

Revolutionary Derrida

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Jacques Derrida was revolutionary Derrida.

The term 'revolution' has surely been used up. In the all-so bored, seen-it-all post-post era that we supposedly live in, revolution has become so *démodé*, either smacking of the agitprop of the last century or belonging to the traditional and reactionary discourse of modernity that Lyotard judged as no longer applicable or useful for an analysis of politics in our times.

What could be less revolutionary or radical than to say that Derrida was revolutionary? Revolutions tire us, revolutions bore us. As of late, there have been so many of them, all named after a colour or flower, the Orange Revolution (Ukraine, 2005), the Green revolution (Iran, 2010), the Jasmine revolution (Tunisia, 2011), the 'Lotus' revolution (Egypt, 2011), each of them less revolutionary than the other. Political revolutions are simply bloody, often bringing to power new, corrupt regimes or restoring the already-powerful to the throne.

So, to say that Derrida was revolutionary Derrida is at best a tepid endorsement and at worst a lazy, careless description. And to do so in the *Oxford Literary Review*, in the pages of which some of the best work by and on Derrida has appeared over the years, may be preaching to the choir. But where better to say it: Derrida was revolutionary Derrida. He was a whirlwind, blasting his way through the academic discourse of the twentieth century.

'I believe in Revolution', Derrida tells Elisabeth Roudinesco in their dialogue *For What Tomorrow ...* (FWT, 83; translation modified). In *Learning to Live Finally*, he refers to his own writing as 'an interminable revolution' (LLF, 31; translation modified). In *Rogues*, the advent of the

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god who could one day save us is said to occur [after] 'a Revolution for which we have as yet no idea', since there can be no *eidos* or paradigm of revolution (*R*, 114). Even though he very rarely associated himself with the term 'revolution' or with revolutionary movements, since he considered the imagery, schemas, scenarios, and representations related to the term suspicious, Jacques Derrida in his last writings undertook a reconsideration of the notion of revolution. Calling for 'an other revolution', and a revolution in the very idea of revolution, in the name of justice, equality, and emancipation — concepts usually associated with a classical leftist paradigm — Derrida urged that the category of revolution be given a new dignity.

But in what way, I hear the skeptic ask, was Derrida revolutionary? Besides the more familiar definition of revolution as a sudden, radical upheaval, an armed uprising, or a 'fundamental change in the political organisation or socioeconomic situation of a country', 'revolution' refers to the action of a celestial body going round in an orbit or elliptic course, its rotation on an axis, and the motion of any figure around a center or axis. It would not be too difficult to find throughout Derrida's writings a thinking of revolution, both the *figure* of revolution, the circular or rotary movement around an axis, that of the circle (oh so many circles everywhere: the logocentric, the economic, the Encyclopedic, the Trinitarian, the triangulocircular, the ontotheological, and so on), and that which circulates (the *ipse*, the One). Yet the revolution that Derrida writes about is not simply the figure of revolution nor can it be mistaken for the political event commonly called revolution, in other words, a revolt to bring about change in a government or a call to engage in street protests or to occupy TV and radio stations in order to topple a regime.

While established analyses of revolution (a prime example here being the French Revolution) have described revolutions as alternating between two phases succeeding each other, comprised of 1) a phase of restoration, a return to the point of departure, back to equilibrium and 2) a phase of inauguration, the sudden, violent emergence of the new, Derrida's thinking of revolution or a revolutionary event is bound up with a thinking together at the same time of the 'without precedent' and what comes back anew in repetition.

Derrida was revolutionary Derrida because he was a thinker *of* revolution. His later texts, but not just his later texts, insistently

argue for revolution and are engaged in 'a political revolution', that is, 'a revolution *of the* political [du *politique*].' His thinking not only created a revolution in thought but also brought about 'a seismic revolution in the political concept' of revolution, in the very idea of revolution, a revolution *of* revolution (*PF*, 27). In this swirling thinking of revolution — which Derrida refers to as 'the only event worthy of the name' — are caught up the event, the messianic, justice, the impossible, ethical responsibility, decision, (self-)mastery, cruelty, domination, and also dreams and dreaming (*FWT*, 139). Far from a naïve, complacent utopianism, Derrida's revolutionary thinking, which urged a thought of a revolution against Revolution, a revolution *in* the revolution, combining oneiric, interruptive disjunction as an opening *and* an urgent acceleration, in its dizzying virtuosity still keeps making our heads spin.