

## Philosophy and Subversion: Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction from the Margins\*

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### Abstract:

The necessity of questioning the privileged spaces of power—be it personal, social, political, or religious—is a demand intrinsic to philosophy’s very own structure. In this paper, an identification of the thinking and the practice of subversion with the essence of philosophy is undertaken as a response to the challenge of intellectual sterilization brought about by the insidious effects of an omnipresent techno-capitalism and academic complicity. In particular, I will discuss Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction as a fertile example of a subversive *ethos* that refuses to be complicit with the powers-that-be but transgresses the complacent order of the present so as to achieve an opening for a more just relation to the “other” of thinking that has always been marginalized by history and the philosophical tradition.

If philosophy is to remain true to its originary inspiration, then, it must remain vigilant to the various moments and forms of fossilizations of power and truth. The achievement of a critical position *ownmost* to philosophy is incumbent to us: i.e., as a radical refusal to be complicit with the present effects of power and a continuous cultivation of an *ethos* of writing and thinking that does not concede its loyalty to anything, even to philosophy.

**Keywords:** Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, politics, subversion, ethos of thinking



Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom...<sup>1</sup>

If I had invented my writing, I would have done so as a perpetual revolution.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction: Philosophical Obscurantism

The long standing criticism against academic philosophy being inaccessible to the common man has been the staple of much misunderstanding of Philosophy's relationship with the other disciplines. In fact, it cannot be denied that, often, by reason of its traditionally privileged position as the over-arching comprehension of being [*ens*], Philosophy has been the object of much suspicion and derision as if it was a terrorizing despot that deserves to be castrated. In the modernist sense, this is rightly so. The violence effected by the absolutization of philosophical reason has led to the destruction of the world and evil to humanity in ways that we would not have thought possible. But the days of Philosophy's myopic vision of itself and claim of mastery over knowledge has already given way to a deconstructive self-reflection that is now more capable of seeing its role within a world enframed by the totalizing effects of modern scientific and technological knowledge. Away from its lofty obscurantism, the present time of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview (with Jean Birnbaum)*, translated by Pascal Anne-Brault and Michael Naas (Hoboken: Melville Publishing House, 2007), 31.



Philosophy has started to move towards the future of a more active engagement with the world. If the goal is no longer merely to interpret, but “to change the world,”<sup>3</sup> as Karl Marx opined, a philosophy more palatable for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, must be cultivated as a concrete response to the growing demand for change within social and political systems of oppressions. If there is any point to Philosophy being an abstract, even obscure discipline, then it must be that sense of fierce intellectual refinement that can push the human person away from the perils of complacency sanctioned by the powers-that-be.

It is in this precise sense of being an instrument of change that we revisit philosophy's relation to the practice of politics. Whether one likes it or not, philosophy can only be considered truly radical if its touches on the political: it is a discipline meant not only to enlighten but a praxis, or a way of life that spurs men into action. In fact, the choice of Jacques Derrida, one of the consummate philosophers of our present times, had a political and apocalyptic tone attached to it.<sup>4</sup> Often caricatured as a prophet of doom, Derrida was seen as the unfortunate heir to Nietzschean nihilism, Marxist economic reductionism, and Freud's destructive libidinal tendencies. His deconstruction of traditional philosophy, specifically of western metaphysics, resulted to him being viewed as an enemy of philosophy: the one who finally completed the destruction of the old values, pronounced the end of history, and hammered the final nail into the “still twitching heart of the old God.”<sup>5</sup>

But we dare not signal the messianic end of everything: of systems of thought, of institutions, of kingdoms or of history! Gone are the days when philosophers can declare that all systems are to be superseded by a final system that will end the search for truth say, for instance, the realization of the Absolute Spirit in the finite human mind in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Idealist system; in Karl Marx's announcement of the coming of the “specter of communism;” or more recently, Francis Fukuyama's interpretation of the fall of European Communism as the

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<sup>3</sup> See Karl Marx, “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” in *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1984), 3-37: 20-1.

<sup>5</sup> John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 158.



inevitable historical triumph of capitalist liberal democracy.<sup>6</sup> Rather, we dare announce that the time for systemic self-complacency has come to an end: the centers of power can now be shaken from the margins.

In this paper, then, I will expound on the idea of a deconstruction from the margins as an attempt to question the privileging of the center of any given system of thought or institution that claims to found its legitimacy either on a transcendental (God) or self-referential, immanent (human nature) absolute truth. By systems of thought, we mean any social, economic, political, historical, or religious system that claims completeness with regard to the production of truth about its object. Due to this completeness, any other pronouncement about the object must necessarily be relegated to the status of a secondary knowledge that is essentially subservient to the privileged order defined by the center. Specifically, however, I will advance the idea that deconstruction, understood as something that takes place in a text, is deeply structured as a subversive mode of philosophizing. Essentially, to philosophize is to be constantly engaged in the never-ending subversion of states of affairs and of systems of thought; it is to be constantly wary of any attempt to solidify the truth of a particular discourse into a privileged ideology whose structure is epistemically violent.<sup>7</sup> By underlining the tension between the monolithic dogmatism of established ideologies and the ruptures occasioned by the subversive nature of philosophic discourse, we hope to commence a

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Henceforth SM.

<sup>7</sup> I follow here the trajectory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's thought on *epistemic violence* as the inevitable theoretical violence consequent to theoretico-ideological production. When applied to the social, economic, political, and historical text, epistemic violence results to the cognitive failure to let the "subaltern," i.e., the concrete, marginalized subject of oppression, "speak for itself" within the narrative of colonialism. The practical effects of this epistemic violence are found in the social inclusions and exclusions necessarily created by the production of knowledge and social identities. (See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg [Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988], 271-313.)



thinking from the margins that enables us to be open to the “other” that has been marginalized by systems of thought, history, and tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, this paper will proceed in three parts: first, a description of the problem of epistemic violence connected with philosophical dogmatism; second, an exposition of deconstruction as a subversive thinking from the margins that critically questions the problem of epistemic violence; and third, the role of philosophic subversion in creating open spaces for justice as a response to the demand of the call of the “other.” I will conclude this paper within the context of the university as a classic exemplification of the emancipatory potential we can expect from the subversive character of deconstruction.

