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**Derrida Reappraised: Deconstruction, Critique
and Emancipation in Management Studies**

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**This paper is circulated for discussion purposes only and its contents should be
considered preliminary.**

Abstract

Derrida has been significantly misread by many management scholars. The paper argues that his work is not 'postmodernist'; further, that Habermas' (1987) influential critique of Derrida's views on truth and politics have led to widespread but misleading views of his critical credentials. Although Habermas is not entirely misguided, a defence of Derrida is provided that sets out the potential for his work to inform management scholars who wish to provide emancipatory critique.

DERRIDA REAPPRAISED: DECONSTRUCTION, CRITIQUE AND EMANCIPATION IN MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Whilst the work of Jacques Derrida has a number of influential admirers amongst scholars of management and organization (Jones, forthcoming) there remains a significant degree of scepticism about the utility of his work, especially perhaps amongst those who wish to change the world in ways they consider to be emancipatory (Feldman, 1998). Indeed, for Gabriel, deconstruction is opposed to such ambitions:

[o]ur theories [i.e. those of management scholars] have mostly given up on the Marxist ideal of changing the world and even on the more modest one of understanding and critiquing it. Instead they increasingly seek to ‘deconstruct’ it through ironic or iconic engagement, endlessly lost in narrative vortices

Gabriel (2001, p.23).

Even some scholars who are generally read as sympathetic to Derrida’s work have suggested that emancipatory critique has to be added on to deconstruction as a supplement to Derrida’s own concerns. For example, Boje feels that it is necessary “to marry deconstruction to the critical theory revival of Marxist critique of ideology ... [otherwise] deconstruction became (*sic*) just another formalism, anti-historical, politically conservative, and ... lacking a social change project” (2001, p.18/19). Nevertheless, Derrida himself has said he believes that

there is an enormous amount to do today for emancipation, in all domains and all the areas of the world and society ... I must say that I have no tolerance for those who - deconstructionist or not - are ironical with regard to the grand discourse of emancipation

Derrida (1996, p.82).

The principal aim of this paper is to argue for a reappraisal of Derrida’s potential to contribute to emancipatory critique in management and organization studies. A contribution that I suggest can be substantial. Indeed, it is submitted that

emancipatory ambitions are not alien to deconstruction as Boje (2001) seems to claim - rather they are intrinsic to it.

THE DERRIDA DEBATE

At least since Derrida's translation into English, the reception to his work has been tainted by its association with others. For example, Heidegger and de Man (the former, a major intellectual influence; the latter, in the 1970s to his death, a high-profile supporter) were both alleged to have been complicit with Nazism. As Beardsworth comments, "Derrida's reputation suffered through association, and the reach of his thinking was severely underestimated" (1996, p.3). Furthermore, Derrida is often classified as a 'postmodernist' - a label that he has never sought or welcomed; indeed Derrida considers that "the facile, demagogic, grave error of confusing my work (or even 'deconstruction' in general) with postmodernism is indicative ... of a massive failure to read and analyze" (1999a, p.263/4).

Whilst these assumptions about the nature of Derrida's work have arisen more or less in spite of his texts, he has of course been critiqued as a major intellectual force in a sustained manner, notably for the purposes of management and organization studies in literary criticism (Eagleton, 1996), sociology (Giddens, 1979) and political science (Callinicos, 1989). However, perhaps the most influential critique for many who suspect Derrida's critical credentials is that of Habermas' as set out in his lectures, 'Beyond a temporalized philosophy of origins: Jacques Derrida's critique of phonocentrism' (1987, pp.161-184) and the 'Excursus on leveling (*sic*) the genre between philosophy and literature' (1987, pp.185-210). It is the (misleading) Habermasian allegations about Derrida's views, which according to him, lead to Derrida's

destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the deconstruction of all the significations ... [p]articularly the signification of truth (p.164) ... [the] mystification of palpable social pathologies (p.181) ... [and] Derrida's recommendation, [that] philosophical thinking be relieved of the duty of solving problems

Habermas (1987, p.210)

that has probably been most significant in rendering plausible a quite widespread view of Derrida within some circles of organization scholars (and of course more widely). A view that is summed up well by Hancock and Tyler:

the deconstructionist rejection of a realist ontology, combined with a concomitant suspicion of the metanarratives of truth and emancipation in Derrida's work is, as Kumar (1995, p.131) notes, so 'relentlessly subversive that it subverts itself'

Hancock and Taylor (2001, p.27).

The paper seeks to challenge this view of Derrida, starting with a brief consideration of critiques that are simply dismissive of Derrida - poking fun at his work rather than making an attempt to engage with it seriously and on its own terms. While these are likely to be trivial in a substantive sense, they are significant nonetheless in that they have established an environment in which a crude caricature of Derrida's work (both false and damaging) has gained significant credence, not just in university barrooms but even in prestigious peer reviewed journals. But it is Habermas' critique that is primarily engaged, in order to show what I think Derrida is up to in relation to truth and his views of emancipation that follow. The paper ends with a consideration of how, in the light of the arguments presented, Derrida's insights might make a contribution to emancipation in organizations.

