

Theory and the Democracy to Come

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Review of:

Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 2003.

Well, I've always regarded the link .
. . I've never really perceived much
of a link to tell you the truth.

--Noam Chomsky

1. In the quotation above, Noam Chomsky attempts to answer a question put to him by Jonathan Ree in an interview for *Radical Magazine* about the relation between his theoretical work in linguistics and his activist and anarchist work in politics. In this interview and elsewhere, Chomsky denies that there is such a link, even though some of his readers might find that disconnect unfortunate. "I would be very pleased," Chomsky says in another interview, "to be able to discover intellectually convincing connections between my own anarchist convictions on the one hand and what I think I can demonstrate or at least begin to see about the nature of human intelligence on the other, but I simply can't find intellectually satisfying connections between those two domains."¹ If, however, Chomsky rejects the possibility of those links, Jacques Derrida's *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* seems on the contrary to revel in making "intellectually satisfying connections" between the realms of epistemology and political philosophy.
2. Certainly, it makes sense to understand Derrida in his recent work as directly engaged with issues of contemporary political philosophy, even as he has continued to revise and advance a theory of language and thought which he began to develop in the 1960s. The marketing description of *Rogues*, for example, advertises "unflinching and hard-hitting assessments of current democratic realities," claiming that the essays "are highly

engaged with the current political events of the post-9/11 world," and Derrida's publishers will no doubt continue to accentuate this ongoing political relevance. But if it seems to some readers that Derrida's work has become more political in recent years, Derrida himself refuses to see this as something new. In the two essays on reason that make up *Rogues*, Derrida attempts self-consciously to revisit and revise his earlier projects, bringing out their political relevance. For instance, in a passage on paradoxical tensions within the idea of "democracy," Derrida argues,

there never was in the 1980s or 1990s, as has sometimes been claimed, a *political turn* or *ethical turn* in "deconstruction," at least not as I experience it. The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking of the political, of the contour and limits of the political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune *double bind* of the democratic. (39)

3. Derrida characterizes his initial, meta-performative revision of structuralist linguistics (*différance*) in terms of its relation to the empirical and ontological limitations of democracy important to his recent work.
4. The two masterfully translated essays collected in this volume were initially presented as lectures, one at Cerisy-la-Salle on 15 July 2002 and the other at the opening of the twenty-ninth Congr s de l'Association des Soci t s de Philosophie de Langue fran aise [ASPLF] at the University of Nice, 27 August 2002. Mixing straightforward political commentary (on 9/11, the war on terrorism, human cloning, etc.) with discussions of political philosophy (in passages on Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Nancy, and others), the essays in *Rogues* work together to deconstruct "democracy" as a mode of sovereignty.
5. In his preface to the two lectures, Derrida quotes from La Fontaine's fable "The Wolf and the Lamb," in which a ravenous wolf accuses an innocent lamb of having muddied the wolf's drinking water. The lamb protests, citing the persuasive evidence that the lamb is in fact 20 feet downstream from the wolf and therefore could not have muddied the wolf's water. "You're muddying it!" the wolf insists, "And I know that, last year, you spoke ill of me." But the lamb protests again, "How could I do that? Why I'd not yet even come to be . . . at my dam's teat I still nurse." At every point of defense, the wolf seems to

win out, and, in the end, "the Wolf dragged and ate his midday snack. So trial and judgment stood" (x). The moral of the fable comes, in a manner that seems characteristic of the exercise of sovereignty, at the *beginning* of La Fontaine's version, before the narrative has unfolded (the decision before the evidence, the judgment before the trial): "The strong are always best at proving they're right, / Witness the case we're now going to cite."

6. Derrida's preface to these two essays thus invokes an old and venerable tradition of thinking about the relation between force and law and, indeed, the priority of force over law, which "long preceded and long followed La Fontaine, along with Bodin, Hobbes, Grotius, Pascal, Rousseau, and so many others, a tradition that runs, say, from Plato to Carl Schmitt" (xi). But at the same time Derrida wonders, "What political narrative, in the same tradition, might today illustrate this fabulous morality? Does this morality teach us, as is often believed, that force 'trumps' law? Or else, something quite different, that the very concept of law, that juridical reason itself, includes a priori a possible recourse to constraint or coercion and, thus, to a certain violence?" (xi). Of course, following Derrida's answers to these questions requires not only a close reading of these two essays, but also an understanding of much of his later work and especially of his last lectures and seminars on "The Beast and the Sovereign," to which he refers several times in *Rogues*.^[2]

