Beyond Derrida: 
The Autoimmunity of Deconstruction

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"After deconstruction, what is to be done?" Richard Kearney poses this question to Derrida in a 1998 interview, and follows it up with the now familiar litany of questions that Derrida's logic of undecidability provokes:

How do we act? ... [H]ow do we move from the text, understood in the broad sense, to action? If there is a deconstructive logic of undecidability, where an event or an action can be both/and, neither/nor, or in ethical terms both good and evil, neither good nor evil, how do we make a decision on the basis of undecidability? ... [H]ow do we discriminate between good and bad actions?¹

Derrida's response is characteristically evasive and provocative:

Deconstruction is not a philosophy or a method, it is not a phase, a period or a moment. It is something which is constantly at work and was at work before what we call 'deconstruction' started, so I cannot periodize. For me there is no 'after' deconstruction—not that I think that deconstruction is immortal—but for what I understand under the name deconstruction, there is no end, no beginning, and no after.²

Notwithstanding Derrida's disclaimer, deconstruction does indeed appear in this passage as something "immortal." If we cannot "periodize" deconstruction, it remains beyond philosophy and outside of history despite the fact that deconstructive practice is in part a historicization of philosophy. Deconstruction therefore historicizes but is not itself historicized; it is not historicizable. This is rephrased by Derrida in Force of Law when he states that "deconstruction itself" ("if such a thing exists") is not deconstructible. Nor is justice, and in a bold move he adds: "Deconstruction is justice."³

These parallel claims—that neither deconstruction nor justice is deconstructible—are troubling. The "spirit" of deconstruction appears to fly in the face of the claim that deconstruction is not subject to its own operational logic. If deconstruction is not a concept but the always already contamination or betrayal of one term or entity by its other then there is no reason why notions or phenomena such as deconstruction itself and justice—especially justice—should not also be subject to this betrayal. The argument that deconstruction is not deconstructible—
because "it is in the name of justice that we deconstruct, and you cannot deconstruct that in the name of which you deconstruct"—needs to be interrogated, particularly given the claims Derrida consistently makes to the political relevance of his thought and to the constant movement back and forth between reading texts and reading actualities.

The writing of this paper began as bombs were raining on the southern suburbs of Beirut half a world away, a reminder of the immensely frustrating disjunction between the act of political thinking and the actuality of the event. Too often the fact that the experience of thinking and the experience of the event are not the same appears to be neglected when readers of Derrida defend his work for its ethico-political import. In the following discussion I want to reflect on the relationship between Derrida's claim about deconstruction and justice and his elaboration of the notion of autoimmunity, in the context of his interest in politics more generally and in democracy to come more specifically. This is not to reiterate the critiques that complain of Derrida's late and unsatisfying turn towards politics and of the paralysis undecidability can cause in matters of politics—not therefore to answer explicitly Kearney's important questions. Rather, I want to focus on the limits of the notion of à venir, the "to come" of democracy, justice, or politics. I will argue that this is the site of deconstruction's own undoing, its "suicidal autoimmunity," at least in the realm of politics (and it is worth asking why deconstruction's undoing occurs here). What can Derrida's political formulations do for us in understanding and interpreting political actualities, and where do they fail in this task?

In what increasingly appears to be the positing of an absolute, in Derrida's later work as well as in that of his readers, within a philosophical approach that defies absolutes, we find reason to rethink Rudolf Gasché's 1986 claim that the "plural nature, or openness, of Derrida's philosophy makes it thoroughly impossible to conceive of his work in terms of orthodoxy, not simply because, since he is a living author, his work is not yet completed, but primarily because it resists any possible closure, and thus doctrinal rigidity, for essential reasons." It is a declaration of deconstruction's immunity to autoimmunity, always open to its other, ever vigilant against the dogma that would begin to destroy deconstruction from the inside. Since Gasché wrote this passage, Derrida's work has been forced to completion by death, but there are other reasons to worry about orthodoxy. Is it time to ask who or what is deconstruction's other and has deconstruction allowed itself to remain vulnerable to such an other? What will come to interrupt what is undoubtedly a historical, conceptual approach to reading, no matter how retroactive and timeless such an approach may appear to contemporary thinkers? Given that at the end of his life Derrida described the coming
philosopher as one who is not necessarily a professional but a practitioner, one who is above all concerned with justice and politics—"who, in the future, reflect[s] in a responsible fashion on these questions and demand[s] accountability from those in charge of public discourse ... who analyzes and then draws the practical and effective consequences of the relationship between our philosophical heritage and the structure of the still dominant juridico-political system that is so clearly undergoing mutation." I believe these are critical questions.6

