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## **Power, "Text" and Public Policy: The Political Implications of Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive Method**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to clarify the distinction between positivist/scientific and interpretive approaches to public policy using the critical framework of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's deconstructive method helps to clarify the relationship among state power, public policy, and the cultural "text" of "subjectivity." It is asserted that the positivistic approaches to policy formation rely on a representation of subjectivity that does not contain sufficient epistemological validity to stand as a foundation for the imposition of norms and values through policy process. This approach to public policy extends, or seeks to extend, the normative grammar that is contained in the dominant discourse through the establishment of a system of rewards and punishments for behavior that conforms, or fails to conform, to that grammar. Public policy, therefore, initiates pressure toward uniformity in the content of "subjectivity." Derrida's deconstructive methodology shows the often hidden ideological content in public discourse, raising questions about the imposition of any fixed definition of subjectivity through public policy. Following Derrida, policy must be more open to a plurality of different modes of existence that can be accommodated by a positivistic approach

## ARTICLE

### Introduction

The passage of welfare reform legislation in the United States suggest a "new" approach to the issue of public assistance. Dubbed as "behavior modification" by both its proponents and critics, this program grants public support as a reward for the modification of actions that have been identified as impediments to self-reliance, productivity, and personal responsibility. Proponents of this strategy argue programs such as "Learnfare," "Workfare," and "Bridfare" are necessary to break the "culture of poverty." Critics argue the plans have not been successful in state sponsored experiments, and they represent little more than a cynical attempt by both political parties to appeal to an angry middle class that sees its own economic prospects in decline.<sup>1</sup>

In academic circles criticisms of such policies have traditionally taken two forms. One criticism has the character of a normative critique of the role played by state power in controlling the poor. In the interest of "stability" the state regulates the behavior of those classes and interests too weak to resist.<sup>2</sup> The second criticism of government intervention cites the connection between state power and capitalist economics. In this critique the state uses its power to discipline the population into the order of employment established by entrepreneurial capitalism and the needs of production.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last decade, however, a new criticism of the processes and methods of public policy analysis has emerged using a different epistemological paradigm. Exemplified in the works of Murray Edelman (1988), Deborah Stone (1988), Andrew Polsky (1991), Neil Postman (1992), Michael Shapiro (1992), and others, this paradigm suggests that the content of such policies as workfare, bridfare, etc. are generated from a broader cultural context that defies a simple normative, scientific, or economic critique. Following an epistemological paradigm that is interpretive rather than scientific, these authors stress the ideological character of the policy process at its very inception, where

assumptions and presuppositions are adopted. After assumptions are made, the formation of policy is largely a deductive process.

This paper will explore this new paradigm in the light of the critique of Western philosophy offered by the French poststructuralist, Jacques Derrida. Derrida's method, called "deconstruction," raises questions about: the validity of a closed epistemological system; the value of deductive logic in the study of social phenomenon; and the process of creating representations of subjectivity as a precondition for social analysis and normative critique. Derrida's challenge to the modern paradigm of knowledge and the reliance on the scientific method to uncover "truth" establishes an epistemological basis for these new critiques of the policy process.

While not the first to claim that a dominant culture will assert its "interests" in policy (such arguments can be found within the Marxist tradition as well as elite theorists such as C. Wright Mills), Derrida's deconstructive method explores the mechanics of the method by which context is translated into public action. Further, Derrida moves beyond a specific focus on economic interests and operates within a context of "culture" that includes the ideas, cultural norms and assumptions that provide the background for policy construction. Transformed into legal statute, the norms and interests of the culture are imposed through the power of the state. From this standpoint, "behavior modification" is revealed as the aim of all public policy. The imposition of "community standards," the inculcation of "mainstream values," "strategic interventions," etc. represent the "normalizing" tools of collective power that operate on a cultural level. All are extensions of state power under the rhetorical sway of a dominant ideology. While perhaps less subtle than other public policy areas, welfare reform reflects the extension of the dominant ideology. To put it another way, policy mirrors the "normative grammar" of the dominant culture, reflecting an ideal characterization of "subjectivity." From the perspective of deconstruction, such constructions of subjectivity have no foundational standing. Therefore, the effect of public policy is not the extension of some natural truth,

but the expansion of institutional power through extending the domain of the dominant discourse on the subject. The strength of Derrida's general epistemological critique is to unmask the tentative and ideological character of such an enterprise. In arguing that "truth" is plural, Derrida undercuts any agenda that would seek to impose a singular discourse on the subject.

This paper explores what Derrida's critique of Western logocentrism means for the concept of political communities and their artifacts, public policy. However, unlike Deborah Stone (1988), this paper will not seek to push Derrida in the direction of a reconstitution of community. The implications of the poststructuralist's epistemology suggest such a reconstitution is epistemologically unsound.<sup>4</sup> The concept of "community" itself suggests a bifurcated universe of members and nonmembers, a fixed system of identities that carry a totalitarian potential. As a result, Derrida's approach provides a rationale for resistance to the imposition of a singular discourse on subjectivity by any political community. Ultimately, this reveals an irresolvable tension between philosophic validity and collective action.

## **I. The Public Policy Tradition**

### **A. Modernity and the Scientific Paradigm**

Public policy is a social artifact. (Wildavsky, 1979, p. 395.) Its linkage to a social and historical context, therefore, cannot be severed. As a social artifact, however, public policy reflects more than the dominant moral and ideological beliefs present in a particular culture. As Michel Foucault suggested, the dominant ideology of any age also reflects a set of presuppositions about the limits and conditions of knowledge. (Foucault, 1973)

If this is the case, the model of policy formulation that focuses on the scientific discovery of truth as a foundation for policy prescriptions reflects the bias of what Deborah Stone calls the "rationality project." (Stone, 1988 4-7.) This project has sought

to impose a model of knowledge taken from the natural sciences onto the social sciences. In the area of public policy, this positivistic model has as its most common form the following: 1) identifying a problem, 2) establishing a set of presuppositions and hypotheses that will guide the investigation, 3) generating and evaluating alternatives, 4) choosing the best option to address the problem, 5) implementing the policy, 6) evaluating the outcome.<sup>5</sup>

Like the natural sciences, this model employs a syllogistic reasoning, judging both the soundness of premises and the logic of conclusions derived from those premises. (Paris and Reynolds, 1983) The outcome of the process is the product "policy X."

