

CAROLYN D'CRUZ (2008) *IDENTITY POLITICS IN DECONSTRUCTION: CALCULATING WITH THE INCALCULABLE*. ALDERSHOT: ASHGATE. ISBN 9780754662082

Dhanveer Singh Brar

Carolyn D'Cruz's *Identity Politics in Deconstruction* is an attempt to reassess one of the central tenets of left wing politics since the 1970s – the personal as the political. D'Cruz sets about interrogating this ideological marker because she believes the politics it has come to represent in the contemporary context have seemingly 'collapsed into readymade political positions' (ix). Identity politics (a term which in this monograph encompasses the politics of race, citizenship and sexual difference) has been too readily installed into a set of definable targets. There is, for D'Cruz, a troubling conciliation between the liberatory ethos of identity politics and state based democratic ideals. By referring to predominantly Australian debates around Aboriginal identity claims, queer experience and government asylum policy, she looks to pinpoint critical disturbances in the structures which make up the politics of identity.

D'Cruz is using this text to reinvigorate deconstruction as a relevant concern for debates around identity, political representation and liberation. Despite the clarity with which she puts forward her claims for the movement between philosophy, politics and culture, her focus on the deconstructive version of the just and ethical relationship to the other - 'the imperative to actually think and take responsibility for the singular act of making an ethico-political decision' (4) - falls short in one or two key areas. A more aggressive theorisation of the links she draws between the procedures of identity claims and state approach to asylum could have been pursued. The absence of an in-depth engagement with Gayatri Spivak also leaves her attempt to think deconstruction politically somewhat lacking.

The opening half of the monograph works on two assumptions which undergird identity politics. First, that the identity status of a speaker is paramount and the starting point for such a politics, and second, that

the testimony of the speaker comes to form an ontological ground for an understanding of the experience of identity. In both instances D’Cruz is not concerned with adjudicating the relative merits of these procedures but rather the logics at work within them. Moving between debates in the Australian based journal *Oceania* on Aboriginal authenticity and the significance given to autobiographical narratives in queer politics, she uses a Foucauldian mode of archaeology to map the discursive formation of such assumptions and the effects they generate.

In the case of the speaking subject of identity politics, priority is given to self identification. Before a subject can begin to speak as a legitimate member of an identity group, he/she needs to produce a form of self-marking. The speaker must declare his/her identity as part of the a priori creation of space from within which to speak. D’Cruz speculates that what is at stake here, even within the space of left identity politics, is the establishment of rules and procedures governing who has the right to speak as a legitimate representative of a minority group. Using a Foucauldian approach to the question of who can speak identity allows for a discursive interrogation of such procedures: ‘suspending reference to a speaking subject does not seek to absolve the investigator from responsibility, but instead enquires after what enables and constrains a subject in the very act of taking up a speaking position’ (28).

Branching out from the speech act, D’Cruz turns to the role of personal testimony in establishing the truth of ‘lived experiences of subjugated identity’ (30). Testimony in this instance operates on a point of difference between the conscious lived experience of an individual (*Erlebnis*) and the placing of experience into a general narrative (*Erfahrung*). Turning again to Foucault, D’Cruz is interested in the decisions which are made when deploying personal testimony as the ontological ground of experience, and the necessary exclusions that take place during such a process. There is, for D’Cruz, a problematic tension between thinking testimony as legitimate source of knowledge and acknowledging testimony and identity as a product of discourse: ‘rather than investing progressive politics and goals for social transformation with a truth that is grounded in experience through “our real experience of social existence” ... Foucault shifts the focus of examining knowledge and relations of power to what counts as true in such discourses’ (36). It is during this examination of testimony, truth and experience that D’Cruz marks a shift in the conceptual direction of her monograph. Having used Foucauldian archaeology to map the formation of identity as truth,

she turns to Derrida. Foucault is set aside because of his apparent limitations in staging a tension between on the one hand recognising that the truth of experience is under construction, and on the other that construction is nearly always performed as presence: 'the issue therefore is not one of overcoming essentialism, but a question of how to work otherwise with the necessity of an impossible essence' (42). D'Cruz moves towards Derrida because his engagement with the violence of metaphysics makes it possible to think experience as never at one with itself.

The introduction of Derrida sets the agenda for the second half of *Identity Politics in Deconstruction*. Raising questions about the function of philosophy within the realm of the political, D'Cruz uses *Spectres of Marx* and the promise of democracy to come to argue that the political and philosophical are neither separable nor inseparable (Derrida, 1994). Derrida's reading of Levinas comes to dominate D'Cruz's final two chapters. The Levinasian tropes of truth, law and justice are used to assess Australia's 'Stolen Generation' debates, and in particular there is a return to testimony and the ethics of collective responsibility. In her closing chapter, she uses the Derridian version of unconditional hospitality as a background to controversy over the Australian government's asylum policy. D'Cruz looks to expose the incompatibility between the promise of democracy (as a condition of a democratic political system) and state sovereignty (as something that requires immunisation against external threats).