The Undeconstructible

Derrida’s descriptions of deconstruction have always wavered between a conditional and an unconditional understanding of the term, and not always self-reflexively so. At times it appears in a concrete, reductive sense, as when he states in a 1999 lecture in Australia that laws are deconstructible "because we change them, we improve them, we want to improve them, we can improve them.... [A]nd to improve means to deconstruct. It is to criticize a previous state of the law and to change it into a better one." In what is probably his most succinct and straightforward essay on deconstruction, Derrida characterizes the problem of describing what has become a "genre" in itself in terms that typify the operation of deconstruction in all concepts:

The impossible is already this: identifying in the singular something that may present itself, that may be accessible as deconstruction. But I thought that, out of courtesy and a taste for hospitality and gratitude, I should talk as directly as possible, straightforward, without ruse or subterfuge, about this word deconstruction and what has happened to it, what has happened through it, with it, in spite of it, in this country and, above all, over the last twenty years.8

This is a familiar bind to us now: to identify a concept in the singular, in this case deconstruction, is an impossible task, yet one that Derrida must inevitably choose as he attempts to speak of what deconstruction is for the sake of hospitality. One cannot identify the singularity of a concept—some trace always escapes it—but at the same time one must speak "directly," "straightforward[ly], without ruse or subterfuge." What he states here about deconstruction describes precisely the operation of deconstruction elsewhere: that one can only ever negotiate between the singular and the general, and therefore between calculation and excess, possibility and impossibility. It seems in this passage that deconstruction is a concept like any other, subject to the operation of diffrance and to
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the demand that we constantly negotiate between the conditional and the unconditional.

Contrast this with his comment in 1986: "Deconstruction is not a critique,"9 or in 1989, "I'm not sure deconstruction is possible, that it is of the order of the possible."10 This doubled conditional/unconditional sense of deconstruction comes to a head in Force of Law where it is the deconstructibility of law that permits the possibility of deconstruction. Derrida elaborates on three points:

(1) The deconstructibility of law (droit), of legality, legitimacy or legitimation (for example) makes deconstruction possible. (2) The undeconstructibility of justice also makes deconstruction possible, indeed is inseparable from it. (3) The result: deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of droit (authority, legitimacy, and so on.) It is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), there is justice (F, 15).

This convoluted passage raises a concern regarding the double bind. Here we see that both justice and deconstruction—if they exist at all, we are constantly reminded—occur on two planes. There is justice as droit or law, that is, justice in the realm of presence, the possible, and the normative, "constructed on interpretable and transformable textual strata." This is not "bad news," Derrida tells us, but may even be "a stroke of luck" for politics and historical progress (F, 14). There is also justice in a realm beyond deconstruction and transformation, perhaps. The first kind of justice is what enables deconstruction. Yet the second form, the justice beyond, is deconstruction. What does this suggest about deconstruction itself? In this passage Derrida is arguing that deconstruction occurs between justice and law, as an experience of what cannot be experienced, and at the same time, since deconstruction is justice, and neither is deconstructible, we must assume it too occurs on two different levels: the conditional and the unconditional. The unconditional justice and deconstruction are one and the same, their existence in question.

We must wonder, then, if deconstruction is justice whether the ensuing discussion of justice in Force of Law applies to deconstruction as well. For example, Derrida asks "How are we to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, irreplaceable groups and lives, the other or myself as other, in a unique situation, with rule, norm, value or the imperative of justice which necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application in
each case?” (F, 17). In the case of deconstruction, how are we to reconcile the unnameable deconstruction with what he has elsewhere described and what has widely come to be known as a method of criticism, a logic into which we can plug any number of concepts and experiences?

This is understood as Derrida’s double bind, the neither/nor structure to justice and deconstruction. The unconditional is the condition for the conditional; without it, without a democracy to come or justice to come, there is no democracy in democratic systems or justice in law. Hence democracy and justice are neither purely conditional nor purely unconditional. As Derrida claims in the case of hospitality, “if we have a concept of conditional hospitality, it’s because we have also the idea of a pure hospitality, of unconditional hospitality.”

