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REVIEW

**Activism Unbound**

Carolyn D'Cruz, *Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Calculating with the Incalculable*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2007.

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*Research on social movement or activist work will often draw attention to the tensions or contradictions that it entails. But what if activist dilemmas were recast across multiple categories—indeed, if they went definitively beyond categorization and calculability? How might this even be possible? Carolyn D'Cruz's Identity Politics in Deconstruction is a philosophical negotiation with such propositions, towards a renewed paradigm for theorising politics and the question of 'what is to be done' in the face of oppression and injustice.*

Research on the experience of doing social movement or activist work will often draw attention to the tensions or contradictions that are entailed by this work. Australian academics Sean Scalmer and Sarah Maddison, for example, pose the tension between 'unity and difference' in their *Activist Wisdom* (Scalmer and Maddison, 2006: 113-38). For the activists whose stories make up that study, such tension is importantly creative—a negotiation that generates perspective and energy for progressing activist projects.

But what if such a dialectical model of political oppositions was abandoned altogether; if activist dilemmas were recast across 'more than two' (Derrida, 1998: 65), categories—indeed, if they went definitively beyond categorization and calculability? How might this even be possible? *Identity politics in deconstruction* is a philosophical negotiation with such propositions, towards a renewed paradigm for theorising politics and the question of 'what is to be done' in the face of oppression and injustice. To do so, LaTrobe University lecturer Carolyn D'Cruz takes the reader on a journey through philosophy and epistemology, imperiled upon 're-thinking the emancipatory promise'

(8). This promise, she notes, is invoked by all efforts toward social justice. Though, unlike programmatic efforts concerned with measuring the distance between the promise and its fulfilment, D'Cruz argues for a politics in deconstruction *a' la* Jacques Derrida: that is, a politics that fully recognises the ultimate incalculability of promises like 'democracy' and *maintains the promise as a promise*. Within this, she maintains a convincing retort to the 'political paralysis and quietism' (5) that deconstruction is sometimes accused of.

Theory and practice, politics and philosophy, law and ethics: these are the grounds upon which we consider questions of social justice. D'Cruz wants us to retain the disjuncture between them rather than write a program that connects them smoothly together, as though one is reducible to the other. As (for example) the politics of Indigenous rights in Australia shows, these domains are hardly more easily reflective of each other than the June 2009 Council of Australian Governments report[1] is fulfilling of the February 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations.

The author's argument is achieved by insinuating this deconstructive politics into some of the strongest calls for social justice in contemporary Australia: those pertaining to the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, the Stolen Generations, and refugees who seek asylum on Australian shores. As D'Cruz demonstrates, the debates that were (and continue to be) staged around these matters amply evince that 'no singular or collective identity can meet the transcendental ideal of the emancipatory subject' (6). It is in this vein that D'Cruz reckons with the promise and limit of a politics based upon identity claims, which has occupied so much of activism (recalling, for example, the international labour movement as a politics advanced from the identity of 'the worker,' or 'the working class,' see 51) and was particularly so in feminist, queer and anti-racist political circles during the 1980s and 90s.

In Chapter 1, D'Cruz engages Foucault's archaeology to reveal his 'formidable materiality of discourse' (13) in a debate staged on the pages of *Oceania* journal in 1992 and 1993, in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers took exception to the assertion of a non-Indigenous educator, David Hollinsworth, that identifying as Aboriginal in Australia may operate as a form of resistance to continuing colonial or racist policies. D'Cruz's analysis of the *Oceania* debate tracks the familiar discourse around 'the protocol of speaking rights' (12) (*Oceania's* has similar contours to the Bell-Huggins debate of 1989-1992; see also discussions in this journal). D'Cruz finds that such discourse tends to conflate 'three issues concerning the speaking subject' (14). These are, 'the problem of speaking on behalf of, and about, others; the claim that knowledge can be reduced to a subject's experience; and the claim that knowledge can be legitimated with recourse to the mere marker of an identity' (14).

In 'disentangling' (15) these three issues, it is the space that D'Cruz

opens which is refreshing here, separating such discussions from the predictable evaluation of the dynamics of power towards deciding upon who did or did not have the right to speak on such an occasion. By instead revealing the structure and function of identity declarations (including rhetorics of authenticity and 'strategic essentialism'), the author advances another way of thinking and talking about the matter of identity and authenticity and its relationship to social justice.