### Deconstruction as a Political Program

That deconstruction has been conceived as political, from its inception, by Derrida is no accident. It was not a theme that suddenly surfaced later in his writings by a stroke of luck or fashion. Deliberately, in fact, its political program had been quite clear even before the time deconstruction became an intellectual fad for many professors of literature in the American continent.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> At the outset, it must clear that the Derridean account of deconstruction as an “openness towards the other” follows Emmanuel Levinas’ account of the other [*l’autrui*] (see Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” in *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. by Richard Kearney [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984], 118). Along this line, Simon Critchley discusses that the sense of ethics in both Levinas and Derrida is hinged on the description of ethics as a questioning of the ego’s freedom and spontaneity by the other (see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* [West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999] and his “Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, edited by Chantal Mouffe [London: Routledge, 1996], 19-42).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty suggests that the popularization of deconstruction within literary circles in America led to its being misunderstood as a literary method that can be easily applied ready-at-hand to any literary text. This mentality produced tens of thousands of deconstructive readings that are “formulaic and boring” and to its subsequent caricature as a kind of “intellectual masturbation.” (See Richard Rorty, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 13-18).



In the wake of Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas post-structuralist thinking, the deconstruction of established philosophical, cultural, economic, and socio-political systems grounds its structural legitimacy in the attempt to articulate what has been repressed by tradition, i.e., by the authoritative and normative accounts of history, economics, sociology, and politics. This attempt precisely constitutes that ethical moment when the stability of the center, for instance, God, Logos, Being [ens], Power or Capital, upon which dominant structures of thought find their self-legitimation, began to be de-centered in the name of that which remains unarticulated, unthought, and un-presentable within the traditional accounts of the history of philosophy. Such decentering implies that our usual understanding of historical and philosophical truth can no longer be taken for granted at their usual face-value: the centers have been exposed at their foundations to be trembling and thus, found wanting. Derrida writes:

Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, as a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.<sup>10</sup>

In a sense, the radicality of deconstruction can be glimpsed from the fact that all systems of thought can be exposed at their roots even before the most radical subjective critique becomes possible. But what is exposed at the roots is the fact that there is no absolutely sacrosanct and privileged point of view from which we can view or take hold of reality. What is at the roots is an origin that is not pure and virgin but one already characterized by fissures and division; in a word, an origin that is not really originary but one that is always already invented, and thus, subject either to socio-political, or techno-scientific, or economic-capitalist manipulation. Viewed this way, the notion of an *originary center* is a contradiction: since the center is itself constructed as such, it can therefore never be originary.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 353-4.

<sup>11</sup> The idea of a center, for Derrida, is "contradictorily coherent" (*ibid.*, 352).



The center can never be an origin unless it has been claimed to be so and made to do so by the intellectual and practical hegemony of those who would be benefited by the existence of a center. The center, as such, is conceivably identical with the origin that guarantees stability to the structures of truth, meaning, authority that by necessity, grounds the possibility for the monopoly of discourse, knowledge, and power. The axis of truth-knowledge-power<sup>12</sup> supported by a coherent center illustrates the general object against which Derrida carries out his most pervasive deconstructive attack, i.e., towards what he calls as the “metaphysics of presence.”<sup>13</sup> In this vein, all systems of thought are seen to suffer from a fundamental structural blindness: i.e., they fail to articulate what has been excluded from the center or, conversely, they fail to heed the voice from the margins. The failure to give voice to what was unthought, unspoken, and unrepresentable by tradition is what precisely constitutes that irreducible “cognitive failure” that characterize the whole history of philosophy.<sup>14</sup> By reason of this cognitive failure, the history of thought is itself implicated within a history of violence that is both theoretical and existential. The limits of a closed philosophical system that refuses to acknowledge its fundamental blindness to what has been marginalized by tradition and the history of thought inevitably results to a dogmatism that is epistemically violent. Through epistemic violence, it becomes impossible for the “other,” that is, the marginalized subject of philosophy and history to let herself be heard within the dogmatisms imposed by the established paradigms of

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<sup>12</sup> I follow Michel Foucault’s standpoint in elucidating this axis. By so doing, I am relating the problem of totalizing truths and knowledge to the concrete effects and contexts of power that were also the central objects of Derrida’s deconstruction. (See Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York and London: Routledge, 1988]; specifically the section on “Theories of the Political” (57-156); see also Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *The Foucault Reader* [New York: Pantheon, 1984], 51-75.)

<sup>13</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 18-24.

<sup>14</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” in *The Spivak Reader*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 203-236; 207. Also in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).



thought and history. Truly, it becomes easy to see how systems of thought that have appropriated unto themselves the monopoly of truth can become instruments of violence and domination. Left unchecked to operate on their monopoly of knowledge and truth, they exercise a “silent programming function”<sup>15</sup> that solidify truths into the precarious notions of the self, morality, or even God.

