

# LETTERS



Dear Radical Philosophy,

I am writing to make some criticisms of Kate Soper's article 'Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism' in RP55 (Summer 1990). I would first like to challenge the following passage:

If this sameness itself is challenged on the grounds that there is no 'presence' of womanhood, nothing that the term 'woman' immediately expresses, and nothing instantiated concretely except particular women in particular situations, then the idea of a political community build (sic) around women – the central aspiration of the early feminist movement – collapses. I say the 'idea', for women still come together in all sorts of groups for feminist purposes, and will doubtless continue to do so for a good while to come even if their doing so transgresses some *Derridean conceptual rulings*. (p. 13, emphasis added)

I would like to argue that Derrida is not challenging the fact that when we meet and talk face-to-face we appear more present than when we use written communication. What he does attack is this empirical experience of presence being used to establish truth, that is the metaphysics of presence. To erect truth on the basis of presence we confuse the *de facto* and the *de jure*, the philosophical fault *par excellence* (Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 1980, p. 140). For example our empirical experience of speech coming before writing as we grow up does not allow us to privilege speech over writing as a general system. As *Of Grammatology* shows us:

(1) the subordination of writing to speech is a prejudice, which not even the special case of so-called phonetic writing substantiates (although it is the case most favourable to this hypothesis); and that

(2) the definition of the graphic sign is really the definition of any sign (that every sign is a *signifier* whose *signified* is another *signifier*, never 'the thing itself', visible, present before us 'in flesh and blood').

(Descombes, p. 147).

Kate Soper confuses an argument that self-presence is impossible as the basis of truth and that our idea of presence is problematic, with the claim that we cannot come together because we are not really there. To make the simple point as well the argument that presence is based on the trace of the other applies to men as well as women. In the essay 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978) Derrida shows that there is a writing before speech in the form of the structure of the psyche. This serves to complicate our ideas that face-to-face communica-

tion is totally transparent by inserting the disruptive effects of radical alterity, even in the psyche, the location of the 'purest' self-presence.

A comparison can be made with what Derrida says about speech-act theory. Although based on commonsense notions of everyday language use speech-act theory erects an entire theory on the basis of these notions which work quite well enough for practical purposes. Derrida questions this form of general theory making from an empirical experience but this does not entail denying the experience (see Norris, 'Derrida' for this argument).

I am also critical of the phrase 'Derridean conceptual rulings' which I find hard to understand. I don't think Derrida would deny that his terms can have conceptual effects but their intention and in their use by Derrida they disrupt any idea of a conceptual rule. A similar fault is made by Barbara Johnson when she suggests that Derrida claims a privileged understanding over Lacan on the basis of writing. The problem is that writing is not a concept or frame, it is 'above all the structural impossibility of limiting this network, of putting an edge on its weave, of tracing a margin that would not be a new mark' (Derrida, *Positions*, 1987, p. 40). Therefore Derrida's 'conceptual rulings' are precisely not that.

If we go through the general strategy of deconstruction or double science in *Positions* (pp. 41–43) this will be clearer. The first phase is the overturning of the philosophical opposition. It can be argued that Cixous and Irigaray remain in this phase. This phase is necessary or we ignore the violence of the opposition, that is that one term governs the other (soul over body, speech over writing, theory over practice, male over female etc.). However, the next stage is the emergence of a new 'concept' which can no longer be held within the previous regime. These are undecidables which resist speculative dialectics and resist any stable solution, e.g. resist becoming conceptual rulings. To give an example *pharmakon* is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside or the outside, neither speech nor writing etc. I think this also answers the point made that Derrida's criticisms are 'posed from the very terrain of the binary oppositions he warns against' (Linda Kintz quoted on p. 15, RP55). To leap out of these oppositions too quickly can leave the field untouched (Derrida, *Positions*, p. 41). The undecidable maintains the opposition but puts it under erasure (*sous rature*). Derrida would avoid any simple leap into intertextual freeplay à la Richard Rorty (see also *The Post Card* for the idea of a system, the post, which is a system in which letters can go astray).

I would also disagree with the statement that Derrida's strategy of 'in-differentiation', 'recommends changes at the level of discourse and consciousness rather than at the level of material – economic and social – circumstance' and that 'it refuses to discriminate between "world" and "text"' (RP55, p. 15). When a criticism like this is made I find it hard to understand if the writer has read any of Derrida's work. For brevity I will quote two

passages by Derrida which would refute the statements made by Kate Soper:

What is produced in the current trembling is a reevaluation of the relationship between the general text and what was believed to be, in the form of reality (history, politics, economics, sexuality, etc.), the simple, referable exterior of language or writing, the belief that this exterior could operate from the simple position of cause or accident'

(*Positions*, p. 91)

Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words – and other stupidities of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed.

(Derrida in Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, 1984, p. 123)

One could also consult *Of Grammatology*, *The Ear of the Other*, *To Speculate – On Freud* and virtually any other text. Again Derrida is not erasing the difference between 'world' and 'text' but problematizing it, our every day assumptions may be fine in practice but can we make general theories on that basis? Deconstruction does not refuse to participate on the field of materialism and idealism but it does approach the field in a radical way. For the most comprehensive analysis of this problematic see *Positions*.