Derrida Dismissed: The Cambridge Affair and *Intellectual Impostures*

The extent of the debate, indeed, the outright hostility Derrida has attracted over the years is well illustrated by an account of two specific events: the so-called Cambridge

affair and the publication of *Intellectual Impostures*. Neither did anything but dismiss Derrida's views but they are significant in that they both provoked widespread controversy that went well outside the confines of academia and damaged Derrida's reputation.

The first, a debate Derrida himself called the "Cambridge affair" (1995, p.419), occurred in 1992 when the University of Cambridge conferred an honorary degree on him, but only after a very close ballot amongst the staff. It provoked an openly hostile letter to *The Times* from an international group of distinguished philosophers. For them his work bore

some of the marks of writing in ... philosophy [but its influence has been] ... to a striking degree almost entirely in fields outside philosophy - in departments of film studies, for example, or of French or English literature. // In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour ... Many [of his writings] ... seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and the puns "logical phallusies" and the like ... where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial. Academic status based on what seem to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university

(extracted from full letter cited in Derrida 1995, pp.419/21)

These insultingly dismissive attacks seem not to have been made after a considered and sustained effort to understand Derrida's work. Rather, the affair is more likely to be symptomatic of a wider debate - the lack of understanding between two distinct approaches to philosophy that (especially in the USA and UK) divide professional philosophers (Baggini & Stangroom, 2002). The dominant approach in Anglo-American countries, 'analytical philosophy', tends to be hostile to so-called 'continental philosophy' and each camp takes little interest in the debates of the other except to dismiss them. (Although, according to Baggini & Stangroom, a gradual and

limited rapprochement between the divide has been slowly taking place over the decade since the affair.)

A few years later, Derrida's work, along with that of other so-called postmodernists (with whom he was classified) was subject to wide and hostile media debate following the publication of Sokal and Bricmont's high profile 'demolition-job' (as they put it) on French postmodernism: *Intellectual Impostures*. It should perhaps be noted that Sokal and Bricmont's main focus as scientists was upon writers who, they argued, used mathematics 'wrongly': allegedly merely to impress and make their work appear more substantial. (For a more general exploration of the whole affair from a management studies perspective see Carr (2000).) This meant that almost all the direct criticism was reserved for thinkers other than Derrida. He did not appear except for one brief reference concerning an improvised response he made at a conference in 1966 to a question on Einstein (Derrida, 1999b), although he was caught, again by association, in the crossfire.

The affair was covered widely in the U.K. broadsheet newspapers and programmes such as BBC Radio Four's *Start the Week* during the summer of 1998 in a way that was highly sympathetic to Sokal and Bricmont. As Sturrock says:

Lacan, Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Deleuze, Guattari and one or two lesser figures turn out not to know their mathematical arse from their physical elbow ... while Jacques Derrida, on whom the authors could ... find nothing to pin, responded [to the publication of *Intellectual Impostures*] with a seen-it-all-before sigh, 'le pauvre Sokal'

(Sturrock, 1998, p.8)

Neither the Cambridge affair nor *Intellectual Impostures* were significant as direct attacks upon Derrida's ideas. However, their importance was that they created or exacerbated an atmosphere in which often ridiculous caricatures of Derrida's claims have been legitimised as received wisdom even in some academic journals of the highest status. To make matters worse, such caricatures are often presented in a style that would otherwise be unacceptable in academic writing - one suggesting that the

only interest is to parody and insult - and furthermore to do so on the basis of secondary sources of questionable standing.

So, for example, in a field in which some of my own work is located, health studies, even a journal that has a reputation for the utmost scientific rigour, *The Lancet*, Muir Gray (1999) was able to publish an article that is difficult to read as anything more than insulting and making fun of what he calls 'postmodernism'. In a style that contrasts startlingly with other articles in the journal, the opening words of the piece are: "Postmodernism, like the elephant is easier to recognise than to define" (1999, p.1550).

He goes on to detail allegations about the characteristics of postmodernism, some of which suggest a half-remembered version of Derrida (although he is never cited or even named):

[t]he notions that everything is a text, that the basic material of texts, societies and almost anything is meaning, that meanings are there to be decoded or deconstructed...

(Muir-Gray, 1999, p.1550)

Similarly, Hodgkin (1996), writing a two-page article on the implications for medicine of postmodernism in *The British Medical Journal*, supports his central claim - that "[i]n a postmodern world anything goes" (1996, p.1568) - by citing just one book, *Postmodernism for Beginners*. It is difficult to conceive of any other issue on which these journals would tolerate such research standards. A state of affairs, incidentally that renders somewhat paradoxical Sokal's claim that 'postmodernists' lack rigour in *their* writing.

There will be no attempt to refute these claims - in themselves they are ridiculous. The point is that they illustrate how a damaging trivialisation of Derrida's work has been legitimised (along with the work of other, mainly French, philosophers). These quite widespread attitudes mean that from the start, work based on Derrida's ideas has an uphill battle to establish its worth.

