

## DERRIDA, TERRORISM, AND COMMUNISM: A COMMENT ON “AUTOIMMUNITY: REAL AND SYMBOLIC SUICIDES”

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay makes an appraisal of the political articulations of the late Jacques Derrida in his “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” interview as a starting point for evaluating him as a political philosopher. Derrida having claimed in the past that he was convinced of Marxism, a critical comparison serves to illustrate where his radical-sounding pronouncements stand in relation to the Marxist perspective. Derrida turns out to be unremarkable, expounding an ambiguous and eclectic pre-Marxist prophetism.

**KEYWORDS:** Communism; Deconstruction; Derrida; Globalization; Marxism; Terrorism

“Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” an interview with the late French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), is a document that sketches a theory of the future by first attempting to engage in the problems of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States, the attack as a consequence of United States Cold War and post-Soviet policy in the Middle East, the duplicity of the Bush administration’s global “war on terror,” the role of the media as a propaganda apparatus in promotion of U.S. militarism and world hegemony, and the relationship between state terrorism, individual terrorism, and war.

These are significant issues. Derrida, however, addresses them abstractly and problematically. The social analysis is not particularly original or profound, and there is not much that fundamentally distinguishes it from middle-class radical criticism of U.S. foreign policy. Some left liberals would no doubt identify with Derrida’s position. Derrida is right to question the interviewer, Giovanna Borradori’s appraisal of September 11 as an unprecedented “major event.” He suggests that a true “major event” would be more unforeseeable, irruptive, and conceptually disruptive from a world-historical perspective.

“It was not impossible to foresee an attack on American soil by those called ‘terrorists’ [...] there had already been a bombing attack against the Twin Towers a few

years back” in 1993 by Islamist fundamentalists.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, “September 11’ is also, still, and in many respects, a distant effect of the Cold War itself, before its ‘end,’ from the time when the United States provided training and weapons, and not only in Afghanistan, to the enemies of the Soviet Union, who have now become the enemies of the U.S.”<sup>2</sup>

Considering the hypothesis that September 11 is a “major event,” Derrida borrows a term from immunology, “autoimmunity” (when the immune system of an organism responds against its own tissues, cells, or cell components), and says September 11 is the outcome of an autoimmune crisis that involves “three moments” in a political “autoimmunitary process,” “three autoimmunitary terrors”—(1) the “Cold War in the head,” (2) the “worse than the Cold War,” and (3) the “vicious circle of repression”—with “absolute terror” consisting in that there is now no nuclear standoff between the U.S. and Soviet Union, but an anonymous, unforeseeable, and incalculable threat to the world.

Derrida is not really arguing for the world-historicalness of September 11, which was perpetrated by nineteen anti-U.S. Islamist terrorists (bin Ladenists), most of whom were Saudi citizens living in America and Europe and who received advanced flight training in the United States. That is indicated when he begins to discuss repression and says, “[D]efenses and all the forms of what is called [ . . . ] the ‘war on terrorism’ work to regenerate, in the short or long term, the causes of the evil they claim to eradicate.”<sup>3</sup> The implication is that the United States is a repressive and/or terrorist state.

Corroborating his statement in the 1971 “Positions” interview that deconstruction is not neutral and takes sides,<sup>4</sup> and confirming his non-independent political position from the status quo—as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s when he did not openly criticize the totalitarian Soviet Union and French Communist Party because he was afraid of being denounced by the Stalinists as a partisan on the right<sup>5</sup>—Derrida proceeds to make a revealing assertion in “Autoimmunity” that is not inconsistent with his past CP fellow-traveling. His “radical deconstruction” (to use the interviewer’s phrase) turns out to be not so radical after all:

If I had to take one of the two sides and choose in a binary situation, well, I would. Despite my very strong reservations about the American, indeed, European political posture, about the “international antiterrorist” coalition, despite all the de facto betrayals, all the failures to live up to democracy, international law, and the very international institutions that the states of this ‘coalition’ themselves founded

1. Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 85–136; p. 91.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. Jacques Derrida, “Positions: Interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 37–96; p. 93.

