DECONSTRUCTION

A tradition of philosophical analysis and textual criticism begun by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Derrida engages the canon of Western philosophy from Plato through Hegel to Heidegger, modern literature and art, and key social and political thinkers including Marx, Freud, and Saussure.

The general significance of Derrida’s work cannot be detached from the distinctive style of his writing: deconstruction works through the elaboration of particular texts, rather than creating concepts or general systems. The concepts associated with deconstruction – dissemination, parasites, pharmakon, trace, and others – are like found objects, terms which turn out to have ambivalent meanings in particular textual traditions. As a ‘method’ of analysis, or a way of reading, deconstruction exposes unacknowledged implications in existing traditions. This systematically parasitical dependence of deconstruction on other texts makes the application of any particular deconstructive motif a hazardous affair of partial validity.

Derrida’s own work can be divided into an early phase of ‘critical’ deconstruction, and a later phase of ‘affirmative’ deconstruction. Deconstruction first came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Derrida is often thought of as the quintessentially ‘French’ theorists, deconstruction has been most influential in the English-speaking academy. In Of Grammatology (Derrida 1976), the basic lineaments of deconstructive ‘method’ are established. Derrida’s notorious claim that “there is nothing outside the text” is really an interpretative rule, according to which reading is meant to follow the immanent patterns of texts rather than impose external criteria of interpretation (Barnett 1999). In readings of Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Rousseau, Derrida identified a recurrent tendency to render writing as a secondary, contingent medium for the expression of pure thoughts properly expressed in direct speech. Derrida calls this privileging of expressive speech over the risks of mediated communication ‘logocentrism’. He claims that it embodies a deep prejudice in Western thought in favour of the ideal of a disembodied, isolated subject hooked up to the external world by the fragile and untrustworthy medium of referential language. In ‘classical’ deconstruction, this inherently normative evaluation of the relationship between speech and writing, orality and literacy, is subjected to critical analysis that leads to apparently perverse conclusions. If writing is able to act as a supplement to the pure form of expressive speech, then this logically implies that something essential must be absent from the pure form; it turns out that far from being a mere supplement, writing is a necessary supplement to the supposedly pure form of speech. The analysis of speech and writing in Of Grammatology exemplifies a general theme in deconstruction, whereby what is secondary, accidental, or contingent is shown to be fundamental to the working of identities, meanings, and systems. The point of this demonstration is not, thought meant to be disobliging, but rather to encourage a re-ordering of the terms of normative evaluation through which concepts are developed and deployed.
Derrida calls the assumption that phenomena such as meaning or identity must have singular essentialist forms ‘the metaphysics of presence’. This term indicates the relevance of deconstruction to geography’s concern with spatiality and temporality. Deconstruction is indebted to Heidegger’s argument that Western thought has consistently privileged the present tense when trying to apprehend the nature of being, or ontology. By affirming the irreducible role of writing in the expression of thought, Derrida is arguing that all those aspects for which writing or textuality stands – spatial and temporal extension, and the dimension of difference that these imply – are constitutive components of apparently free standing entities such as the unified, self-identical subject of philosophical reason. This is articulated by one of Derrida’s most important neologisms, the notion of difference (Derrida 1982), which refers to the movement of spatial differentiation and temporal deferral that Derrida holds is the condition of possibility for any and all identity, punctuality, or unity.

Although Derrida’s work is most often thought of as a poststructuralist radicalization of structuralist accounts of signification, the concern with issues of presence, time and space indicates the degree to which deconstruction engages critically with phenomenology as well, including the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas. Deconstruction points up the limitations of internalist, monological accounts of the self typical of phenomenology that privilege ‘experience’ as the primary modality of subjectivity. Moreover, rather than thinking of deconstruction as merely concerned with the instabilities of meaning and signification, it is better to think of it as part of a broader revival of interest in rhetoric. For example, one of Derrida’s most influential contributions has been to popularise the writings of J. L. Austin on the performativity of language-in-use across social sciences and humanities.

Deconstruction reached its institutional zenith in the 1980s, having become an orthodoxy in literary studies in the USA especially, although it was less well received in mainstream English-language philosophy. There is an identifiable shift in Derrida’s work from the late 1980s onwards towards a more ‘affirmative’, although no less arcane, register of deconstruction. Less concerned with calling Western philosophy to task for its blindesses, Derrida turned to the task of mining this same tradition for the traces of an alternative vocabulary of ethical concern and political responsibility. This shift coincided with a series of public scandals concerning Heidegger’s Nazi affiliations and the anti-Semitic war-time writings of Paul de Man, Derrida’s close friend and leading deconstructionist critic in the USA. In the wake of these controversies, Derrida’s writing undergoes an explicit ethical and political turn, focussing on a set of topics such as the gift, animality, hospitality, ghosts, friendship, and forgiveness; as well as political topics such as sovereignty, democracy, and cosmopolitanism. There has also recently been a degree of rapprochement between deconstruction and ‘analytical’ traditions of philosophy.

In geography, deconstruction has had a variable reception-history. Derrida is rarely cited as a ‘key thinker’ on issues of space and place, yet he is a background presence in a number of intellectual developments in the discipline in the last decade and a half. Deconstruction first came to prominence as part of debates about postmodernism, when it was invoked as an authoritative reference point for critiques of essentialism and foundationalism in epistemology. This epistemological reading saw deconstruction externally applied to support arguments about the contingency of knowledge-claims and the constructedness of phenomena. This construal of deconstruction owed a great deal to Richard Rorty’s pragmatism. In a number of fields, such as economic geography or
critical geopolitics, deconstruction is appealed to as a variant of ideology-critique to help in debunking claims of objectivity and naturalness.

The predominant anti-essentialist, epistemological framing of deconstruction has been supplanted by the more sophisticated focus on ontological issues. Doel (1999) provides the most systematic engagement with the spatial and temporal metaphysics of deconstruction, laying out an alternative spatial grammar of mobility, relations, and foldings. Postcolonialism in geography has also been heavily inflected by deconstruction. Derrida’s concern with issues of reading, interpretation, and context are intimately related to a wider critique of Western historicism (Young 1990). And most recently, geographers have begun to engage seriously with the ethical and political aspects of deconstruction’s treatment of themes such as hospitality, responsibility, radical democracy, cosmopolitanism and sovereignty (Barnett 2004, 2005, Popke 2003).

The ethical and political turn in deconstruction indicates that what is most at stake in deconstruction is neither epistemology nor ontology per se, but rather a challenge to rethink the inherent normativity of theoretical reasoning. Certainly, any temptation to deploy deconstructive ideas as if they were social-theoretical concepts is best avoided, not least because Derrida’s engagement with various traditions of metaphysical reflection is almost completely devoid of any mediation by sociological or historical conceptualisation that any such usage would require. In short, deconstruction might be much less new, original, or disruptive than is often supposed. Deconstruction is not best thought of as either postmodernist nor poststructuralist; rather, it lays is a practice of reasoning governed by the imperative of working through inherited traditions in critical, inventive, and responsible ways. Deconstruction therefore continues a tradition of Enlightenment critique, but with a distinctive flourish.

References

Suggested Reading