The Objection of Impenetrability

One of the concerns that unites those who wish to rubbish Derrida's work with some of those who have critiqued it as a significant intellectual force is what Habermas has referred to as Derrida's "somewhat impenetrable discussion[s]" (1987, p.194). The philosophers writing to *The Times* about Derrida's Cambridge degree saw his writing similarly, as "semi-intelligible". I am not without *some* sympathy for this general point.

Derrida's texts have posed me problems of reading and interpretation that I have rarely encountered in other writers and I do concede that personally some of his work (especially for example Derrida (1986)) has eluded me so far! Cooper (1989) has likened reading Derrida to solving a series of cryptic crossword clues and Derrida has said much the same sort of thing about his attempts at reading Heidegger: "I am still trying to understand Heidegger ... He is one of the thinkers who I am constantly unable to understand" (1999b, p. 82).

However, as Cooper's analogy with crossword clues implies, with effort, Derrida's writing *is* comprehensible. Derrida's difficult style is symptomatic of an ambition to use language to make it say things that it has not previously said (Howells, 2002). As Cooper says

Derrida assumes that ... a demand [for conventional academic coherence] may actually work against ... genuine understanding ... since it is implicitly grounded in the idea that knowledge is somehow already clearly structured for us in the 'external world'

(Cooper 1989, p.481)

He often uses a writing style that he has called 'paleonymy' (Derrida, 1976) in which an old term is used for a new or revised concept: 'supplement', 'différance', 'writing' etc.. All this however I read as deliberately ironic, in that it self-consciously draws attention to communication as a central problematic. So for example, Derrida's use of the term 'writing' has sometimes been (mis)understood as valuing permanent inscription over ephemeral utterance (Weber, 1995). But this is because its

paleonymic sense has been missed. 'Writing' in its paleonymic sense expresses our logocentric desire to deny *différance* - it is simultaneously that which cannot be written *or said*, since it precedes and makes possible the act of speaking or the act of inscription of marks on paper as well as being therefore (aporetically) conventional writing or the speech.

Thus, his difficulty does not arise from a perverse desire to be obscure nor to hide the ultimate lack of meaning in his texts as has been suggested by some of his sneering critics, nor does 'difficulty' in itself suggest a lack of coherence. Such a criticism risks also being highly a-historical, as it is clear that in some cases what was first seen as 'difficult' becomes widely comprehensible for later generations. Far from being logically incoherent then, Derrida's 'difficult' style is consistent with his wider critique of logocentrism, of which the "*accepted standards of coherence and rigour*" (my italics) to which the letter to *The Times* draws attention are part. In a sense then his style is a reflection of his wider arguments, in that the 'style' *in itself* challenges these accepted standards. Put differently, Derrida's style, is illustrative of his claim that *any* "text is complicated, there are many meanings struggling with one another, there are tensions" (Derrida, 1999b. p.79). He understands conventional modes of expression that *appear* to be straightforward as denials of these tensions and struggles.

It is worth noting that some writers in management and organization studies have adapted Derrida's critique of academic conventions that is made by the very style of the writing, as a part of their own attempts to convey resistance to the logocentric - and, for some (Calás and Smircich, 1991) phallogocentric - representational practices that have come to dominate modes of expression in management writing. A recent example that is a full-length book is Burrell (1997). The following marks:

WARNING: LINEARITY KILLS

first appear on page 8 in embolden upper case lettering isolated from and larger than the rest of the text, disrupting its 'flow'. It is a formulation that is printed at regular intervals throughout the book. Burrell asserts that throughout the book he wants to "underplay the importance of developing an argument in a linear logical way" (1997, p.27) and the very layout of most of the book is intended to support this aim, with for

example, its “two streams of textual material moving in opposite directions ... [which will make the reader] confused at first but that is all to the good” (1997, p.33).

Whilst it is tempting to conclude that Derrida’s style of writing may be a problem for his readers rather than for his ideas, what Derrida’s difficulty *has* contributed to (even if it is through his readers’ laziness) are occasions on which he has been (as far as he was concerned) purely and simply misunderstood. Given the time demanded to understand his texts it is not implausible to believe that those who have dismissed Derrida have done so on the basis of secondary texts or on a superficial reading of a limited amount of his work. Perhaps more worryingly, there are hints of reliance upon secondary texts in some established management writers who are appreciative of Derrida. For example Boje says he has used “Derrida’s approach to deconstruction ... “tamed ” by [the pedagogic text] Culler (1982)” (1995, p.1007). He leaves unexplained in what sense tamed is used.