5. Alex Callinicos, “Obituary: The Infinite Search,” *Socialist Review*, November 2004, 22 July 2009, <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=9101>; Jacques Derrida, “Politics and Friendship,” *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 147–198; p. 163.

and supported up to a certain point, I would take the side of the camp that, in principle, by right of law, leaves a perspective open to perfectibility in the name of the “political,” democracy, international law, international institutions, and so on. Even in its most cynical mode, such an assertion still lets resonate within it an invincible promise. I don’t hear any such promise coming from “bin Laden,” at least not one from *this world*.<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, in the deconstructive perspective, the “binary situation” of the twentieth century was the political “balance of terror” between two powerful nuclear-armed states—U.S.A. vs. U.S.S.R.—and Derrida, whatever his “strong reservations” at the time, leaned toward the latter, perhaps seeing hope in its “invincible promise” of socialism, despite the betrayals and bureaucratic perversions of Soviet Stalinist Communism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries in 1991, the twenty-first century has now ushered in a new “binary situation”—U.S.A./Europe vs. Osama bin Laden. Political reality is reduced to an opposition of “democracy” (*the future*) and bin Ladenism (*no future*).

Derrida speaks of one of the two sides; however, one must ask if there are no other sides in politics, independent sides. Obviously, there are. Derrida’s political reduction is an abstract dichotomy, but that does not arise as an issue of concern for him or Borradori in “Autoimmunity.” Having staked his claim in the political camp of the advanced Western countries, the French poststructuralist philosopher proceeds to chart the course of a social Utopianism composed of bourgeois humanism, speculative idealism, and moral philosophy. Some maxims can be distilled from pages 113 to 115 as follows:

- Faith in the perfectibility of (1) public space, (2) the world juridico-political scene, and (3) the world itself.
- Doing everything possible to prevent the rise of (1) fanaticism, (2) obscurantism armed with modern technoscience, (3) violation of every juridico-political principle, (4) disregard for human rights and democracy, and (5) non-respect for human life.
- Unacceptableness of (1) cruelty, (2) disregard for human life, (3) disrespect for law, (4) disrespect for women, and (5) use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for religious fanaticism.
- Autonomous legal force as (1) an international institution of law and (2) an international court of justice—i.e., an institution like the United Nations and UN Security Council, modified in structure and charter, non-dependent on rich powerful nation-states.

Here no attempt is made to address the question of social class. Law within the prevailing world capitalist system is a class institution in defense of bourgeois right. As Evgeny Pashukanis observes, “The spread and development of international law occurred on the basis of the spread and development of the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>7</sup>

6. Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” pp. 113–114; italics in original.

7. Evgeny Pashukanis, “International Law,” Marxists Internet Archive, 13 May 2004, 22 July 2009, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pashukanis/1925/xx/intlaw.htm>.

If Derrida is suggesting a break with global capitalism and its international legal framework, or some sort of compromise, that is never examined in the lengthy interview.

Derrida is conscious of his Utopianism: “I’m not unaware of the apparently utopic character of the horizon I’m sketching out here.”<sup>8</sup> Because he cannot reconcile himself to “what *dominates* and even *governs* in the United States,” he leans to the European half of the U.S.A./Europe camp and hopes for a “new figure of Europe” that will lead the world. His justification is basically that Europe and the tradition ushered in with the European Enlightenment made “absolutely original marks in regard to religious doctrine” that cannot be found in America, the Middle East, or the Far East.<sup>9</sup>

The radical multiculturalists, who endorse other genealogies of deconstructionism, might charge Derrida with the crimes of cultural chauvinism, Eurocentrism, and Western exceptionalism. Yet the French philosopher insists that he is not assuming a Eurocentric position. He presents his stance as part of a critique of the nation-state as an artificial “theological” and “religious” socioeconomic formation that enlists “political theologies.” Derrida’s “new” Europe is an international society that is not confined to the political and geographical borders of the state, and there will be “European noncitizens,” as well as people living far from what was once demarcated as Europe.

This “new” Europe will be neither a super-state nor world-state, but a global stateless future society, the transformation towards which will require a “long and patient deconstruction,”<sup>10</sup> a “new and unprecedented form of de-state-ification.”<sup>11</sup> Such a society will also transcend the state-dependent concept of citizenship, for the state is negative and limiting: it monopolizes violence; it represses and excludes non-citizens; and its expression of sovereignty is a “theological legacy.” Both self-protecting and self-destructing (i.e., *pharmakon*), the state embodies autoimmunity and inevitably perverts technological advances into weapons of mass destruction and all forms of terrorism.<sup>12</sup> September 11, for instance, is one such product of the autoimmunity of the state.