On the flip side there is also an either/or structure to this claim. Either there is an unconditional, formless, “if it even exists” justice which provides the condition for a normative or rule-based justice or there is only the latter, which means we only apply a just rule, bereft of a spirit of justice. Derrida asks rhetorically, “Is it ever possible to say: an action is not only legal, but also just? A person is not only within his rights but also within justice? Such a man or woman is just, a decision is just? Is it ever possible to say: I know that I am just?” (F, 17). These questions presume a pure, absolute notion of justice, despite its unknowability, its irreducability. They presume that there can be no understanding of justice that permits one to say “this decision is just,” no alternative to this polarity between a justice that is normative and rule-based (and therefore unjust, for Derrida) or an unconditional justice that prohibits us from saying “I know that I am just.” This condemns to injustice any practice that does not acknowledge a Derridean notion of the impossibility of justice, and denies the possibility of a practical, conditional understanding of justice that is not based on a blind adherence to rules and norms. I want to suggest that it is a narrow view of politics and justice indeed which overlooks practices that are motivated neither by a normative, programmatic approach nor a justice to come.

Thus in his discussions of deconstruction and justice Derrida constantly betrays himself. On the one hand, he states, “you cannot deconstruct that in the name of which you deconstruct,” and on the other, he gives as an explanation for why he could not have a philosophical mother that any such figure would have to be his granddaughter—one who inherited and reaffirmed deconstruction—implying that there are no “deconstructive-philosophers” (the only kind women can be) except those born of Derrida himself. In this audacious instant, quite clearly Derrida is the father and author of deconstruction as a concept—an unarguably periodized concept. These betrayals could be regarded as
further evidence of the double bind that Derrida himself is well aware of: deconstruction is both an operation of the perhaps or impossible and a concept, inherited and reaffirmed. Yet there is something unsettling in the ease with which one can evade criticism in the use of this neither/nor, both/and logic. We can and cannot speak of deconstruction; there are and there are not rogue states; there is and there is not democracy, and so forth. Has the formula of the deconstructive double bind come to act as a kind of immunity against critique?

A fundamental tension should be noted here, rooted in two approaches to alterity in Derrida’s work which is significant for any discussion of deconstruction, politics, and justice. As Jack Reynolds puts it, “Much of Derrida’s work on alterity palpably bears a tension between his emphasis upon an absolute and irrecoverable notion of alterity that is always deferred and always ‘to come,’ and his simultaneous insistence that the other is somehow always already within the self.”14 We see this quite clearly in these descriptions of the undeconstructibility of deconstruction and justice. While Derrida criticizes Levinas’s approach to alterity for heading too far into ineffability—“As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude ... the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable”15—he frequently, and perhaps increasingly in later writings, appeals to this very point “where thought breaks with language.”16 In his later discussions of autoimmunity and democracy to come, two concepts that also bear this tension, the point to be considered is where thought breaks with politics. I am arguing that it is the appeal to this second notion of alterity that provides an alibi, a form of immunity against deconstruction’s other or others, against what will come inevitably to displace it—the very immunity that Derrida regards as detrimental to the survival of community or democracy when it appears in an absolute form.

Autoimmunity

Derrida’s more extensive discussions of democracy, terrorism, and rogue states in Philosophy in a Time of Terror and Rogues: Two Essays on Reason elaborate a use of the term autoimmunity that is immediately appealing for its apt characterization of a number of contemporary political situations. The “war on terror” is a particularly appropriate example, as Derrida demonstrates explicitly in his conversation with Giovanna Borradori on the moments or symptoms of autoimmunity. Terrorist aggression comes “as from the inside,” Derrida states, referring to the hijackers of September 11 who trained and prepared for their act of terrorism against the United States within its borders. In his most frequently cited definition he explains that “an autoimmunitory process is
that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity.” A double suicide is thus enacted: the hijackers’ own suicide, as well as the suicide of those who “welcomed, armed and trained them” (PT, 95, 94, 95). It is a definition faithful to biomedical autoimmunity. Like the disease that ravages a body by attacking the body’s immune system, thereby destroying it from within, a nation or sovereign power brings on its own destruction by doing that which allows its enemies to penetrate and destroy its protective, immunizing forces.

It is a terrifying autoimmunity we encounter in Philosophy in a Time of Terror, one that threatens to appropriate all acts of resistance. Even repression is shown here to produce, reproduce, and regenerate “the very thing it seeks to disarm.” Referring to the effects of 9/11—the inability to put a face on such terror which relegates it to “being just one event among others”—Derrida states:

Yet all these efforts to attenuate or neutralize the effect of the traumatism (to deny, repress, or forget it, to get over it) are but so many desperate attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements. Which produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome (PT, 99).