Policy X is considered valid if it reflects the methodological presuppositions, classificatory schemes, epistemological assumptions, and biases about human nature that were granted in step 2 of the policy process. As Gordon Tullock and Richard Wagner suggest, public policy begins with "first principles" of human action and then proceeds deductively. (Tullock and Wagner, 1978, p. ix.) This is the case for all "scientific" approaches to public policy, whether defined as positivism, behavioralism, rational choice theory, or cost benefit analysis. This epistemological pattern is designed after the natural sciences, where the empirical findings are used to validate (or invalidate) the assumptions of an hypothesis. In that sense, policy is considered rational if it reinforces the biases that were accepted as the foundation for its own inception.

But what has this procedure really proven? It is an illusion to think that ideological premises can produce a non-ideological result. The strength of Derrida's deconstructive method is to reveal the multiple interventions that undemonstrable assumptions have had in the construction of collective decision making. In this sense, a "rational choice" is little more than a choice that reflects the dominant norms of the society. It does not reveal some fundamental human truth.

## **B. The Interpretive Model**

As Christopher Lasch claimed, the scientific approach to policy making began to collapse along with much of the Enlightenment tradition. As a result, the search for scientific certainty in the social sciences only survives by narrowing the range of discourse to technical questions that can be solved quantitatively. (Lasch, 1995) In contrast to this tradition is a broad array of work that includes hermeneutics, aesthetics, and elements of the Marxist tradition. What these different schools of thought share is the understanding that the “truth” of public policy is formulated out of historical context. Within this perspective Derrida’s work is extremely important in providing an intellectual framework for analysis.

The interpretive framework is exemplified in the work of Deborah Stone (1988), Murray Edelman (1988), Andrew Polsky (1991), Niel Postman (1992), Michael Shapiro (1992), and others. Generally, these authors oppose this scientific paradigm of public policy analysis. While each emphasizes a different aspect of the problem with the scientific method, these authors share a perspective that stresses the significance of interpretation in the analysis of politics and public policy.

The interpretive framework does not follow the strict syntax of scientific statements. The scientific paradigm focuses on causality and predictability under strict rules of verification. The interpretive model is more open, having as a presupposition the historical nature of understanding. "Understanding" is viewed as a construction, not as a fixed, eternal "truth." This paradigm challenges the deductive system used in traditional policy analysis. It takes as its focus the very issues that the scientific model cannot address: the validity of the classificatory schemes; the truth value of various characterizations of human subjectivity; and the link between the normative content of policy alternatives and political power.

By denying the claims of the scientific method - that truth has a unidimensional character and follows linear causality - power, policy, and cultural reproduction cannot be separated from one another. Public policy, as a part of generalized politics, involves

commitment, belief, passion, and symbolic identification. Public policy, as politics, is an activity driven by emotion and passion, not science. (Stone 1988) Logical deduction is possible only after categories and definitions are established. It is precisely this commitment to the process of defining that defies the rationality project.

Edelman's assertions lead in a similar direction. For Edelman, politics is a symbolic activity in which various material and ideological interests seek to mobilize a generally passive public by the use of emotionally charged metaphors. Therefore, politics is about the construction and maintenance of myths and beliefs. Public policy serves to enhance and reinforce these beliefs. In particular, the mythology of the poor in the United States as worthless and lazy parasites makes their control and oppression appear as rational behavior by the state. (Edelman 1971) According to Edelman, assumptions regarding human nature, "appropriate" conduct, and rational politics are simply reflections of different ideological positions conveyed through language. These cannot be validated by science because the language itself is a reflection of the historical and political context in which the text is discussed. (Edelman 1988)

State power and the role of belief in politics is a theme also developed by Andrew Polsky. Following Foucault's strategy for a genealogical inquiry into French penal and mental institutions, Polsky examines the history of what he terms the "therapeutic state" in the United States. He claims that policy is constructed in order to inculcate "mainstream" values, especially to a suspicious underclass. (Polsky 1991) Clients of the state are pushed to change child rearing habits, find new residences, maintain sexual abstinence, and adopt different spending habits. Refusal results in the breakup of family units or incarceration. (Polsky 1991) He concludes that the fusion of power with assistance has led to the imposition of a dominant ideology on those who lack formal powers to resist and whose compliance is deemed necessary for the functioning of an advanced industrial economy.

Michael Shapiro, drawing heavily on Michel Foucault, argues that the contingent nature of interpretive knowledge makes public policy a political not a scientific undertaking. Practices develop historically and “reside in the very style in which statements are made, in the grammatical, rhetorical, and narrative structures that compose even the discourses of the sciences. (Shapiro 1988) The entire apparatus of power can be brought to bear on those who do not conform to expectations, even though the specific direction of state coercion is largely arbitrary.

The interpretive approach asserts that policy is an artifact of culture and context. As a cultural "text," policy cannot be separated from the assumptions that underlie its content. Therefore, policy is a reflection of cultural bias, not the uncovering of "truth" in the arena of public affairs. As such, it always serves the system of power reflected in the dominant ideology of subjectivity.

The scientific model of knowledge operates according to the parameters of syllogistic reasoning. This form of deductive reasoning must be built on assumptions. But where do those assumptions come from? Derrida elaborates the contextual nature of foundational assumptions, raising doubts about the essential condition for deductive policy making. Derrida's claims call into question the linearity of this deductive process and his ideas raise doubts about the validity of the “truth” that emerges as an outcome. These claims, if taken seriously, must shake the very foundations of traditional public policy analysis.