It is within this context of epistemic violence where we can properly situate Derrida’s deconstructive project as a political program. The epistemic violence resulting from the cognitive failure to take into account the “unthought” as the that-which-cannot-be-thought by the tradition reveals itself as the inevitable catalyst for the very activity of deconstruction. This element of the unthought is what Derrida will ultimately call as “the impossible” as he clarifies the motivational structure for carrying out the critique of presence. The “impossible” is what transgresses the closure and “indicates a way out of it”<sup>16</sup> leaving “scars” of that irreducible alterity or exteriority that continuously disturbs the closure of totality.<sup>17</sup>

On this account, Derrida’s deconstruction of presence takes place as a reading of the metaphysical tradition as a *logocentric* text which exposes itself to its own flaws as a result of an alterity which the text is unable to reduce or expel.<sup>18</sup> This alterity or exteriority is what exceeds the closure of the totality of presence and creates the fissures which open up the logocentric text to regions of meaning no longer contained within the system ordained by presence, but one already determined as an effect of *différance*, that is, the play or movement that underlines the differing and deferral of presence.<sup>19</sup> In this vein, deconstruction as “something that takes place in a text” becomes a question of a strategy that opens a text up into

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 57.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Differance” in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 141.



the possibility of the multiplicity of meanings.<sup>20</sup> This mechanical sense orients us to a central point about what a deconstructive reading is: it is not an effect or an activity of the subject who exercises absolute power and control over its own destiny. Instead, it is the subject herself who becomes inscribed within and transformed into an effect of language.

What is at stake in this gesture here is the most radical separation—or distantiation—of the hermeneutic powers of the conscious subject from the established effects of language and textuality. Simply, this means that the subject is no longer the sole absolute ruler and lord of meaning, the sovereign and autonomous authority with regard to the interpretation of texts. Instead, inasmuch as she is inscribed as an effect of language, the subject herself becomes *subjected* to its [i.e., language] disruptive effects.<sup>21</sup> With its sovereignty questioned, the ahistorical transcendental subject, as interpreter of texts, becomes subjected to historicity and to the finite conditions of meaning and existence.

### Deconstruction as Subversion

The decentralization occasioned by the fissures within the center itself and the ruptures effected by the marginal reveals to us the very structure of deconstructive thinking as subversion.<sup>22</sup> Set against the complacent hegemony of the powers-that-be, deconstruction confronts

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend" in *Derrida and Differance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-5; 2.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida's decentering constitutes the subject within and through language, "inscribing" him in the language, constituting him as a "function" of language (see "Differance," 145). In this regard, the subject can only *speak*, as it were, insofar as he conforms his *speech* to the rules of the language-system taken as a system of differences. The subject, through speech, is only intelligible within language. Consequently, since *differance* is what makes possible the play of differences within language, constitutes the present in terms of these differences, and inscribes the subject within language, *differance* is that which enables the subject's speech to be meaningful within the language. *Differance* itself, is "the relation of speech to language." It is the detour which one must pass if one is to speak (ibid., 146).

<sup>22</sup> Having its roots in *differance* as "the subversion of every realm" (ibid., 153), deconstructive decentralization shares in the radical project of distancing power away from all forms of hegemony, whether "social, economic, and cultural" (Foucault, "Truth and Power," 75).



philosophy by what is “other” to it. But this other *of*, or *to*, philosophy, is an other that has been hitherto “unheard of by philosophy, an other which is no longer its other.”<sup>23</sup> It is an other that cannot be philosophy’s proper other because it cannot be reduced to philosophy and since it is irreducible to philosophy, this other becomes the site of non-philosophy, even as an anti-philosophy, that puts into question the credibility of philosophy as a self-engrossed discipline. Within philosophy, therefore, at its roots, lies inescapably the very structures of its own subversion that places something at the center only at the expense of what has been at the margins. The whole history of philosophy, within this perspective, becomes a series of substituting one center for another, always aimed at a particular consolidation of the axis of truth-knowledge-power. Yet, within its own seeds, as an activity of thought aimed at the dynamic movement of the center and its margins, of a center against other centers, of the struggle between its inside and outside, philosophy remains to be a dynamic process that can never be laid to rest. Perpetually moving, it continually sets itself against itself or against anything that arrests its internal dynamicity in favor of a complacent order of things. This is the reason why subversion belongs to the very structure of philosophy: it is a form of thinking beholden to nothing except the impossible “other” that comes to rupture its own complacency. It is a form of thinking that recovers its movement away from the solidifying structures of thought. And thus, any attempt to privilege a certain absolute and originary principle or order of things should be anathema to the very nature of philosophic thinking itself. In this sense, the freedom of thought that describes philosophy demands an utmost respect for the life that thinking serves. Against all forms of solidification of thought, the philosophic life can only be realized when thought is left free to affirm life in its pristine, “original difficulty.”<sup>24</sup>

### Deconstruction from the Left

This obsession, akin to the Nietzschean affirmation of life, is what effectively aligns Derrida as a thinker of the left. But this is not to fetishize him as an anarchic despiser of common reason and its resulting social and

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, xiv.

<sup>24</sup> I follow John Caputo’s lead in restoring the “original difficulty of life” in his *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 209.



political institutions. Instead, Derrida has firmly sided himself with the impossible other who demands that their voices be heard and their call responded to as a matter of justice. Derrida would rebuke any intellectual who would side with the powers-that-be especially with those institutions that support the (un)holy alliance of the Church, the State and Capital. In his *Specters of Marx*, considered as Derrida's most mature political engagement, he categorically denounced the unholy alliance that had conspired to drive away the looming specter of communism announced by Marx: "All possible alliances are forged to do away with this common adversary: the specter of communism."<sup>25</sup>

For Derrida, the task of thinking demands a more radical commitment that should take the side of the less fortunate and of those who are farthest remove from the benefits of power. Those intellectuals who act in complicity with the techno-scientific and capitalist powers betray, in essence, their call towards the construction of a more just order of things. Blatantly, they are in cahoots with the structures of oppression and domination that deconstruction has so vigorously opposed. On this account, the moments of *aporia*<sup>26</sup> encountered during a deconstructive reading are not meant to paralyze the individual into inaction. On the contrary, they move us into a kind of response that is moved away from the egoisms of the individual towards a more adequate faith-response to the suffering of the other person. In a word, deconstruction is a guide for us to be fully responsive in an ethical manner to the demands of justice occasioned by the limitations of our finite totalizations. The moment of epistemic blindness must give way to a decision geared towards the radical transformation of the state of things.<sup>27</sup> As Spivak reminds us:

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 124 .

