

Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001

By Jacques Derrida

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The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

--Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*

Where is the contemporary theorist to be located along the political position continuum? During the 1960s and 1970s, the academic descendants of the old radical left (in its many Labor, Socialist and Marxist varieties), found themselves in an historical paradigm shift. One could have renounced the modernist, metanarratives of the past (especially Marxism) and embraced a thoroughgoing skepticism of all theories that claim to scientifically order and define the entirety of the social system. This option was adopted by such postmodern theorists as: Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Conversely, one could have continued to embrace much of the main tenets of such metanarratives, while grafting on the newer intellectual and political foci of race, gender and sexual orientation. Such an option was adopted by various Marxist theorists (Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Terry Eagleton, and Stanley Aronowitz). This review of Jacques Derrida's recently published book, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*, will analyze how Derrida, as a postmodern theorist, has situated himself within the present social world and the current political position continuum.

First, the two main, divergent definitions of postmodernism, one from a postmodernist and one from a Marxist perspective, must be discussed. A definition of postmodernism is provided by the postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979/1999). Lyotard defines postmodernism as a condition of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv). He continues: "the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games-a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches-local determinism. (p. xxiv)."

Postmodernists view their work as exposing modernist metanarratives (such as those of Marx and Freud) for being totalizing in their discourse. These metanarratives excluded the plethora of other viewpoints that emerged from the study of race, gender and alternative sexualities. Instead of offering such totality, postmodern theorists view themselves as offering disparate, multiple, local discourses. Supposedly, such discourses do not totalize and exclude, but localize and include.

Marxists critique postmodernism by viewing it as having emerged from certain time and space developments during the last half century in the history of capitalist development. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey states that "[p]ostmodernism . . . ought to be looked at as mimetic of the social, economic, and political practices in society (p. 113). Thus, postmodernism emerges out of the transition of international capitalism from "Fordism" (mass, industrial, state-overseen production) to "flexible accumulation" (decentralized, multinational, service-oriented capitalism) (p. 173). Frederic Jameson, in *The Cultural Turn* (1999), states that postmodernism is "the cultural logic of an enlarged third stage of classical capitalism" (p. 43). Jameson continues, "then it makes sense to suggest that the waning of our sense of history, and more particularly our resistance to globalizing or totalizing concepts like that of the mode of production itself, are a function of precisely that universalization of capitalism (p. 43)."

The Marxist critique of postmodernism emerges as an economic critique, one that views cultural phenomena as arising from the relations of production. Jameson argues that postmodern narrative, in its rejection of metanarrative, masks the true conditions of global capitalism in this postmodern age of globalization.

Derrida's *Negotiations* is a diverse collection of various discussions and interviews all dealing, in some way or another, with the concept of negotiation. Derrida discusses the academy itself, multiple political causes, and his intellectual history. My focus here will be on the book's dealings with the theoretical concept of negotiation. Derrida's discussion of the word is important, since the concept of negotiation was chosen to be the unifying theme of *Negotiations*. Derrida opens the book by unpacking the surface meaning of negotiation itself, defining the word negotiation as being "neg-otium, not-ease, not-quiet - . . . no leisure" (p. 11). The discussion of the word negotiation continues as Derrida must "*negotiate* its usage" (p. 12). He continues: "I appropriated the etymology for this new writing (ethical or political). Un-leisure is the impossibility of stopping, of settling in a position. Whether one wants it or not, one is always working in the mobility between several positions, stations, places, between which a shuttle is needed. The first image that comes to me when one speaks of negotiations is that of the shuttle, *la navette*, and what the word conveys of to-and-fro between two positions, two places, two choices. One must always go from one to the other, and for me negotiation is the impossibility of establishing oneself anywhere (p. 12)."

Derrida further elaborates: "Thus, when I think negotiation, I think of this fatigue, of this without-rest, this enervating mobility preventing one from ever stopping. If you would like to translate this philosophically, the impossibility of stopping, this means: no thesis, no position, no theme, no station, no substance, no stability, a perpetual suspension, a suspension without rest (p. 13)."

My first reaction to these passages was extremely negative. I originally thought that such a postmodern idea of negotiation involves not the negotiation of theory into praxis, as Marxists desire, but instead the utter impossibility of deciding, "settling," on a particular theory or position, ignoring the question of how to translate theory into a specific praxis. Following again from my original view, Derrida asks us to imbibe the postmodern "metanarrative" of indecision, "mobility," or positively coded indecision. This postmodern shuttle must keep one safe during the infinite, postmodern process of negotiation. One does not negotiate by translating "not-ease" into ease, or "un-leisure" into leisure, eventually leading to a liberatory destination. Rather, one must become indefinite and indifferent, a permanent traveler on the shuttle that has no final destination, but never runs out of fuel.

Well, enough said. Not quite. Derrida's manuscript is replete with surprises and this review is by no means exhaustive or total. Instead, like a postmodern jigsaw puzzle, all the pieces resist coming together unless one looks at the picture with new eyes. What Marxists chastise, the postmodern left's desire to expel all metanarrative, including Marxism, can be viewed by some as an overreaction, on the side of the postmodernists, to the ways in which Marx was misinterpreted by Marxist-Leninism. Derrida recalls his early experiences: "I was anti-Stalinist. I already had an image of the French Communist Party, and especially the Soviet Union, that seemed incompatible with, let's say, the democratic left to which I have always wished to remain loyal" (p. 163). Hence, it is perhaps not a coincidence that postmodernism derived from the non-Marxist, French intellectual left. The fundamental question to be answered is if postmodernism is an intellectual overreaction (contra Harvey and Jameson) to the totality and repression that was expressed through such metanarratives like Marxist-Leninism. Or, conversely, and even more radically, did such a negative experience among French intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s with how Marx was interpreted, lead to the correct discovery that the problem with metanarratives was not in their misinterpretation (as many contemporary Marxists believe)? Is the problem deeper than just that Marx should be purged of his more deterministic theory and on the whole be accepted?

Postmodernists are just as radical as their fellow Marxist, leftist academics. Their postmodern radicalism is located in the following two correct realizations: (1) *all metanarratives*, including those of Marx himself, are idealist and totalizing and (2) one must endorse Leftist, Social-Democratic politics as a practical negotiation in the everyday world. Has Derrida embraced negotiation for its practical postmodern definition, "the impossibility of stopping, this means: no thesis, no position, no theme, no station, no substance, no stability" (p.13)? This "no position" can easily be misinterpreted as meaning no political stance; such is the contemporary Marxist misdefinition. In conclusion though, maybe the postmodernists are correct; Marx's theoretical paradigm (and all "modernisms") *are* the problem. The severe postmodern overreach, in my view, is that they in their theoretical structures, sidestep critiquing metafiction and the metastructure of society, while also failing to provide radical alternatives that move beyond the false telos

of Social-Democracy (or the various forms of "Marxism" that try to save the master from economic errancy). To finalize, one must come back to Marx's famous, yet infamous dictum: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Yes, old impractical friend, but how do we change it?

References

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