This reliance upon secondary sources to ‘tame’ Derrida also applies even to thinkers equally as influential as Derrida and has led to misleading and damaging claims being made about his views. Which brings us to Habermas who says, “Jonathon Culler reconstructs in a very clear way the somewhat impenetrable discussion between Derrida and Searle ... [f]rom this complex discussion, Culler selects ...” (1987, p.194) and Habermas goes on to attack Derrida’s (alleged) position of deconstructing philosophical texts with the tools of literary criticism, especially through a critique of ‘style’. All of this part of his critique was explicitly based on a secondary source. As Howells says, Habermas’ claims drew

an untypically curt and categorical response from Derrida: ‘Cela est faux’ (‘This is false’...). Habermas claims that Derrida’s arguments are circular, that Derrida believes all interpretations to be erroneous, and all understanding to be misunderstanding ... Derrida denies that he has ever expressed such views

(Howells, 1998, p.69)

It is to Habermas’ critique that I now turn. Habermas’ arguments are detailed and complex so I will extract two of the basic charges against Derrida made by Habermas,

which seem to me to be behind much of the suspicion about Derrida from those with a critical orientation towards social theory. First Derrida is accused of a subversive and anarchistic orientation with regard to truth and reason (1987, p.181/2) seen for example in his apparent attempts to dissolve the distinctions between logic and rhetoric, philosophy and literature. Second, Derrida is accused of preferring philosophy to politics; he is guilty of being inattentive to the social practices that surround texts.

These two accusations are related: as Callinicos argues, what follows from a relativist orientation to truth is a compulsion to question the possibility of grounding any personal political commitments because the logic of the position on truth denies the means either to “analyse those existing social arrangements which he [Derrida] rejects or to justify this rejection by outlining some more desirable state of affairs” (1989, p.79). In other words deconstructionism’s relation to truth, read following Habermas, subverts *all* claims, even those Derrida himself explicitly makes in the name of emancipation.

Let us now discuss the first charge about truth, leaving the second (though related) charge concerning emancipation to form the backdrop to the concluding section of the piece. The approach in these discussions is to develop the Habermasian argument with examples from management writing that seem to have been influenced by it and then defend Derrida’s position.

DERRIDA SUBVERTING TRUTH?

Derrida is regularly assumed to be a relativist in spite of his explicit denials (Derrida, 1981a; 1999b). One of the reasons that Derrida can be thought of in this way I think is because of Habermas’ mistaken assertion: “Derrida’s purposely paradoxical statement that any interpretation is inevitably a false interpretation, and any understanding a misunderstanding” (1987, p.198). As we have seen, Derrida has denied ever saying this (though Culler’s (1982, pp.175-180) interpretation of Derrida uses a similar formulation to Habermas’). Related to this claim, Habermas also believes that Derrida seeks to subvert *any* distinction between literature and philosophy, logic and rhetoric.

For Habermas this is further evidence of “the relativism of meaning Derrida is after” (1987, p.197).

It seems plausible to suggest that it is following this sort of critique of Derrida that Feldman (1998) can offer a commentary upon a debate among four participants (Carter, 1995; Clegg, 1995; Jackson, 1995 and Parker (1995a and b)) conducted in *Organization Studies* which he says was “concerning the meaning of knowledge and truth” (1998, p.61). Feldman reads their arguments in the same sort of way that Habermas reads Derrida’s (and incidentally in the same way as Habermas reads Foucault’s) in that Feldman ascribes to Carter, Clegg, Jackson and Parker a position that “they have learnt from Foucault, Derrida and others that rationality is neither objective nor true ... [t]hus all four debaters ... assume that relativism in one form or another is the only acceptable social basis for organization theory” (1998, p.61).

Habermas, in his critique of Derrida, is particularly anxious to defend philosophy from being read as if it were literature and I suggest that Habermas’ assertion of what he thinks the respective distinctions should be represent a good illustration of the contrasting orientations to truth between himself and Derrida. Derrida would not think Habermas wrong in asserting that there are differences between literature and philosophy. In my reading of him, Derrida accepts that there are differences in *degree* between (what is conventionally represented as) literature and (what is usually categorised as) philosophy (Derrida, 1992a). As Derrida says,

it seems interesting to me to study certain discourses, those of Nietzsche or Valéry for example, that tend to consider philosophy as a species of literature. But I never subscribed to that notion and I have explained myself on this point. Those who accuse me of reducing philosophy to literature or logic to rhetoric (see for example, the latest book by Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*) have visibly and carefully avoided reading me

(Derrida, 1995, p.218).

Habermas appears to be critical of Derrida however, because Habermas wants to suggest a stronger difference between philosophy and literature - a difference in *kind* -

an intrinsic or essentialist distinction between literature and philosophy. For Habermas philosophy must distinguish itself from poetry and other forms of literature because for him what is central in making philosophy philosophy is that, like science, it has to deal with “truth-validity” (1987, p.336) claims. While not denying that all language contains some literary and rhetorical elements, in Habermas’ view these must be ‘bridled’ for the purposes of reading philosophical discourse. (In a social science context, many would insist, in parallel to Habermas on philosophy, that research findings are different from literature because they must similarly be subject to scrutiny on the basis of ‘validity’.)

Derrida is best defended from the allegation that he relativises the two forms of writing by suggesting that he has never sought to *deny* the distinctions traditionally made between literature and philosophy. Indeed deconstructive practices would not make sense unless distinctions and oppositions in texts were taken ‘seriously’. The focus of deconstruction is the detailed scrutiny of the precise points at which distinctions are invoked so that easy and comfortable assumptions about the implications of such distinctions cannot be made. Thus, in relation to literature and philosophy, Derrida can be read to be agnostic about the distinction *per se*, that is, he brackets off the question of whether or not they are intrinsically different in ontological terms (Hillis Miller, 1995). His interest is in seeing what invoking the distinction does - what has to be privileged and what has to be marginalised in order to make a strong distinction appear plausible.