<sup>26</sup> *Aporias* are experiences which bring us to the limits of finite human knowing and allow us to recognize what is structurally beyond the possibility of metaphysical thinking. It is an experience of encountering an impasse in thinking on account of a threshold that one cannot conceptually cross. Here, one encounters a moment of impossibility/impassibility since thinking is confronted by the possibility of being in a place where "there is no longer any problem," in a threshold where conceptual representation of objects no longer holds. See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Beardsworth in his book also traces this possibility of political action in the "relation 'between' aporia and decision" within the project of



“deconstruction alone cannot found a political program;” “a mere change of mindset, however great, will not bring about revolutions.”<sup>28</sup> What is further necessary is a radical commitment that abhors any allegiance to the dominant centers of oppression. Thus, a deconstructive political position must be set against any individualistic position that claims to found a liberal ethics of individualism, a position of a “body-without-organs” that is socially paralyzed by virtue of its deliberate refusal to engage concrete ethical situations.<sup>29</sup> What such individualistic ethics fail to realize however, is that their refusal to engage the ethical demand results to the fetishization of the powers of oppression as the normative state of affairs. This results to a system where individuals themselves are increasingly fragmented and decentralized with respect to the political and economic control of their lives. In this situation, what remains is “a lack of any conceivable interest in a collective practice of social justice, or in recognizing the ethico-politically repressive construction of what presents itself as theoretical, legal, benign, free, or natural.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the question remains: “As thinkers, to whom are we indebted to? To the demand of the *impossible* other or to the powers-that-be?”

### Subversion as the Ethos of Thinking

Confronted by the aporia of this philosophico-political question, we can say that the most important deconstructive lesson in understanding the relationship between philosophy and subversion is the constant questioning of “the complacent apathy of self-centralization” and “the bigoted elitism [theoretical and practical] conversely possible in collective practice.”<sup>31</sup> What is essential, then, is to cultivate that *unyielding* and

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discerning a political sense within Derrida’s philosophy. His central claim is that: “aporia is the very locus in which the political force of deconstruction can be found.” See his *Derrida and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), xiv.

<sup>28</sup> Spivak, “Revolutions that as yet have no model: Derrida’s “Limited Inc.”” in *The Spivak Reader*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, with a preface by Michel Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). I also allude here to Gayatri Spivak’s critique of Deleuze in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

<sup>30</sup> Spivak, “Revolutions that as yet have no model,” 101.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



*incorruptible* “ethos of writing and thinking” that does not concede its loyalty to anything, “even to philosophy, an *ethos* that does not let itself be scared off by what public opinion, the media, or the phantasm of an intimidating readership might pressure one to simplify or repress.”<sup>32</sup>

Subversion, then, is a commitment to a life of freedom; though a freedom that is already conditioned by its responsibility for the plight of the other and one that *necessarily* positions itself against the totalizing hegemony of any kind of power. In what may be thought as freedom in the wake of Foucault, Levinas, Heidegger and Derrida, such absolutization of our human capacity is not a relapse back into a potentially violent subjective relativism but a *selective exorcism*<sup>33</sup> of the evil ghosts brought about by the complacent and insipid thinking of contemporary technocapitalist culture. Condemning the alienation and dehumanization brought about by the all-pervading and incessant technicalization of nature by modern technology, the thinker has the task of preserving wonder as the source of a child-like force that can put the present culture’s complacency within critical lens, into a kind of perpetual de-construction that lets nothing be safe and self-assured. This force that comes from the innocence of wonder is the source both of a subversive potential that can combat the subtle and pitiful transformation of human beings into mere cogs in the global industrial machine or their violent and their forceful extraction as beasts of burden that can be readily summoned at hand as cheap labor

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 27-28.

<sup>33</sup> I have taken this idea from Derrida’s conception of a “selective critique” to filter the many “Marxisms” or spirits of Karl Marx (SM, 69). In his *Specters of Marx*, Derrida insists for a certain kind of selectivity when he mentions the need for a “critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation” of the philosophical inheritance bequeathed to us by Marx, an inheritance that is always and already “a call to responsibility” (114). My initial use of this term “selective exorcism” was in an earlier lecture I delivered during the *Marx Festival 2012: Reviving the Specter*, which is a conference conducted in March 2012 in honor of Professor Amable Tuibeo, founder of the Department of Philosophy of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. The lecture was later published as “Marx is not a Marxist: The Ghost of the “To Come” and the Technological Transformation of Labor and the Life of Capital” in *Mabini Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2014), 1-15; see page 6.



within *Enframing*.<sup>34</sup> The thinker must therefore always learn how to learn, in an endless process of re-learning and unlearning, always drawing from this innocent wonder the impetus for a tenacious faith in the coming of a better future. Recalling Martin Heidegger's counsel, a certain "piety of thinking" is thus in order, if we are to insist on the essential condition for a subversive mode of philosophizing. This piety of thinking is not a fearful and remorseful return to dwelling but a radical struggle to keep life and everything that is necessary to sustain it with dignity—such as respect, recognition, love, and forgiveness—together as integral parts of the human being's journey towards authenticity. The promise of the "to come" [*à venir*] can only be assured by a non-assuming and non-assured, yet subversive, waiting because it knows that the stability of the powers-that-be lay on foundations whose finite structure would always be solicited (or shaken up) by the "to come" of what is *other to* temporality, from the other that comes to constitute the time of the subject and its power as such.