## **II. Deconstruction and the Problem of Meaning**

### **A. Text, Meaning, and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity**

Derrida's critique of Western philosophy is based on the idea that there is continuity among the central philosophic tenets of this tradition, from Plato to Kant and Hegel. Following Heidegger, Derrida asserts that a consideration of “being” has been at the core of the Western tradition. Heidegger claimed that the West has lost its link to true

“Being.” (Heidegger 1977) However, Derrida is suspicious of the onto-theology of “Being” suggested by Heidegger’s formulation. Therefore, Derrida rejects Heidegger’s metaphysics, but assimilates Heidegger’s notions of language and power as they are linked to the articulation of “Being.”<sup>6</sup> Derrida concludes that there is a link between constructions of the subject and the exercise of political power.

This metaphysical mask around the concept of being is very powerful in Western philosophy. Derrida argues that the task of capturing "being," described as "presence," has been carried out by the formulation of a text that claims to represent the essential nature of "being." From Plato to the modern period, Western philosophy has postulated "being" as a transcendent category, separated from sense impressions. The result of this formulation is the creation of an ontological dualism that separates mind/matter, being/sensing, and subject/object.

This ontological distinction has also provided the foundation for Western epistemology since Plato. "Knowledge" has been considered to be the result of a relationship between "subject," that which describes, and "object," that which is described. There has been, therefore, continuity between the "doctrine of the forms," the ontological dualism that made Plato's epistemology possible, and the notion of a "thing in itself," as the transcendental category of "being" postulated by Kant. Both presuppose a transcendental realm of "being" that lies beyond the human ability to "know." The proposition that one transcendental realm of "being" exists in which objects and events have their "true" character suggests there is universal subjectivity and a universal normative grammar based on that representation of the subject.

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" Derrida describes the Western Philosophic tradition. This mode of interpreting the world "dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin." (1978a, p. 292.) It seeks to affirm "being" by creating an "onto-theology" in which the possibility of the subject, "being," remains decipherable within the context of a closed epistemological framework. It creates the conditions for

humanism, an elaboration of history as "the being who," as a foundation for a totalizing metaphysics, in which the notion of "being" validates itself through an indirect and circular logic of affirmation. Subjectivity reflects back on itself to validate the content of "being."

But there is another form of interpretation in Derrida's work, one that reflects Derrida's own position. In the bulk of Derrida's writings the focus is on an affirmation of the "noncenter," the end of center as the affirmation of the "play of the world." Derrida asserts that our discourse about the world refers only to other discourses. Discourse cannot, therefore, affirm being because it cannot return to an origin. There is only the play of difference, the substitution for the substitution, the play of the noncenter in discourse. The result is "the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin..." (1978a, p. 292.)

To the exploration of this idea on "text," Derrida has assigned the term "deconstruction." Deconstruction is the attempt to push at the margins of "logos" which Derrida claims is at the heart of Western philosophy. The project is not anti-philosophical, as has been claimed, but is an attempt to examine the bias upon which the Western philosophic tradition is based. By implication, the philosophic underpinnings of a cultural process of reproduction, in all its forms, must be included in the deconstructive enterprise.

A deconstructive reading of text requires that the metaphysical underpinnings of text be unmasked by a reading that takes the text to the edge, the margins of metaphysics. In practical terms, this requires that the notion of "authorship" and "intention," as representations of closed systems of meaning, need to be superseded by an open reading in which authorial intentions give way to non-intentional contexts. To read text as conveying "only" the author's intentions is to read text within the metaphysical confines of "self-presence." All text, within this view, reinforce the presence of being through the very act of authorship. (Derrida 1976, 159)

Derrida concludes that Western philosophy engages in a circular logic in which the premises upon which the metaphysics of presence are based represent the essential precondition for the generation of propositions within the logocentric system. It is, therefore, quite understandable that Derrida sees Hegel at the pinnacle of Western logocentrism, identifying "logic" with a generative ontology. (Derrida 1976, 24) Being replicates itself in the process of coming to the realization of self.

Derrida explores this claim in his deconstruction of the methodological strategies of Claud Levi-Strauss and Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his discussion of Rousseau Derrida claims that Rousseau created a hypothetical time before language in order to demonstrate where society had gone "bad." Derrida asks if such a presupposition makes sense. Is it possible to ascertain the pre-social, pre-linguistic origins of language? (Derrida 1976, 252) This assumption makes Rousseau's critique of society possible, but it is built on an epistemological foundation that Derrida claims is insupportable. If the foundational premises upon which the analysis is built and from which the conclusions are logically deduced are speculative and arbitrary, can the conclusions have any validity? The premises are only reinforced by the act of drawing a conclusion, not through an external source of verification. Ideology is extended, not philosophically validated, through this process.

In deconstructing the methodological strategy of Levi-Strauss, as in Rousseau, Derrida seeks to show the logical impossibility of what is being asserted. The natural/social opposition which creates the foundation for Levi-Strauss' enterprise is part of a binary metaphysical scheme passed down in the Western philosophic tradition. In response to the claim that writing had a degenerative effect on the Nambikwara, Derrida claims that the concept of generating a text, as Derrida defines it, must have already existed in the Nambikwara prior to the introduction of phonetic writing by the anthropologists. Otherwise, its adoption in the reinforcement of social hierarchy could not have been possible. (Derrida 1976, 129)

In the discussion of Levi-Strauss Derrida is also trying to make a broader epistemological point. Levi-Strauss represented the extension of logocentrism to anthropology. At the roots of structural anthropology Derrida finds a central tenet of Western philosophy characteristic of late modernism. Levi-Strauss was critical of totalizing concepts in discussions of human behavior. His reasoning, similar to Weber's, suggests that totalizing concepts in the study of human society are not possible because of the infinite range of possible expressions by and about human beings.<sup>7</sup>

This is not Derrida's claim. Like Levi-Strauss, Derrida argues totalizing concepts have no epistemological foundation. However, Derrida asserts that within a linguistic system possible expressions are finite. It is the substitutions of meaning for any textual statement that are infinite. (Derrida1978a, 287) Derrida's argument represents a shift in reasoning. The idea that subjects can create an infinite array of statements is a defense of a particular type of subjectivity that protects the sanctity of the author. To suggest that a finite number of statements exist, and that the impossibility of a total truth stems from not being able to decide among them, shifts emphasis away from the subjectivist bias of the Western culture.