The concept thus articulates the dangers of a paradigm in which security and terror feed off each other, propelling a ceaseless and seemingly inescapable escalation of violence. Thus Israel destroys the fabric of its own existence in a desperate attempt to secure its borders against the Palestinians whom it has imprisoned within these borders by building a so-called “security fence,” enacting the double suicide of which Derrida speaks. Consider Shuli Dichter’s poignant elaboration of this suicide as he travels alongside a portion of the wall near his kibbutz in the documentary “Mur.” He states:

We love this land so much that we seal it. It’s a postmodern interpretation of the saying: ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’ Commit suicide with the Palestinians. Take them with us to our death. What more can I say? This fence blocks the artery that feeds the Israeli heart. If there was some kind of osmosis, deranged as it may have been, between us and the Palestinians, if there was some chance that we would integrate into this region, that Zionism would flourish, that the Jewish people would have a home in this world, this fence has eliminated that possibility.... So as to console ourselves for killing ourselves, we’ll write in history
books that we brought it upon ourselves. That will be our sole consolation. 

Similarly, the American and British governments, in repeatedly stalling a ceasefire in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, incite the forces already gathering against them—the forces among them—who cannot be ferreted out by prohibiting passengers from boarding aircraft with bottled water or toothpaste. Derrida sums it up well:

Whether we are talking about Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Palestine, the 'bombs' will never be 'smart' enough to prevent the victims ... from responding, either in person or by proxy, with what it will then be easy for them to present as legitimate reprisals or as counterterrorism. And so on ad infinitum.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 or the "pervertability" of democracy into colonization, decolonization, and fascist and Nazi totalitarianisms\textsuperscript{18} demonstrate above all the limitlessness of vulnerability—"whence the terror." Indeed, the worst terrorism is one that "installs or recalls an interior threat, at home ... —and recalls that the enemy is also always lodged on the inside of the system it violates and terrorizes" (PT, 100, 188 n. 7).

Autoimmunity appears here in a negative light—an ill-fated response to the fear of the enemy's or other's intrusion, of the loss of the fantasy of security or invulnerability. Vulnerability can be terrifying, and the effort to immunize oneself against it can lead to the most violent security measures. Thus democracy breeds its own inner violence, Derrida warns, coming "to resemble [its] enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats." Referring again to 9/11, he reiterates that it is perhaps because the United States has a democratic culture and system of law that it was able to expose itself to the very "terrorists" who trained under the nose of the CIA and the FBI (R, 40). The autoimmune process in this case is instigated by the openness of borders—a necessary porosity—but turns ugly when it seeks to protect itself from such vulnerability.

In "Faith and Knowledge," where we find the first extensive treatment of the concept of autoimmunity in Derrida's work, we find a meaning somewhat different from the terrifying autoimmunity of his last writings. In this text, today's religions are shown to have recourse to technology—to "tele-technoscience," to "global spectacularizing"—to promote their messages and doctrines, at once a necessity and a hindrance to their well being and survival. Religion, Derrida explains,
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reacts immediately, simultaneously, declaring war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places, in truth from place itself, from the taking-place of its truth. It conducts a terrible war against that which protects it only by threatening it, according to this double and contradictory structure: immunitary and auto-immunitary.19

Indeed, there can be nothing “heilig, sacred, safe and sound, unscathed, immune,” without the risk of autoimmunity. Community itself must cultivate its autoimmunity in order to stay “alive,” in order to remain “open to something other and more than itself.”20

Contrasting these uses of the term, it seems we have a “good” (the desire for perfectibility) and a “bad” (the risk of pervertibility) version of autoimmunity.21 On the one hand, autoimmunity must be cultivated; we need the other to break open our fortifications against it. We must remain vulnerable—the individual, the community, the state—despite the risks of harm, terror, and destruction, in order to prevent the exclusion of the outside that is our condition for existence. This autoimmunity is a kind of rigorous self-critique, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of an immune system that protects us absolutely. In Derrida’s discussion of democracy in Rogues, for example, democracy is shown to be “the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility” (R, 86–7). It is because within a democratic system democracy itself—its history, concept, and name—can be interrogated that it is an example of autoimmunity. There is nothing new in this use of the concept. Autoimmunity, or the attack from within, is simply another way to describe the work of deconstruction, which Derrida has always stressed involves risk. It is another reminder that the other is within the self-same, rupturing, negotiating, preventing closure and stasis.