To understand subversion in this manner implies an openness to what may come as a sort of monstrosity from the future. Subversion can never stop at the absolutization of any particular metaphysical standpoint but must always recognize its historical inscription as always already implicated as a possible target of its very own process of subversion. A subversive standpoint, in the name of justice and the future, has to always and already contain in itself the elements for its own destruction and the force initiating its own subversion. If a particular critique risks claiming a sacrosanct standpoint, immune to any critique, it will transmogrify itself into a monster worse than the totalizing systemic evils that it purports to combat. Historically, the substitution of one hegemonic center by another,<sup>35</sup> as from traditional monarchies to socialist totalitarianisms or from the Euro-American bourgeois capitalism to transnational techno-

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<sup>34</sup> I formulate this statement within the context of Martin Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the history of ontology as the problem of the Enframing [*Ge-stell*] occasioned by modern technology. See for instance Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 311-341; 334.

<sup>35</sup> To give an instance, Reiner Schürmann illustrates this deconstruction of the history of philosophical systemic hegemonies as a series of unifying substitutions of different kinds of phantasms in his *Broken Hegemonies* (trans. Reginald Lily [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003]).



capitalism or from colonial to nationalist rule, has only camouflaged the translation of violence and injustice within the aura of modern liberal thought. Once the substitution has taken place, the new hegemon stands to appropriate the full powers of sovereignty unto itself. This tendency, which we have witnessed in the unfortunate mass murders and killings of innumerable human persons in world history carried out in the name of religion, race, ethnicity, state, nation, capital, or simply ideology, has become the prevalent feature of our social and political histories. Such arrogation of power that is tied to these despicable evils against human life can only be the result of the essential insecurity that lies at the heart of all regimes of totalizing mastery and violence. Knowing their own fragile foundations, the practical hegemony of power, whether in an individual dictator or a social aristocracy, or in a national oligarchy or in a corrupt state, will always be subjected to the limits of its own temporality. The instances of an Adolf Hitler, a Saddam Hussein, a Mu'ammer al Gaddafi, or of a Ferdinand Marcos, instruct us that power and its preservation can only depend upon the execution of a terror masked as legitimate power. Yet, the same instances also reveal that the power they possess is mortal and simple, one that can always be subverted in the fragility of the instant. Destined to perish, these despots and their kingdoms testify to the presence of an autoimmune logic that reveals the seeds of subversion contained within every exercise of power.<sup>36</sup> Power can and will always be subverted, its own subversion being the condition for its existence.

The presence of a dialectical tension between the exercise of power and its very own subversion testifies to the fragility of life haunted by its essential subjection to temporality. Haunted by its involuntary birth and inevitable death, human life remains to be that ultimate reference that can decide and assess the fate of power and its manifold effects. Temporal life, in its concrete facticity, reveals to us the radical insecurity that lies at the heart of any assumption of power whether it be an individual, by a

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<sup>36</sup> By "autoimmunity," I make an explicit reference to Jacques Derrida's thinking of this concept as referring to that "strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion "itself" works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its "own" immunity." See Jacques Derrida and Giovanna Borradori, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida" in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94. This work will be henceforth cited as PTT.



social collective, by a cultural group, or a nationalist political imagination. These roots will always reveal themselves solicited in their very foundation by the processes of change that result from the very structure of time. Such threat of danger runs counter to the security enjoyed by the sovereign powers of this world. Subversion shakes the whole edifice of sovereignty by revealing all things as coming to their fruition in a certain end whose coming will surprise us. Life thus, in all its beauty and ugliness, happiness and pain, joys and sorrows, pleasure and pain, comfort and terror, will come to an end. But this is also to recognize that the threat of the end, of a certain apocalypse for life and all its forms, is also at the same time a kind of promise: one that is premised on the coming of the future [*avenir*] that announces a better state of life. Such promise of a better state illustrates that the movement of life is always one that goes from the bad to the good, from the good to the better, in an indefinite process of appropriating what is proper to human life itself, i.e., to continue in its movement as long as it can and to resist forms of power that threaten to end its time.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, while the subjection of human life to the ecstasies of past, present, and future reveal its fragility as the ownmost beauty of human existence, any attempt to eternalize human life through an idea or ideal must be always seen as suspect. This means that philosophic thinking must make us wary of those ideological mystifications that purports to support it but

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<sup>37</sup> In a way, this point is similar to, or runs parallel to, Martin Hägglund's central thesis about the nature of human life as essentially mortal in his *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). While there is really nothing philosophically new in this assertion, Hägglund's claim about the *trace*-structure of time as the principle of a "radical atheism" led him to deny any transcendental significance to human mortal life (no eternity or after-life). This kind of atheism interprets the "desire for immortality" as a disguised form of an immanent human desire for survival that is prior to immortal desire yet "contradicts it from within" (1). So for him, the truly radical atheism is one that does not only deny God's existence but one that qualifies the survival inherent to life as "incompatible with immortality" (ibid.). This leads him to develop a notion of immortality understood against the perfect and endless possession of life in the now, present, or instant, but precisely as the opposite of life, i.e., absolute death. He writes: "If to be alive is to be mortal, it follows that to *not* be mortal—to be immortal—is to be dead" (8). Thus, the prescriptive negation of a choice or a belief in anything transcendent to life as capable of giving meaning to the question of what it means to be human. This leads him to the allegedly "radical" conclusion that even "the immortality of God is not desirable in the first place" (ibid.).



ultimately run counter to life's essential mortality, i.e., to its preservation and continuation. The innumerable "isms" propagated by various cultural politics must thus always be held in check by a critical reflexive stance, one that is always open to the possibility of its own endless subversion.