Derrida's main impetus is the desire to uncover the metaphysical character of the concept of "hierarchy" in general. Hierarchy is undermined if authoritative assertions regarding texts and their interpretation cannot be generated. Even the author of a "text" cannot be judged to be the final arbiter. "Text" combines author's intentions, the author's social context, personal milieu, and the epistemological and linguistic structures in which text is created. In using the term "text" Derrida attempts to open the interpretive field that has been dominated by the traditional notions of authorship and speech/writing as the idea of "being" reflecting upon itself.

Derrida's deconstructive method, therefore, undermines any totalizing theory of knowledge. Deconstruction performs this task as it reveals the logical inconsistencies, paradoxes, and unintended meanings in the reading of text. By de-centering any text, a

deconstructive reading shows the metaphysics of self-presence that underlies the idea of authorship, origin, and intention in the Western tradition. The "play" of deconstruction is the disruption of that presence.

By shaking the epistemological foundations upon which the authority of policy choices rest, Derrida's analysis raises important questions about the construction and assessment of policy outcomes. Public policy generated out of a modern, scientific bias functions by assuming an authority that is not there. If the meaning of subjectivity cannot be authoritatively determined, the substance of public policy and the circular process by which policy outcomes are measured must be abandoned. Following Derrida's epistemological critique, the outcome of the policy process is shown to be nothing more than arbitrary choice backed by the power of the state.

### **B. Identity, "Differance," and the Grafting of Text**

The decentering of "being," the opening of "play," is not simply a rhetorical device. Removing the center of "being" is accomplished by revealing the contingent nature of truth. All of Western metaphysics revolves around the "column of being" which is itself not there. (Derrida 1981a, 352) This is the case because all the representations of "being" are closed, complete, as is the notion of "being" itself, a notion of closed self-sufficiency. "Being" should be written with a line through the letters in order to signify the impossibility of "being's" independence, of "being" standing alone. (Derrida 1981a, 354)

To demonstrate this claim, Derrida suggests a shift in thinking about the way in which objects receive their identities. Western epistemology has centered on building foundations for positive statements about "being."<sup>8</sup> Identity is formed through the use of a differentiating scheme for categorizing the diversity of experience. "Being" reflects upon itself through making assertions about its "identity." However, if there is no

transcendental realm of "being" that informs the content of "identity," all such statements are insupportable.

To put this problem in slightly different terminology, the "signified," as that which is to be represented, and the "signifier," as that sign which is to represent the signified, stand in opposition. This opposition manifests itself as the difference between the sensible and the intelligible. (Derrida 1978a, 281) Derrida questions the system which supports the difference between signifier and the signified. The traditional notion of the sign, as "being" reflecting back on itself, is rejected. Identity is not formed by the idea of self-presence.

Derrida asserts that identity is generated from what a signifier is not, rather than a positive, metaphysical formulation of being. This Derrida refers to as "differance." Identity is formulated out of the play of differences, which forbids any element from referring only to itself. (Derrida 1981b, 26) No sign can be immediately present to itself, but gains meaning from the play of differences between itself and other elements.

Derrida's idea of "differance" presents the possibility for a radical shifting of ground within the Western philosophic tradition. If identity is established by what a signified is not, two conclusions are immediately apparent. First, the interconnectedness of text is demonstrated as an epistemological necessity for the creation of new texts, and secondly, the question of determining the truth value of statements is complicated by the infinite interconnectedness of contexts. Both of these topics require some elaboration.

If a signified is not complete in itself, but only in relation to that which it is not, and that which it is not is infinite, then the contingent nature of truth and the problem of textual interpretation is obvious. (Derrida 1981a, 304..) Philosophy cannot achieve closure. (Derrida 1981a, 353) There must always be an opening, a thing left open, an element unsaid.

Derrida is not asserting that there is no truth, or that there is no possibility of truth. That is not the direction of his argument, even though this position is often mistakenly

attributed to him. Derrida's argument seeks to demonstrate that there is not "one" truth. Truth is plural. (1982b, 103) Deciding among the truths, to pick one truth, is the impossible task.

To Derrida, Western philosophy has forgotten its metaphysical origins, forgotten that it has based its truths on metaphors, the signifier and the signified, in a cyclical process of epistemological regeneration. Representation, the result of the process of signification, is the creation of structural illusion. (Derrida 1981, 297)

Text does not convey "being" but instead represents a chain of metaphors about "being." The story of events validate themselves only through repetition, in which text turns back on itself, eventually losing sight of its contingent origins. Born of repetition, the text reproduces the process of its own triggering. (Derrida 1981a, 292)

Without the column of truth around which to organize closure, there is only text. The creation of text is always the transformation of other texts. It is a grafting. To write is to graft onto a text that already exists. (Derrida 1981a, 355) There is no origin, nothing prior to text. There is only the bottomless, endless, transformation of text. (Derrida 1981a, 333-334)

Philosophy is a great discourse governed and limited by the resources and organization at its disposal. (Derrida 1982a, 177) As a contingent reflection of experience, the discourse of philosophy requires features not present in the experience itself. There must be a structure which makes the creation of text possible, which allows for the experience to have meaning. (Derrida 1982a, 326) Previous texts provide the conditions and the limitations for new texts. (Derrida 1982a, 189) Every text has "traces" of other texts as its presupposition. Every text is a trace of a trace. (Derrida 1981b, 26) There is nothing before the text, no original author, no origin that is itself not text. (Derrida 1981a, 333) Language does not convey the signifier, but a metaphor. (Derrida 1982a, 178) As metaphors, all terms remain ambiguous. Metaphors are open to shades of subtlety, leaving the "true and proper" meaning undecidable.