Derrida does not desire to abolish the state in one stroke. Instead, he expresses ideas that hint at reading Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (1917), a theoretical work that extracts, sorts, and systemizes Marx and Engels’ perspectives. Briefly, classical Marxism defines the state as a repressive apparatus of coercion, as systemized violence. The internationalist Marxist program thus inscribes in its agenda the “withering away of the state,” not to mention the withering away of law, for the fulfillment of “complete democracy” and the “overcoming of democracy” in the long transition period from capitalism, through the *dictatorship the proletariat*, to communism. This is summed up in the dictum “So long as the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state.”<sup>13</sup>

8. Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” p. 115.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

13. V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, Marxists Internet Archive, 1999, 22 July 2009, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/cho5.htm>.

Of course, the Marxists, who see the state and law as legacies of exploitative class society, are not interested in dispensing with either the state or law at once. As for Derrida:

For a deconstruction [of the state] to be as effective as possible, it should not, in my view, oppose the state head on and in a unilateral fashion. In many contexts, the state might be the best protection against certain forces and dangers. And it can secure the citizenship of which we have been seeking. The responsibilities to be taken with regard to the state thus differ according to the context, and there is no relativism in this. But, ultimately, these necessary transactions must not obstruct a deconstruction of the state form, which should, one day, no longer be the last word of the political. This movement of 'deconstruction' did not wait for us to begin speaking about 'deconstruction'; it has been underway for a long time, and it will continue for a long time. It will not take the form of a suppression of the sovereign state at one particular moment in time but will pass through a long series of still unforeseeable convulsions and transformations, through as yet unheard-of forms of shared and limited sovereignty. [. . .] The deconstruction of sovereignty has thus already begun, and it will have no end, for we neither can nor should renounce purely and simply the values of autonomy and freedom, or those of power or force, which are inseparable from the very idea of law.<sup>14</sup>

Derrida's subsequent point that "justice does not end with law [n]or even with duties"<sup>15</sup> is not really antithetical to the Marxist perspective. But his language above is vague, and the reference to the state in "many contexts" as the "best protection" against certain "forces" and "dangers" needs elaboration. What contexts, what forces, what dangers? The theories of transition and "new" Europe are related to what Derrida says is the transformation for "a new international law, a new international force in the service of new institutions, and a new concrete figure of sovereignty," which requires a unified European military force.<sup>16</sup> Economically and politically, that would, as this author interprets Derrida's argument, necessitate a United States of Europe (U.S.E.) distinct from the state-less "new" Europe, yet prerequisite to it and the more democratic society of the future Derrida calls "democracy to come."

Beginning with the so-called "binary situation" of U.S.A./Europe vs. Osama bin Laden, one can turn to the U.S.A./Europe binary and see stages of transition in the conception of the "deconstruction of the state." Here there are possible counterparts from the classical Marxist doctrine, such as the aforesaid "withering away of the state." Derrida suggests the process of state deconstruction will achieve the completion of the Enlightenment. Presumably, his autonomous legal force, non-dependent on rich powerful states, will begin to take form in the transitional deconstructive period of the U.S.E. to the international "new" Europe. Despite the ambiguities in Derrida's stages of future historical development, they can be counterposed with those of Marxism. See Fig. 1.

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14. Derrida, "Autoimmunity," p. 131.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Derridaist Stages of Development	Marxist Stages of Development
U.S.A./Europe	World division of capitalist nation-states
U.S.A./U.S.E.	Transitional state period/Proletarian dictatorships
International New Europe	Socialism/Communism
Democracy to Come	Higher stage of communism

Fig. 1. Stages of historical development in Derridaism and Marxism.

There are a number of problems. The prognosis Derrida outlines in “Autoimmunity” ostensibly writes off the possible spark of revolutionary upheavals in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. He exclusively locates the center of transition as originating in Europe and spreading outward from there. One may, of course, argue in Derrida’s case by citing the eruption of mass protests and street battles in Greece after the December 5, 2008, police killing of fifteen-year-old student Alexis Grigoropoulos in Athens. As the Associated Press reported on December 11, “The unrest that has gripped Greece is spilling over into the rest of Europe,” but “the clashes have been isolated so far, and nothing like the scope of the chaos in Greece.” “Nevertheless, authorities in Europe worry conditions are ripe for the contagion to spread.”<sup>17</sup>

Other than the Enlightenment tradition, an ideological tradition, what is the economic basis and justification for the “new” European prognosis? Fundamentally, the events in Greece were underlain by the deepening, still ongoing, world economic crisis and the prospects of unemployment confronting students and workers. Thereupon arose the mass social struggle. On one hand, Derrida admonishes against semanticism and concept fixation, adding, “We must also recognize here strategies and relations of force.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, he makes ideology and hope, *an ideology of hope*, integral components of his theory of the future, revealing that his method is based on pure speculation, not social and economic analysis.