The double-bind in which the practice of philosophic subversion finds itself reveal to us the multifaceted character of subversion itself. As an activity presenting both promise and danger, subversion is not necessarily bad. On the contrary, in many cases, it might be the only ethical way to respond to the absolute demand of the impossible that is "to-come" [*à venir*]. For Derrida, this impossible is what comes from the future as the unexpected *arrivant* whose coming can only be approximated but never adequately prepared for. It is what comes as a shock, whose monstrosity is also the source of its beauty, that opens life in its temporality to that absolutely other, which in the ultimate analysis comes to constitute the time of its own human mortal life.<sup>38</sup> Time, then, is not an achievement of the subject<sup>39</sup> but one that is already given as an effect of the face-to-face relation.<sup>40</sup> Or, as Emmanuel Levinas strongly asserts, it is the intersubjective relation, within the *space* announced by the coming of "[t]he other as the future,"<sup>41</sup> that gives rise to time, one which is no longer

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<sup>38</sup> This is a point which escapes Martin Hägglund's critique of Emmanuel Levinas (see *Radical Atheism*, 76ff). Drawing his analysis mainly from *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans Alphonso Lingis [The Hauge, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979]) and *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1981, 1997) he fails to note that the time of the self as a *trace* can only be constituted by the coming of what is absolutely other to the life of immanence, i.e., by what is absolutely transcendent so as to rupture the self-containment of the subject. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Time and the Other" in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 37-58; 45-6.

<sup>39</sup> See Sean Hand, "Editor's Introduction" to "Time and the Other" in the *Levinas Reader*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, 45. Levinas writes: "The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history."

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

understood *merely* as “a purely personal duration.”<sup>42</sup> The life of the self (or ego) is thus revealed not as an autonomous, purely sovereign, and powerful subject but one whose identity is always already solicited by its own essential fragility. The structure of time reveals a peculiar weakness in human life itself inasmuch as life is incapable, at will, of persistence in being and of recalling into presence the ecstasies of the past that has already passed or of the future which is not yet, and more significantly, of holding on to its own *present* time (i.e., the now or the instant). Due this, we see that human life “never attains true self-possession” but is only “alive from moment to moment.”<sup>43</sup> Phenomenologically, we are then forced to conclude that “the being of the ego [i.e., human life], as a constantly changing living present, is not autonomous being but *received* being, it has been *placed into existence* and is sustained in existence from moment to moment.”<sup>44</sup> The persistence of life is a result of the continual re-endowment of being from moment to moment that illustrates the giving of time no longer as the event of the subject but of an alterity that escapes the complacent order of the present, i.e., of an *other that is absolutely foreign* to the order of thought, language, and presence—or simply, in Derrida’s words: the impossible.

The subject’s entrance into time or, the acquisition thereof, marks the constitution of life as essentially divided in itself. But this division occurs, at the same time, as the movement of temporalization that marks the emergence of life as constituted space. Thus, we see that the subject’s entrance into time, i.e., temporalization, also marks its entrance into space, i.e., spacing, where life is properly constituted as finite, i.e., as having the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, D.C.; ICS Publications, 2002), 54.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Original emphasis. This movement from the phenomenological consideration of time to its dialectical confirmation in an ontology of lived experience is also sanctioned by Levinas’ own admission that his method “is not phenomenological to the end.” (See Levinas, “Time and the Other,” 45.) At the limits of phenomenology (as the study of appearances) lies an opening for the understanding of concrete human life in terms of lived-experience. This is the philosophical path that Edith Stein herself has taken even before Levinas. We cannot anymore pursue our reflections here about this difficult question due to the limits of space.



possibility of beginning and of coming to an end. This radical finitude, however, does not enclose life with a limited and meaningless mortality, but one whose immanence is always already opened to the contamination of the other in transcendence. This way, the becoming space of time, or what Derrida calls as “spacing-temporalizing,” can always already be an effect of the “play of *differance*,” i.e., the movement that resists assimilation into any standard system of presence.<sup>45</sup> The immanientiation of the subject through temporalizing-spacing does not preclude the rupture of what is absolutely other to it. On the contrary, the immanence of life demands that it be brought out into time by an *impossible* alterity that comes unexpected because it is totally *other to time*. This totally other comes as the impossible object of a hope that effectively suspends and defers the security of present power regardless of its form. Subversion, which implies an over-throwing of power initiated from below, testifies to this hope that human life is always on the move towards something better, in a space where life inevitably comes to its more proper fulfillment, though one that will never fully come or be given. To understand life as a movement is thus to see it as always *given time*,<sup>46</sup> dynamically sustained, as it were, by a continuous giving of successive instants. Human life is thus always already delivered over to its future time, not by virtue of its self-present sovereign power, but by a gratuitous act that reveals life as a gift continually re-created and renewed. This persistence is warranted by a joyful hope in the coming of the future time of life that is sure to come because life itself is necessarily moving towards its own perfection. Life is always necessarily on the way towards the future way as a process of becoming and this constitutes the structure of life as one of survival. To survive means, in this case, to continuously break-upon the abyss of nothingness, and to defer, in an indefinite postponement, the event of death. But as Derrida makes clear, to survive, as

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<sup>45</sup> See Derrida, “Differance,” 136-7.

<sup>46</sup> In Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the aporetics of the gift, he clearly states that what is given by the gift is time. He writes: “The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*. The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. *There where there is a gift, there is time*. What it gives, the gift of time is also a demand of time.” (Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992], 41; original emphasis.) Transporting this argument into the genesis of the self/subject, the gift of time is at the same time the gift of life that also announces itself, ironically, as a gift of death (see *ibid.*, 54).



the act of adding life [Latin 'super' + 'vivere'; French 'sur-vie'], also contains the economy of going beyond-life, of persistence not only as the continuity of life, but even to go beyond this mortal life, to live on beyond the essential finitude of human life. As Derrida himself makes clear:

I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living and dying. It is originary: life is living on, life is survival [*la vie est survie*]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death.<sup>47</sup>