All text is unclear, out of context, by the very nature of its becoming text. To forbid closure, to open dissemination, is to end "Meaning" and substitute "meanings," as contingent forms of "knowing" derived from structures. Text emerges as the result of the grafting on the metaphor of a metaphor. Thus, text does not verify "being," but reflects back onto other texts. Presence makes its appearance as the activity of the textual apparatus reflecting back upon itself. (Derrida 1981a, 299)

When applied to issues of politics, these ideas alter the understanding of collective action. Derrida is suggesting that textual validity is a cultural product, not a reflection of transcendental truth. Textual repetition provides the illusion of universals. If the text on subjectivity is constructed through this process it will reflect norms and biases that are undemonstrable except by reference to other texts on the subject. Through the traces of previous texts contained within them, public policies adopt an air of legitimacy. Derrida reminds us that political legitimacy is fundamentally different than philosophic truth.

### **C. Limits, Knowledge, and "The Scission"**

Derrida defines the limits of knowledge by suggesting that we are trapped within the structures and metaphysics that provide the means of discourse. We cannot move outside, to a meta-text, divorced and unrelated to the existing text. Nothing can have its basis beyond the structure itself. If the production of text is a grafting, then the graft must be attached to something. And, claims Derrida, there is no place outside of text from which to view it. (Derrida 1981a, 290) We cannot escape metaphysics. (Derrida 1981b, 17) There is no way to make a destructive proposition that is not formed out of the logic that it seeks to contest. (Derrida 1978a, 280) This was the dilemma faced by Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, according to Derrida.

If an epistemological reconstitution outside of metaphysical discourse is not possible then what is Derrida's point? Derrida wants to show how the concepts,

presuppositions, and structural limits of philosophy can be turned against themselves. (Derrida 1981b, 24) Any text can be shown to collapse through the elaboration of its possibilities for infinite substitution. Every philosophic system can be pushed until it slides to the point of exhaustion. (Derrida 1981b, 6)<sup>9</sup>

Text can neither capture "being" nor provide "truth." How can we speak of "truth" when every statement of "truth" is dependent on a speculative and theoretical account? (Derrida 1978b, 141) Text cannot even convey meaning, if meaning is the recapturing of the infinite relations of identity and non-identity within an ever evolving plurality of contexts.

What remains Derrida terms the "scission." The scission is a cut out of the infinity of substitutions and the plurality of contexts. When you cannot undertake the infinite commentary, then "take a cut of it." (Derrida 1981a, 300) The pure present is untouchable fullness. (Derrida 1981a, 301) It appears in discourse only as myth. (Derrida 1981a, 303) The present can appear only by taking a cut of itself, giving itself a beginning and an end, limiting the space and providing closure. Unity is the myth of reconstituted scission. Paradoxically, the unity is achieved only with the dissemination of the plural.

In Derrida's critique of Levi-Strauss, in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse on the Human Sciences," Derrida comments on the results of his view of knowledge for social inquiry. If knowledge is the assemblage of scission, the ad hoc arrangement of the fragment, then any totalizing theory of knowledge is impossible. Knowledge is interpretation, a myth imposed on the scission. Human science is reduced to a series of alternative mythologies. (Derrida 1978a, 287-288) The substance of traditional "social science" is, therefore, rhetorical and ideological.

Derrida's position provides support for the interpretive approach to social inquiry. What lies behind the "scientific paradigm", exemplified by positivism, behavioralism, rational choice theory, and cost benefit analysis, is the view that a singular, non-

ideological "truth" is possible. This position asserts that a specific set of rules govern human activity and that those rules are unaffected by context. The "truth" governing human behavior can be "discovered" if only the instruments are sufficiently refined.

However, if truth is plural the application of the scientific paradigm to social issues is problematic. These "scientific" approaches to public policy are formed in a "scission," a cut of the plurality. Derrida's analysis reveals the bias that emerges with this approach to policy making.

### **III. The Politics of the Scission**

If we take Derrida seriously we need to radically rethink politics, both as a scholarly enterprise and as the practice of collective action. If traditional political theory creates representations of the human character, and representation has the structural role of depicting "being" within the scission, than traditional political theory is a deductive extension of metaphysics. Political theory is the collected anthropologies of the "subject" produced out of the scission.

Political practice also emerges from the scission. Political practice cannot be separated from the myth that informs behavior. To the extent that political theories have provided the presuppositions necessary for a deductive policy formulation, they have served to extend speculative metaphysics into the arena of collective action. Hence, the struggle of politics is the struggle for control over the "archive" that has the power to determine the content of "subjectivity."

#### **A. The Onto-Theology of the Subject as the Foundation for Collective Action**

Derrida resists the idea that his aim is to reduce all writing to myth. (1981b, p. 52.) The distinction between "logos" and "mythos" is a logocentric opposition that he is unwilling to accept. Deconstruction can only take place between texts, not from outside.

The only reference of a signifier is another signifier. Writing is only compared to other writing. (Derrida 1981b, 53) However, within the writing of text, myth can be created and disseminated. The myth of subjectivity is particularly important to Derrida.

Derrida stated that the goal of his project is not to destroy the subject, but to show that what we call the "subject" and "subjectivity" are references to specific historical and structural constellations in which those terms find their meaning. (Derrida 1981b, 88) Subjectivity is historically bound. In that sense deconstruction allows for the peeling of the cultural layers, the traces of previous texts, that provide the apparent validity of any particular ontology that serves as the basis for political action. In that sense, Derrida suggests he opens the possibility of a materialism that is more conscious of its speculative and teleological problems than Marxist materialism. (Derrida 1981b, 74)

To the extent that the human sciences engage in a methodological quest for representation they are engaged in an enterprise that is potentially destructive. As people are turned into representations, positive identities that can be characterized, measured, and defined, they also become objectified, as the subjects in service of the categories of definition. Derrida suggests that as representations, people can become replaceable, expendable, objects, units in mass production, police computers, and concentration camps. (Derrida 1982c, 317)

The methodological foundation of deductive political theory is the objectification of "being." In positive political theory the goal is to produce "objectified" facts which serve to categorize subjectivity. In this tradition of political analysis one begins with ontological presuppositions regarding the "identity of being" and then proceeds logically to "objective" conclusions. In a reciprocal process, the definition of the "subject" reinforces the onto-theology of "being" when action dependent on that presupposition takes place.