I think the posing of the relation of Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism is a very important task and one that is very hard. However, I feel that Kate Soper does misunderstand the position of Derrida. I would agree that Derrida can be read in a conservative or quietest way, of which Richard Rorty provides the prime example. I think that deconstruction does have important political implications which are valuable to the radical left. Of course I cannot say much in relation to feminism, if Derrida does get in the way then I am sure his work will be sacrificed. However, I do feel that Kate Soper's comments show a lack of understanding which can only further right-wing readings of Derrida (whether they call themselves postmodern bourgeois liberals or not). I would like to close with Derrida's description of deconstruction:

deconstruction (I use this word for the sake of convenience, though it is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me) was not primarily a matter of philosophical contents, themes or theses, philosophemes, poems, theologemes or ideologemes, *but especially and inseparably meaningful frames, institutional structures, pedagogical or rhetorical norms, the possibilities of law, of authority, of evaluation, and of representation in terms of its very market.*

(Derrida, *The Time of a Thesis: punctuations*, pp. 44–45, emphasis added)

Mr Benjamin C. Noys

## Dear Radical Philosophy,

I am grateful to Benjamin Noys for his comments on my article, which I accept may have misconstrued Derrida at one or two points. In regard to my reference to 'Derridean conceptual rulings', however, I think he may have missed a touch of irony. I certainly did not wish to imply that Derrida's attack on 'presence' meant that 'we cannot come together because we are not really there'.

I am sure that no collocation of bodies can be ruled out by an argument, and I do not think Derrida intends us to suppose that it can. My point was rather that Derridean theory made it problematic to regard such 'comings together' as evidence of the kind of consensus and effective unity of purpose which is intrinsic to collective political endeavour. In the act of coming together and making 'common cause' we sink or conflate differences (or the play of difference) of the kind the theory requires us to observe, and in this sense defy its scruples.

'Conceptual rulings' may, I admit, not express this well and show too little respect for Derrida's wish to preserve his terms from all taint of 'presence'. But Derrida is nonetheless quite capable of fairly rule-like formulations (e.g. 'Grammatology must deconstruct everything that ties the concept and norms of scientificity to ontotheology, logocentrism, phonologism' (*Positions*, p. 35), and I suspect my own formulation was prompted by a prescriptive current in his own writing.

As for the strategy of 'in-difference', I think my article is less averse to this than Benjamin Noys implies. I did, however, sound one of two cautions about the ways in which a policy which is advanced in a spirit of gender-alertness might conceal or encourage a certain gender blindness or literal indifference to gender. I cited Linda Kintz's suggestion of a possible blind spot in Derrida's argument in this connection, but I don't in fact think this problem is something internal to Derridean argument or resolvable within it (and if it were I think Derrida would sort it out as well as anyone). I think it has to do with political discriminations in which all of us are caught up.

That would be part of my reply to the final points in the letter about my charging Derrida with idealism. Everyone with an interest in the matter from Engels onwards can claim to have 'problematized' the relationship between 'world' and 'text' ('base' and 'superstructure'), but anyone who does so and who also continually defers any statement about how the theoretical 're-valuation' of the relation between 'general text' and the 'form of reality' relates to the 'form of reality' can be charged with a certain prevarication about how far they wish to sustain the difference in question. As I tried to suggest in my article, I may tremble (slightly) at the approach of a male stranger on a lonely walk even as my thoughts about gender relations are trembling on the verge of embracing 'in-difference'. Faced with that disjuncture, one cannot help feeling that until the 'form of reality' catches up, then what may seem a good idea (for example, to act neither 'like a woman' nor 'like a man') may be an impossible practice.

Kate Soper

## Dear Radical Philosophy,

### *Self Determination and Power Event*

What a curious review in *Radical Philosophy* 55 of the 'Self Determination and Power' event held in Govan recently!

Sadie Plant's view that 'many were disappointed by the atmosphere of complacency' really would have to be supported by some evidence. It would be evidence that would contradict the experience of the vast majority of the people attending over the two days.

Similar problems in perception are evidenced by her view that *Scottish Child* offered a romantic image of childhood as justification for looking at these themes with Noam Chomsky, George Davie and a whole string of commentators, writers and ordinary people.

I really am curious about this 'romantic'. It can't be gleaned from a reading of *Scottish Child* magazine. Certainly nothing like this exists south of the border, but a cursory glance reveals that this is no consumer title presenting heaps of advertorial copy based on a partial or romantic view of childhood.

Perhaps Sadie Plant found other things romantic about this

unusual gathering -

the fact that there were, unusual at such things, equal proportions of men and women?

the playing of soft music over the p.a. during breaks?

in a cultural and political context where the adjective, literary, is used as an accusation, the prominence of artists, musicians, writers and poets as part of the programme?

Or was it 'romantic' that post-industrial Govan was the site for such a gathering on Common Sense philosophy that was attended by a large audience, 10% of whom came from the immediate locality, a third of whom were unwaged, many had never been near a philosophy class in their lives, and the one group clearly under-represented were professional philosophers from institutions of higher education?

If 'a more coherent and immediate paradigm is urgently required' for change in our society (the organisers' ambitions for the event were much less high-minded), are we to see such light emerge from your reviewer's Queen Mary and Westfield College? We watch with interest.

Derek Rodger, Editor, *Scottish Child*, Glasgow



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