It is in this final chapter that D'Cruz arrives at some of the most potent, but unsatisfyingly brief, moments of analysis. The critique of Australia's treatment of refugees is assembled around the Derridean concept of unconditional hospitality towards the stranger. The Australian state, she argues, needs to take the risk of not demanding identification from aliens who could never have access to such documentation. It would need to build asylum policy from such a basis in order to maintain its constitutional commitment to the ideal of democratic justice. D'Cruz innovatively ties this suggestion to her earlier examination of identity politics. For her, there is a troubling structural similarity between the insistence upon a priori self identification and the necessary truth experience of testimony which shapes left identity politics and the democratic state's violent approach to aliens. Despite the apparent political distance between the two, 'discourses of identity politics are complicit with a language that remains hostile to the foreigner' (110). In order to un-link itself from this complicity with the calculability of the state, identity politics

needs to locate a pathway out of the demand for self-marking as a condition of speech and become open to the figure of the stranger:

To send discourses of identity politics towards the stranger, then, is another way of reminding such discourses to maintain a space for the incalculable order of justice. This cannot be done by overcoming aporias (by definition an aporia is impassable and cannot be overcome), but by working between the impossibilities that structure the condition of possibility to *make* ethical decisions and render oneself open to the coming of something unheard of and new. (111)

Unfortunately this is the last D’Cruz has to say on the subject as she brings *Identity Politics in Deconstruction* to a close. The suggestion of a structural complicity between the conditions for speaking within identity politics and the excesses of state auto-immunity remain largely unresolved. The overall thrust of the text may have been better served by starting with the contentious but tantalising point D’Cruz inserts into her conclusion – that the vigour of identity politics may have been short-circuited by the decision to move closer to the functions of the sovereign democratic state.

D’Cruz misses another opportunity. Her broader concern with the relationship between philosophical deconstruction and political activism is hampered by the lack of a lengthy engagement with Gayatri Spivak. As a theorist, Spivak actively acknowledges her allegiance to deconstruction and her more socially orientated work as a Marxist and feminist. There are several occasions where Spivak could have been put to use by D’Cruz to extend her encounter with the groundless ground between philosophical speculation, political ideology and social movements. In ‘The Setting to Work of Deconstruction’, Spivak provides an explicit analysis of how deconstruction can become politically viable, and even pulls up Derrida for not moving deconstruction far enough outside the academy (Spivak, 1999 : 423). Her negotiation with the singularity of the other could have proved useful to D’Cruz for the way in which it moves beyond issues of national sovereignty. Spivak’s work tends to occupy the space between (Government Organised-)Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) and the subaltern constituency of the global south, by locating subaltern invocations of ‘aporias of exemplarity’ (Spivak, 1999: 430). Her recent essay ‘Righting Wrongs’, whereby the first world adjudication and

dispensing of human rights is put into suspense by a particular example of subaltern practice, puts such exemplarity to work (Spivak, 2008: 14). As a writer and speaker, the question of how to take up the politicised 'I' whilst maintaining her links to deconstruction is also something which cuts across Spivak's work and could have been put to use by D'Cruz. Spivak's strategy is often to ride the very tension D'Cruz fixes upon in her earlier chapters, between positioning herself as a general subject (feminist, Marxist, comparative literature scholar) and her singularity as a person, to open up a horizon of understanding (see Spivak, 1998).

Thus it seems odd for D'Cruz not to have used Spivak more extensively as a way to think philosophical aporia as a mode of political practice. In fact, it is interesting to note that when imagining a figure capable of operating in the space between philosophy and activism, D'Cruz arguably produces a pen portrait of Spivak without naming her:

Put very simply, there is nothing stopping a person who philosophises about the promise for a democratic future from attending public protests, signing petitions, donating to aid agencies, voting as a citizen participating in lobby groups, forming organisations that attempt to transform the powers that be and so on. What one chooses to do however, cannot be decided in advance by an already prescribed political and philosophical programme that does not distinguish between the two domains. This is to say, at the heart of any claim to any kind of identity or philosophy or politics is an origin marked by difference and deferral, an otherness necessary to its acquisition of meaning. (66)

References

- Derrida, J. (1994) *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. P. Kamuf. New York: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (2008) 'Righting Wrongs - 2002: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals'. *Other Asias*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Spivak, G. C. (1999) 'Appendix: The Setting to Work of Deconstruction'. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1998) 'Feminism and Critical Theory' *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.