What Derrida argues is that the traditional distinction between these terms shows that dominant traditions in philosophy and science since Plato privilege theories of truth as *mimesis* (1981b, pp.171-252). Truth as *mimesis* assumes the stability of language as an instrument with which to represent (or imitate) a pre-existing world which provides, as Derrida puts it, “the presumed possibility of a discourse about what is” (1981b, p.191).

In order to maintain this position however, mimetic truth seekers must, as Habermas recognises, ‘bridle’ the literary aspects of philosophical/scientific discourse - metaphor, metonymy, myth and so on - which if allowed into such discourse would destabilize its claims to represent the world more or less unproblematically, that is as

truth-validity. Habermas wants philosophy to achieve what Derrida has called “pure representation without metaphoric displacement” (1976, p.291) that enables “the inscription or transcription of the thing itself ” (Derrida, 1981b, p.191). The problem Habermas faces is that any such bridling is inherently arbitrary and Derrida is not prepared to countenance such a practice.

This is not to say that Derrida discounts truth (in Habermas’ terms, validity claims). Indeed, Derrida affirms rather than denies truth and he says of his whole enterprise:

it goes without saying that in no case is it a question of a *discourse against truth* or against science. (This is impossible and absurd, as is every heated accusation on this subject.) And when one analyzes systematically the value of truth ... it is not in order to return naively to a relativist or sceptical empiricism ... I repeat, then, leaving all their disseminating powers to the proposition and the form of the verb: *we must have [il faut] truth*

(Derrida, 1981a, p.105; italics in original).

I interpret Derrida as suggesting here that truth is a trivial notion - many statements are true (the grass is green, the sky is blue). Derrida’s emphasis is to show that ‘truths’ can only appear in language and in contexts of interpretation and that furthermore interpretations are always subsets of other truths. Contrary to Habermas, Derrida believes that language and context are always and inevitably slippery and uncooperative with us, even when we are writing philosophy or science, and this uncooperativeness can only be ignored and marginalised (or bridled as Habermas might say). It cannot be done away with.

For Derrida therefore, representational practices cannot be mimetic, they cannot represent things themselves, “in the first place because there is no thing itself” (1976, p.292). This statement is not a denial of the materiality of the universe; the point he is making is that our representational practices are *always* irredeemably implicated in the constitution of how we think of a ‘thing’ ‘itself’ so that a distinction between the imitated and the imitation breaks down (Hobson, 2001; von Glaserfeld, 1991). For Derrida, ‘things’ cannot be understood in themselves without interpretation. Thus, we

can never have access to one originary phenomenon 'behind' language that can simply be imitated. Truth can only aspire to be a simulacrum - imitating an imitation (Ronai, 1999).

Thus Derrida's interest is in questioning not truth *per se* but rather *singular* truth. He questions whether any interpretation can claim to have captured 'the truth' in the strong sense of the single, correct way of seeing things that are true. For Derrida 'the truth' in this strong sense is always undecidable, where, as he puts it, "[u]ndecidability is the competition between two *determined* possibilities or options, two determined duties" (1999b, p.79; my italics).

Possibly encouraged by the dominance of the Habermasian relativistic reading of Derrida, some management commentators, including some of those friendly towards him (Chia, 1994; Wood, Ferlie & Fitzgerald, 1998) have conflated undecidability with indeterminacy. A conflation that Derrida has done nothing to encourage. Arguing for indeterminacy, at least as intrinsic to all meaning, seems to me to be a frontal attack on truth, meaning and value. Derrida's undecidability as competition between two determinate options is by contrast, a defence of truth, meaning and value against indeterminacy on the one hand and against those who, like Habermas in his search for validity (precariously) aspires to find *one* truth about things as they really are (Payne, 2000).

So, in the language of social scientific research, contrary to Habermas, Derrida is more or less unconcerned with theory building in the orthodox sense of generating a standpoint (such as Habermas' communicative action) from which to justify social criticism. Indeed, deconstruction resists theory in this sense by constantly destabilising it and showing that there are always other ways of seeing things that are true. In as much as Derrida does theory, his concern is to show that theories must always be on guard against themselves because the problematics of language always render them unstable (Couzens Hoy, 1993).

In summary, Habermas' reading of Derrida on truth is misleading in that it sees his work too radically - as being 'subversive' of truth itself. Indeed, Habermas' influential use of the term 'subversive' in relation to Derrida's work may have accentuated the

misleading effect. Derrida himself rarely claims to provide subversive readings although this term is regularly applied by some sympathetic management writers to describe what Derridean analyses can offer: see for example, Legge (1996) or Willmott (1998a). Derrida's caution in relation to subversion I suspect is because subversion could imply overt negativity or hostility. Better terms might include destabilising, unsettling or discomposing, because, like the term deconstruction itself, they suggest that the ambition is not to launch a fatal attack against what claims to be 'true' but to provide a more affirmative reading that could be welcomed by the proponents of the theories he examines - exploring what apparently authoritative claims have overlooked or repressed. What Spivak (1999) has called a critical intimacy rather than the critical distance more orthodox in academic writing.