packed full of wolves from the four corners of the world, the seminar [on the Beast and the Sovereign] was in large part a *lycology* and a *genelycology*, a genealogical theory of the wolf (*lycos*), of all the figures of the wolf and the werewolf in the problematic of sovereignty. It just so happens that the word *loup-garou* in Rousseau's *Confessions* has sometimes been translated into English not as *werewolf* but as *outlaw*. We will see a bit later that the *outlaw* is a synonym often used by the American administration along with or in place of *rogue* in the expression "rogue state." (69)

7. The first and longer essay in *Rogues*, "The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?)," was presented at a conference entitled "The Democracy to Come (Around Jacques Derrida)." This phrase, "the democracy to come," echoes throughout *Rogues* as a kind of refrain. "Democracy to come" comes to mean different, even

contradictory things over the course of Derrida's argument. "Democracy to come" suggests, on the one hand, a protest "against all naïveté and every political abuse, every rhetoric that would present as a present or existing democracy, as a de facto democracy, what remains inadequate to the democratic demand" (86), and on the other hand, something charged and pregnant on the horizon, an "event" with all of the political and sexual promise of what is "to come." It signals, in other words, the political *and* the biological, "force *without* force, incalculable singularity *and* calculable equality, commensurability *and* incommensurability, heteronomy *and* autonomy, indivisible sovereignty *and* divisible or shared sovereignty, an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on" (86).

8. All of the binaries that Derrida balances in the notion of a "democracy to come" turn on the fulcrum of what he calls the paradox of "autoimmunity." Autoimmunization, as any doctor could tell you, involves a condition in which the cell-mediated response of an immune system begins to act against the constituents of a body's own tissues. That is, the body becomes confused, and supposes that it has somehow begun to be dangerous to itself, and so reacts accordingly. In a like manner, "democracy" seems to require a certain "auto-immunization" in order to survive, as when populations decide democratically to abolish democracy. Here Derrida points to the example of Algeria:

The Algerian government and a large part, although not a majority, of the Algerian people (as well as people outside Algeria) thought that the electoral process under way would lead democratically to the end of democracy. They thus preferred to put an end to it themselves. They decided in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy *for its own good*, so as to take care of it, so as to immunize it against a much worse and very likely assault. . . . There is something paradigmatic in this autoimmune suicide: fascist and Nazi totalitarians came into power or ascended to power through formally normal and formally democratic electoral processes. (33)

9. Derrida also points to the example of the aftermath of 9/11 in the United States and elsewhere, where a phantom "war on terror" means, at least to some, that the United States "must restrict within its own country certain so-

called democratic freedoms and the exercise of certain rights by, for example, increasing the powers of police investigations and interrogations, without anyone, any democrat, being really able to oppose such measures" (40). This is not to say that 9/11 *created* this situation, even if that event "media-theatricalized" the effects and preconditions of an autoimmunization already in progress (xiii).

10. Still, as useful as the concept of "autoimmunization" is, the notion that "democracy" operates within a monopolizing code of "exceptions" is not new; in the seventh chapter of *Rogues* Derrida concedes as much: "Had I said or meant only that, wouldn't I have been simply reproducing, even plagiarizing, the classical discourses of political philosophy?" (73). In fact, Derrida reminds us, Rousseau's *On the Social Contract* argues that in its "strict" sense democracy is impossible: "Taking the term in the strict sense, a true democracy has never existed and never will" (73). So what, then, does Derrida contribute to the discourse of political philosophy?

11. There are a number of important interventions in *Rogues*. In the first essay, Derrida asks: "can one and/or must one speak democratically of democracy?" (71). This question calls attention to the general epistemological predicament of explaining democracy (which Derrida has already shown to be an *aporetic* concept) so that "anyone" could understand it. It is a surprisingly simple question that points to the difficulty in achieving any kind of true democracy. As Derrida explains, to "speak democratically of democracy," or to say that "anyone must be able to understand, in democracy, the univocal meaning of the word and the concept democracy" is to imply "that *anybody* or *anyone can* or *may*, or *should be able to*, or *should have the right to*, or *ought to*, and so on" (71). Significantly, the italicized portions of that last quotation were delivered in English, the rest of it in French, even as the previous paragraph is sprinkled with words in Greek and German. Not surprisingly, Derrida implies in the following paragraphs that it is *not* possible to speak democratically of democracy, for to do so, "it would be necessary, through some circular performativity and through the political violence of some enforcing rhetoric, some force of law, to impose a meaning on the word *democratic* and thus produce a consensus that one pretends, by fiction, to be established and accepted--or at the very least possible and necessary: on the horizon" (73).

