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Derrida and Beyond: The Poststructuralist (Im)Possibilities of Decoding History

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Abstract: The poststructuralist understanding of history is not defined by the concept of verisimilitude, realism or mimetic discourse. It considers history as a text. However, it is not an assertion of linguistic textuality, instead, the “text” comprehends the existence of the word in the world in an indefinitely multiplied structure of the past, the present and the future. The paper explores the structure and nature of historical sensibility, the epistemological condition of historical accounts, the form and mode of historical descriptions and their validation.

Keywords: *Deconstruction, History, Narrative, Power/ Knowledge, Under erasure*

The state of history is persistently questioned by deconstruction and poststructuralism. The critique of logocentric narratives of history is always a search for heterogeneous “other”. Though, the deconstructive approach to history has been viewed by Frank Lentricchia as a “subtle denial of history” (1988: xiii), Terry Eagleton as a “hedonist withdrawal from history” (2008: 130) and a “liquidation of history” (2005: 96), and by Perry Anderson as a “the randomization of history” (cited in Elliott 1998: 172). If we examine closely the arguments of these critics, we find that they are not completely denying history as such. Instead, they reveal that history is constructed through multiple forces, by subsuming a range of ethico-political concepts, and different significations. To be precise, history does not represent a monolithic truth or fact, but gives interpretations to the past, and of the past. So what is contested is whether history still has a sense as “History”. The paper provides a poststructuralist understanding of history as explicated in Jacques

Derrida, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and few “postmodern” thinkers.

Poststructuralism: Jacques Derrida and History

Jacques Derrida argues that history is constructed with endless traces, and thus calls attention to *différance*. Since there is no essential order to history, it becomes anti-essentialist, anti-teleological, anti-foundationalist, anti-representationalist and anti-realistic. What these critics mean to say is that the past cannot be discovered or found but invented, narrativised and *re-presented*. In order to understand the notion of the “deconstruction” of history, it is necessary to understand Derrida non-concept of “deconstruction”. Newton Garver in the “Preface” to *Speech and Phenomena* explains, ‘In its negative component, the core of Derrida’s analysis, or “deconstruction,” is a sustained argument against the possibility of anything pure and simple which can serve as the foundation for the meaning of signs. It is an argument which strikes at the very idea of a transcendental phenomenology’ (1973: xxii). However, deconstruction is not the dissolution of the subject. Garver further notes, “This is, of course, not a rejection of any familiar everyday experience, but a rejection of a concept, a concept that is an idealized and, one might say, logicized abstraction from our common everyday experience” (xxiii).

David B. Allison in a footnote to “Translator’s introduction” to *Speech and Phenomena* explicates the project of deconstruction:

It signifies a project of critical thought whose task is to locate and “take apart” those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought, those concepts which command the unfolding of an entire epoch of metaphysics. “Deconstruction” is somewhat less negative than the Heideggerian or Nietzschean terms “destruction” or “reversal”; it suggests that certain foundational concepts of metaphysics will never be entirely eliminated, even if their importance may seem to be effectively diminished. There is no simple “overcoming” of metaphysics or the language of metaphysics. Derrida recognizes, nonetheless, that the system of Western thought is finite; it has a finite number of work themselves out in a given period of time as particular moments within this tradition, e.g., as

particular schools or movements of philosophy. In this sense, Derrida also speaks of the “completion” of metaphysics, the terminal point of “closure” for the system. But the work of deconstruction does not consist in simply pointing out the structural limits of metaphysics. Rather, in breaking down and disassembling the ground of this tradition, its task is both to exhibit the source of paradox and contradiction within the system, within the very axioms themselves, and to set forth the possibilities for a new kind of meditation, one no longer founded on the metaphysics of presence. (1973: xxxii-iii)

It clearly suggests that deconstruction is not destruction or dissolution of the subject, and it never subverts completely the idea of “presence” or “truth”. It tries to find out the limitation of the subject, and how it is constructed and legitimated. It breaks down its structure through its inherent paradoxes and contradictions, and then affirms a new kind of subject emancipated from the order of the “metaphysics of presence”.