On the other hand, autoimmunity stands for the fearful reaction to the loss of this illusion of security. In neither case, however—the autoimmune welcoming of the other and the autoimmune defense against the other—do we necessarily encounter a pure idea of the unconditional, the im-possible, the irreducible. It is only when Derrida arrives at the notion of democracy to come and makes clear the relation between these concepts that the discussion turns again to an alterity that is absolute and irreducible.

Democracy to Come

Derrida insists that while autoimmunity is not synonymous with “aporia” or “the double bind,” it shares with these terms a fundamental
undecidability which is more than an internal contradiction; it is a "nondialectizable antinomy" (R, 35). Yet we are not given a satisfying explanation for how autoimmunity demonstrates its own unconditionality. It operates in democracy, as we have seen, as a "renvoi, a referral or deferral, a sending or putting off," for example, the exclusion or expulsion of the domestic enemies of democracy under the pretext of protecting it from within, or the curtailing of certain civil rights in the name of homeland security (R, 40). Indeed, "democracy has always been suicidal," Derrida states, "and if there is a to-come for it, it is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise, life and the force of life" (R, 33). What is this "thinking life otherwise" which is the condition of democracy to come? Derrida expends a great deal of energy in Rogues defending the idea that there is no proper democracy, asking

Who, then, can take it upon him- or herself, and with what means, to speak from one side or another of this front, of democracy itself, of authentic democracy properly speaking, when it is precisely the concept of democracy itself, in its univocal and proper meaning, that is presently and forever lacking? (R, 34).

It is this lack of closure—of immunity to the other, or to what democracy is not—that renders democracy autoimmune. It is an autoimmunity inscribed onto the concept of a democracy without concept,

... a democracy devoid of sameness and ipseity, a democracy whose concept remains free, like a disengaged clutch, free-wheeling, in the free play of its indetermination; it is inscribed right onto this thing or this cause that, precisely under the name of democracy, is ever properly what it is, never itself (R, 37).

Derrida adds that the democracy to come is neither constitutive nor regulative in the Kantian sense (R, 37). He complicates this further in a later chapter, making the following curiously ambivalent remarks:

Yet the regulative Idea remains, for lack of anything better, if we can say 'lack of anything better' with regard to a regulative Idea, a last resort. Although such a last resort or final recourse risks becoming an alibi, it retains a certain dignity. I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it (R, 83).

He follows this up with three reservations about a Kantian regulative idea. First, the im-possible, the unforeseeable coming of the other, is not privative, inaccessible, or indefinitely deferred, but comes to me "from on
high” and seizes me here and now, “in the form of an injunction ... that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later” (R, 84). This urgency cannot be idealized; it is undeniably real. Second, the responsibility of action cannot consist in applying a norm or rule to a situation, for this is a simple deployment with no relation to justice or juridical, political, and ethical responsibility (R, 84–5). Finally, Derrida expresses a general unease about using Kant’s notion of the regulative idea glibly, without rigorously expounding on the strict meaning Kant gave to the imaginary, the necessary illusion, and “the indispensable use of the as if (als ob)” (R, 85). Once again, we are presented with only two options: an injunction “from on high” which leads to justice or a normative deployment which does not.

It seems Derrida protests too much on this matter of the regulative idea. Ultimately, it is difficult to interpret democracy to come as anything but a regulative idea or ideal, in all but the most abstract sense. If it is impossible, incalculable, a promise that will never show itself fully, how do we know or experience it? If we cannot, then how useful is it for politics? The constant attention to a democracy that is never “itself,” that we can never know in a pure sense, merely reinforces the idea of this pure concept—assumes there is an ideal democracy we cannot know that conditions the democracy we know—deflecting from anything we might say about the democracy we experience, however imperfect. Derrida thus follows the path of the madman, as he once accused Foucault of doing for attempting to write a history “of madness itself” and not the history of madness described from within the language of reason. “Total disengagement from the totality of the historical language responsible for the exile of madness,” Derrida chides him, is possible in only two ways, “either do not mention a certain silence (a certain silence which, again, can be determined only within a language and an order that will preserve this silence from contamination by any given muteness), or follow the madman down the road of his exile.”

