and is sceptical of Lacan’s notions of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’, seeing them as remnants of a post-war existentialist ethic, the unacknowledged debts to Hegelian phenomenology.

Derrida believes that Lacan simplifies Freud’s text. In Lacanian analysis the truth (logos) systematically shines forth as spoken or voiced. Psychoanalysis remains ‘the talking cure’ founded on spoken truth. Psychoanalysis remains ‘the talking cure’ founded on spoken truth.

Derrida cautions us that when we learn to reject the notion of the primacy of the signified (of meaning over word) we should not satisfy our longing for transcendence by giving primacy to the signifier (word over meaning). He feels that Lacan has done precisely this.

I stated earlier that Derrida is attempting to subvert the logocentric theory of the sign. Traditionally, the signifier refers to the signified, that is, an acoustic image signifies an ideal concept, both of which are present to consciousness. The signifier ‘dog’ indicates the idea ‘dog’; the real dog, the referent, is not present. In Derrida’s view the sign marks an absent presence. Rather than present the object we employ the sign; however, the meaning of the sign is always postponed or deferred.

Derrida has developed a concept which he calls ‘differance’ and which refers to ‘to differ’ – to be unlike or dissimilar in nature, quality or form – and to ‘to defer’ – to delay, to postpone (the French verb différer has both these meanings). Spoken French makes no phonetic distinction between the endings ‘-ance’ and ‘-ence’; the word registers as differ. This undetected difference shows up only in writing.

The advent of the concept of writing, then, is a challenge to the very idea of structure; for a structure always presumes a centre, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meaning and a solid foundation; and it is just these notions which the endless differing and deferring of writing throws into question.

As we have seen, Derrida’s analysis of Husserl led him to portray language as an endless play of signifiers. Once an independent signified was abandoned signifiers referred to other signifiers which, yet again referred to signifiers. Language is thus the play of differences which are generated by signifiers which are themselves the product of those differences. Derrida incorporates into the meaning of differance the sense of deferring. Differance is itself endlessly deferred.
Nietzsche's undoing of opposites is rather like Derrida's undoing of them as a part of deconstructive practice.

For Nietzsche there is no possibility of a literal, true, self-identical meaning. (Derrida, too, is deeply committed to the view that philosophical discourse is something to be deciphered.) Nietzsche described the figurative drive as the impulse towards the formation of metaphors. Every idea, he said, originates through an equating of the unequal. Metaphor is the establishing of an identity between dissimilar things:

What, therefore, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions. . . . coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal. 

In his later work Nietzsche gave this figurative drive the name 'will to power'. Our so-called will to truth is the will to power because the so-called drive for knowledge can be traced back to a drive to appropriate power. Our so-called 'viII to truth is the will to power because the so-called 'subject' knows nothing. Derrida has shown, even philosophy is permeated with metaphor. Some people have urged that technical and scientific language should be purged of metaphor but, as we have seen, metaphorical expressions are rooted in language itself. For example, we habitually think of organizations spatially, in terms of up and down. We tend to think of theories as though they were buildings, and so we talk of foundations, frameworks, etc. 'Base' and 'superstructure' are fundamental concepts in Marxism. As Derrida has shown, even philosophy is permeated with metaphor without knowing it.

Meaning shifts around, and metaphor is the name of the process by which it does so. It is a threat to orderly language and for the proliferation of meaning. First, there is no limit to the number of metaphors for any given idea. Second, metaphor is a sort of rhetorical double-bind, which states one thing but requires you to understand something different. (I found it interesting to learn that many schizophrenics cling to the literal and avoid metaphors because these are ultimately undecidable.) Metaphors evoke relationships and the
I consider for a moment the metaphor 'time is money'. In particular, it is insidious since they are so interwoven into our speech that the frivolous and not to the main business of life. Metaphors like these -- emptiness, with a vacuum. The metaphors reinforce the idea of life as first and foremost the life of work, while activities outside of it belong to weekends are breaks between work. We associate the metaphor of work with plenitude, with something of importance, and that of leisure with wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or foolishly, saved or squandered. 'Time is money', 'time is a limited resource' and 'time is a valuable commodity' are all metaphorical concepts. They are metaphorical since we are using our everyday experiences with money, limited resources and valuable commodities to conceptualize time. But this is not the only way in which human beings may conceptualize time; it is tied to our culture. There are cultures where time is none of these things.

Let us consider another example: the organizing metaphors surrounding work and leisure. One does a full day's work; one is in or out of work. Leisure time, on the other hand, is to be filled; holiday weekends are breaks between work. We associate the metaphor of work with plenitude, with something of importance, and that of leisure with emptiness, with a vacuum. The metaphors reinforce the idea of life as first and foremost the life of work, while activities outside of it belong to the frivolous and not to the main business of life. Metaphors like these are particularly insidious since they are so interwoven into our speech that their flavour of metaphor is lost upon speakers and hearers.

The politics of metaphor

Our ordinary language is saturated with metaphor. For example, in our society argument is in part structured, understood, performed and talked about in terms of war. There is a position to be established and defended, you can win or lose, you have an opponent whose position you attack and try to destroy and whose argument you try to shoot down. The language of argument is, basically, the language of physical combat. That 'argument is war' is built into the conceptual system of the culture in which we live. Lakoff and Johnson have pointed out that it need not be so; that one can easily imagine societies in which argument is conceived differently -- for example as theatrical performance. In such a society both argument itself and the criteria for success or failure in argument would be quite unlike our own.

Some metaphors, in certain historical periods, have been liberating. The historian Christopher Hill has described how in the seventeenth century nature came to be thought of as a machine to be understood, controlled and improved upon by knowledge. Nature as a machine was (at that time) a tremendously exciting, liberating idea. Human beings were freed from Providence or divine will and could not only understand the world better but could begin to change it.

I think that the creative or imaginative aspect of sociological theories often lies in their use of metaphor. Parsons likens society to a biological organism; Marx uses the metaphor of a building, the base and superstructure; Goffman uses the metaphor of a stage 'performance'. Metaphors serve to draw attention not only to similarities but to differences. As the theory develops and becomes more precise, concepts emerge that sometimes have little to do with the original metaphor.