Jacques Derrida’s sustained critique of the metaphysics unravels of the conventions and claims of history: the fundamental tenet that there is a stable or knowable reality “out there”. Derrida states that meaning cannot be determined from a chain of free-flowing signifiers, that is, origin or end would be in the process of *différance*. Derrida’s approach of *différance* and “trace” epitomize the signifiers disconnected from any claim to absolute meaning. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida correlates the way the trace dismantles “presence” and “meaning” with Freud’s use of “the arche-phenomenon of memory” to deconstruct consciousness (70). Moreover, since each signifier is incomplete, and contains the traces of other signifiers, the originality is subject to the endless play of language and deferral of meaning.

Derrida takes history and context into account without *archie*, without *telos*, and without reaching any stable ground. However, it does not mean, as Derrida writes, “that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book” (1988: 148). What it means rather is that “every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to a particular ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring” (148).

For Derrida, history is not linear, developmental, logical or coherent. It contains within itself gaps, “secrets ghosts,” and holes, and is founded on faulty memory, so retrieving historical context in its purity is impossible; therefore, any attempt to make history coherent is opening of historical context as “another name for what is still to come.” As a result, “the context is not absolutely determinable: there is context, but one cannot analyze it exhaustively; the context is open” (2001: 13). Derrida further says,

History does not cease to be an empirical science of ‘facts’ because it has reformed its methods and techniques, or because it has substituted a comprehensive structuralism for causalism, atomism and naturalism, or because it has become more attentive to cultural totalities. Its pretensions to founding normativity or a better-understood factuality do not become more legitimate but only increases its power of philosophical seduction. A confusion of value and existence, and more generally, of all types of realities and all types of idealities is sheltered beneath the equivocal category of the historical. (cited in Wood 2009: 18)

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida attempts to theorize the representation of the past through “hauntology,” that is, the past often figures as a kind of haunting. He suggests that like a haunting, a past is only half present, odd, and incomprehensible. Derrida’s idea of multiplicity and ambiguity in inheritance can be extended to understand the buried-ness and half-knowability of history:

An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. . . . If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. One always inherits from a secret – which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’ . . . The injunction itself (it always says ‘choose, and decide from among what you inherit’) can only be

one by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times – and in different voices. (1994: 16, emphasis in the original)

Poststructuralism: Postmodernism and History

Like Derrida, Roland Barthes and Jean-Francois Lyotard have deconstructed the portrayal of realism in the narrative form. They viewed narrative as a textual convention that utilizes a chain of strategies which seems to constitute the idea of “truesemingness”. It suggests what Barthes describes, “Historical discourse does not follow the real, it can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that it happened . . .” (1997: 122). Despite having different backgrounds of origin, the project of Derrida, the Yale critics, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White is to undo the totalization of the subject in various ways. In their approach, sometimes, they take a similar path. Even the concepts and practices of postmodernism take a deconstructive turn in terms of, as Dick Hebdige writes,

“an anti-teleological [possessing no overall design and plan] tendency within epistemology [the science of knowledge], the attack on the ‘metaphysics of presence’ [a self-certifying or absolute structure or foundation which lies beyond the operation of language], . . . a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, . . . a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the ‘de-centring’ of the subject, an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, the replacement of unitary power axes by a plurality of power/discourse formations, the ‘implosion of meaning’, the collapse of cultural hierarchies . . .” (cited in Wood 2007: 2, the explanations in brackets are of Tim Woods).

The formulations of Hebdige clearly show Derrida and Foucault’s influence on postmodernism, and its critique of the transcendental signification of “reason,” “truth,” and/or “identity, on the one hand, and emphasis on “indeterminacy,” “multiplicity,” “difference” and so on, on the other. Lyotard’s assertion of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” is clearly related to anti-realism championed by poststructuralism. Postmodernism’s focus on textuality and

dissemination of foundational notion of language is derived from Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," particularly from the idea of "free-play," the infinite signification in the absence of transcendental meaning. Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of "transcendental signified" and Foucault's critique of history have been adopted in postmodernism. As Bran Nicol writes "[P]oststructuralism favours a creative approach to interpreting the literary and artistic texts that demonstrate how its meaning is always multiple and deferred rather than fixed, and this is in tune with the 'postmodern' approach to interpreting texts . . ." (2009: 6).