The finitude of human mortal life does not automatically demand that we resign to the limitations of immanent life in death but instead, through the trace-structure of time, signifies that the existential movement “which creates time and creates it as its “space,”<sup>48</sup> is always a becoming that necessarily moves forward towards the future considered as a progress of life. Yet, inasmuch as it will never arrive at a full and “true possession of [its] existence,”<sup>49</sup> human temporal life can only move towards this future fullness of life by reason of transcendence, i.e., by being continually given time by the totally and absolutely other that resists (because entirely other to it), yet sustains, time.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> H. Conrad Martius, “Die Zeit,” *Philosophischer Anzeiger II*, 2 and 4 (1927/28), 349. Cited in Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> This formulation is contextualized within Edith Stein’s argument for the gift of life (or being) as an act of the eternal being, i.e., that being that has no temporal dimension. (See *ibid.*, 37, 61, for some instances). It is obvious here that I take issue with Martin Hägglund’s reductionist transmogrification of deconstruction into an autoimmunitary process that limits human life within total immanence to the total exclusion of any form of transcendence. What is called *radical atheism* is simply an obstinate refusal to leave the plane of material immanence that results from the failure to assess what is really at stake in deconstruction. His refusal to recognize the sphere of absolute alterity that instigates the origination and perpetuation of time was in manifest contradiction to what Derrida was opening himself up to: i.e., the impossible [other] that is revealed as the unrepresentable, unnameable, unthinkable, and incalculable *arrivant* coming from the future. In domesticating the impossible into pure immanence, Hägglund ridiculously arrives at a conclusion opposite to what Derrida himself has



Within this context, to survive means to engage in a continual subversion of the present since to continually live on means that one must overthrow all those structures that impede the free flow of life as it actualizes itself on the way to its proper future. Subversion complicates the structure of survival since it sets itself against all present structures that threaten to destroy the time of life. In doing so, subversion discriminates against those modes of life, or what we may call as *image-structures of living on*, that hinders or closes the possibility for a fuller experience or better state of life. In this vein, it is possible to pronounce the radical evil of those ideological structures that limit life to a certain *metaphysical* “organization of time”<sup>51</sup> and becomes a form of theoretical and practical hegemony over human life. Thus, we set subversion against the economies of violence manifested in various totalitarianisms such as colonialism, nationalisms, terrorisms, and other forms of domination. Derrida was unambiguously adamant against these ideological movements that destroy human life or curtail its essential tendency towards the achievement of a better state, thus his indictment of the modern slavery brought about by techno-capitalism, of the deceptions presented by the modern mass media, of the

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painstakingly called for, i.e., to be open to that which is the *other of*, because entirely *other to*, presence, language, thinking, and calculative economy in the name of a structural future which surpasses immanent mortal life and opens it up, from within temporality, to its own proper transcendence. His espousal of a rigid form of atheistic materialism was the logical outcome of an arbitrary reduction of deconstruction as a method that is, to use John Caputo’s description, “all scrubbed up and sanitized.” (See John Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11:2 [Spring 2011], 32-125; 33). This arbitrariness can, in turn, be traced to a certain (deliberate?) ignorance about the varied ways and forms in which Derrida carries out his task of deconstruction. So, instead of furthering the cause of life, such re-inventive, though ultimately un-deconstructive, reduction of deconstruction encloses life within a materialist ideology that offers life no future except one that moves towards a violent immanence. Such reduction is ideological because it implicitly re-inscribes the purist (metaphysical) dichotomy between materiality and ideality which Derrida was so keen to overcome.

<sup>51</sup> In this context, I follow Richard Beardsworth’s understanding of metaphysical thought “as a specific *organization* of time . . . one that ‘disavows’ time by casting an opposition between the atemporal and the temporal, the eternal and the transitory, the infinite and the finite, the transcendental and the empirical.” (*Derrida and the Political*, xiii).

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violence of those “blood nationalisms,”<sup>52</sup> and of modern terrorism which have no future because they promise nothing better about life except the simulacrum of a life saturated by fetishism. To single out terrorism for instance, Derrida strongly condemns “not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism,” but more importantly, the fact that these discourses and acts of violence, and intolerance (such as anathema, excommunication, censorship, marginalization, distortion, control, programming, expulsion, exile, imprisonment, hostage taking, death threats, execution, and assassination)<sup>53</sup> “*open onto no future and, in my [i.e., Derrida’s] view, have no future.*”<sup>54</sup>

This way, philosophic subversions must selectively set themselves against the ideological and openly set life within those modes of living that promise a better state of life or in what Derrida calls as the openness to the “messianic,” which he takes as a “general structure of experience” that opens life to the future as its fuller realization though “without the structure of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration.”<sup>55</sup> This messianic structure is something that we should distinguish against “messianisms” or traditional religious institutions (such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam). For Derrida, the understanding of the messianic as that universal structure that prevents our experience from being self-contained in its present provides the radical fulcrum from which the separation of what is authentically “religious” from mere religio-ideological and fanaticized fetishism can be worked out. This only happens when the human subject of religion has already surpassed the Dionysian frenzy of “the demonic secret and the orgiastic sacred” towards the sphere of “the

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<sup>52</sup> SM, 169.

<sup>53</sup> See Borradori, PTT, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 113. Original emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” trans. Samuel Weber, in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1-78; §21, 18. Also published in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, edited with an introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 40-101.



responsibility of a free self.”<sup>56</sup> In what “amounts to a thesis on the origin and essence of religion,” the “*passage* to responsibility” involves the destruction of the sacred secret of the demonic in order to integrate responsibility into the life of the subject. As Derrida writes:

The subject of responsibility will be the subject that has managed to make orgiastic and demonic mystery subject to itself; and has done that in order to freely subject itself to the wholly and infinite other that sees without being seen.<sup>57</sup>

For us, this implies that the practice of subversion must be essentially inscribed within the sphere of responsibility. Without this responsibility, it risks transforming itself into a worse image of the ideological fetishes that were under de-construction. If subversion was to serve the injunctions of the *messianic*, as a response-able waiting for that which is “to come,” it must radically always keep open this relation to the future as the source of change, of transformation, of ever-new avenues for the freedom of philosophic thinking.