DERRIDA AS POLITICAL QUIETIST?

Habermas' other major strand of critique (though the two are not disconnected), particularly prominent in management and related areas of social sciences is to read Derrida's work as esoteric, playful and unconcerned with (if not in outright denial of) the experience of oppressive and other problematic manifestations of power. For Habermas, the practice of deconstruction might appear to be subversive but offers nothing to replace that which it destroys. Indeed, deconstruction may not even help us to 'do' subversion at all, because subversion implies a desire to change and deconstruction in a Habermasian reading demurs from thinking about how things could be different let alone better (Couzens Hoy, 1993). For Habermas then, Derrida

degrades politics and contemporary history to the status of the ontic and the foreground, so as to romp all the more freely, and with greater wealth of associations, in the sphere of the ontological

(Habermas 1987, p.181).

Perhaps picking up on the associations suggested by Habermas' 'romp', Kincheloe and McLaren lump Derrida together with Lyotard and Baudrillard as 'ludic postmodernists' to whom they argue, "critical researchers should assume a cautionary

stance” (1998, p.271). It cannot be legitimate simply to ignore political and social questions which according to Habermas Derrida often does, or when discussing them to refer to them merely as ‘text’. Do terms of conventional political and sociological analysis then become signifiers, “the product of language games or temporary discursive stabilizations” as O’Doherty & Willmott (2001, p.464) have put it, rather than being the real ‘places’ or structures within society where oppression occurs, as is more conventionally assumed? If Habermas is correct, then surely Derrida veers dangerously towards offering an inherently bourgeois form of analysis, as there is nothing to connect it to ‘reality out-there’. Themes such as emancipation might be seen as texts open to deconstruction rather than as political praxis

Especially in his early writing, Derrida rarely uses terms common in the standard lexicon of political radicalism and he has never written a work of political philosophy as such (Bennington, 2001). Perhaps for these reasons Habermas’ reading is plausible; indeed I think it needs to be admitted that an emancipatory project *can* be avoided after reading Derrida (especially, I think, early Derrida) in a way that could not be after a (conventional) reading of Marx (Elliott, 2000; Soper, 1996).

However, I suggest that this non-emancipatory reading is possible because Derrida does not use the familiar signposts that have become conventional in conducting political debates. Derrida’s overall project resists the channelling of his ideas down the traditional tracks provided for us in the orthodox delineations between academic disciplines - including, in particular, their language practices. Deconstruction cannot be simply applied to politics because politics (as an academic subject and praxis) must itself be deconstructed (Jay, 1992). However, this stance carries the risk of being misunderstood by those who refuse to move outside the traditional conventions. I think Howells is correct in saying that deconstruction

does arouse intense fear and hostility amongst many liberal or conservative thinkers precisely because it pulls the carpet out from under their feet: it questions the comfortable assumptions of common sense and replaces them with the questions themselves, rather than a new set of answers; it dismantles the liberal consensus, shows up its illogicalities and simplifications, but it puts no new ideology in its place; indeed, it

argues that there is no firm ground or foundation to our most cherished preconceptions. Derrida, and perhaps you and I, may find this exciting and liberating, we may delight in the attempt to found an ethics and politics on [this basis] ... but the accusations of nihilism, however misplaced, are hardly surprising

(Howells, 1998, p.141/2).

Indeed, some of the work of established scholars in organization and management who are strongly influenced by Derrida is open to be read as being non-emancipatory in the sense that no strong commitment to organizational change is overtly demonstrated. Some of these writers can be read to be esoteric, pursuing interests out of intellectual curiosity rather than as part of some kind of left-leaning political or personal project. Even if it is granted that their emancipatory intentions are implicit, the ideas risk 'doing' nothing. So for example, Willmott, whilst appreciating what for him is its valuable subversion of the dominant 'distal' view of organizing, is justified in questioning how Cooper & Law's (1995) analysis of 'distal' and 'proximal' views of organization

can be of assistance in the practical, political process of changing the conditions - personal/political - that routinely impede its realization [i.e. that of 'proximal' thinking over 'distal'] in everyday organizing practices

(Wilmott, 1998a, p. 238).

I have an even greater degree of sympathy with this sort of criticism, especially when authors influenced by Cooper & Law go beyond what might (sympathetically) be understood as a disinclination to advertise the emancipatory potential of their work and appear to commend its appropriation for what I take to be an opposing political project - management consultancy. For Chia, analysis influenced by Derrida is

practically useful and relevant to practising managers. It would help practitioners understand better how they have come to develop deeply entrenched habits of thought which unnecessarily circumscribed the possibilities for action ...[it is thus] eminently, instrumentally usable

(Chia, 2000, p.517/8).

Indeed, a version of Derridean ideas does seem to be relatively readily able to be appropriated in this sort of way. For example, Gergen's (1992) Derrida-influenced account of 'postmodernism' in organizations parallels that of Cooper & Burrell (1988) in many ways - for example, in its call for the need to abandon the search for one meaning. However, while for the latter analysis the political agenda was to develop a radical critique of organizational power, for Gergen, the aim seems to be to enable managers to survive in a so-called postmodern climate, providing them with an intellectual framework within which organizational procedures might be adapted in the face of these cultural changes (Burrell, 1993; Hancock and Tyler, 2001).