Besides Derrida’s reference to his 1993 book *Specters of Marx*—which argues for a politically heterogeneous New International “without party” and “without common belonging to a class”<sup>19</sup>—it is obvious that he *hopes* for the construction of some form of

17. Paul Haven, “Greek-Inspired Protests Spread across Europe,” *Seattle Times*, 11 December 2008, 22 July 2009, [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2008495209\\_apeueuropeunrest.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2008495209_apeueuropeunrest.html).

18. Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” p. 105.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 85.

communist society. But whatever inspiration he may take from classical Marxism, there is nothing particularly Marxist in his line of argumentation in “Autoimmunity.” Derrida, for one, does not identify the world proletariat as the revolutionary subject of history. He does, of course, imply that, in the future society, there will be (1) no oppression by work conditions, (2) people will be able to find the work they desire, and (3) there will be neither “certain countries” nor “certain classes” that benefit from an unequal world economic system.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, that remains wishful thinking without party organization and program, strategy and tactics, and political initiatives. Confirming the Utopian heritage in which he writes, Derrida does not speak of the international working class and its independent forms of mass political organization, that is, of revolutionary parties. Rather, he invokes faith in the memory of the Enlightenment and to Reason, and proposes a de facto middle-class front, a petty-bourgeois front, of *intellectuals, writers, scholars, professors, artists, and journalists* who must “stand up together” against violence and discrimination.<sup>21</sup>

Derrida advises studying the struggle against intolerance in “Europe and elsewhere.” Three figures he highlights are French: Voltaire, Zola, and Sartre. He also urges ripostes and acts of resistance: “Our acts of resistance must be, I believe, at once intellectual and political. We must join forces to *exert pressure and organize ripostes*, and we must do so on an international scale and according to new modalities.”<sup>22</sup> This is evidently a broad-based middle-class radical movement whose struggle for state deconstruction is constituted in international pressure groups and pressure politics. That is not the same as workers’ struggles, which have traditionally consisted of picketing, stop-work meetings, rallies, trade union action, walk-outs, office and factory occupations, asset seizures, and general strikes against the assault on workers’ jobs, wages, and rights.

There is a reference in “Autoimmunity” to philosophers of the future, philosophers of the European tradition, “philosopher-deconstructors” who will be part of the struggle. They “will not necessarily be professional philosophers but jurists, politicians, citizens, even European non-citizens.”<sup>23</sup> Frederick Engels declared in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886) that the German proletariat is the heir of classical German philosophy.<sup>24</sup> Can Derrida’s European philosopher-deconstructors come from the broad layers of the working class: autoworkers, coalminers, cooks, janitors, mechanics, nurses, postal workers, sanitation workers, store clerks, tailors, transit workers, tree trimmers, truck drivers, etc.?

These matters and many others are not addressed in the “Autoimmunity” discussion. The interviewer Giovanna Borradori says: “This dialogue is a quintessential example of his [Derrida’s] unique style of thinking: a fascinating mix of erudition and exuberance and

20. Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” p. 124.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

22. *Ibid.*, p.126; emphasis added.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 116.

24. Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Marxists Internet Archive, 2003, 22 July 2009, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/cho4.htm>.

intellectual sophistication, timelessness and timeliness.<sup>25</sup> That is the overstated language of inflated panegyric. Derrida does not present himself as all that innovative, and he stumbles in the critique of political economy. (Does deconstruction have a political economy?) This is obvious when he attempts to deal with the matter of globalization:

[G]lobalization is not taking place. It is a simulacrum, a rhetorical artifice or weapon that dissimulates a growing imbalance, a new opacity, a garrulous and hypermediatized noncommunication, a tremendous accumulation of wealth, means of production, teletechnologies, and sophisticated military weapons, and the appropriation of all these powers by a small number of states or international corporations. And control over these is becoming *at once* easier and more difficult. The power to appropriate has such a structure (most often deterritorizable, virtualizable, capitalizable) that, at the very moment when it seems controllable by a small number (of states, for example), it escapes right into the hands of international nonstate structures and so tends toward dissemination in the very movement of its concentration. Terrorism of the “September 11” sort (wealthy, hypersophisticated, telecommunicative, anonymous, and without an assignable state) stems in part from this apparent contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