Furthermore, how does this democracy to come motivate us, ethically or politically? In what sense can we speak of an injunction that is unconditional? Readers of Derrida have embraced these words and defended them in the name of a profound responsibility to the other. We have yet to hear, however, an adequate explanation for why an unconditional justice “from on high” or openness to the radically heterogeneous would motivate, as Ernesto Laclau puts it, “some kind of ethical injunction to be responsible and to keep oneself open to the heterogeneity of the other.” It does not follow from an impossibility of ultimate closure and presence that there is an ethical imperative to cultivate that openness or even to be committed to a democratic or just society. The necessity of unconditional justice is thus never made clear in a
practical political sense. We seem to have accepted these terms without question, that an injunction "from on high" is the only way to interrupt sameness, to prevent totality, unity, oneness, and their inherent dangers—dangers, I might add, that we have also come to accept without question.

We need to consider that Derrida is inconsistent in his demand for an unconditional incalculable. Its necessity in matters of politics is never clear, despite his increasingly repetitive lists of the terms of its operation: im-possibility, the khora, the inheritance of a promise, the unforeseeable coming of the other, incommensurability, incalculable singularity, messianicity without messianism, unconditional hospitality or forgiveness, and so forth. The reductiveness of his argument in later works should make us pause to consider whether indeed we find an increasingly dogmatic adherence to the incommensurable other, in the positing of an unconditional that is no longer secret, no longer silent, perhaps no longer capable of the intervention Derrida so desires. Consider the following series of claims in the concluding pages of *Rogues*:

A 'responsibility' or a 'decision' cannot be founded on or justified by any *knowledge as such*, that is, without a leap between two discontinuous and radically heterogeneous orders (R, 145).

Without the absolute singularity of the incalculable and the exceptional, no thing and no one, nothing other and thus nothing, arrives or happens (R, 148).

Only an unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality. Unconditional hospitality exceeds juridical, political, or economic calculation. But no thing and no one happens or arrives without it (R, 149).

I want to argue that what we witness here is the autoimmunity of deconstruction, in the second sense I outlined above, that is, an autoimmune reaction to one's own vulnerability to invading forces. The emphasis on the unconditional, particularly on the leap required when making political, ethical, or juridical decisions or judgments, immunizes deconstruction from critique. Perhaps this is a way for us to read Derrida's claim in *Force of Law* that deconstruction and justice are not deconstructible, a claim that could be the undoing of deconstruction in the realm of politics and justice. This does not mean that Derrida's work is not useful or important for political thought and practice—on the contrary, as I seek to show in the following section—but it does mean
that we need to interrogate the necessity of the unconditional in matters of justice.

**Politics Without the À Venir**

The concept of autoimmunity appears to work just as well without an incommensurable other or unconditional promise—without the to come. When we interrogate its effects, ask how it is politically useful, we note that the double bind of deconstruction enables us to complicate a political terrain that is constantly being simplified for us, reduced to a series of binaries that foreclose questions and critique. We are prohibited from publicly criticizing the Israeli government's excessive use of force in Gaza or Lebanon by the fear of being accused of anti-Semitism, despite the fact that some of the strongest voices of opposition to this force belong to Israeli Jews. If we attempt to interrogate the meaning and use of the term “terrorist” and the strategies and premises of the “war on terror” we are in danger of being demonized along with those we seek to understand—an understanding that is assumed to mean justification. We are afraid to address “one side” of any conflict without addressing the “other,” as though there were ever only two sides, as though matters of justice have only to do with being sensitive to the condition of victimhood and recognizing pain. In this sense, deconstruction does appear to be about justice—although not necessarily so—but a justice that does not appear to me to arise out of a pure, unconditional idea of justice.

In many of his more explicitly political writings Derrida’s relentless emphasis on the impossibility of absolutely distinguishing between the inside and the outside, the here-now and the beyond, or the self-same and the other—in other words, on the impossibility of an absolute, protective immunity—is thus critical for an analysis of political events. He demonstrates this in such texts as “Taking Sides for Algeria,” “The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration,” and in numerous interviews. While Derrida’s practical engagements are often highlighted by his readers—held out as proof to his critics that his work is indeed useful for politics—these practical interventions are not often given sustained attention. They are political statements rooted in the deconstruction of binaries for which Derrida’s work is famous—nuanced, yet decisive. Significantly, however, the à venir is largely missing.