To this end, in Chapter 2 D'Cruz continues to resist making familiar judgements on the (r)uses of identity claims by undertaking a careful interrogation of the privileging of 'experience' in activist rhetoric. She revisits the counterposition of feminist standpoint, or anti-foundational, theory—where the experiences of the subjugated are 'the best sources for constructing a socially transformative knowledge' (33)—with foundational or post-positivist realist stances, where identities are mediated by, and require negotiation with politico-cultural theory. This is a binary in which debates about 'the evidence of experience' (with reference to Joan Scott's important essay of this space and time) are often bracketed, particularly at the time of the *Oceania* debate. D'Cruz's discussion of these positions provides further philosophical charting of the identity-political terrain through a dialogue between the anti-foundational Scott and the post-positivist realist William Wilkerson. In her analysis, at the same time as Foucault's archaeology seems to reach its limit, D'Cruz calls on Derrida to intervene, noting that both opposed positions 'exhaust their capacity to account for the grounds upon which oppositional status is acquired.' Further, they both have 'empirical recourse' to 'categories as a means to test reality' and they 'do not *displace* the oppositional logic that supports the hierarchy' (40). Derrida's deconstructive thinking facilitates this displacement: through his 'metaphysics of presence,' it is clear that 'there is an unavoidable essentialising moment in any empirical investigation that must presume to know what it is looking for' (40). Anti-foundationalist identities rely upon an essential oppression; post-positivist realists upon an ontologised theoretical construct. The process engaged in by the author here simultaneously disentangles postmodernism from deconstruction and Foucault from Derrida, continuing to provide useful refinement of the terms upon which identity politics are debated within political philosophy and cultural theory.

This chapter is enlightening though requires very careful reading for someone unfamiliar with the finer points of these debates. For activism, and/or for those of us who find ourselves engaged in debates such as that held in *Oceania*, the suggestion is that we recognise the quasi-transcendental aspect of our claims and our work; the secondary claim is that all activism involves an invocation of, and negotiation with, the transcendent. In identity politics experience is singular but is collectivised in order to become political. Still, when this happens the singular remains in excess of the collective, so the grounds of collectivity are always unstable and interruptible.

At this point in the book it is clear that the considerations required of us by deconstruction can be frustratingly intricate, doubly so given that they are to an end that we cannot know and from a ground that turns out to be groundless. This launches nothing less than a 'crisis between philosophy and politics' (50), categories that are otherwise held to be diametrically opposed, as in Marx's Thesis XI; or forced into collapse as in the activist question of 'what is to be done?' However, D'Cruz reminds us after Spivak that this is 'a productive crisis' (49, 55). In this vein, Chapter 3 takes us through Kant, Foucault, Marx and Derrida—in order—to advance the principle of accepting, being inspired and beginning with contradiction. Principally, this contradiction is that embodied by activists' use of reason (critical or otherwise) and thereby truth. For identity politics is based within reason, particularly when epistemology and experience are fused; at the same time reason is instrumental to the founding violence that generates the social division upon which identity politics are assumed (56). In this way activism begins in the 'impossible, yet necessary language of ontology—which is indispensable for such movements to acquire legibility, intelligibility and communicability' (97). This founding contradiction marks the proliferating tensions that activists find themselves working within, as well as the basis for taking action, which becomes a matter of '*choosing* between *contradictory* injunctions' (59), something that always takes place in the singular. It is part of the heritage of the emancipatory promise which, like all inheritances, 'always involves interpretation, translation and choice' (65). Indeed, 'the *very same texts* (the *Bible*, Nietzsche's works, Heidegger's works, Marx's works) can give rise to both a progressive and a regressive politics' (66). This scenario, for activists, is marked by the ghost in Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*: 'anxiety in the face of the ghost' (Derrida, 1994: 108), or anxiety in the face of contradiction, can without due care result in harmful foreclosure. Hence the need to keep the promise, and thus the future, alive: if we do not do this, we may eliminate the possibility of justice.

The ghost also marks the dislocated or 'disadjusted time of the present' (67). This brings the reader to Chapter 4, where D'Cruz 'examine[s] the question of how to connect such disjunction in terms of our response and relations with others. This takes us to the domain of ethics and the calls for justice' (67), which necessarily involves a discussion of law and its relationship to justice. The necessity for such a negotiation is manifested for example in the question of response to the Stolen Generations in Australia. Here D'Cruz echoes fellow Australian philosopher Linnell Secomb's attention to the multiple temporalities that this call requires us to hold together in responding (Secomb, 2003). In this sense, 'disjuncture is the *necessary* condition of the possibility for justice' (81, my emphasis). The Mabo case and pursuant land rights debates are also exemplars here—the just outcome of land rights being 'granted' is reliant upon the founding ontological violence of colonial law. The choice to overturn *terra nullius* was an ethical one: 'the Mabo reinterpretation of *terra nullius* opened new dimensions within the calculability of law' (86). So D'Cruz puts deconstruction to work upon responding to the Stolen

Generations and establishing native title, demonstrating the political efficacy of thinking identity politics in this way. Crucially, in this the author puts paid to the idea that identity struggles should be aimed principally or wholly at legal recognition—this is another way ‘in’ to asking practitioners of identity politics to consider their activism within the at once more capacious and more exacting framework of ethics.