An influential post-structuralist thinker, the late Michel Foucault (whose work on the social sciences and the relations between power and knowledge will be discussed in the next chapter), was particularly fond of using 'geographical' metaphors such as territory, domain, soil, horizon, archipelago, geopolitics, region, landscape. He also makes profuse use of spatial metaphors -- position, displacement, site, field. Althusser, too, in Reading Capital uses many spatial metaphors (terrain, space, site, etc.). Foucault suggests that, since Bergson perhaps, there has been a devaluation of space. Space has been treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile; time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. But to talk in terms of space does not mean that one is hostile to time. Althusser believed that the use of spatial metaphors in his work was necessary but at the same time regressive, non-rigorous. Foucault, on the other hand, was more positive. He said that it is through these spatial obsessions that he came to what he was looking for: the relations that are possible between power and knowledge. 'Once knowledge can be analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which
Derrida has provided a method of 'close-reading' a text very similar to psychoanalytic approaches to neurotic symptoms. Deconstructive structures 'as such' are part of the text. The deconstructive procedure is to spot the point where a text covers up its grammatical structure. Deconstructors show that the 'privileged' term depends for its identity on its excluding the other and demonstrate that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead.

Derrida's procedure is to examine the minute particulars of an undecidable moment, nearly imperceptible displacements, that might otherwise escape the reader's eye. He tries to locate not a moment of ambiguity or irony ultimately incorporated into the text's system of unified meaning but rather a moment that genuinely threatens to collapse that system. Derrida's method is not that of Hegel. Hegel's idealist method consists in resolving by sublation the contradictions between the binary oppositions. Derrida stresses the point that it is not enough simply to neutralize the binary oppositions of metaphysics. Deconstruction involves reversal and displacement. Within the familiar philosophical oppositions there is always a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms controls the other, holds the superior position. The first move in deconstructing the opposition is to overthrow the hierarchy. In the next phase this reversal must be displaced, the winning term put 'under erasure'. Deconstruction, then, is the attempt to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed.

Before making some critical remarks, let me try to sum up. Derrida has made a close study of many philosophers: Nietzsche, Rousseau, Husserl, Heidegger and others. He argues that they have been able to impose their various systems of thought only by ignoring or suppressing the disruptive effects of language. One of the ruling illusions of Western metaphysics is that reason can somehow grasp the world without a close attention to language and arrive at a pure, self-authenticating truth or method. Derrida’s work draws attention to the ways in which language deflects the philosopher’s project. He does this by focusing on metaphors and other figurative devices at work in the texts of philosophy. In this way Derrida underlines the rhetorical nature of philosophical arguments.

Deconstruction stresses the irreducibility of metaphor, the difference at play within the very constitution of literal meaning. It should be remembered that deconstruction is not simply a strategic reversal of categories which otherwise remain distinct and unaffected. It is an
activity of reading in which texts must be read in a radically new way. There must be an awareness of ambivalence, of the discrepancy between meaning and the author's assertion. Derrida discovers a set of paradoxical themes at odds with their manifest argument. His method consists of showing how the privileged term is held in place by the force of a dominant metaphor and not, as it might seem, by any conclusive logic. Metaphors often disrupt the logic of an argument.

Derrida writes that we have a metaphysical desire to make the end coincide with the means, create an enclosure, make the definition coincide with the defined, the 'father' with the 'son'; within the logic of identity to balance the equation, close the circle. In short, he is asking us to change certain habits of mind; he is telling us that the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace. Contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time. Derrida wants us to 'erase' all oppositions, undoing yet preserving them.

Deconstructionists tend to say that if a text seems to refer beyond itself, that reference can finally only be to another text. Just as signs refer only to other signs, texts can refer only to other texts, generating an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called intertextuality. There is a proliferation of interpretations, and no interpretation can claim to be the final one. Now, Derrida is sometimes taken to be denying the possibility of truth. This is not so. It is more plausible to think of him as trying to avoid assertions about the nature of truth.

The usual superficial criticism of Derrida is that he questions the value of 'truth' and 'logic' and yet uses logic to demonstrate the truth of his own arguments. The point is that the overt concern of Derrida's writing is the predicament of having to use the resources of the heritage that he questions.

Derrida's work confronts us with many problems. Having argued that there cannot be a realm of the signified independent of the signifier, he opens up the vista of an endless play of signifiers that refer not to signifieds but to other signifiers, so that meaning is always ultimately undecidable. Derrida gives as an example of undecidability Plato's frequent presentation of writing as a drug, pharmakon. This Greek word can mean either 'poison' or 'cure' and, as with a drug, which way it is taken (translated) makes a lot of difference. Consider another important case of undecidability: an isolated note found among Nietzsche's unpublished manuscripts, a single sentence in quotation marks: 'I have forgotten my umbrella.' In a sense, we all know what this phrase means, and yet we have no idea of what its meaning is in this instance. Is it a

jotting to himself, a citation, or a phrase overheard and noted for further use? Perhaps the umbrella is seen as some sort of defence, a protection from the weather? Nietzsche, on the verge of breakdown, has left his defences behind; caught in a rainstorm, he has forgotten his umbrella.

Of course, it could also be analysed in Freudian terms, as psychoanalysis often focuses on the significance of forgetting and phallic objects. 'I have forgotten my umbrella': the phrase is undecidable. This illustration could be a metaphor for the whole of Derrida's text.

As we saw with Derrida's work on Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, deconstruction questions the self-identity of signifier and signifies and the self-presence of the speaking subject and the voiced sign. There is an abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a fixed subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, to an absolute founding and controlling first principle.

Deconstruction disarticulates traditional conceptions of the author and the work and undermines conventional notions of reading and history. Instead of mimetic, expressive and didactic theories of 'literature' it offers textuality (écriture). It kills the author, turns history and tradition into intertextuality and celebrates the reader. One of the main features of post-structuralist theory is the deconstruction of the self. In place of a unified and stable being or consciousness we get a multifaceted and disintegrating play of selves. The reader, like the text, is unstable. With deconstruction the categories of 'criticism', 'philosophy' and 'literature' collapse, borders are overrun. The work, now called 'text', explodes beyond stable meaning and truth towards the radical and ceaseless play of infinite meanings. Critical writing, formerly analytical and coherent, becomes playfully fragmented.

Is this a result of Derrida's view of language? It has been suggested by Terry Eagleton that meaning may well be ultimately undecidable if we view language contemplatively, as a chain of signifiers on a page; it becomes 'decidable' and words like 'truth', 'reality', 'knowledge', and 'certainty' have something of their force restored to them when we think of language rather as something we do, as indissociably interwoven with our practical forms of life. The deconstructor's method often consists of deliberately inverting traditional oppositions and marking the play of hitherto invisible concepts that reside unnamed in the gap between opposing terms. In the move from hermeneutics and semiotics to deconstruction there is a shift of focus from identities to differences, unities to fragmentations,
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ontology to philosophy of language, epistemology to rhetoric, presence to absence. According to one recent commentator 'deconstruction celebrates dissemination over truth, explosion and fragmentation over unity and coherence, undecidable spaces over prudent closures, playful and hysteria over care and rationality'.