12. This refusal to allow for some fixed and stable

speaking "democratically of democracy" may be what allows Derrida to posit "intellectually satisfying connections" between his theoretical and political work. By contrast, Chomsky, as I have mentioned, sees no problem with "speaking democratically of democracy" and so *resists* any effort to posit necessary links between a specialized theory and politics. In *Language and Responsibility* (1979), for example, Chomsky emphasizes the danger in attempting to find links between his writing in linguistics and politics:

One must be careful not to give the impression, which in any event is false, that only intellectuals equipped with special training are capable of [social and political analysis]. In fact that is just what the intelligentsia would often like us to think: they pretend to be engaged in an esoteric enterprise, inaccessible to simple people. But that's nonsense. . . . The alleged complexity, depth, and obscurity of these questions is part of the illusion propagated by the system of ideological control, which aims to make the issues seem remote from the general population and to persuade them of their incapacity to organize their own affairs or to understand the social world in which they live without the tutelage of intermediaries. For that reason alone one should be careful not to link the analysis of social issues with scientific topics which, for their part, do require special training and techniques, and thus a special intellectual frame of reference before they can be seriously investigated. (3)

13. Whereas Derrida's poststructuralist stance uncovers problems in the very idea that "democracy" could as a concept be understood, Chomsky's socialist libertarian work relies on the assumption that, given the correct information, people will arrive at the truth of a given political situation--a difference that helps to explain their distinct approaches to the matter of bridging theory and politics.
14. If Derrida and Chomsky are coming from different places, the former nevertheless draws productively on the latter in *Rogues*. In what may be the most interesting chapter of the book, "(No) More Rogue States," Derrida refers to Chomsky's *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in*

World Affairs in order to present the hypothesis that "if we have been speaking of rogue states for a relatively short time now, and in a recurrent way only since the so-called end of the so-called Cold War, the time is soon coming when we will no longer speak of them" (95). We will no longer speak of them because, in the first place, people have since 9/11 begun to take a more active and instrumental interest in the official discourse of "rogue states," which means that it will be more and more difficult to speak of them other than in the self-contradictory terms of U.S. political discourse.

[Chomsky's] *Rogue States* lays out an unimpeachable case, supported by extensive, overwhelming, although in general not widely publicized or utilized information, against American foreign policy. The crux of the argument, in a word, is that the most *roguish* of rogue states are those that circulate and make use of a concept like "rogue state," with the language, rhetoric, juridical discourse, and strategico-military consequences we all know. The first and most violent of rogue states are those that have ignored and continue to violate the very international law they claim to champion, the law in whose name they speak and in whose name they go to war against so-called rogue states each time their interests so dictate. The name of these states? The United States. (96)

15. But if the United States seems the most roguish of rogue states, it is not the only one. *All* states, whether "democratic" or not, act according to the foundational logic of roguishness. Such is the fundamental clash between the *demo*- and the -cracy: "As soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power and a rogue state" (102). There cannot be, in other words, a sovereign who is not also a rogue: "There are thus only rogue states. Potentially or actually. The state is voyou, a rogue, roguish. There are always (no) more rogue states than one thinks" (102). The parenthetical "no" is Derrida's shorthand way of saying "when there are only rogues, then there are *no more rogues*" (103).
16. Another reason why, in Derrida's hypothesis, the phrase "rogue states" will eventually disappear is that the hyper-theatricalized media aftermath of 9/11 illustrated an already obvious truth: "after the Cold War, the absolute threat no longer took a state form" (104). 9/11 simply announced or amplified this fact:

Such a situation rendered futile or ineffective all the rhetorical resources (not to mention military resources) spent on justifying the word war and the thesis that the "war against international terrorism" had to target particular states that give financial backing or logistical support or provide a safe haven for terrorism, states that, as is said in the United States, "sponsor" or "harbor" terrorists. All these efforts to identify "terrorist" states or rogue states are "rationalizations" aimed at denying not so much some absolute anxiety but the panic or terror before the fact that the absolute threat no longer comes from or is under the control of some state or some identifiable state form. (105-106)