In spite of the tenor arguably to be found in some established Derrida-influenced work in management and organization, this passage from Derrida surely renders questionable - if not illegitimate - the use of deconstruction, *except* to change things in a radical and emancipatory direction:

the most radical programs (*sic*) of a deconstruction that would like, in order to be consistent with itself, not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical academic discourses but rather ... to aspire to something more consequential, to *change* things and to intervene in an efficient and responsible, though always, of course, very mediated way ... Not doubtless to change things in the rather naive sense of calculated, deliberate and strategically controlled intervention, but in the sense of maximum intensification of a transformation in progress, in the name of neither a simple symptom nor a simple cause (other categories are required here)

(Derrida, 1992b, pp.8/9; italics in original).

For me therefore, for political and ethical reasons, I would join Weiskopf and Willmott in urging deconstructive analyses to strive to address "as reflexively as possible, how particular representations come to be *privileged and solidified*" (1997, p.7; italics in original) in order to question, and where appropriate, work against such privileging. As Derrida (1992b) puts it, to intensify transformational progress. Indeed, in the light of his pronouncement above and his other recent, strong and

explicit invocations of emancipatory discourses this seems to me to be incumbent upon all of us who 'use' deconstruction. Derrida is rarely less equivocal:

I refuse to denounce the great classical discourse of emancipation. I believe that there is an enormous amount to do today for emancipation, in all domains and all the areas of the world and society. Even if I would not wish to inscribe the discourse of emancipation into a teleology, a metaphysics, an eschatology, or even a classical messianism, I none the less believe that there is no ethico-political decision or gesture without what I would call a 'Yes' to emancipation

(Derrida, 1996, p.82)

THE END OF THE BOOK AND THE BEGINNING OF WRITING: DERRIDA AND EMANCIPATION IN ORGANIZING

So, how might Derrida's ideas be used to further the classical discourse of emancipation in an organizational context? The oppression I am going to focus upon is the oppression of dominant language, arguing that this is one way in which deconstruction might change things in organizations. At first glance, the oppression of language might appear to be trivial when compared to material or economic conditions ⁽¹⁾. However, I will argue that dominant organizing practices can be understood to be oppressive because they rely upon understanding the enunciations of managers in a that way Derrida (1976) calls 'the book'. I take this to mean reading these enunciations as we might an encyclopaedia - as meaningful and authoritative in that, like an encyclopaedia the enunciations refer beyond themselves to the 'real world' and invoke the real world as authority.

Writers of the book in this sense are those who value truth as mimesis - they are not creators but transcribers, producing words that are to be believed in as much as they imitate 'the real'. Read as a book, management *language*, in itself, 'disappears' from orthodox analysis because it is what is being imitated that is of interest. However, not only is it the case from a Derridean perspective that these management 'truths' make

the world appear to be ‘this’ rather than ‘that’, as importantly in the context of emancipation in organizations, I argue that these truths are invariably ones which support the elites in charge of organizations and deny the interests of others.

What is suggested as an emancipatory project is to start to read what managers say as a form of Derridean writing or text. In contrast to reading ‘the book’, an orientation to reading a ‘text’ in the special sense Derrida gives to this word, is a reading of language that is understood to be caught up with the ‘real’ rather than rigorously separate from it. Language and reality for Derrida are interdependent, woven together like coloured threads in text-ile. As Schalkwyk puts it, “It is this weave, this textile of two kinds of representation - reality and language in a continuous process of reiteration through time - that Derrida means by ‘the text’” (1997, p.387/8).

Thus Thompson, in criticising Derrida: “[w]e could have a very interesting time deconstructing them [company mission statements], but the priority should be to investigate the gap between rhetoric and substance in areas such as equal opportunities” (1993, p.196/7) seems to me to have missed the central point of Derrida’s argument. Derrida is far from suggesting that ‘substance’ does not matter; rather he suggests the impossibility of drawing a neat distinction between (to use Thompson’s terms) ‘rhetoric’ and ‘substance’. Rather, language and substance are mutually constitutive, forming the Derridean ‘text’.

Derrida, as we have seen, breaks radically with all ideas of truth as a description or reflection of things as they really are. As Howells says, all such theories of truth “imply an established world pre-existing perception and representation; but there is for Derrida no ‘world’ pre-existing the sign; the sign is constitutive of the world as we know it” (1998, p.76). Thus Derrida argues,

The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and ... against difference in general

(Derrida, 1976, p.18)

So, an emancipatory project following Derrida is to set oneself against the 'book' of management orthodoxy and show the aphoristic energy of rereading managers' enunciations as writing or text in Derrida's sense of these words. Such a reading will encourage us to stop treating management as unitary and more or less straightforward - to stop us reading the talk of managers as a common-sense representation of *the* organizational reality; but to see it as text - fragmentary, varied and unstable.