In his homage to Mandela, for example, Derrida writes that Mandela’s political experience or passion can never be separated from a theoretical reflection: about history, culture, and above all jurisprudence. He has always been, Derrida adds, “like all the greatest politicians, a man of reflection” (LR, 14). That Derrida means by this a deconstructive
reflection is evident when he describes Mandela as one who admires the legacy of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, yet who "respects the logic of the legacy enough to turn it upon occasion against those who claim to be its guardians" (LR, 17). In other words, Mandela sets himself "against the code in the code" (LR, 34), exhibiting a "respectful admiration" for the dignity of a tribunal, refusing to accuse his judges at the moment when he appears before them. Mandela "seizes the occasion," Derrida claims, speaking to them in order to speak "over their heads" (LR, 36). A man of the law who rejects that law "in the name of a superior law, the very one he declares to admire and before which he agrees to appear" (LR, 27), Mandela never ceases to appeal to the voice of conscience, "to the immediate and unfailing sentiment of justice, to this law of laws that speaks in us before us, because it is inscribed within our heart" (LR, 27).

While this essay certainly illustrates some of Derrida's most prominent political themes—the paradox of the force of law, critical intervention from within the law, emancipatory desire, and the refusal to polarize politics—there is little indication of the unconditional justice that Derrida elsewhere invokes as necessary for politics. There is only one point at which he alludes to a democracy to come, citing Mandela's recollections of the democracy the elders of his tribe in the Transkei described to him, a democracy before the arrival of white colonizers. While Mandela states that the freedom and equality of early African societies in South Africa could not measure up to the demands of the present epoch—such a society "contained the seeds of a revolutionary democracy" (LR, 24)—Derrida interprets this as a prefiguring or foreseeing of a revolutionary democracy. These early African societies "make visible ahead of time, what still remains invisible in its historical phenomenon, that is to say, the 'classless' society and the end of the 'exploitation of man by man'" (LR, 25). One could read this, however, as an evocation of a democracy already seen, not an invisible to come, even if only in the eyes of a young boy listening to the nostalgic stories of his elders.

In "Taking Sides for Algeria" there is a similarly noticeable absence of the unconditional. In this text from a public meeting held at the Sorbonne on February 7, 1994, following an appeal for civil peace in Algeria by the International Committee for the Support of Algerian Intellectuals and the League for the Rights of Man, Derrida provides us with a rigorous alternative to the polarization of the sites of political conflict into two opposing camps. Avoiding political neutrality, he argues, does not mean choosing a camp from between two sides of a front that allegedly define the given of the conflict. Political responsibility means refusing this given, taking sides, rather, four times.26
These four sides provide us with a working definition of democracy. First, while the future of Algeria belongs to the Algerian people, one must acknowledge and reaffirm the internationality of the stakes of the solidarities that bind us “all the more that they do not merely bind in us the citizens of definite nation-states” (TS, 120). A “true” democracy also requires at the very minimum an electoral commitment, public discourse—in the form of a free press, for example—and respect for the electoral verdict that entails a change in political power, a change that must remain an uninterrupted possibility (TS, 121). Third, democracy implies both a radical secularism and “a flawless tolerance” which provide shelter against terror and protect the freedom of discussion and interpretation within every religion (TS, 122). Finally, this democratic exigency can only come from the living forces of the Algerian people, “from an Algerian society that recognizes itself fully neither in a certain state ... nor in the organizations that fight it by resorting to assassination or to threats of murder, to killing in general” (TS, 122). Respect for the anger, suffering, and upheaval, but also the resolution, calls us to an uncompromising condemnation of the death penalty, and says no to death, torture, execution, and assassination (TS, 123).

**Another Justice, Another Politics**

There is no testament to the incommensurability of the other nor to the impossibility of justice in these texts. In his bold claims concerning democracy and justice in Algeria, the impetus to struggle appears to be motivated not by an unconditional justice but by a profound empathy for the experience of injustice and attachment to the cause of a people with whom Derrida identifies himself. It is not a democracy or justice to come but what we have already seen of equality or justice—and what we have seen of injustice, of suffering and pain—here or there, then or now, that motivates us, inspires us to protest against injustice. It is respect for the resolve, suffering, and tremendous resilience of the “living forces” of Algerians that demands action, and the equality and democracy experienced by Mandela’s elders that motivates, rather than an unconditional justice.

It seems no one has admitted, at least to my knowledge, that the claims made in these political statements could be considered the kind of calculable, technocratic formulas that Derrida relentlessly criticizes elsewhere. This begs the question, for whom is the critique of a normative, rule-based politics meant? Other political philosophers? If this is evidence of the leap required when moving from the unconditional to the conditional, the incalculable to the calculable, we must ask what use ultimately a theory of the double bind or autoimmunity—at least one that
posits the necessity of the to come—is for the practical matter of politics. It seems we have not inquired sufficiently into the perceived necessity of an unconditional hospitality, forgiveness, democracy, or justice, for political action. The only way to do this would be to “read” political actualities or events and listen to the actors embroiled within them, a task not many of us are prepared or equipped to do.