Derrida states his work will end the idea that ideology is somehow an effect or reflection of being itself. (Derrida 1981b, 90) Derrida seeks to prevent any concept from

representing a center, or summary, from which it can govern due to a theological presence. (Derrida 1981b, 14) Here we can begin to see the political significance of Derrida's deconstructive enterprise. If the structural foundation that underlies the formation of "text" determines the direction of discourse, then the control of that structure is a political activity.

If political life is reflected in the signs of the culture and in the structures for the generation of those signs, and if the signs that are generated are the presuppositions underlying political action, then control over the generation of signs takes on a political character. Political power serves as a gatekeeper over what is admitted to the archive. Once a sign is admitted into discourse it has the power of dissemination. It becomes a trace, an origin for future discourse, and a point for the expansion of its territory within the totality of discursive activity.

If knowledge is something that is created, rather than discovered, then the direction taken by the knowledge creating enterprise, as a textual grafting, has a political dimension. This political observation represents a point of convergence among the poststructuralists. Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition, Foucault in Power/Knowledge, and Derrida in No Apocalypse, Not Now (as well as other places), all claim the generation of knowledge is directed by the structure of power.

## **B. The Politics of the Graft: The "Subject" and Public Policy**

Derrida shares the view, common to the poststructuralist enterprise, that any representation of the "subject" is speculative, metaphysical, and the reflection of the power that dominates the cultural archive. The content of "subjectivity" is a result of the particular constellation of traces and grafts that have been "accepted" within the dominant discourse on the "subject." "Subjectivity" is, therefore, something that is created, not discovered. It is a cultural product.

The construction of subjectivity is part of a larger process of social reproduction. In this historical, contextual process the signs and symbols of the dominant discourse are appropriated and reapplied to emerging contexts and conditions. This is why, within modernism, the construction of "subjectivity" retains a continuity, even within changing constellations of events and interests.

Derrida's critique of Western epistemology challenges the notion, exemplified by Kant's Universal History, that there can be "one" history, "one" normative grammar, and "one" subjectivity. The deconstructive enterprise provides a means to negate the validity of any definition of subjectivity that claims a privileged status. Not only is this the case because of the historical and relative nature of ontological claims, but as discussed above, a positive assertion regarding "human nature" must take place within a closed epistemological system, a condition that, logically, must result in the contingent nature of any such claims. The construction of "subjectivities," the premises of deductive policy analysis, reflects the limits of the cultural archive, not the content of human nature.

The significance of this position for public policy cannot be overstated. If public policy can be shown to serve the "myth" of a specific definitional content of subjectivity, a myth that reflects the dominant discourse on subjectivity that has origins in the archive, not in "being," then public policy is a means for the dominant culture to extend and enlarge its influence. Public policy becomes, therefore, a disciplinary tool in the hands of the interests that control the institutions of power.

While Derrida's analysis may seem to parallel the Marxist tradition, the "interests" that exercise power are conceived in a much broader sense. Economics is reduced to only one component of a constellation of particulars that constitute a dominant culture. Derrida's analysis also applies across different institutional forms of political life. Neither democracy nor totalitarianism can necessarily be assumed to legitimate and incorporate multiple definitions of the subject. When a deductive procedure is used in the creation of policy quite the contrary is likely to occur. In that case, public policy is

successful to the extent that it has been able to extend its definition of the subject into alternative cultural archives. To the extent that it fails, public policy has been unable to break the alternative definitions of the subject held by competing systems of normative grammar.

To put this in schematic terms, all public policy using a positivist epistemology follows the same basic form: given the character of the human subject (X), policy (Y) should bring about desired condition (Z). However, following Derrida's logic, the historically contingent nature of the process through which the content of (X) has been formulated suggests that there are clear epistemological problems generated by a static conception of (X). In addition, there are clear problems that relate to matters of power and political practice. The content of subjectivity delineated by the (X), as a reflection of archival parameters, only has correspondence with policy (Y). For outcome (Z) to be expected from policy (Y) the content of subjectivity (X) must be firmly established.

Deconstruction suggests that the power to impose a definition of subjectivity operates as a necessary condition of the positivistic models of policy making. From that perspective, the problem of making policy are technical. Once subjectivity has been constructed the creation of a system of measurements allows for the monitoring of "success." In addition, the deductive form of policy analysis prevents the representation of diversity, even where there are preexisting alternative definitions of the self. Government policy tends to reflect the biases of the majority culture or the most powerful groups within the state. Policy results are, therefore, *exclusive* rather than inclusive. The process will have the effect, if not the stated purpose, of homogenization.

Alternative discourses have marginal political power, making resistance to the imposed conception of subjectivity difficult, if not impossible. This results from the conditional nature of the policy process. Benefits are secured by adopting behavior that resembles that prescribed by the dominant ideology. Assuming that behavior reflects the content of subjective consciousness, behavior changes are sufficient for the validation of

a strategy's success. Thus, in the "wedfare" program an increase in the numbers of marriages is an indicator of the success of the initiative.

This form of policy making is governed by a circular logic. The "truth" of the prevailing view of subjectivity is revealed in the state's ability to force compliance with its demands. To put this another way, policy serves an "ideal subject" reflected back from the dominant archive through the policy process. Policy redefines the content of competing definitions of the subject in the process of empowering its own effectiveness. The power of the state, reflecting the dominant ideological position on "subjectivity," is brought to bear on the alternative definitions of the self.

A problem emerges if the policy process should try and account for multiple discourses on "subjectivity." If policy (Y) corresponds only with subject (X), how can the policy process account for (X<sup>1</sup>), (X<sup>2</sup>), (X<sup>3</sup>), etc.? This condition would require (Y<sup>1</sup>), (Y<sup>2</sup>), (Y<sup>3</sup>), etc., a condition that is impossible if the outcome (Z) remains a singular reflection of the dominant normative ideal. Within the bureaucratic model of state intervention, such complexity would be difficult, if not impossible, to manage. Therefore, multiple definitions of subjectivity represent a problem for the modern state, in general, regardless of the structure of decision making.

