

INTRODUCTION

The Trace of the Political

THIS PROJECT TAKES THE RISK TO DISCERN THE PREVALENCE OF what can be termed nonsovereign power, a power without right, as that which empties the legitimized power of disciplines and law (moral and juridical). The risk lies in thinking of the practice and prevalence of such neutralizing power as the temporal spacing that is constitutive of all named identities—what Derrida indicates as “trace” or the play of *différance*—thereby disclosing it as the site of the biopolitical. Despite the differing historicity of the biopolitical perspective from the deconstructive, and the difficulty of bringing the interrogation of presence (or oneness) to bear on the analytics of power conceived as fractal, the shape of this inquiry is wholly conditioned by Derrida’s long-standing and relentless engagement with the self-presence and purity of the concepts informing what is said to be proper to the human being as distinguished from the so-called animal. By biopolitical, I refer to a modality of power, which Foucault theorizes as characteristic of “state racism” or a discourse of “care” (the state’s care of its population), which is exercised as a decision over the life that is and is not worth saving or living.

My understanding of power in relation to race draws on Foucault’s genealogy of modern power as characterized by “what might be called power’s hold over life . . . the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being” (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 239–40). Further in this same lecture of 17 March 1976, he says,

The specificity of modern racism, or what give it its specificity, is not bound up with mentalities, ideologies, or the lies of power. It is bound up with the technique of power, with the technology of power . . . We are dealing with the workings of a State that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise its sovereign power. The juxtaposition of—or the way biopower functions through—the old sovereign power of life and death implies the workings, the introduction and activation, of racism. And it is, I think, here that we find the actual roots of racism. (258)

Introduction

As the originally canceled origin, the trace, which is the spatializing of time and the temporalization of space, inhabits and haunts every living entity, thereby rendering its self-presence as a dissimulation of what in fact produces it—namely, a temporal composite of a succession of marks in space on a page. The identity of the living subject, in other words, is always written, inscribed by and in a space/time. For Derrida, the trace is not only “prior” but also the condition of all conditions of possibility, be they sensible or transcendental intuitions. It is the mark of the “living in life.” What, then, does it mean to say that this self-canceling and instituted origin, which is nothing if not the necessity of temporal movement, is also the site of biopolitics? Why situate the contemporary struggle of biopolitics at the level of a critique of traditional ontology? How can it be said that the stakes of biopolitics (which are the effects of a historically marked discourse of power/knowledge) are best disclosed through the logic of the trace?

The two perspectives (biopolitics and deconstruction) achieve a synthesis in Agamben’s political theory. For Agamben, who develops the concept of biopolitics, the decision on life (a process of animalization) derives from a political ontology that founds itself on an ancient structure of sovereignty. Agamben’s analysis of the paradoxical structure of sovereignty as a form of power that is essentially sustained by and harbors anomie—as evidenced by its potentiality to suspend the law and create lawlessness (state of exception)—suggests that anomie is properly the trace of the *nomos*. Here, in this space where the trace of the law as anomie is both its suspension and its violent force, Agamben locates a genuine and immanent political possibility—namely, the neutralization of the force of law, an event that he variously delineates as a species of worklessness or nonsovereign power. There is a decisive value to interpreting Agamben’s analysis of sovereign power in terms of the deconstructive trace: it enables a narrowed inquiry into the relation between law and language. The suspension of the law (anomie, trace, state of exception) can now be parsed as the suspension of speech (right, subjectivity, humanity)—a site where the silence opens the political. To reintroduce this analysis into the discursive terrain of contemporary race politics has the effect of reradicalizing the function of the trace with regard to human/animal propriety. Thus, it appears

that any investigation of the logic of race for a revised political ontology requires some contiguity or an impure synthesis of biopolitics and deconstruction.

Derrida elaborates the logic of the trace in varied disciplinary contexts and thereby proliferates a vast lexicon (*différance*, writing, pharmakon, gift, hospitality, democracy, justice, etc.) that refers to singular events that disclose nonpresence. This project takes its point of departure from the ontological and political context of what Derrida terms *la bête*, which can be understood as the trace that renders undecidable the attributes of speech and life in the polis as proper to man. In a parallel yet displacing move, Agamben's apprehension of sovereignty's self-division (between constituting and constituted power) as indicative of a secret anomie within law and right locates power (over life) not in self-presence but in the operation of *différance*. In other words, keeping in mind the necessary coimplication of law and language, the problem of sovereign power must be thought as the potentiality of spacing to divide and separate (and manage) life: the state of exception as the *trace* of the law. To follow the workings of power as the appropriation of temporal spacing is also to translate the trace into the terms of potentiality. By rigorously privileging the thought of potentiality in its survival beyond its actualization, Agamben thereby gradually brings into view a power without right that does not so much differ and defer the power of decision and division as it altogether empties it of all significance. The consequence of this displacement is not minimal. If the operation of *différance* is the potentiality that is always held in reserve—the power that invariably spaces and temporalizes—and remains unexhausted by the sovereign decision, then what is thrown open to question by this displacement of the trace is the necessity of the powerful concomitance between language and law. In other words, if violence as anomie or exception is the trace of the structure of sovereignty and its deployment of the law, and if this structure can be neutralized, then language is liberated from a necessary implication in power. What is language that is not implicated in law, sovereignty, and its capacity for violence?