It is said that every boundary, limit, division, frame or margin instals a line separating one entity or concept from another. That is to say, every border marks a difference. The question of the border is a question of difference. Derrida writes, 'No border is guaranteed, inside or out.' Applied to texts, this finding becomes 'no meaning can be fixed or decided upon'. According to deconstructionists there is nothing other than interpretation. As there is neither an undifferentiated nor a literal bottom or ground, the activity of interpretation is endless. It is also a fact that every text tends itself to deconstruction and to further deconstruction, with nowhere any end in sight. Finally, no escape outside the logocentric enclosure is possible since the interpreter must use the concepts and figures of the Western metaphysical tradition. The term used to describe the impasse of interpretation ('there is no way out') is *aporia*. "The supreme irony of what Derrida has called logocentrism is that its critique, deconstruction, is as insistent, as monotonous and as inadvertently systematizing as logocentrism itself."21

Having given a few criticisms of Derrida and deconstruction, I now want to ask, 'Are his methods allied or opposed to Marxism?' When faced with new approaches such as deconstruction it is very hard to try to work out whether they are useful aids in building a new socialist order or are just other forms of bourgeois recuperation and domination. I think I am right in saying that deconstruction is, for Derrida, ultimately a political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought and, behind that, a whole system of political structures and social institutions maintains its force. But in practice it cannot be denied that his work has been grossly unhistorical and politically evasive.22 One post-structuralist, Michel Foucault, argued that Derrida's own decision to avoid questions about the extent to which the text arises out of and reflects underlying social practices itself reflects a social practice. He said that by deliberately restricting himself to textual analysis the question of evaluating textual analysis as a social and political practice cannot be raised. In so far as textual undecidability precludes raising questions about truth it perpetuates the status quo.

On the other hand, some commentators have suggested that deconstruction, by unsettling the theories with which we have surrounded ourselves, serves to indicate that our account of the world could be different but that it cannot tell us how it would be different. The structures within which we operate 'little by little to modify the terrain of our work, and thereby produce new figurations'. Is this himself, and then parading the parody?23 Derrida has himself observed that certain American uses of dominant political and economic interests of American society. He has concepts, themes that carry along with them a whole unrecognized about Marx - a silence that can be construed as a prolonged postponement, a refusal as yet to engage with Marxist thought.

There are some critics, like Fredric Jameson, who feel that the claims of synchronic thought must somehow be reconciled with those of rhetoric and Marxist dialectic.24 But other critics have suggested that the up in a rhetoric of tropes and images that entirely controls its logic. Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, has argued that deconstruction is are inevitably couched in a rhetoric which itself lies open to further deconstruction it is committed to a sceptical epistemology that leads back to Nietzsche, rather than Marx.25

Some of the most trenchant criticisms of deconstruction have been made by the English Marxist critic Terry Eagleton. According to Eagleton the main characteristics of deconstruction are that it rejects any notion of totality and that it is against the privileging of the unitary subject. Deconstructionism asserts that literary texts do not have relations to something other than themselves. It follows that deconstruction is not concerned with blaming anybody for the exploitation which definite judgements could be delivered. Eagleton, in 1981, wrote that many of the vauntedly novel themes of deconstruction do little more than reproduce some of the most commonplace topics of bourgeois liberalism. The modest disownment of theory, method and system; the revulsion from
Further reading

A useful discussion of Derridean deconstruction and the Derrida–Foucault dispute.

A good introduction to the subject. Two excellent chapters on Derrida are followed by others that discuss the implications of Nietzsche's writings, the relation between deconstruction and Marxist thought, and the work of contemporary American literary critics.

An excellent book; besides introducing Derrida's writings on Plato, Hegel, Saussure, Rousseau, Kant, it explains the significance of his work, and discusses recent philosophical controversies. It contains a useful bibliography.

A lucid exposition.

A clear and useful defence of Derrida's deconstruction from the accusation of nihilism, empty reversalism and textual idealism.

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the dominant, totalising and unequivocally denotive; the privileging of plurality and heterogeneity; the recurrent gestures of hesitation and indeterminacy; the devotion to gliding and process, slippage and movement; the distaste for the definitive — it is not difficult to see why such an idiom should become so quickly absorbed within the Anglo-Saxon academies. 26

It is suggested by Eagleton that deconstruction is not only reformist but ultra-Leftist too. On the one hand, deconstruction is a sort of patient, probing reformism of the text. Because it can only imagine contradiction as the external warring of two monistic essences, it fails to comprehend class dialectics. On the other hand, deconstruction is ultra-Left in that it is 'a problematic that sees meaning itself as terrorist'. Both left reformism (social democracy) and ultra-Leftism are among other things antithetical responses to the failure or absence of a mass revolutionary movement.

In a recent book the leading exponent of Derrida's thought in Britain, Christopher Norris, reminds us that Derrida wants to stress the non-availability of any such thing as a direct unmediated knowledge of the world. Derrida wants to emphasize the culturally produced (as opposed to the natural) character of thought and perception. In his polemic against Jean Baudrillard and others, Norris argues that deconstruction has nothing in common with those forms of extreme anti-cognitivist doctrine that would claim to have come out 'beyond' all distinctions between truth and falsehood, reason and rhetoric, fact and fiction. In Norris's view, Derrida has been at some pains to dissociate his project from the kind of irrationalist or nihilist outlook which takes it for granted that truth and reason are obsolete values. He has a continuing critical engagement with the truth-claims and ethical values of Enlightenment thought. 27 Derridean deconstruction supports the Enlightenment critique even while subjecting that tradition to a radical reassessment.
and among structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism and post-structuralism. The author maintains the centrality of psychoanalysis to semiotics and gives many examples from literary and film texts. It is an excellent introduction to the work of Saussure, Freud's primary and secondary processes, metaphor and metonymy, Freudian and Lacanian models of the human subject, and the interpretive strategies of Roland Barthes.

A useful book; it contains helpful discussions of the work of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida.

A clear introduction to post-structuralism. The author argues its political usefulness to feminism, and considers its implications for feminist critical practice. It includes chapters on psychoanalysis (Lacan), language and subjectivity, discourse and power (Foucault).

**Chapter 5**

**Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: French feminist theories**

**Introduction**

In this chapter I want to provide a brief introduction to the work of three French thinkers: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Of course, there are many similarities and differences between them. One characteristic that they have in common is that they have all been influenced, in different ways, by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Another common feature is that they all have something interesting to say about subjectivity, sexuality, language and desire.

**Hélène Cixous**

**Introduction**

Besides being a novelist, Hélène Cixous is a critic and commentator. In my presentation I will focus on only two aspects of her work: her antagonism to all forms of dualistic thinking based on oppositions and hierarchies, and her espousal of a feminine practice of writing related to the body. She sees feminine sexuality as rich and plural and she draws a parallel between feminine libido and writing. She believes that the patriarchal order can be challenged by feminine writing.

