

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2021

Volume 48 Issue 1

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Jacques Derrida, *Theory and Practice*. Translated by David Wills and edited by Geoffrey Bennington and Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019, 144 pp., \$38.00 (cloth).

Philosophy and Nonphilosophy: On Derrida's *Theory and Practice*

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The aim and scope of Jacques Derrida's 1976/77 seminar "Theory and Practice," which is now available in an accurately translated English edition, must be understood within its historical, institutional, and political context. The most pressing issue for French philosophy in the second half of the 1970s was undoubtedly the question of the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy. After the events of May 1968, the philosopher's position within the academic field and in the rapidly changing political reality had become increasingly uncertain. The emergence of the so-called new philosophers, which roughly coincided with the first airing of the exceedingly popular philosophy TV show *Apostrophes* on January 10, 1975, as well as the threat to academic philosophy from a reform championed by French education minister René Haby, reinforced an ongoing debate on the role of the philosopher and the task of philosophy. The philosophers were forced to reconsider their position within the French educational system, a system they sought to fundamentally renew while at the same time protecting it against the neoliberal reform (the administration used the term *liberalisme avancé*). As the philosophical institutions faced these sociopolitical challenges, the philosophers were confronted with various questions concerning the nature and task of philosophy: Is there a clear line between philosophy and nonphilosophy? Has

philosophy come to an end, or has it only just begun? Can and should it be introduced and taught to nonphilosophers? And who are these nonphilosophers? University students? Readers of journals and books, or the audience of TV shows? Maybe even, or maybe particularly, the workers? Or maybe this indeterminable collective known as “the masses”?

In relation to the educational system, Derrida’s own position as *caïman* at the École Normale Supérieure was both central and peripheral: instead of holding a chair at one of the Paris universities, he, like his fellow *caïman* and close friend Louis Althusser, prepared the students of the ENS for the challenging and centralized *agrégation*—a requisite for a career in higher education. Each year, the *agrégés* were presented with a different subject, usually a conceptual opposition such as theory and practice or life and death. Therefore, Derrida was not entirely free in his choice of topic for his ENS seminar—a circumstance that troubled him as much as his crucial role within the system of the *agrégation*, a system he actually despised. The leitmotif of the 1976/77 seminar on theory and practice was the French expression *faut le faire*, an expression which, among other things, refers to the imposed choice of the subject: “must be done.” As he explained to his students the year before, Derrida tried to adapt his work to fit the *agrégation* program “while fighting against the institution of the *agrégation*.”¹ In 1974, Derrida institutionalized his fight by founding GREPH (Research Group on the Teaching of Philosophy), a project that would take up a significant amount of his time and energy in the years to come and would ultimately result in the formation of the Estates General of Philosophy in June 1979 and the eventual prevention of the Haby reform, at least of its most severe effects on academic philosophy. In his seminar, however, Derrida’s strategy was to submit to the *agrégation* program while opposing it at the same time: “not conform to it but make of it the object—to be deconstructed—of this seminar.”²

To address and deconstruct the opposition between theory and practice, Derrida chose the contemporary discourse of Marxist philosophy as his starting point, more precisely the writings of his colleague and friend Louis Althusser. According to Derrida, this was the only “*specifically philosophical* field in which the theory/practice opposition remains active, invested” (5). By choosing this starting point, Derrida engaged in an ongoing debate on the task of Marxist philosophy and the role of the Marxist philosopher. The

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 7.

² *Ibid.*

classic 1960s “structuralist” Althusser advocated for a very rigid, theoreticist notion of philosophy and assigned a central role to the philosopher and his teaching of nonphilosophers in and for society and the history of humanity. However, following the events of 1968, he questioned these positions, a development that resulted in his widely discussed *Elements of Self-Criticism* (1974).³ Shortly after its publication, Althusser’s former student Jacques Rancière published *Althusser’s Lesson* (1974), an extensive and brilliant critique of Althusser’s philosophical development and political activism which denounces the philosophocentrism of his work. Rancière’s critique would prompt Althusser to fundamentally rethink his idea of the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy in the second half of the 1970s.⁴

Derrida argues that the origin of all Marxist philosophy lies in an “event” that manifests itself in Marx’s eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*: the eleventh thesis (“Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it”), in particular, represents something fundamentally new in the history of philosophy. As an “event,” it is unexpected and brings about something radically original: it is “an event of self-institution” (119). Being part of the history of philosophy, this “event” seems to be preceded by a long history, and it even seems to repeat this very history: it could therefore be more adequately described as an “auto-hetero-institution” (119). The meaning and the status of this institutionalizing event has been the subject of a great deal of debate. While many Marxists, and non-Marxists such as the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, thought that Marx wanted to proclaim the end of philosophy, some representatives of “Western Marxism,” most notably Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, argued that Marx’s famous thesis articulates a radical change within philosophy.⁵

In order to understand the meaning of this presumed radical change within philosophy, Derrida untangles Althusser’s confusing web of definitions surrounding the notions of theory and practice. For Althusser, everything

³ Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: Verso, 1976), 101–61.