Following from Derrida's deconstructive logic, the point is not that no community is served by policy, but that policy represents an extension of one form of subjectivity that, following modern universalism, intrudes into a social context that is plural, with multiple discursive fields. The "velvet glove" of policy should be most effective on those who share the dominant definition of "subjectivity" that informs policy. Policy should be least effective for those who do not subscribe to the dominant discourse. As a result, the "iron fist" of disciplined compliance becomes "rational" for those who fail to follow the dominant normative grammar.

Policy based on the identity (X) will not speak to (X<sup>1</sup>), (X<sup>2</sup>), (X<sup>3</sup>), etc. Further, policy (Y) will reflect the content of "subjectivity" contained in the normative grammar of

(X), extended through the institutions of power into the policy arena. From the perspective of Derrida, the real result of the policy process is the extension and replication of (X) through policy (Y).

If the definition of "subjectivity" that informs the policy process is demonstrated to be a historical phenomenon (as Derrida suggests), not a representation of a transcendental universal "self," then Derrida has effectively laid the foundation for a critique of public policy. Policy based on the identity (X) may ignore the needs (material and ideal) of (X<sup>1</sup>), (X<sup>2</sup>), and (X<sup>3</sup>). In general, policy based on (X) may violate the sense of "justice" contained within alternative normative grammars. With one universal definition of "subjectivity," justice is reduced to ethnocentric bias and the power to enforce it.<sup>10</sup> Derrida's critique of modern epistemology, and the "subjectivity" contained within it, explain the resistance of (X<sup>1</sup>), (X<sup>2</sup>), and (X<sup>3</sup>) to policy (Y). If policy (Y) requires the adoption of the normative grammar, identity, and ideals of (X) in order to be effective, then (Y) is rationally resisted by all who would not seek to become (X).

### **C. Public Policy as "Text": Defending the Normative Ideal Through Intervention**

Public policy, simply stated, is what government does. As described above, Derrida describes the mechanism by which text validates behavior through grafting onto other texts. There is, however, a reciprocal process that takes place in this relationship among "subjectivity," policy, and normative goals. The parameters of government action are drawn by the content of "subjectivity" within the dominant, power controlling, culture. But government action also shapes the content of "subjectivity" by creating a disciplinary structure of rewards and punishments within the collective. Behavior that is consistent with the dominant normative grammar finds rewards, behavior that is not finds punishment.<sup>11</sup>

In more subtle ways, however, the text of "subjectivity" shapes government activity. Tax systems that reward private capital, home ownership, and the nuclear family

have their foundation within the onto-theology of the subject. Where such goals are not embraced or pursued through explicit forms of behavior, the strategy known as "intervention" is used.

Intervention is designed to alter patterns of activity in the targets of the intervention. It is a strategy used by the state to homogenize a plurality of alternative conceptions of the self. In what Polsky has identified as the growth area for intervention, the underclass, interventionist strategies take the form of eliminating those behaviors that are outside the norm. (Polsky 1991, 203) Targets for intervention are pressured to modify behaviors not consistent with the mainstream. (Polsky 1991, 16.) The intervention may take the form of guidance or coercion, but both are reinforced by various forms of surveillance.

Once the dominant social pattern is established the state can sanction agents as the protectors of the archival values. Intervention is warranted against all who do not share the normative ideal. They are to be directed to "healthy" practices that will better assist them in "realizing their potential."<sup>12</sup> (Bermant and Warwick, in Bermant, Kelman, and Warwick, 1978, 382) The decision to alter a subjects behavior can be made by any of society's agents, including: teachers, therapists, police, contracting agencies, the courts, or other "legitimate" arms of intervention. (Stolz in Bermant, Kelman, and Warwick, 1978, 40)

Because it devalues personal autonomy, the practitioners of intervention suggest the ethics of interventions must be considered before interventions takes place. The inequality of power between the intervener and the target, however, is not the central issue. That is taken as a given. (Bermant and Warwick in Bermant, Kelman, and Warwick, 1978, 378) The "legitimacy" of the agents of interventions must be assured if the intervention is to be considered ethically justified. (Kelman and Warwick in Bermant, Kelman, and Warwick, 1978, 17) Who is it that confers legitimacy within the modern

state? It is the state itself, as the keeper of the idealized subject, a reflection of the norms, values, and aspirations of the dominant culture.

Government policy both represents the dominant form of subjectivity found in the society and acts as a repository and gatekeeper for changes and challenges manifesting themselves within the culture. Public policy organizes and legitimates the selection process of the ideas to be transmitted through the cultural institutions such as schools, business practices, the military, and the media. As the regulator of the process, the state can effectively delegitimize ideas that question the status quo. The "truth" of the ideas being transmitted through the cultural mechanism is demonstrated by the "success" of the icons that emerge at the top of the economic hierarchy. The message is that those who conform find success, measured at the very least by employment, and those that do not can "rationally" be made to do so through any means necessary. In this sense, the "truth" of the dominant definition of "subjectivity" is "proven" by the economic rewards it produces for the believers.

The process of "self-validation" also produces other cultural manifestations as the dominant text on "subjectivity" digests and eliminates other competing definitions. In the United States this subtle (and often not so subtle) form of imposing the homogenization of cultures results in the irony of Native Americans and African Americans celebrating European culture and worshipping European gods. The processes involved in the promotion of "welfare" or "bridefare," as part of the welfare reform proposals of the 1990's, are not structurally different from these other forms of discipline that have been imposed on alternative texts of the "subject."