In the essay 'Sorties' Cixous describes the set of hierarchical oppositions which, she argues, have structured Western thought and governed its political practice. She cites oppositions such as 'culture/nature', 'head/heart', 'form/matter', 'speaking/writing', and relates...
them to the opposition between 'man' and 'woman'. She notes that one term of the opposition is always privileged. Each couple is based on the repression of one of its terms, yet both terms are locked together in violent conflict. Without nature, culture is meaningless; yet culture continually struggles to negate nature. Another example of a dualist structure of unequal power is colonialism; she remarks how the Arab population was both necessary to, and despised by, the French.

Such dialectical structures, Cixous argues, also dominate the formation of subjectivity, and thus of sexual difference. She uses Hegel's Master/Slave relation to illustrate this. In this story the subject requires the recognition of an Other from whom the individual differentiates him- or herself. Yet this recognition is experienced as threatening, and the Other is immediately repressed, so that the subject can return to the security and certainty of self-knowledge. Now, consider the opposition man/woman. Within a patriarchal society, woman becomes represented as the Other, necessary to the constitution and recognition of identity, but always threatening to it. Sexual difference is thus locked into a structure of power, where difference, or otherness, is tolerated only when repressed. The movement of the Hegelian dialectic depends on an inequality of power between the two oppositional terms. The well-known story of Sleeping Beauty exemplifies this. The woman is represented as sleeping, as possessed of negative subjectivity until she is kissed by a male. The kiss gives her existence, but only within a process that immediately subordinates her to the desire of 'the prince'.

In her early work Cixous focuses attention on the space in which women are placed by culture. She questions the naturalness or inevitability of structural hierarchies. Wanting to overcome these hierarchies, her strategy, as we shall see, is to explore the subversive possibilities of a 'feminine' writing practice.

An important part of Cixous's project is to unearth the myths that sustain the logic of patriarchy, undoing their 'naturalness'. Let us take as an example her interesting interpretation of the Oresteia myth. She reads it as a narrative of the origins of patriarchy. Seeing Orestes as placed at a turning point in history, Cixous focuses on the debate in the Iphigenia over the relative claims of revenge for murder of a husband (Agamemnon by Clytemnestra) and murder of a mother (Clytemnestra by Orestes). She draws attention to Apollo's ruling that 'the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed... the man is the source of life' - an account of reproduction that diminishes the gravity of matricide, and thus seems to license the development of patriarchal social relations. She notes that it is Electra's voice that is the loudest in the demand for the death of her mother; she is the leader of the phallocrats.

Cixous rejects both the Freudian and Lacanian models of sexual difference, which she sees as condemning women to negativity in their privileging of the phallus. Instead, she argues for the possibility of sustaining a bisexuality: not as a denial of sexual difference, but as a lived recognition of plurality, of the simultaneous presence of masculinity and femininity within an individual subject.

Writing and the body

For Cixous, writing is a privileged space for the exploration of such non-hierarchically arranged bisexuality. Writing, she believes, can be the site of alternative economies; it is not obliged simply to reproduce the system. This argument is developed in the context of close readings of a series of texts by Kleist, Shakespeare, Poe, Genet and others. It is clear that she favours texts that are excessive in some way, texts that undermine fixed categories.

Cixous, then, is committed to the production of a form of writing that would embody bisexuality, and operate in the interests of women. In her view women's relations to their bodies are culturally inscribed. She believes that the cultural is organized differently for men and women, and that a writing practice that reformulates the cultural is of particular importance for women.

Cixous then goes on to theorize an alternative economy of femininity in relation to the concept of 'the gift'. She describes two possible attitudes to giving: one, which is described as 'masculine', is caught up in the mechanisms of exchange, and will give only with a certainty of immediate return. Cixous suggests an alternative, or feminine, economy of giving which derives from the work of Georges Bataille. He was very interested in those aspects of human culture that are not reducible to the classical economic balance between production and consumption. These aspects include art, games, spectacles, war and perverse sexuality. In his view such activities show the futility of a mechanical systematization of human existence. His favourite example is the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy (wealth) without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving.
Taking up this theme Cixous writes:

Can one speak of another spending? Really, there is no ‘free’ gift. You never give something for nothing. But the difference lies in the why and how of the gift, in the values that the gesture of giving affirms, causes to circulate; in the type of profit the giver draws from the gift and the use to which he or she puts it.¹

This different relation to giving is what Cixous sees as characteristic of an alternative, feminine, practice of writing. Such writing would reject the security of fixed categories of stable identity; moreover, it would not be afraid to create subjectivities that are plural and shifting.

Feminine writing, asserts Cixous, cannot be defined. Nevertheless, she does ascribe one characteristic to it: its proximity to voice. Speech is privileged because of its closeness to song and thus to the unconscious. Cixous wants to explore the associative logic of music over the linear logic of philosophical and literary discourse. For Cixous, speaking is a powerfully transgressive act for women, and writing is a privileged space for transformation.

Cixous believes that writing is produced and understood in relation to the body. She believes that we often separate mind and body. Most of us have an illusion of intellectual control but it is at the cost of erasing, censoring and hystericizing the body. This interest in the relation between language and the body leads her to an engagement with the unconscious. Cixous often uses both myth and dream in her texts as ways of exploring the archaic and the repressed, and as ways of unsettling the illusion of subjective autonomy and conscious control. It should, perhaps, be added that Cixous’s commitment to moving beyond the categories of the rational and the knowable, towards the site of creation, multiple subjectivity and the bodily roots of human culture derives from a close study of Nietzsche.²

This focus on writing as a political strategy has a biographical significance for Cixous. As both woman and Jew she has experienced loss and exclusion. She has been closely identified with the group Psychoanalyse et Politique (Psycho et Po) who struggled to develop revolutionary theories of the oppression of women on the basis of psychoanalytic theory. Wanting to challenge the unconscious structures of patriarchal oppression, the group worked like moles to disturb the dominant order. They were hostile towards groups that described themselves as ‘feminist’, seeing such groups as reformist, and as working simply to gain access to, and to reproduce, the structures of masculine power.

Cixous’s comments on writers are always linked to her desire to theorize the power of language, to evade the habitual, to move beyond the hierarchies of dual opposition. From her studies of authors like James Joyce, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Heinrich von Kleist, Edgar Allan Poe, Sigmund Freud and others she derives an understanding of the relations between subjectivity, textuality and sexual difference which is crucial to her own writing practice.

One of Cixous’s main interests is in forms of writing that disturb the notion of individual subjectivity as unified and stable, and explode the boundaries of the self. Many critics are interested in Poe because his writings reflect the logic of narrative and because he seems to foreshadow the concerns of modernism. Cixous believes that Poe’s writing, in its very excess and perversity, represents a challenge to existing forms of subjectivity, desire and sexual difference. She admires Poe’s writing because it removes the illusion of subjective autonomy and of a unified homogeneous identity. It is the power of Poe’s writing to move beyond the rigid categories of love/death or conscious/unconscious which Cixous values.