Foucault and Derrida, despite their so many disagreements, stressed "the fragmentary, heterogeneous and plural character of reality, denied human thought the ability to arrive at any objective account of that reality reduced to bearers of this thought, the subject, to an incoherent welter of sub- and trans-individual drives and desires" (Callinicos 2002: 2). The notions of fragmentation, heterogeneity, ruptures and the like reveal the shared thoughts of poststructuralism and postmodernism. In a broader sense, Derrida and Foucault belong to the same school of poststructuralism that intend to disseminate "the serene unity of stable sign and the unified subject" (Young: 1981: 8). Their works are interrelated in the sense of deconstructing the structures of "the classical conception of the unitary subject".

Deconstruction emphasizes a continuous deferral and difference in the system of signs which insists on the impossibility of knowing reality. Thus, meaning keeps on slipping from one point to another in a *mis en abîme* (endless regress), and the seeming meaning is the result of *trace* and *différance*. The various key ideas and concepts of Derrida – deconstruction, *différance*, logocentrism – are adopted and adapted in the postmodern discourses. Christopher Norris says that "there is a sense in which deconstruction can be seen as a part of the wider postmodernist tendency to challenge or subvert . . . arbitrary genre distinctions" (Derrida 1982: xi). In short, most of them are concerned with the dispersal of centre, blurring of boundaries, exhaustion of authenticity, fragmentation, and the like.

Poststructuralism: Hayden White, Narrative and History

Continuing the premise of poststructuralism, Hayden White considers history as a "narrative" and a "form" to perpetuate an ideology. He further argues that narrative is not a "neutral" form into which content is

engraved, but is ideologically freighted, and tries to impose unification, stability, progression, coherence and proximity to the un-totalized history. It presupposes a plot, which includes a definite beginning, middle and end. White remarks that plot-structure gives to narrative a recognizable form, but "the coherence of series . . . is the coherence of myth" (1978: 56). That said, historians do not reproduce the past, but they organize the scattered events through stories which give a particular effect to the events. Describing the nature of history, Roland Barthes writes in "The Discourse of History" that history is 'always aimed at "filling out" the meaning' and is organized with "the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series" (1997: 121). In order to achieve certain coherence, objectivity, factuality, and "scientific" brand of historiography, it includes and excludes some elements in the construction of the past. White very categorically states how historical events are constituted:

The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of techniques that we would normally expect to find in the employment of a novel or a play. (1978: 84)

With the aim of arriving at a particular point of view, the histories organize themselves through stories, which simultaneously also create "the gaps, absences, aporias, and contradictions in texts" (6). Narrative helps to fill the gaps and absences in order to create the effect of the real. Narrative "is not merely a neutral discursive form" but "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (1987: ix). The narrative provides an illusory coherence and meaning in constructing historical events, which is never "politically innocent," that is, its representation is not value-neutral.

The deconstructive approach of Hayden White escapes "origin" in order to provide space for "free-play". In a broad way, White is concerned with tropes, metaphors, metonymies, and narrativization in history-writing. White regards that narrative is not only a form of discourse which contains diverse real or imaginative content, but also

possesses content before its manifestation is speech or writing. The depiction of historical accounts in the narrative is restricted by the forms and patterns of narratives, and in consequence, the historical facts are not "given" rather "constructed" by the historians. Challenging the role of narratives, White says, [T]he formal coherency of any historical narrative consists solely of a "fraudulent outline" imposed by the historian upon a body of materials which could be called "data" only in the most extended sense of the term" (1978: 55). He also believes that there is no "value-neutral" mode of narrative description or construction of events. In other words, no narrative is politically innocent, as he says that the "very use of language itself implies or entails specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only all interpretation, but also language is politically contaminated" (129).

