



## Derrida and the marginality of the French intellectual

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**Edward Baring's exciting reinterpretation of Derrida's early years paints a picture of a postwar French elite that was both scintillating in its intellectual prowess and deeply parochial: it was a world in which Derrida thrived.**

Reviewed: Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945-1968*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 326 pp.

For all the intense pressure to conform, marginality has often been a badge of honour in French intellectual life. The most brilliant minds of the postwar generation went to great lengths to emphasise their marginal status. Such eminent figures as Raymond Aron, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly claimed that they did not belong and that their thinking departed from the prevailing orthodoxies of the time. Jacques Derrida, too, claimed to be an outsider. A North African Jew, whose intellectual profile put him at odds with Sartrean existentialism and Althusserian Marxism, he was convinced that he did not fit into any pre-conceived ideological mould. Derrida's theories of deconstruction confirmed this emerging (self-)image. By detaching texts and actors from their historical contexts, the approach he pioneered in *De la grammatologie* (1967) actively encouraged post-structuralist scholars to seek out the 'margins' and 'traces'. In much the same way that Bourdieu wrote *La Noblesse d'État* (1989) in order to prove that he stood apart from the elite, so Derrida created an entire methodology that would reinforce the marginal.

The reality, however, was rather different. There was nothing especially marginal about any of the figures mentioned above. They were deeply rooted in the most rarefied upper echelons of the French intellectual elite. They read similar texts, trained for the same *concours* and ended up as philosophy students at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), a higher educational institution the impact of which has been out of all proportion to its small size. Seen in this light, Derrida's early career is the highly conventional story of a bright young philosophy student whose main aspiration in life was to go to Paris to study at the ENS. If there is anything that made him exceptional, it was not his ideas or his trajectory, but the fact that he was one of the very few students to gain admission to the ENS. Nor did he

become more radical as he matured: he passed his *agrégation*, taught at the Sorbonne and finally returned to the ENS in 1964 as an *agrégé-répétiteur* in philosophy. At no point in his early years did he break away from the system that had made him. He was, as Baring makes abundantly clear in the opening pages of this book, deeply implicated in and entirely dependent on it.

This tension between marginality and conformity makes the job of the intellectual historian that much more difficult. There is a significant and legitimate temptation to dismiss Derrida's self-conscious desire to embody the marginal as deceit or self-delusion. But to do so would be to ignore the foundations on which he built so much of his political and philosophical thought. Even if he was a pure product of France's intellectual establishment, his willingness to illuminate some of its more obscure philosophical corners genuinely mattered. It is to Edward Baring's credit that he manages to take the young Derrida's intellectual trajectory seriously, while simultaneously standing back from the hagiography that surrounds him and giving us a complete historical picture of where he came from and how his environment shaped him.

### **Derrida and Christian thought**

Baring's approach is both historical and biographical. The outer chapters of the book present the broad philosophical and institutional contexts of the 1940s, 50s and 60s; the central chapters are in-depth analyses of key texts and their relation to these outside events. Right from the beginning, it is clear that Baring intends to overturn some cherished myths about Derrida, starting with the importance of his North African identity. He argues that this has been overplayed, especially in more recent accounts of his life that have tried to link the disruptive methodology of deconstruction with his disrupted Algerian roots : "The limited contextual accounts of Derrida's thought have often concentrated on his Algerian or Jewish background, reiterating his own narrative of exclusion from the French mainstream" (p. 10). In fact, Baring argues it would be more accurate to see Derrida, not only as French, but also aspiring to integrate fully into the "mainstream" of Parisian intellectual life. Rather than focus on some imagined alternative identity, we should understand his thought "first and foremost as a response to the pressures of academic life in the French capital" (p. 20).

This leads directly into a discussion of the pre-eminent French philosophical debate of the mid-1940s: the struggle to define existentialism. Baring maintains that this debate was the unavoidable horizon for the young Derrida before his admission to the ENS in 1952. Through a careful analysis of the political contexts surrounding Jean-Paul Sartre's famous 1945 lecture *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, he shows clearly how the term 'humanism' re-entered the political vocabulary and became a battleground on which Communists and Catholics fought for legitimacy. In the wake of the violence and humiliation of the Second World War, all the major political groupings wanted to show that they were, in some way, humanist. In the 1940s, Derrida was still a *lycéen* in Algiers. But the polemic surrounding existentialism was present in his very earliest teenage writings in which he read Heidegger and Husserl through a Sartrean lens and recast them as humanist existentialists. At the same time, the

young Derrida's essays reveal another key aspect of his thought, namely his engagement with Christian philosophy.

It is here that Baring significantly alters our view of Derrida's development as a scholar. His careful archival work brings to light a young philosopher in tune with – and sympathetic to – the central arguments of postwar French Christian philosophy. From the moment of his first encounter with existentialism as a *lycéen*, Derrida had tried to temper what he saw as Sartre's "nihilism" and "atheism" with an appeal to a transcendental God. Later, when Derrida found himself in the politically-charged environment of the ENS, he was quickly forced to downplay these overtly Christian tendencies. They nevertheless remained a subterranean presence in his work. Thus, in his 1954 *Mémoire*, Derrida drew on Kierkegaard and the work of his supervisor Maurice Patronnier de Gandillac to give an unusually "mystical" reading of Husserl's concept of 'genesis' that stressed its journey towards the transcendental. Likewise, in his 1962 introduction to Husserl's *Origine de la Géométrie*, he used Christian interpretations to support his phenomenology of mathematics. The crucial moment in the text was when, in Baring's words, Derrida "compared the indeterminacy of the [infinite] idea, as an ideal pole that is itself transcendent to history, to God" (p. 170). In so doing, he made clear the extent of his affinity for Christian Heideggerianism.