These sorts of readings privilege the process in which organizational members are necessarily involved in what Chia memorably calls "reality-configuring-event-structurings" (1997, p.700/701). Mainstream management theory can thus be understood as merely one reality-configuring-event-structuring, and in so understanding it one can resist the way its cultural dominance has enabled it to give itself out as a book rather than a text - as *the* reality-configuring-event-structuring.

Following Derrida (from his earlier work in which he links violence and metaphysics (1978, p.79-153) or elaborates the relationship between violence and the letter (1976, pp.101-140) to his later work on violence and the law (1992b)) I particularly want to raise the question of *violence* when communication is understood as the book rather than as writing. But 'violence' where the use of such a term is intended to be unorthodox and so particularly apparent. I raise issues of violence where it is not physical and where it is therefore rarely called by that name: violence in the domains of knowledge, thinking, writing and language (Grosz, 1998).

What is of particular concern here is the violence in making what management 'is' seem to be relatively straightforward and obvious, thereby closing down the possibilities for us to think differently. Dominant ways of talking and arguing about organizing use a language that is the language of managerialism (Grey, 1999). The contribution of deconstruction to an emancipatory project is to disrupt and unsettle this language - to make it more apparent that *language itself* is the site of contestation rather than a neutral representational medium (Cooper, 1989).

For Derrida, when ideas appear to be self-evident it is because the undecidability of language is being (violently) suppressed. His work is emancipatory in that it recalls and highlights such undecidability and in doing so challenges established,

institutionalized interests. This style of thought is therefore one which actively encourages a commitment to valuing paradox, contrast and counterintuition (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997) never wanting to move from a mood of restlessness.

A mood of restlessness is a mood that modes of analysis like that of Habermas wish to dispel, once the 'truth' about a problematic has been determined. In contrast, Derrida's work has (at least in principle) what is for me the 'check' of being ever conscious of the precariousness of its own truth claims. Not because truth is denied but because it recognizes that there is always more truth - truth therefore always has to be on guard against itself.

Conclusion

The ethical and political benefit of deconstruction that is here being commended is to provide new languages of contestation to unsettle the manifestations of all too seductive (and sometimes insidious) managerialism. Derridean analysis can be used to unsettle conventional ways of reading organizational language, making the enunciations of managers the texts that they 'write' which are productive of meaning - rather than a book that imitates more or less unproblematically what is.

In other words, the ambition is radically to question the supposed single 'reality' that managers arbitrarily carve out for us through their language. That which might be assumed to be familiar and obvious is shown as able to be recast in unfamiliar ways to defamiliarize, estrange, denaturalise and unsettle that which we might otherwise take to be more or less clear, authoritative and stable in what it communicated (Learmonth, 1999). In particular, Derrida's ideas represent a way of developing emancipatory modes of thinking for those who, like me, feel oppressed and marginalized in the one-dimensional managerial world that such language appears to have constituted. What they do not do however is propose a vision of a utopian 'emancipated' world. Following Derrida, presenting such a vision would always and irredeemably be threatened and rendered paradoxical by the problematics of representation.

Derrida's point is that all authoritative claims, including those seeking to be emancipatory, need to be on guard against themselves. Even emancipatory discourses

can tend towards totalitarianism if they conceal paradox and uncertainty and lend unwarranted authority to the author of such ‘answers’ - even as they masquerade as liberal and progressive (Willmott, 1998b). The nearest Derrida gets to a classical utopian discourse therefore is to suggest that emancipation is grounded in the preservation of the free questioning of everything - *including* what might count as emancipatory (Derrida, 2001) - all apparently straightforward answers deny the need for the restlessness in thinking which is being commended. What is being commended is a version of an emancipatory project Alvesson & Willmott call ‘questioning’:

principally directed at challenging and critiquing dominant forms of thinking ... The aim is to combat the self-evident and the taken for granted ... Its intent is to doubt and resist authority (and its disciplining effects) without, necessarily, proposing an alternative agenda or set of prescriptions

(Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, p.176).

In summary then, a deconstructive reassessment of emancipation and the political more generally, challenges us in particular not to be swayed by the violence that inheres within the assertion of decidable singularities - the violence that inheres in the claim that ‘what I say is this ...’. Deconstruction is a mode of reading designed to show how the world we think we find only gets (and has got) made in the shapes and terms that we take for granted as given, self-evident and natural (Meisel, 1995). Deconstruction is therefore an emancipatory critique in the sense that it enables us to see managers’ claims and practices in a new light so that, as Couzens Hoy (1993) argues, if we thereby come to deplore some of them, “we can try ... to shake up ways of thinking sufficiently so that we can start to see what would be preferable instead” (p.251).

Footnote

1. To be clear, I do not wish to deny (sometimes extreme) economic and physical oppression in organizing processes. I am (emphatically) not wishing to imply that such 'macro-oppression' is unimportant, indeed, quite the reverse. My focus here should not be taken to suggest these are unimportant, only that there are also other kinds of oppression. The oppression of language is more subtle (and therefore more likely to be missed). Furthermore I submit, it is a form of oppression that academics have a realistic chance to influence.

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