17. If, however, the phrase "rogue states" has fallen or will shortly fall into desuetude, "rogue" is by itself still very much with us. In fact, the Pentagon now describes those soldiers accused of torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib as "rogue soldiers," a move that demonstrates the depth of Derrida's contention that "abuse of power is constitutive of sovereignty itself" (102).
18. Another contribution made by Derrida's *Rogues* occurs in the second lecture, at a moment when the *aporetic* aspect of democracy seems to have made political action all but impossible. What is one to do if democracy, in all its messy autoimmunity, must remain forever on the horizon, always only "to come"? What can we do while we wait for what is "to come"? In a complex, but strikingly lucid passage, Derrida attempts to answer these questions by referring to the question of "unconditionality." Political philosophy has seemed fairly unanimous on the connection between unconditionality and sovereignty:

This inseparability or this alliance between sovereignty and unconditionality appears forever irreducible. Its resistance appears absolute and any separation impossible: for isn't sovereignty, especially in its modern political forms, as understood by Bodin, Rousseau, or Schmitt, precisely unconditional, absolute, and especially, as a result, indivisible? Is it not exceptionally sovereign insofar as it retains the right to the exception? The right to decide on

the exception and the right to
suspend rights and law [*le droit*]]?
(141)

19. If sovereignty and unconditionality are inseparable, what would it mean to speak of their separation? Derrida argues that the "democracy to come" *depends* on our attempt to separate them: "It would be a question not only of separating this kind of sovereignty drive from the exigency for unconditionality as two symmetrically associated terms, but of questioning, critiquing, deconstructing, if you will, one in the name of the other" (143). That is to deconstruct sovereignty *in the name of* unconditionality. With this gesture, Derrida refers us again to some of his previous work:

Among the figures of unconditionality without sovereignty I have had occasion to privilege in recent years, there would be, for example, that of an *unconditional hospitality* that exposes itself without limit to the coming of the other, beyond rights and laws, beyond a hospitality conditioned by the right to asylum, by the right of immigration, by citizenship, and even by the right to universal hospitality, which still remains, for Kant, for example, under the authority of a political or cosmopolitical law. Only an unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality. . . .

Another example would be the unconditionality of the *gift* or of *forgiveness*. I have tried to show elsewhere exactly where the unconditionality required by the purity of such concepts leads us. A gift without calculable exchange, a gift worthy of this name, would not even appear *as such* to the donor or donee without the risk of reconstituting, through phenomenality . . . , a circle of economic reappropriation that would just as soon annul its event. Similarly, forgiveness can be given to the other or come *from* the other only beyond calculation, beyond apologies, amnesia, or amnesty, beyond acquittal or prescription, even beyond any asking for forgiveness, and thus beyond any transformative repentance, which is most often the stipulated condition for forgiveness, at least

in what is most *predominant* in the tradition of the Abrahamic religions.
(149)

20. Hospitality, the gift, forgiveness. These are difficult concepts, and it is difficult to imagine what forms they may take in our postmodern political sphere. But this invitation to imagine otherwise is necessary at a moment when the vulgar adhesive that joins unconditionality and sovereignty seems to be drying fast. Is Derrida's complex mix of poststructural and political philosophy (presented within an "undemocratic" matrix of rhetorical play and discursive sophistication) more likely to split the atom of sovereign unconditionality than Noam Chomsky's quasi-Cartesian attack on American exceptionalism? Fortunately, we need not answer that question absolutely, since both have something to offer; it is, however, important to keep asking.

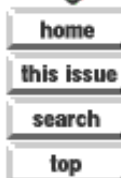
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Notes

1. Both interviews are featured in Achbar and Wintonick's now-classic documentary "Manufacturing Consent--Noam Chomsky and the Media." As recently as 2 November 2003, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Chomsky maintains that there is "virtually no connection" between his publications in linguistics and politics. Chomsky's refusal to find a link between these domains has not prevented others from attempting to find it for him. See, for example, Salkie, chapter 9, "Connections." The introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Noam Chomsky* also contains a section on the unity of Chomsky's theoretical and political thought.

2. The brief summary of Derrida's seminar that follows is based on my notes of his lectures at the University of California, Irvine, from 2002-2004.

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Talk Back