What I find impressive is that, besides her theoretical works, Cixous has also produced a large number of fictional texts.³ These fictions stretch the limits of the novelistic: character is uncertain, the narrative point of view is unstable, the apparent transparency of language is challenged, and linear temporality is unsettled. In these texts she explores many of the issues that also dominate her theoretical and critical works: subjectivity, the corporeal roots of language, femininity, relations to the Other, and the possibilities of social and subjective transformation.

Having established the political importance of feminine writing for women, Cixous found a woman practising such a writing. This is really quite remarkable. Having theorized the limitations and dangers of dualist thought, of subjectivity based on the obliteration of the Other, Cixous discovered another woman writer who was exploring the same issues in fictional form: Clarice Lispector.

To understand this fully, one has to remember that Cixous’s theorization of feminine writing had taken place almost entirely in terms of the texts of canonical male writers such as Joyce, Kleist or Hoffmann. And her theoretical vocabulary had been largely derived from male theorists such as Lacan and Derrida. And then, suddenly, she came...
across a writer who was largely unknown in France, who was Jewish, who was a woman and who shared many of her philosophical and stylistic preoccupations.7

Cixous found in Lispector, the Brazilian novelist and short-story writer, a sustained exploration of the relations between subjectivity and writing. Lispector embodies many of the ideas which Cixous had propagated. Cixous greatly appreciates Lispector's exploration of subjectivity, her positing of alternative relations to otherness, her stylistic minimalism, and the audacity of the ethical issues with which she engages. And so these writers have much in common; both explore the possibility of an alternative economy of representation to the bodily, the overturning of hierarchies, and the recognition of the multiplicity of subjectivity. Like Lispector, Cixous wants to reject the constraining masks of social identity in favour of a Heideggerian notion of the multiple and temporal experience of Being.

Writing and the theatre

Much of Cixous's recent writing has been for the theatre. Theatre has provided Cixous with a space in which to develop her analyses of subjectivity, and to explore further the bodily roots of meaning. She has been able to challenge what she sees as the dominant forms of thought and reason, and to posit new structures of historical explanation. She feels that the theatre is a space where the poetic can still survive within the forms of a public and accessible ritual.

Cixous stresses the importance in drama of moments of crisis, of personal or historical turning points which carry within them the possibility of change. In the theatre (unlike a novel) time cannot be re-run; the ending cannot be read first. The audience is locked into a bodily experience of time. Cixous is keenly aware of the thought of Heidegger, who stressed the ways in which a recognition of the temporal aspects of Being lead to the confrontation of our own mortality, and thus to the necessity of choice.

To put it concisely, Cixous uses the theatre as a space in which to develop her critique of the forms of subjectivity and representation that dominate contemporary life. She believes that the theatre, in the past, consistently objectified women. Referring to the ultimate fate of Electra, Ophelia and Cordelia, Cixous concludes that theatre functions as specular fantasy, where women characters function as mirrors of male heroism. Women in such theatre are silenced and repressed, their bodies both negated and elevated to the level of display.

As I mentioned earlier, Cixous has a great interest in forms of thought that do not rely on hierarchical oppositions, but are instead open to the possibility of multiple differences. Such forms of thought have been theorized by Jacques Derrida, with his concept of difference, the process of differing and deferring.8 These philosophical concepts are important because they are attempts to avoid categorical oppositions in favour of a never completely finished process of production of meaning.

Cixous's early plays are principally concerned with women's relation to patriarchal culture. I am thinking of Portrait of Dora and Le Nom d'Oedipe. Her two most recent plays have involved the analysis of historical change and political structures. Both plays have been located in Asian countries. The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk deals with the history of Cambodia from 1955 to the Vietnamese invasion of 1979. Cixous's shift in this play from sexual politics to national struggle disconcerted many of her readers but it could be said on her behalf that she seems to have had an intuitive understanding about the increasing importance of ethnic and national struggles.

In L'Indiade (The Indiad, or the India of their Dreams) Cixous dramatizes the history of India from 1937 to 1948, a period which saw the culmination of the Indian struggle for independence from British rule, the partition of India into India and Pakistan, and the assassination of Gandhi. It dramatizes the different conceptions of national identity which lay behind the policies of the politicians. The partition of India becomes a metaphor for the competition between different conceptions of personal and social relations.

Cixous displays an increasing interest in the concept of resistance, and in the need to preserve and protect vulnerable peoples and cultures against the forces of homogenization and oppression. She believes in the possibility of an alliance between different forms of otherness, which would protect and respect difference, but would be strong enough to represent significant resistance. Cixous sees a political and ethical role for the theatre in terms of a capacity for openness to the Other.

Writing for the theatre has both extended and transformed Cixous's project. It has allowed her to explore different relations to otherness, to develop her theorization of the bodily dimensions of language, to posit the existence of alternative social and subjective economies, and to tie her theoretical work to the mechanisms of historical change.
These developments have led Cixous's work away from the intense focus on feminine subjectivity and its relations to the female body that were so important to her work in the 1970s. Instead, she is now committed to understanding women's struggle as part of a broader political and ethical movement: to realize the subjective and collective dimensions of a feminine economy, to preserve cultural diversity in the face of homogenization, and to resist the different forms of social domination.

**Luce Irigaray**

**Introduction**

Luce Irigaray, a feminist philosopher, uses psychoanalysis in her examination of philosophy and its presuppositions. She is difficult to read partly because of her many references to German philosophy, and because a large number of her terms derive from Lacan and Derrida which she often reworks or redefines. In my selective account of Irigaray's work I will focus on her critique of patriarchy especially in philosophy, her critique of psychoanalysis, and her claim that women need a language of their own.

One of Irigaray's main aims is to expose the foundations of patriarchy and, in particular, to show it at work in philosophy. Secondly, Irigaray wants to define female identity. But one of the problems she faces is: how does one define female specificity without getting locked once again inside the patriarchal framework one is trying to escape from?

Irigaray does not have much time for the attempt to reverse the order of things, simply to reverse the balance of power between men and women. What she is concerned with is to promote and encourage the development of a social form specific to women. She believes that an entre-femmes (a sociality among and between women) is a necessary condition for the creation of female identity and subjectivity.

The danger is always that in accepting the terms of the system currently in force, women will become 'men'. Whatever equality means, it does not mean becoming like men. Fighting for equal wages and equal rights is, in the end, subordinate for her to the more important struggle which is to challenge the foundation of the social and cultural order.