The knowledge of historical reality gets modified and constructed by the writer's race, gender, cultural background, economy and such other issues. In consequence, truth becomes relative, since there are no transcendental truths, perfect history and reliable projections come under a question mark. And if the historian himself is a practitioner of a scholarly discipline, "he is likely to be a devotee of one or another of its sects and hence biased; and if he is not a practitioner, he is unlikely to have the expertise necessary to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant events of the field's development" (White 1978: 81), White says that every representation of the past has specifiable and ideological implication. "The recent theories of discourse," writes White, "dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents" (1987: x). In such cases narrative is an 'effective system of discursive meaning production by which individual can be taught to live a distinctively "imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence," that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formation in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects' (x). White further observes:

[The] authors do not always make use of the same incidents; when they do, the incidents are revealed in

quite different lights. And yet these are variations which have to do with the same country, the same period, and the same events – events whose reality is scattered across every level of a multilayered structure”. (1978: 56)

White has rightly said that “real life can never be truthfully represented as having the kind of formal coherency met with in the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story” (1987: ix). Regarding the elements of literature and fiction in history, White provides very thought-provoking notions based on Barel Langs' propositions propounded in *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (1990). Summarizing Lang's ideas White writes:

[The] language not only turns or swears away from literariness of expression, but also deflects attention from the states of affairs about which it pretends to speak. Any figurative expression . . . adds to the representation of the object to which it refers . . . [F]iguration produces a “perspective” on the referent of the utterance, but in featuring one particular perspective it necessarily closes off others. Thus it reduces or obscures certain aspects of events. (2001: 380)

In this way, Lang and White support the idea of the "impropriety" and "intrinsic limitations" of any literary representation, of figurative discourse for the representation of genocide. The destruction of the Second World War is intrinsically "anti-representational". Lang argues that, although historical representation may "make use of narrative and figurative means," it is not essentially "dependent on those means" (380). What Lang proposes for anyone writing about the holocaust is "an attitude, position, or posture which is neither subjective nor objective, neither that of a social scientist with a methodology and a theory nor that of a poet intent upon expression of 'personal' reaction. Here, Lang invokes Roland Barthes' idea of "intransitive writing" – "a distance denying discourse" – which denies the distance among the writers, texts what is written about, and finally the reader" (382). Intransitive writing is not independent of both author and reader.

Poststructuralism: Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge and History

Like White, Foucault's works are also concerned with the study of history, but unlike him, he does not focus on formal devices of the

narrative. Rather he concentrates on the reflection of power. The deconstructive approach of Foucault, to use Derrida's words, escapes "play and order of the sign" as he is concerned with archaeology and genealogy in the discourse of history. Foucault's archaeological and genealogical approach to study history focuses on division, dispersion, and disparity in historical sources, and rejects the idea of the singular point of origin. A Foucauldian study focuses on discourse, and power/knowledge in the construction of the subject. Discourse produces power and resists it. It is controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a number of procedures. In so doing, it deconstructs unity, identity, stable forms, and uninterrupted continuities to reveal multiplicity, fragility and complexity of events. As Foucault says, "[I]t disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself (1977: 147).

Foucault was concerned with how power operated within what he calls an institutional *apparatus* and its *technologies* (techniques). Foucault's conception of the apparatus of punishment included a variety of diverse elements, linguistic and non-linguistic – "discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic propositions. . . . The Apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge. . . . This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of the relations of force supporting and supported by types of Knowledge" (1988: 194-96).

Foucault's concept of the exercise of power is embodied in juridico-discursive mode, and the proliferating and productive mode. The former, which is – to use Foucault's other terms – similar to "the deployment of alliance," is a prohibitive power and distinguishes forbidden sexual act from the permitted; and the latter, which is similar to "the deployment of sexuality," is power/knowledge strategies and networks.

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* shows how the institutions of discipline produce subjects, and how it affects the entire system. The seminal pattern of restoring order is repression, the process through which something is determined and reduced. The institutions exercise their power to control the individual and society. The very contention of

discipline and punish reveals non-reciprocal power-structure that acts selectively and reduces the domain of an individual.