The pretheoretical motivation of this inquiry was to think through what it might mean to outfox the norms by which life is

Introduction

governed and managed in the contemporary global context. The juxtaposition of deconstruction and biopolitics delivered this pursuit to the aporia of a logic where not only does sovereignty dissimulate presence (and vice versa) but nonpresence, or the trace, is disclosed as nothing but differentiated powers. *HumAnimal* engages the logic of the displacement of the trace into the thought of potentiality by focusing on the spacing between law and language through the figure of silence. More specifically, the question is whether the figure of the animalized brute (neither properly human nor animal) can exercise a power of silence. Throughout, the attempt is not only to apprehend silence as the emptying power within language—in other words, a political potential that dislocates the overlay of language by the law—but more important, to disclose the spatial temporality of such power as quintessentially ethical.

Part I attempts to detail the process of arriving at this argument by first situating the questions within the context of the philosophy of race and studies of animality. Listen: It may all be very well to exhibit the insubstantiality of racial categories as ontological essences, but it is another to address the practice of race as an “ism”—that is, as the violent extirpation of human or animal identity (or propriety) that was never fully possessed to begin with. Furthermore, the political task of conceptualizing resistance on the terrain of impropriety means that it must be discerned as immanent to power. Thus, after delineating the broad problematic and the reasoning that led to its construction, and specifying the use of certain recurring terms, “First Words on Silence” turns to the question of silence as a manifestation of this impropriety and aims to understand its role as immanent to language. As a theme and a device, literature has, of course, claimed ownership of the signifier “silence,” and it has done more to dislodge its adhesion to any given signified by rendering it the element of the literary within literature. However, given the genealogy of literature and its unspeakable secret, as discussed by Derrida, and the “work” that a certain unspeakable silence does in a novel such as J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, I attempt, in the next chapter, to distinguish the appearance of a certain neutralizing power held by the slave from what binds the discipline of literature to a discourse of contract. But in what sense does such silence sever language from the law (be it of literature or

right)? And what are the political implications and theoretical consequences of making such distinctions? The inevitability of these questions demands focused attention to the approaches that Derrida and Agamben assume toward the law and its relation to language. This chapter, entitled “Law, ‘Life/Living,’ Language,” however, privileges the question of power as biopower and the commitment to its neutralization through nonsovereign silence. The next chapter in turn privileges the relation between Derrida and Agamben in terms of the deconstruction of presence. What, I wondered, do Agamben’s writings say about the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism? Would it be fair to say that Agamben engages in a serious parody of deconstruction?

These inconclusive elucidations (or obfuscations) of Derrida and Agamben on law and language, silence and power, raised for me other related questions pertaining to singularity and silence and seemed to partition the project along the lines of the political in the first part and a reflection on the ethical in the second.

“The Wild Child: Politics and Ethics of the Name” pursues Derrida’s ethical injunction to a certain silence in the context of hospitality in relation to an extreme figure outside the law—the so-called feral child that haunts the nature/culture dichotomy. To refrain from questioning, and to encounter the ethical decision in and through a discernment of the inherent violence of naming, what do these agnostic experiences disclose about the proper name and its relation to the law and, more pointedly the “good name” of a child that has no name? This inquiry into the wild child is carried over into the next chapter to the context of scientific naturalism as a discipline of naming.

In the last chapter, “HumAnimal Acts: Potentiality or Movement as Rest,” it is the mute physical body of the acrobat that appears to turn cartwheels around the machine of the law to confound its workings. This body, it seems, requires that it be situated at the threshold between identities, concepts, even philosophical traditions, and best shows itself in relation to Agamben’s appropriation of Aristotle’s concept of potentiality. This joyful body of the rigorous acrobat redefines space and time by disclosing the stillness that resides in action. To contemplate this body, I suggest, is to perceive that it can embody the

Introduction

very power of language beyond the law's purview. As a modality of what Foucault might term the "care of the self," which refers to practices that are necessarily anomic and exceptional, agile movement, if practiced thoughtfully, recalls living beings—humAnimals—to their essential capacity for happiness.