**On reason and rationality**

Western feminism in all its forms is an inheritor of the Enlightenment and its contradictions. It is clear to Irigaray that Enlightenment values have not been applied to women. Moreover, the faith in reason underestimated the non-rational elements in the human mind and its will to power, to control, manipulate and destroy in the name of the rational. She sees this reason as peculiarly male. For Irigaray the culture of the West is monosexual; the status of women is that of 'lesser men', inferior or defective men. She insists that there is no neutral or universal in this culture. What is taken to be neutral, for example, science or philosophy, is in fact gendered: it is the discourse of the male subject.

Irigaray's critique of rationality is not a prescription for female irrationality; when she argues that rationality is male she implies that it has a certain structure. In her view Western rationality is characterized by the principle of identity; the principle of non-contradiction (A is A, A is not B), in which ambiguity/ambivalence has been reduced to a minimum; and binarism, for example, the opposition of nature/reason, subject/object, which assumes that everything has to be either one thing or another.

Many writers have used male–female symbolism to describe rationality as male and the female as unconscious. But, one wonders, is it not dangerous to regard women as irrational, or as the unconscious of culture? What is important is that rationality is categorized by Irigaray as male, not in order to oppose it, but in order to suggest a more adequate conceptualization in which the male does not repress or split off the female/unconscious, but acknowledges and integrates it.

Irigaray is also critical of Marxist categories and believes that the emphasis on production and economic relations obscures the domain of symbolic relations. She argues that women need to interpret their present situation and status not only in economic terms but also in symbolic terms. The only way in which the status of women could be fundamentally altered is by the creation of a powerful female symbolic.

**On psychoanalysis**

Irigaray's relation to psychoanalysis is complex; it is characterized by indebtedness and by critical distance. The strength of her analysis is that she uses the theories of both Freud and Lacan against them to put forward a psychoanalytic explanation for theoretical bias. Her criticisms of psychoanalysis can be summarized as follows:
Post-structuralism and postmodernism

1. Psychoanalysis, like other disciplines, is historically determined. This means that its attitude to women is historically determined as well. As psychoanalysis does not recognize this, its phallocentric bias is elevated into a universal value.

2. The social order which determines psychoanalysis rests on the unacknowledged and incorporated mother.

3. Psychoanalytic theory is governed by unacknowledged and uninterpreted fantasies. It purports to analyse the fantasies of others, but meanwhile its own discourse perpetuates the dominant cultural fantasies.\[1\]

Despite her critique, Irigaray is convinced of the powerful potential of psychoanalysis. With language as the instrument, real and profound change can take place in the life of the analysand. It is essential, however, to rethink psychoanalysis from women’s point of view.

This is what Irigaray has begun to do. Her work can be seen as a sort of psychoanalysis of Western culture, seeking what underpins its fragile rationality, looking for the ‘repressed’ or unconscious of culture. Irigaray’s method is to look for the fantasies that haunt philosophical discourse. She argues that the male projects his own ego onto the world, which then becomes a mirror which enables him to see his own reflection wherever he looks.

Her second step is to look for the mother. The mother supports the processes of the male imaginary but is not herself represented, a neglect equivalent to matricide. Irigaray’s strategy is to look for the resistances and defences which conceal the original crime of matricide. These two principles, to look for the specular relationship and to uncover the buried mother, underlie all her analyses of the philosophers. She is seeking the varied fantasies which persist in discourse as symptoms of the patriarchal unconscious. Western culture, in short, is a monologic, monosexual culture in which men speak to men. What Irigaray wants to do is to work out the conditions of women’s subjectivity. How can women assume the I of discourse in their own right and not as a derivative male I?\[2\]

Let us now turn to the question, how does the female function within the Western imaginary? (By ‘imaginary’ I am referring to unconscious fantasy.) Irigaray aims to show that Western philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse sees sexual differences as though there were only one sex, and that sex were male (that is to say, women are defective men). She writes that we need to look at the fantasies underlying the propositional statements of male thinkers. In her own work she has analysed the unconscious fantasies underlying the Freudian and Lacanian systems. She argues that Freud’s model of sexuality is male. In his fantasy the role of women in childbirth is not recognized and women inevitably appear in his scenario as defective males. To reiterate: Western culture, identity, logic and rationality are symbolically male, and the female is either the outside, the hole or the unrepresentable residue. The feminine always finds itself defined as deficiency, imitation or lack.

It is not surprising, then, that women face immense problems. These problems do not arise from immutable characteristics of women’s ‘nature’ but are an effect of women’s position relative to the symbolic order. Hate, envy or rivalry are often operative between women because a way of symbolic negotiation is not available.

Irigaray is very concerned with the unrepresented mother–daughter relationship. By this she means that there is an absence of linguistic, social, cultural representation of that relationship. We can readily think of examples of the mother–son relationship, but we have to go back to Greek mythology to find culturally embodied representations of the mother–daughter relationship.\[3\] In short, the mother–daughter relationship has been by-passed.

An unacknowledged mother–daughter relationship makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for women to have an identity in the symbolic order that is distinct from the maternal function. Irigaray accepts the clinical view that women have difficulty in separating from their mothers, that they tend to relationships in which identity is merged and in which the boundaries between self and other are not clear. She represents this psychoanalytic diagnosis as a symptom or result of women’s position in the symbolic order. If women do not have access to society and to culture, they remain in a state of abandonment, of dereliction.

Reinterpreting classical myths

For Irigaray the gesture which excludes women from philosophy and the gesture which excludes women from the polis are one and the same. There is a connection between the status of women in Western thought and the status of women in Western society. Irigaray has interpreted many classical myths. She believes, like Cixous, that in mythology we can see a struggle taking place between the maternal and paternal genealogies, eventually ending in the installation of patriarchy.
The final section of Irigaray's book *Speculum* consists of a remarkable reading of the myth of the cavern in Plato's *Republic*. In Irigaray's reinterpretation, the roles of the imaginary mother and father are attributed to the cavern (the womb) and the idea respectively. In progressively moving away from the shadows towards the light, the prisoner is moving away from the mother. She argues that truth has come to mean leaving behind the Mother (the cavern) and her role in reproduction. Irigaray demonstrates that Plato's ideal republic, despite appearances, is not at all egalitarian; his city is monosexual, his citizens all 'men' – they accede to all the civic functions in so far as they resemble men and renounce their specificity.

Like Cixous, Irigaray is fascinated by Greek myth. Irigaray has written about the myth of Athena, daughter of Zeus. It is on Athena's advice that Apollo, against the chorus of women, installs patriarchy by decreeing that Orestes' matricide was justifiable. In Irigaray's account of the myth, patriarchy covers its tracks by attributing the justification of matricide to a woman. Athena, the father's daughter, was an alibi for patriarchy.