⁴ At this time, Althusser made various attempts at writing an introduction to philosophy for nonphilosophers. These very illuminating manuscripts were recently published. See Louis Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, ed. and trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); *How to Be a Marxist in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

⁵ There is, however, an important difference between Gramsci and Althusser: while Gramsci believes that everyone is a philosopher, Althusser’s philosophy tends to exclude virtually everyone from the realm of philosophy. From Derrida’s point of view, both these attempts at eliminating the problem of nonphilosophy immobilize philosophy, turn philosophy into a mere doctrine.

human is practice and every practice, even in its most basic form (e.g., the transformation of natural raw materials into product), exists as part of a complex social arrangement. Therefore, theoretical practice has also to be understood as a social practice, and it also transforms some form of raw material (in this case “representations, concepts, facts” [64] which, in turn, are the products of other, more basic practices). Within theoretical practice, Althusser distinguishes between prescientific theoretical practice (“ideology”) and scientific theoretical practice (or simply “theory”). The “event,” or the advent of Marxist philosophy (as manifested in the eleven theses), marks the threshold that separates ideology from theory. While the prescientific theoretical practices also had their “philosophies,” only Marxist philosophy facilitates “Theory” (uppercase), that is, “the Theory of practice in general” (66). The new Marxist practice of philosophy transforms philosophy as much as it transforms the world. But did this transformation, this “event,” really occur in 1845 when Marx wrote his famous notes on Feuerbach? Or doesn’t Althusser imply that it is only in his interpretation that this “event” actually takes place? For Althusser, “Marxist philosophy is *founded*, but in an *undeveloped* state; it must be elaborated and given *theoretical existence and consistency*” (44).

Halfway through the seminar, at the beginning of the fifth session (out of nine), Derrida declares that, unlike Jacques Rancière a few years earlier, he will not follow the path of Althusser’s “self-critical” development beyond this early stage in which Althusser situates his own philosophy as the “Theory of practice” that would overcome ideology and pave the way for future “theory.” After pointing out that Althusser’s philosophocentrism reproduces a decisive gesture of philosophical modernity—claiming to transcend the entire history of philosophy, to mark the end of philosophy and/or the beginning of philosophy proper—Derrida turns to Heidegger’s appreciation and criticism of Marxism in his *Letter on Humanism* (1946). Derrida addresses Heidegger’s brief but very revealing remarks on Marx’s eleventh thesis not because he wishes to engage in a Heideggerian critique of Marxism, but because he wants to develop “a potentially deconstructive reading of him [Heidegger] and of the questions he poses to Marxism” (73). The intricate path of Derrida’s subsequent meditation on the notions of theory and practice in Aristotle and Heidegger seeks to reveal the way in which Heidegger, like Althusser, repeats the traditional gesture, how he also “intends to overflow not only all other philosophy, the whole history of philosophy,” but also “the philosophical as such” (71).

If, according to Heidegger, the entire tradition of philosophy was trapped in the “technical” determination of “thinking,” then philosophy’s relation to nonphilosophy would always be one of determination. From this perspective, Marx’s attempt to redefine philosophy as a deliberate effort to transform the world would not appear as some radically new approach, but rather as philosophy’s most extreme fulfillment of its destiny. The traditional theoreticism would prove to be nothing more than the preparation of “an elaboration, an intervening, aggressive, grabbing elaboration [*eingreifende Bearbeitung*] of the *Wirkliches*” (95).

Whenever Heidegger attempts to overcome, or rather “overflow,” the traditional theoreticism (in other words, the technical determination of thinking that culminated in Marxist philosophy), it is Derrida’s opinion that this overflow remains “in *affinity* with what is overflowed, *affined* and I’ll even say confined to what is overflowed” (86). Derrida tries to show that Heidegger is unable to escape the need to determine nonphilosophy, to change the world: wherever he tries to desist from determining the nonphilosophical, he is confined to questioning and determining nonphilosophy. Philosophy’s relation to its “thing” (*Sache*)—the thing to be thought (*das zu Denkende*), as Heidegger would put it, or the thing that is the point (*worauf es ankommt*)—can neither be simply determined by philosophy, nor is it, in turn, able to simply determine philosophy. For Derrida, all of Heidegger’s attempts to open his thinking to nonphilosophy, to let “thinking” be determined by nonphilosophy and eventually *become* nonphilosophy are bound to fail. Or, as Derrida stated some years later, still in the context of his ongoing reflection on his struggle for the auto-hetero-institution of philosophy, “There is no non-philosophical barbarity; the fights of the debates we are talking about always oppose different philosophies, forces represented by different philosophies.”⁶

Derrida’s 1976/77 seminar on theory and practice is a crucial document in understanding the development of French philosophy in general and the debate on Marxism in particular. By focusing on what he calls the *débordement* of philosophy towards nonphilosophy, Derrida provides a rich and thought-provoking interpretation of Marx and Althusser, but also of Heidegger and Aristotle. In his interpretation of these classical and modern thinkers, he points the reader to the question of how to situate Derrida’s own project in the context of the theory/practice opposition and the underlying

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Antinomies of the Philosophical Discipline: Letter Preface” (1984), trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Eyes of the University*, vol. 2 of *Right to Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 168.

question of the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy. In comparison to Althusser's explicitly Marxist project, it almost appears as though Derrida considers his own project to stand closer to the "event" of 1845 — precisely because, like Marx, Derrida himself does not strive to overcome or solve the challenge of nonphilosophy. The looming threat of the Haby reform and the "new philosophers" prompted him to make a case for a philosophy that refuses to become a mere teaching or a school. Much like Marx, Derrida understands his own philosophical project to be a continuation and an amplification of a historical movement. In Derrida's case, this continuation lies in the auto-hetero-deconstruction of philosophy. However, the point for Derrida and his philosophical teaching is to destabilize philosophy without abandoning it, to confront and challenge it with nonphilosophy without dissolving it in the process.