Foucault was concerned with the rules and practices that produced a meaningful statement and regulated discourse in different historical periods. Discourse, Foucault argues, never consisted of one statement, one text, one action or one source but whenever they "refer to the same object, share the same style and support a strategy . . . a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern, they for Foucault belong to same discursive formation" (cited in Hall 2003: 44). Concerning the question where meaning comes from, the critics of Foucault rightly describe "nothing exists outside of discourse" or "nothing has any meaning outside discourse". Foucault argues that we can have only knowledge about things if they have a meaning, not the things in themselves which produce knowledge. History, like power/knowledge, is a process of exclusion which leads the production of certain discourse over others.

Subjects like "madness," "punishment," or "sexuality" give certain kind of knowledge about themselves. Any discussion on "insanity," "punishment" or "sexuality" prescribes certain ways which govern what is "sayable" or "thinkable" and exclude the other ways. "Subject," which in some way personifies the discourse – the madman, the hysterical women, the criminal, the deviant, the sexually perverse person – represents the way knowledge was constructed about it. How this knowledge acquires authority, and a sense of truth at a historical moment is an important concern for Foucault.

The practice in the institutions to deal with the subject – medical treatment for the insane, punishment for the guilty, moral discipline for the sexually deviant – is regulated and governed by the discursive practices. The acknowledgement of a different discourse or episteme supplanting the existing one opens up a new discursive formation and conception of "madness," "punishment" or "sexuality" to regulated social practices in new ways. Foucault's *History of Sexuality, The Birth of Clinic, Discipline and Punish* focus on the roles of various institutions, and how they affect people and their conduct in resisting the effects of the institutions. He also emphasises the discursive practices in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

. . . the prohibitions, exclusions, limitations, values, freedoms and transgressions of sexuality, all its

manifestations, verbal of otherwise are linked to a particular discursive practice. It would reveal, not of course as the ultimate truth of sexuality, but as one of the dimensions in accordance with which one can describe it . . . in a system of prohibitions and values. (2009: 213)

Poststructuralism: History “Under Erasure”

A deconstructive study of history is not “destruction” of such concepts. The aim of deconstruction is “to undo” the established structures of metaphysics that logocentrism supports. Barbara Jonson remarks, “*Deconstruction* is not synonymous with *destruction* . . . It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word *analysis*, which etymologically means ‘to undo’ . . . If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim of unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another” (1988: 5, emphasis in the original).

Deconstruction of the subject, text, or any other concept is to bring it “under erasure,” which is on the visual level “to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion” (Derrida 2002: xiv). It refers to “inadequate yet necessary” position of the concept and its signification. For its inadequacy, it is crossed out, and for its necessity, it remains legible (xiv). Nicole Anderson writes that “for Derrida ‘under erasure’ (*sous rapture*) means to retain a concept or word while simultaneously demonstrating its inaccuracy” (2012: 4). Following Anderson's parameters of terming “ethics under erasure,” I extend the term to history, and constitute the phrase “history under erasure”. There is a correspondence between the condition of (im)possibility, as Derrida affirms it through law and justice, and history or narrative under erasure. The approach of “under erasure,” borrowed by Derrida from Heidegger’s *The Question of Being* to dismantle the “metaphysics of being,” includes a series of deconstructive strategies – trace, dissemination, *différance*, hauntology, (im)possibility, aporia, *khora*, discourse of spectrality, messianic promise, etc.

How do “history under erasure” manifest? With reference to the condition of (im)possibility, it can be suggested that in everyday social, cultural, political, institutional, or any other form of practices, the metaphysical and normative history and narrative are constantly put

under erasure. Deconstructing logocentric structures of history does not destroy them, rather negotiates and mediates in normative structures by bringing them under erasure. History under erasure reveals that its metaphysical and normative structures are, to use Anderson's words, "constant oscillation and negotiation with singular situations requiring singular responses (possibilities) which simultaneously reshape, re-constitute, re-invent norms" (2012: 86). Deconstruction of history also suggests that "through singular responses, the perceived universal and unifying position of metaphysical and normative . . . [history] is constantly being undermined, is shifting and forever changing" (86). So, to put logocentric history and narrative under erasure is to deconstruct a conception which provides a single monolithic meaning. It is not a rejection of history as metaphysical discourse.

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