Athena carried the head of Medusa on her shield. Any man who looked on Medusa was turned to stone. Freud comments that Athena is thus also the sexually unapproachable woman; being turned to stone is equated with castration. And castration is linked with death; man turns away from his fears and projects them on to 'woman'.

Another myth that fascinates Irigaray is that of Antigone. The myth represents a moment of transition from the genealogy of the maternal to that of the paternal. Antigone and her brother have the same mother; they are linked by the blood tie which Antigone puts before the claims of the polis. Walled up alive in the tomb, Antigone is an image of woman in patriarchy, unable to be heard, but also a guilt-producing fantasy.

Irigaray points out that whereas the brother acts, using the sister as a 'living-mirror' for his actions, and leaving her to be the guardian of his burial rites, the action is not reciprocated; there is no one to recognize Antigone's act. The law of the polis is founded over her suppression; she is confined to family relations and to burying the dead; she does not, like her brother, act in the universal. She signifies the limited ethical sphere of the family.

For Irigaray, the polis, from Plato's ideal republic to Hegel's universal sphere, is founded upon an act of exclusion; what is left outside is nature. The social is constructed against men's fears of death and mortality. In the process it is women, the living reminders of birth, and therefore of transience and death, to whom the sign of 'nature' has been attached.
Julia Kristeva

Introduction

Julia Kristeva arrived in Paris from Bulgaria in 1966. She started out as a linguist in the late 1960s and first wrote about topics related to women and feminism in 1974, around the time she was beginning her training as a psychoanalyst. From the late 1970s onwards her work has been increasingly concerned with psychoanalytic issues, sexuality and femininity. Overall, her main interests are language, truth, ethics and love. Recently she has written on the 'stranger', the outsider and the notion of 'strangeness' within the self – a person's own deep sense of being.

Let me begin by asking: what do Kristeva and Irigaray have in common? Well, first of all, Kristeva and Irigaray share a familiarity with Freud's work, and a knowledge of Lacanian theory. Secondly, they share Lacan's anti-humanism, his commitment to the primacy of language in psychic life, and his understanding of the necessarily sexualized position assumed by the subject in the symbolic. Thirdly, both focus on the relation obscured in Freud's and Lacan's work: the mother–child relation (Kristeva) and the mother–daughter relation (Irigaray). Fourthly, both affirm the archaic force of the pre-Oedipal, which although repressed is also permanently preserved. Finally, both assert the fluid, polymorphous perverse status of libidinal drives.

There is no doubt that Lacanian psychoanalysis remains the fundamental conceptual and methodological grid for Kristeva's work. Her earliest writings are based on Lacan's notions of the mirror stage and the castration complex. These two moments provide the necessary conditions for the subject's acquisition of a speaking position. Though Kristeva has taken Lacan's conceptual apparatus as the starting point for developing her own methods and objects of investigation, nevertheless, she is critical of certain aspects of his work.

Unlike Lacan, Kristeva is always aware of the historical and social aspects of signification and subjectivity. She thinks that Lacan rarely includes concrete determinations in his work. For Kristeva, however, the social and historical determination of individuals and signifying practices is always essential.

Secondly, in contrast to Lacan, for whom the imaginary order functions only in a visual register, Kristeva stresses all the sensory registers. The imaginary is not only a visual order, it is also, Kristeva claims, organized by voice, touch, taste and smell. Kristeva believes that Lacan concentrates too heavily or exclusively on verbal language at the expense of other models of signification. Moreover, while Lacan insists on a definitive break between the imaginary and the symbolic, Kristeva posits more of a continuity. Kristeva's concepts testify to the pre-Oedipal and pre-mirror stage processes and relations generally neglected in psychoanalysis. Indeed, her work on pre-Oedipal, narcissistic identificatory relations and maternal dependencies provides an orientation that is underemphasized in Freud and Lacan, and which owes a debt to the work of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott.

In spite of these theoretical differences Kristeva uses the Lacanian concepts of the symbolic order and the subject to form the basis of a theory of signifying practice. In brief, Kristeva sees the ideological and philosophical basis for modern linguistics as fundamentally authoritarian and oppressive. She wants to shift away from the Saussurian concept of langue towards a re-establishment of the speaking subject as an object for linguistics. Kristeva has a notion of a speaking subject that is divided and decentralised. Language, for her, is not a monolithic system but a complex, heterogeneous, signifying process located in and between subjects. Language is productive as opposed to a mere reflection of social relations.

There seems to be some agreement that Kristeva, as opposed to Cixous and Irigaray, cannot strictly speaking be considered a purely feminist theorist. Kristeva's views lead her to reject any idea of an écriture féminine or a parler femme that would be inherently feminine or female. Though Kristeva does not have a theory of 'femininity', and even less of 'femaleness', what she does have is a theory of marginality, subversion and dissidence. She believes in the potentially revolutionary force of the marginal and repressed aspects of language. Like Cixous, Kristeva argues that there are feminine forms of signification which cannot be contained by the rational structure of the symbolic order and which therefore threaten its sovereignty and have been relegated to the margins of discourse.

However, unlike Cixous, Kristeva does not locate feminine aspects of language in women's female libido. The feminine is a mode of language open to male and female writers. In the section that follows I will outline Kristeva's views on how the semiotic and the symbolic are aligned with feminine and masculine libidinal energy, and how the return of the repressed feminine (the semiotic) is manifest, for example, in the 'marginal' discourse of the literary avant-garde.
The semiotic and the symbolic

Kristeva’s general model of signifying practice is derived from Lacan’s integration of Freudian analysis and structural semiology. Her conception of the semiotic and the symbolic functions operating in psychological, textual and social life is based on the distinction Freud developed between pre-Oedipal and Oedipal sexual drives.

Kristeva defines this space, following Plato’s Timaeus, as the semiotic chora. It is a space or receptacle, an undecidedly enveloped and enveloping locus from which the subject is both produced and threatened with annihilation. The chora defines and structures the limits of the child’s body and its ego or identity as a subject. It is the space of the subversion of the subject, the space in which the death drive emerges and threatens to engulf the subject, to reduce it to the inertia of non-existence.

Now, though this is a ‘feminine’ phase dominated by the mother, the mother is always considered phallic. She is the consequence of a masculine fantasy of maternity, rather than women’s lived experience of maternity.

If the semiotic is pre-Oedipal, based on primary processes and is maternally oriented, by contrast the symbolic is an Oedipalized system, regulated by secondary processes and the Law of the Father. The symbolic is the domain of positions and propositions. The symbolic is an order superimposed on the semiotic. The symbolic control of the various semiotic processes is, however, tenuous and liable to break down or lapse at certain historically, linguistically and psychically significant moments. It results in an upheaval in the norms of the smooth, understandable text. The semiotic overflows its boundaries in those privileged ‘moments’ Kristeva specifies in her triad of subversive forces: madness, holiness and poetry.