The institutional structure that maintains the power to define the metaphors, the linkages, and the traces that are the elements of any political discourse will have effective political control over the outcome of public debate. Even in a democratic state the ability to make the scission one way rather than another determines the outcome of the policy process. Deconstruction serves as a method to both peel away the layers of previous

traces and to demonstrate the linkages of any sign to the other signs from which it derives its meaning. Therefore, it is a method to uncover structures of power that underlie the public policy and the way in which this power is used to reinforce the norms, symbols, and "truth" contained in the dominant culture.

### **Conclusion: Community, Identity, and the Totalitarian Potential**

In challenging what he considers the logocentrism of the Western tradition, Jacques Derrida argues that the fixed identities of objects that are supposedly given to us by language are not that at all. Language is a play of signs in which signs refer only to other signs. The transcendental signified, the pure "being" to which signifiers supposedly refer, is a speculative metaphysical premise that has served in the role of providing a foundation for the construction of a deductive system of knowledge. On that foundation a logocentric tradition was built that allowed the exercise of political authority. Derrida's method reveals how the system of positive knowledge reinforced itself through the process of its own transmission. Sign was laid upon sign, the traces of traces, representing the history of the process of signification within the Western culture. When read as the text of the Western world, the traces can be peeled back, as an anthropology of the sign.

If Derrida's assertions are considered, and the truth they contain is an absence of any one truth, then the deconstructive enterprise uncovers the prejudices, biases, and ethnocentrism of the language that informs political behavior. As collective institutional behavior, public policy is linked to a reciprocating activity in which the production of signs reinforces the foundations which make particular institutional patterns, normative grammars, and disciplinary activities appear as rational. To Derrida, peeling back the text to uncover the pattern of traces carried from previous texts makes evident the claim that the "column of truth," does not exist.

The issue raised by Derrida's deconstructive method, that politics extends the myth of subjectivity through the use of coercive power, has implications beyond the specific historical constellation of power found in the modern nation state. The deconstructive method can be equally applied to all forms of collective association. In delineating the mechanism by which historically contingent definitions of the subject become the foundational basis for public action, Derrida exposes the tension between majoritarian democracy and the idea of plurality as another form of the tension between the community and the individual. If there is nothing other than "text," there is also no singular "truth" to validate collective behavior in any form. In drawing us to that conclusion, Derrida raises serious questions about the possibility of politics being anything other than the imposition of ideology through the use of overt and covert forms of coercion.

This conclusion clearly raises questions about the reconstitution of the political community. Taking into account the conditions that surround the construction of public policy it does not appear that the concept of community has a benign nature. Communities are organized around singularities, not pluralities. The content of community myths, metaphors, and ideals have persuasive force as a result of their distinctive character. They carry power by the very fact of what they are not. They delineate, separate, and distinguish one group from another. In that sense, political communities are exclusive.

The exclusivity of the community is the corollary of the inclusive nature of internal policy. Policy seeks to draw all into the community, its norms, values, and processes. It seeks to make all part of its exclusive domain through the strategy of homogenization. The power to impose a singular definitional content onto the human being is the power to control the lives and destinies of all who fall within the domain of the political life. Public acquiescence is secured through the combination of rhetorical illusions and the exercise of collective force.

Is public policy possible in the wake of a Derridean deconstruction? It must be assumed that governments will always engage in some form of collective action, so the real question is what *should* public policy look like in the wake of this critique. Governments must recognize that there is not one right way to live that can be supported either by scientific technique or a notion of transcendental truth. They need to take into account that there are multiple definitions of subjectivity that produce different forms of the “good life.” Can this be reconciled with the bureaucratic form of state organization? That appears unlikely. Positivist approaches to policy promote a bureaucratic form of social life, not personal freedom. The outcomes of such a process serve institutional requirements for the orderly administration of individuals, not individual need. The result is a system of manipulation and control. Derrida’s analysis reveals the paradox hidden in the Western democracies that pursue such a singular approach to policy making. The attempts to impose a correct way to live incorporate a totalitarian ethos even though the decision making process may be carried out with democratic procedures.

Accounting for plurality is the challenge for the postmodern political world. As long as organized authority believes it can impose a singular answer to the question of “how to live” through legal statute, institutions will be perceived as the arm of oppression by marginalized groups. In that sense, the recent welfare reforms represent a step backward as the disciplinary authority of the state aims at imposing a way of life rather than allowing each community and each individual the power to seek their own answers to the questions posed by life.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the various issues and positions on welfare reform see: King (1992), Page (1992), Conniff (1992), and Ingwerson (1992), Caraley (1996).

<sup>2</sup> See Piven and Cloward (1971), Moynihan (1968), Wolin (1988).

<sup>3</sup> See Fischer (1984), Offe (1988), Dolbeare (1982).

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Koch, "Poststructuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism," The Philosophy of the Social Sciences, volume 23:3, September 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Versions of this can be found in Mason and Mitroff (1981), Stone (1988), Wildavsky (1979).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the link between the Being and political power in Heidegger see "Letter on Humanism (Heidegger 1977)

<sup>7</sup> One finds a parallel expression in Paris and Reynolds in the "underdetermined" nature of rational ideologies. (1983, p. 210.)

<sup>8</sup> These positive assertions take the character of "representations" of truth, whether within the classical episteme of "appearance" or in the modern episteme of "function." See Foucault, The Order of Things

<sup>9</sup> Derrida admits that this would also make his own text undecidable. (1982b, p. 137.)

<sup>10</sup> Here it should be noted that the Paris and Reynolds claim that "rational ideology" may be plural is incoherent. A plurality of ideological presuppositions must produce conflicting policy prescriptions and interventionist strategies.

<sup>11</sup> The disciplinary power of the system of rewards and punishment finds some of its most obvious manifestations in the pre-modern prohibitions on so-called "victimless crimes." Systems of punishment for actions such as prostitution, drug use, gambling, etc., deny the voluntarism that is part of the modern, Enlightenment definition of the "subject." It is clearly ironic that voluntarism is denied in these areas but is stressed in regard to the poor taking responsibility for their poverty.

<sup>12</sup> It is also suggested by Bermant and Warwick that if the problem is defined properly an explanation of why intervention was necessary should not be required.