There are alternative ways to articulate politics, ethics, and justice—or forgiveness, hospitality, and democracy—without appealing to a notion of alterity in matters of justice and politics which it seems we can only articulate as a regulative ideal or ineffable beyond. This does not negate the effectiveness of Derrida’s attention to the antinomies of politics, nor does it suggest that undecidability is paralyzing or that the only solution is a normative, calculative approach. I am suggesting that we have not even begun to assess the role of the unconditional in political actualities (as opposed to political thought)—whether we speak of an incommensurable alterity or an undeconstructible justice—and this is where Derrida has not helped us much.

This reading of actualities, of events, is something that political practitioners and actors have long practiced and acknowledged, constantly in confrontation as they are with their others—not their incommensurable others but the others they must sometimes struggle to understand or die at the hands of. Merleau-Ponty put it wisely in a 1960 interview; in actuality, he wrote, political life is not fixed into either/or dilemmas, and politicians are not as Manichean as is commonly thought:

There are moments for affirmation and moments for negation: these are moments of crisis. Beyond these moments, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are the politics of an amateur. Let me emphasize this point: by refusing to abide by the yes and the no the philosopher does not stand outside politics, but is confined to doing what everyone, and especially the professional politician, does.27

Here is a very rare testament by a philosopher to the insight of the political practitioner, perhaps the very coming philosopher Derrida has invoked, but political philosophers are not strangers to this refusal either.28 My complaint is not merely another allusion to the seemingly insurmountable gap between thought and practice, but about a kind of philosophy that hails itself as politically important yet clings to a justification or ethical ground that means very little in the event, in the moment of crisis, action, and decision. There may be obstacles for the theorist in thinking the event and in acting—the constant and often tediously slow work of “translating” ideas—but the gap will not be closed
by creating a beautiful and complicated logic that never leaves the pages we write or read.

When asked whether he is in despair over the situation in Israel and Palestine, Shuli Dichter tells Simone Bitton, director of Mur. "Were I [in despair] I wouldn’t be here. Were I [in despair] I wouldn’t talk. Silence frightens me most. Desperate people keep silent. I’m not [in despair], I’m fighting." Is it a pure idea of freedom or justice that motivates this man to act; is it an injunction “from on high”? On the contrary, it appears to be his confrontation with suffering and inequality—not an unconditional injunction but a refusal to tolerate the pain of others, which anyone may or may not feel in this encounter, may or may not act upon. Like countless other political actors, Dichter already knows—is forced to acknowledge on a daily basis—the exigencies of political crises, and therefore the risk that any political program will miss its mark. If we are to engage in philosophy that does not break with politics, we have to look there, where the moment of crisis demands a thinking that has no alibi, that is not seduced by a regulative ideal or pure à venir.

Gasché’s statement about the impossibility of closure in Derrida could be a demonstration of the very autoimmunity of deconstruction. What was once a startling insight, even a shocking intervention, has come to immunize itself against its own other or others. Thinking about the "good" autoimmunity, this is as it should be. We could turn Derrida’s words concerning community back to him: deconstruction needs to cultivate its own autoimmunity in order to stay “alive,” in order to remain “open to something other and more than itself.” This other might be the very practitioner Derrida believes the coming philosopher should be, and a justice focused on commensurability rather than incommensurability, commonality rather than difference, and the conditional rather than the unconditional.

Notes


2. Ibid., 65.


12. Ibid., 10.

13. Not to mention no women philosophers, although Derrida qualifies this by explaining that the figure of the philosopher has always been a masculine figure, which is why he “undertook the deconstruction of philosophy” to begin with, and women who come after deconstruction are not women philosophers but women who think. See Screenplay and Essays on the Film Derrida, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (New York: Routledge, 2005) 97. See also Penelope Deutscher’s essay in this issue for a discussion of this passage.


16. Ibid., 114.


20. Ibid., 51.

21. See Penelope Deutscher's essay in this issue for a further discussion of the terms perfectibility and pervertibility.


23. For a discussion of this ethical motivation see Antonio Calcagno's paper in this issue.


28. I am thinking above all of the work of Étienne Balibar, who tirelessly pursues the question of the relationship between philosophy and politics, never losing sight of the practical matters of existence in human communities and nations, as well as many others—too many to name—who never feel the need to call upon alterity for a motivation for justice.