Let me try to make clearer the link between the semiotic and the avant-garde. The semiotic is the rhythmic, energetic, dispersed bodily series of forces which strive to proliferate pleasures, sounds, colours or movements experienced in the child’s body. Like the repressed, the semiotic can return in/as disruptions within the symbolic. The semiotic is both the precondition of symbolic functioning and its uncontrollable excess. It is used by discourses but cannot be articulated by them.

Kristeva is fascinated with the avant-garde ‘texts’ of Mallarmé, J. Lautrémont, Artaud, Joyce, Schoenberg, Cage, Stockhausen and even Giotto and Bellini. These texts, whether they are written, dramatic, musical, visual or auditory, are disturbing because they provide a more direct expression of the semiotic than is usually possible in more conventional symbolic representational systems. These semiotic eruptions represent transgressive breaches of symbolic coherence. In short, the symbolic/Oedipal/social mode owes a debt of existence to an unspeakable and unrepresentable semiotic/maternal/feminine.

I mentioned the pre-Oedipal phase just now. Kristeva’s theory is mostly concerned with developments in the pre-Oedipal phase where sexual difference does not exist. The question of difference only becomes relevant at the point of entry into the symbolic order. In discussing this situation for little girls, Kristeva points out that since the semiotic is pre-Oedipal, it is linked to the mother, whereas the symbolic is dominated by the Law of the Father. Faced with this situation, the little girl has to make a choice: ‘either she identifies with her mother, or she raises herself to the symbolic stature of her father. In the first case, the pre-oedipal phases (oral and anal eroticism) are intensified.’ If, on the other hand, the little girl identifies with the father, ‘the access she gains to the symbolic dominance will censor the pre-oedipal phase and wipe out the last trace of dependence on the body of mother’.

Kristeva thus delineates two different options for women: mother identification which will intensify the pre-Oedipal components of the woman’s psyche and render her marginal to the symbolic, or father identification which will create a woman who will derive her identity from the same symbolic order. Now, though the fluid mobility of the semiotic is associated with the pre-Oedipal phase, and therefore with the pre-Oedipal mother, Kristeva makes it quite clear that, like Freud and Klein, she sees the pre-Oedipal mother as a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity. In her view men can also be constructed as marginal by the symbolic order, as her analyses of male avant-garde artists – Artaud, Céline, Joyce, Lautrémont, Mallarmé – have shown.

Kristeva seems to regard only men as writers or producers of the
avant-garde. Although exclusively male in Kristeva's terms, the avant-garde is nevertheless the best representative of the repressed, feminine semiotic order. An important part of Kristeva's argument is that any strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference, lead to a weakening of traditional gender divisions.

But what about women writers? In Kristeva's view, women are not inside the symbolic in the same way as men. Women tend to write in one of two ways. They may either produce books that are largely compensatory substitutes for a family, that simulate a family structure—novels of autobiography, romance or family history—they produce stories, images or fantasies in place of an actual family; or else, women write as hysterical subjects, bound to the body and its rhythms.

To conclude, let me recapitulate the interplay of the semiotic and symbolic processes. On Kristeva's model all texts and all cultural products are the result of a dialectical process: the interaction between two mutually modifying historical forces. One is the setting in place, the establishment of a regulated system, or 'unity'—which is the symbolic. Underlying and subverting this is the semiotic, a movement of 'cutting through', breaking down unities. In times of rupture, renovation and revolution (which Kristeva identifies with the symptomatic eruptions of the avant-garde) the symbolic is no longer capable of directing the semiotic energies into already coded social outlets. Its subversive, dispersing energies transgress the boundaries or tolerable limits of the symbolic. Sooner or later, depending on the extent of the threat it poses, the semiotic is recodified, reconstituted into a new symbolic system. The semiotic, like the return of the repressed, challenges the borders of the symbolic through the work of the avant-garde, which poses a new transgression and a new recodification of the symbolic.

By transgressing the boundaries of the symbolic order, the avant-garde creates upheavals and ruptures which may enable what is usually unspoken to be articulated. Of course, the avant-garde text risks co-optation or recuperation in functioning as a 'safety valve' or outlet for what may otherwise have become a more disruptive political practice. In reconverting the semiotic back into a new symbolic, its energy is dissipated in the conservation and stabilization of the symbolic. It also risks the opposite extreme, fascism, in which the disruptive semiotic processes are rechanneled into both a (narcissistic) love relation with the charismatic leader, and a rigidified organization hierarchized in even tighter form through this identification.

Further reading
The main debates covered in this important book are: essentialism, the kind of symbolic law culture requires, sexual difference, how far knowledge is inherently patriarchal and the practical and political use of Lacanian psychoanalysis. There are fourteen papers including the following: Morag Shiach on Cixous, Margaret Whitford on Irigaray, Elizabeth Wright on Kristeva. For advanced work.
One of the best introductions to Anglo-American and French feminist literary theory. The second part is a most useful discussion of three representative French figures: Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva.
A brilliant collection of ten essays that explore the encounter between feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and film theory. There are scholarly discussions about femininity, feminine sexuality, the imaginary, Dora, Kristeva and many helpful sections on Lacan.
An accessible book which deals with all aspects of Cixous's work and puts them in their historical and philosophical contexts. The author looks at her theoretical writings, her work as a critic, the fictional writings and, finally, her work for the theatre. A very useful book.
This book is a thoughtful and scholarly discussion of Irigaray's work and
Chapter 6

Lyotard and postmodernism

Introduction: meanings and characteristics

In this chapter I want to explore the many meanings and characteristics of the term postmodernism. After giving an outline of Lyotard's main theses about the postmodern condition, focusing especially on his views about scientific knowledge and aesthetics, I make some criticisms of his work. I conclude with a discussion on some aspects of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism is being talked and written about everywhere in contemporary Western societies. The term postmodernism is being used in many artistic, intellectual and academic fields. The figures usually associated with postmodernism include: Rauschenberg, Baselitz, Schnabel, Kiefer, Warhol and, perhaps, Bacon, in art; Jencks and Venturi in architecture; Artaud in drama; Barth, Barthelme and Pynchon in fiction; Lynch in film (Blue Velvet); Sherman in photography; Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard in philosophy. There are, of course, other subjects that should be mentioned: anthropology, geography, sociology and so on. The list is endless, and the names of those included and excluded lead to vigorous debates and bitter controversies. But one thing is clear: postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs our attention to the changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture. The term is at once fashionable and elusive.

Let us begin by looking briefly at the following 'family' of terms: modernity and postmodernity, modernization, modernism and postmodernism, words which are often used in confusing and