This was as much a political as a philosophical move. Despite the strongly Communist atmosphere that predominated in the ENS in the 1950s, Derrida had found a way of reconciling his interest in Christian philosophy with a philosopher (Husserl) who was 'acceptable' to Communist students. Or, to put it another way, Derrida was searching for a new synthesis between existentialism and phenomenology, one that would combine the 'scientific rigour' of Communism with the transcendental possibilities of a Christian god. In this respect, at least, Derrida was grappling with the key political issues of the postwar period. Across Western Europe, bewildered populations were also searching for a middle ground between the two great ideologies of the postwar moment – Christian Democracy and Communism.<sup>1</sup> Baring's stimulating reinterpretation of the young Derrida allows us to situate him more clearly in this broader context, even if his philosophical speculation was more complex and opaque than that of almost anyone else at the time.

### **Structuralism and beyond**

The second part of Baring's book continues this sophisticated historicisation of Derrida by taking the reader through the earliest attempts to theorise 'différance' and the deconstructive approach to writing and text. Again, institutions played a crucial role. Derrida's return to the ENS in 1964 put him in contact with a number of overlapping intellectual movements. These included Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Out of this melting-pot, Derrida would ultimately fashion an

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<sup>1</sup> On this, see for instance Pieter Lagrou, *Patriotic Memory and National Recovery. The Legacy of Nazi Occupation in Belgium, France and the Netherlands 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Martin Conway, 'The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1973' in *Contemporary European History* (Vol. 13, No. 1, 2004), pp. 67-88.

entirely new methodology, called deconstruction or ‘post-structuralism’, in the late 1960s. Unfortunately, Baring’s book comes to an end in 1968, before deconstruction became a fully-fledged methodology. He therefore focuses his attention on the period from 1964 to 1968, during which Derrida laid the groundwork for his subsequent philosophical innovations.

Perhaps the most original and convincing insight in the final three chapters of the book comes from Baring’s juxtaposition of Derrida’s philosophy with the institutional constraints of his teaching. It has become common to link the insularity of twentieth-century French philosophy to the centralised and homogenous training received by students for their *baccalauréat*, *concours* and *agrégation*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, as Baring points out, most students at elite institutions such as the ENS do not believe that they are being ‘formatted’ to think in a particular way, but they nevertheless find themselves at the heart of a dense web of networks and influences that encourage intellectual conformity. The challenge, then, is to identify specific ways in which the style of teaching affects students.

Baring does this by showing how the form of the *agrégation* exam influenced Derrida’s approach to text and writing. From 1964, Derrida had to prepare his students for the *agrégation* and much of his teaching was geared towards passing the exam. In his classes, he made clear that students presenting texts for the *agrégation* in philosophy would be expected to provide a crystal-clear commentary alongside an original interpretation. But this was not just a pedagogical strategy: on the contrary, Baring argues that these “twin demands informed the very process of deconstruction” (p. 256) by focusing Derrida’s attention firmly on the practice of reading and the nature of texts. Deconstruction was not simply born from an abstract engagement with philosophical debate; it was also the product of many long hours of teaching, reading and re-reading. Obviously, it would be simplistic to locate the roots of Derrida’s journey from phenomenology to deconstruction in the *agrégation* alone. In his final chapter, Baring discusses the powerful philosophical battles – above all, with the ENS’s passionate group of Althusserians – that shaped his trajectory. But the consistent efforts to situate the young Derrida within his institutional and political worlds give us a more rounded picture of a complex man.

Those who see the creator of ‘post-structuralism’ as an incomprehensible and impenetrable figure will not be converted by this book. Likewise, those who raised Derrida to the status of a media star and prophet during his lifetime will object to this book’s rigorous contextualisation. But this is Baring’s great achievement: using a combination of thorough archival work and close textual readings, he reveals a philosopher closely tied to his intellectual context. Baring has adopted the critical approach of Anglo-American political thought and intellectual history to provide new insights into Derrida’s intellectual development. Quite apart from its historical value, this approach also makes it possible to move away from the tired polemical battles surrounding postwar French intellectual engagement and the pre-eminence of ‘French theory’. As this book so eloquently

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<sup>2</sup> This critique has been developed at length in works such as Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

demonstrates, French intellectuals like Derrida were neither prophets nor villains; they were just one of many different groups jostling for attention in the fluid political space after the end of the Second World War. Their ideas therefore deserve to be studied alongside other historical phenomena of the period.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps now we can finally restore intellectuals to their proper place in the history of postwar French political culture – as modest but penetrating critics of a changing world.

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this multi-faceted approach is Daniel Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-racism in France* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2012).