This is inaccurate. The arguments that there is no globalization and that globalization is a “rhetorical artifice” are ideological mantras of nationalist-oriented tendencies. The irony is that Derrida has declared opposition to the national state system. Globalization is an economic fact. It is a qualitative change in the economic infrastructure of international finance capitalism that developed towards the end of the twentieth century with the introduction of the microchip, integrated circuit, transnational corporations (which are not the same as multinational corporations), and globally integrated production processes.

Globalization represents (1) the inherent tendency of capital to expand and (2) the outgrowing of the productive forces from nation-state confines. This results in a complex and contradictory process that precludes harmonious development. Globalization does not mean greater equality, a more just distribution of wealth, or corporation among nations. The opposite takes place. Extraction of surplus value—the source of capitalist profits—is truly internationalized; the majority of humanity becomes wage workers; worldwide polarization of wealth and poverty is vastly intensified; and the antagonisms that lead to war in the world division of competing nation-states are exacerbated.<sup>27</sup>

Capitalist private property forms are rooted in the national state, a historically bourgeois socioeconomic formation, and now come into conflict with the global socialization of production. That contradiction cannot be resolved within the borders of the nation-state, which puts a break on the expansion of capital and development of the productive forces. Confronted with the economic limits set upon them by the nation-

25. Giovanna Borradori, “Deconstructing Terrorism: Derrida,” *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 137–172; p. 139.

26. Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” p. 123; italics in original.

27. International Committee of the Fourth International, *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, World Socialist Web Site, 1998, 22 July 2009, <http://www.wsws.org/exhibits/sreply/toc.htm>.



state system, transnational corporations “forsake,” in a manner of speaking, their national states of origin for more efficient exploitation of labor and maximization of profits elsewhere: dominating and organizing global production of commodities, distributing them to world markets, and dictating policy to national governments. The crisis of over-production remains all the while, even with globally organized capital.

Rather than dissimulating (concealing or disguising) imbalances, as Derrida mistakenly claims, capitalist globalization is the profoundest expression of national and international socioeconomic imbalances. The conclusion derived from affirming globalization as an economic reality is that the nation-state and its traditional property forms are obsolete. Derrida’s pseudo-communist social Utopianism (which hopes for a distant “democracy to come,” beyond law and beyond duty, of unconditional hospitality) works up from a *leap of faith*. Not surprisingly, he says he is a follower of the rightwing Romantic Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>28</sup> Without a philosophical science of perspective, deconstruction, even if well meaning, slides into eclectic prophetism. Derrida, in that respect, is rather conventional.

Jacques Derrida sets out to grapple a number of serious social and political problems in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.” These are the post-Cold War world order, U.S. geostrategic interests, September 11, the “war on terror,” international law, Westernization, the nation-state, democracy, protest politics, and globalization. Being neither a political economist nor political scientist, however, he resorts to speculative philosophy, abstract dichotomizations, and intuitive prognostications that stand out for their ambiguities and inaccuracies under examination. These weaknesses are perhaps ascribable to Derrida’s descent from the non-quantitative, subjective idealist philosophical schools of existentialism and phenomenology. Notwithstanding his past declarations that he was convinced of “Marxism” (his quotation marks) and that there will be no future without Marx,<sup>29</sup> Derrida comes across as a pre-scientific and pre-Marxist Utopian socialist in the “Autoimmunity” interview.<sup>30</sup> Despite the radical-sounding phraseology and clever verbiage, deconstruction offers no truly independent philosophy, perspective, program, or initiatives in relation to capitalism as a world economic system.

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28. Reference to Kierkegaard as rightwing is stated as a biographical fact and not meant as a reproach of Derrida through guilt by association. See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

29. Derrida, “Positions,” p. 63; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 13.

30. Marxism holds that the necessity of socialism is determined through a scientific understanding of capitalism, that this knowledge must be imparted to the working class, and that socialism is actuated after workers seize “public power” and socialize the means of production. See Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Marxists Internet Archive, 2003, 22 July 2009, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm>.

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