### Towards an Emancipatory Education

In the context of this radical responsibility, subversion as the ethos of thinking in turn demands a form of education that freely cultivates itself away from the insidious effects of a university education that serves the purposes of transnational capitalism, religious fundamentalisms and decadent nationalisms. To advocate this educational freedom means that a conscious emphasis is placed on the freedom of students to think for themselves and to provide the necessary spaces for defining their life projects apart from the fetishism of the high culture of contemporary capitalist education. It is not hard to see that much of what happens in the educational field has only legitimized the hegemony of instrumental techno-scientific reason to the detriment of philosophic education. What is crucial to note at this point is the continual consummation of the apocalypse of free thought in favor of the triumph of the ideology of money. A university or any educational institution that cannot move towards the

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



prioritization of the philosophical “right to think” will eventually fall prey into its own auto-immune destruction.

To illustrate an instance, the advent of the Philippine K-12 technology and the consummation of the ASEAN integration are inevitable signs of the impending doom Philippine universities are facing. Although this argument can be extended to include all universities in general, it is an unfortunate truth that education in our modern universities have become complicit with the perpetuation of the dominant classes’ hold on power within the international division of labor. Instead of becoming the locus where truth is to be discoursed and freedom is to be practiced, the modern university has become a factory for the production of slaves for the same old masters.<sup>58</sup> Itself enslaved by the demands of the international techno-capitalist market, the university often acts as a conduit of an indifferent comprador nation-state that quantifies human lives merely as labor force whose value is reduced to the economic. Nowadays, what is undertaken as a university education is, more often than not, an ideological brain-washing that conditions them into becoming happy slaves.

This idiosyncrasy of our modern universities can only be countered by a certain return of the university to its roots in philosophy (and by implication, the humanities). If the university is to survive in this present age of technological machination, it must learn to subvert its dependence on the economic by providing the space for the counter-cultural critique of the reign of the money-fetish and all the religious and nationalist ideologies embedded in it. Thus, the university must remain true to its nature as an *universitas*, a totality which, in its pursuit of knowledge should be free from any influence—be it state power and its appendages in politico-economic power; or in the tele-technological superiority of the media, culture and religious ideology—that might distort its mandate to truth.<sup>59</sup> The university must prioritize its service to life in its

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<sup>58</sup> I owe this insight to Mary Evans, *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 45.

<sup>59</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition (Thanks to the “Humanities,” What Could Take Place Tomorrow),” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 24-57; 26. A version of the essay was also published in Peter Pericles Trifonas and Michael A. Peters (eds.), ISSN: 2362-7581



aim to achieve truth and the appropriation of things which are proper to it as a matter of justice, always seeing to its advancement and free (as much as possible) from the disruptive, alienating, and dehumanizing effects of modern techno-capitalism.

To accomplish this, the university must: first, move away from the imbecilic emphasis on the propagation of technical courses that treat students as objects that stand-to-presence ready-at-hand for export for the world's labor market. Human persons are not things that you can just export like bags, toys, or furniture. The university must not only focus on making nurses, engineers, architects, computer programmers, tourist guides, businessmen, lawyers, politicians, and the like ready to be ordered and deployed as the market demands. Rather, the university must also ensure that its future professionals develop the philosophical competence to think about their lives and their future not only in terms of a passive reception of jobs but more importantly, as creators of their jobs and hence, of their lives and future.

Second, as a result of the above, the university must not treat education as a business meant to gain economic profit. On the contrary, it must emphasize the centrality of critical thinking skills as the most important tool for the pursuit of knowledge and of a life-project. This demands that the university be run or managed, on key areas of administration and educational supervision, not by businessmen or technologically machinated individuals, but by intellectuals who have a vision of freedom for its students so that they can be lead "home" along the path of human self-realization. These intellectuals need not be professional philosophers but individuals whose philosophy of life share the idea of education for freedom as opposed to the idea of education for profit.<sup>60</sup> The university, in its deepest essence, is not for profit. On the contrary, the essential nature of the university lies in its philosophical character, in its being the cradle for philosophical thought. As Jacques Derrida says: "[t]he university is philosophy. A university is always a construction of a

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*Deconstructing Derrida: Tasks for the New Humanities*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11-24; 13.

<sup>60</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Liberal Education and Democratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).



philosophy.”<sup>61</sup> It is only by remaining faithful to philosophy that the university can achieve its real nature or essence, as something purposive. By insisting on its philosophical character, the university is able to serve as a repository for thinking that aims to combat the all-pervading and insidious effects of modern technological domination. In order to achieve that meditative attitude, we must insist that a particular philosophical stance be acquired in defense of human life that has been subtly attacked from many sides. The quantitative ordering of life as an essential supply for the world’s industry is an effect of a thinking that seeks to control the life of human beings as if they were objects that can be manipulated at whim by those who are in power—be it in the university, local society, or national community. Camouflaged under the pretension of providing a better quality of life for the citizenry, it is in essence the attempt to domesticate life and appropriate to the state the power over it.

In conclusion, we can say that the establishment of the university is only possible insofar as it is an effect of a certain techno-scientific rationality. Nevertheless, its mandate to truth renders it free to achieve a particular distance from the insidious effects of modern technology and to chart its course towards a better and fuller affirmation of life. Thus, a university only achieves its real identity when it does not lead its students astray towards Enframing but rather leads them to find their way “home” in that ever-precarious search for the meaning of life and the achievement of what is proper for the human person, for his life, and to his body. Such a liberatory promise can only happen through a return to free thinking, a coming home to philosophy, whose main task precisely consists in this subversion: the *unmasking* of all forms of human alienation. This is the reminder Karl Marx gives us: “It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.”<sup>62</sup> In the same spirit, it is only by going beyond the manifold ideologies that have conditioned human life that we can help set it free to achieve what is its proper destiny in justice, no matter what forms life may take. And that is what we mean by deconstruction from the margins.

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<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy 1*, translated by Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx, “Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher* (February 1844).



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