Chapter 5 opens into the ethics of response to the refugee and explores hospitality, autoimmunity and sovereignty, through Derrida via Levinas. The refugee is ‘the subject *without identity papers*’ (94, my emphasis): incalculable, bringing irrefutably into question the representational conventions at the heart of the calculable aspect of democracy. In the case of the refugee, ‘I am obligated to prevent the other’s death before I ask the other to disclose his or her identity. Yet, within the logics and protocols of identity politics, disclosure is almost mandatory’ (110). Clearly, calculable aspects are not the only aspects of democratic practice or of the democracy to come. Democracy, we are reminded, also remains open to the singular constituent who is yet to be registered. This is how D’Cruz’s thesis puts identity politics in its place: it is ‘a calculative means to further the emancipatory promise’ (94). Similarly calculable realms, such as law, ‘are to be reckoned with only as adjunct to the incalculable realms of ethics and justice’ (108). In this sense the author has certainly ‘[opened] discourses of identity politics away from their propensity to become stuck within frames of self-reference ... reminding such discourses to maintain a space for the incalculable order of justice’ (111) through the demonstrative agency of the refugee or stranger. D’Cruz connects the ontological urgency of the quintessential activist question of ‘what is to be done?’ to its ethical contexts—in doing so sustaining the question’s emancipatory promise by not definitively answering it.

This is a key strength of D’Cruz’s thesis. By the end of the 20th century commentators such as bell hooks (1990) and Naomi Klein (2000) were warning against the ‘ruse’ of identity politics, its co-optation by neoliberalism, global market capitalism and western cultural imperialism and thus its ultimate harm to social justice outcomes. D’Cruz’s sophisticated evaluation of identity claims and the politics they generate traces how such harmful outcomes were made possible through, in particular, the conflation of epistemology and experience (and other such confluences). In doing so she is not advocating for the ‘end’ of identity politics nor suggesting that it is insufficient or redundant as a political strategy. This would be impossible anyway in light of the entanglement of identity claims with western metaphysics. Instead, by ‘being neither for or against’ identity politics she leaves one with the sense that there is ‘something left’ in identity politics that we can work with, particularly if we reconfigure politics as Derrida’s ‘democracy to come.’ This democracy is representational *as well as* something other. In this respect particularly, D’Cruz advances the debates on the status and value of identity claims that continue to operate within the relevant academic and political circles.

D'Cruz points out, in advance of foreseeable accusations of disconnection or retreat from concrete political engagement, that 'there is nothing' in her thesis 'stopping a person who philosophises about the promise for a democratic future' as she does here 'from attending public protests, signing petitions ... forming organisations that attempt to transform the powers that be, and so on.' What is novel about her thesis, distinguishing it from other mentalities of activist organising, is that 'what one chooses to do ... cannot be decided in advance' (67), because we do not act within a unified or linear temporality—rather, we do so within that 'disadjusted time of the present.' We are required 'to actually think and take responsibility for the singular act of making an ethico-political decision' (4).

This book addresses the present debates about solidarity within 'global' activism's pursuit of 'another possible world' (the catchcry of the World Social Forum) and is particularly well addressed to the focus, within this debate, on diversity or, 'a world in which there is space for many worlds,' in the words of Subcomandante Marcos. This has generated a revitalised politics of solidarity by bringing difference to the fore. D'Cruz, with Derrida, adds to this by putting difference-as-singularity as the basis of an *ethics*. This is a challenging proposition for activism as it undoes many of its ontological commitments (to, say, 'social justice') by revealing them as 'quasi-transcendent.' Indeed, by presenting identity politics in deconstruction, D'Cruz simultaneously opens out her discussion to politics and activism on 'the left' more generally—any movement aimed towards the democracy to come, any legatee of the emancipatory promise, anyone haunted by spectres of Marx, any body living in Scalmer and Maddison's 'creative tensions.'

Despite its avowed location in 'the activist call to the academy' (4), the audience for *Identity Politics in Deconstruction* is not necessarily limited to academic activists and the like—it could also be reviewed from the perspective of, say, justice for the Stolen Generations or for refugees in Australia. The book has potential applicability across the humanities and social sciences, including law and policy making disciplines, proved perhaps by the fact that a Derrida scholar (or indeed a scholar of Levinas, Foucault, or other continental philosophers engaging with questions of political justice such as Agamben and Habermas) would doubtless write a very different review. This reviewer found it a useful text for walking through and/or 'applying' Derrida's thinking on justice, hospitality, law, sovereignty and forgiveness (as much as to do so is not missing the point!) Its consideration of contemporary ethical imperatives could be read alongside texts such as Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) (who is outed by D'Cruz, after Peggy Kamuf, as a Derridean, see 44) or Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters* (2000). It also explains and engages in the debates about and between postmodernism, deconstruction and realism. In this regard it would be a useful text for upper level students as a record of 1980s and 90s academic deliberation in this area, and would serve to push the debates into the present tense. Stylistically,

clear academic language facilitates a highly sophisticated argument. On the whole, the engaged reader is likely to be considering the implications of Carolyn D'Cruz's provocative and erudite thesis for a good deal longer than can be contained here.

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### Notes

1. The June 2009 Council of Australian Governments report suggested that 'on a number of social indicators, things have got worse' for Indigenous people, see Hawke (2009).

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