

Against Eclecticism

An eclectic is not a philosopher,
 he is a sort of echo repeating all sounds.
 —J. Simon

*T*his is a manifesto, written with a certain urgency, to call attention to what seems to me to be an increasingly evident tendency among scholars who know they have been influenced by poststructuralist theory to minimize that critical influence, to describe it as simply one among many “methodologies” that has been used to advance empirical projects that are now taken to be the primary object of research and writing. The minimization of poststructuralist influence and the denial of its epistemological position (one that, among other things, insists on the necessary interconnection between the theoretical and the empirical) takes place under the sign of eclecticism.

Earlier this year I went to a talk given by a young historian whose work is beautifully Derridean even as it treats a concrete historical topic. When asked by someone in the audience—a senior professor as it happened—about his “methodology,” he described it as “eclectic.” He only borrowed here and there from different theories as he found them useful for illuminating specific questions of fact and interpretation, he said, clearly anticipating the anxiety, if not the hostility, of his audience for the very “theory” that, in fact, organizes his work. This placating gesture—at

once an avowal and a denial—is not unusual these days. In conversation with yet another young scholar, this one an art historian, I was told that he had minimized the “theory” aspects of a paper he had written, making it more descriptive and less analytic, interpreting his material within recognizable disciplinary conventions in order to accommodate an audience he assumed would condemn him if they were aware of the full extent of his theoretical preoccupations. Again, eclecticism was the way he glossed his own interpretive stance. Lest this criticism seem to be addressed exclusively to a younger generation that has forgotten the commitments and sacrifices of its elders, I will add an autobiographical example. I find when I am writing letters of recommendation for my brightest and most original students—those whose work is as good as it is because they are operating with the critical insights of poststructural theory—I, too, tend to minimize the theoretical dimensions of their work. Seeking to reassure some imagined conservative historians that this candidate for a job or a fellowship is not a raving theorist, I talk mostly about the thematic or substantive focus of the work and offer the soothing observation that his or her approach to theory and method is eclectic, by which I want to imply that she or he is not attempting to put forth a critique of disciplinary practice, even though the highest praise I can give a student is that that is precisely what she or he is doing.

I want to argue in this manifesto that the current invocation of eclecticism, while perhaps a necessary protective strategy, can nonetheless lead to a permanent silencing of the critique that certain theories have enabled. I take my definition of critique from Barbara Johnson, who writes:

A critique of any theoretical system is not an examination of its flaws and imperfections. It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of the system's possibility. The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself. (xv; see also Brown and Halley)

In writing against eclecticism, I am endorsing neither dogmatism nor purism nor orthodoxy—though it is hard to write this without seeming

to do that. I do not want to suggest that we work exclusively within the confines of a single theoretical frame; indeed, I think selective use of several theories is fine. I am not issuing a call to the fallen to return to the faith. I am not denying the innovative potential of recombination, hybridity, or bricolage. I am in favor of transgressing disciplinary and theoretical boundaries and of confusing categories and I am not against change. I even think that iteration can be subversive because it changes meanings (but, of course, I learned that from Derrida). What I am against is the notion, implied in the uses of eclecticism I have cited, that we are no longer foregrounding conflict and contradiction in our work, no longer subjecting the foundational premises of our disciplines or, for that matter, our era to rigorous interrogation, no longer asking how meaning is constructed and what relations of power it supports, but instead applying so many useful methods in a common empirical enterprise in which even radical insight is presented simply as new evidence and the conceptual foundations of disciplinary practice are left safely in place. Eclecticism, in the highly specific usage I have referred to, connotes the coexistence of conflicting doctrines as if there were no conflict, as if one position were not an explicit critique of another. The aim is to ignore or overlook differences, to create balance and harmony, to close down the opening to unknown futures that (what came to be called) “theory” offered some twenty or thirty years ago. This “theory” has a long philosophical lineage from Socrates forward and including the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, but I want to confine myself in this essay to poststructuralism and especially to deconstruction. “What is at stake,” writes David Carroll, “is a certain relation to the possibility of (necessity for) movement, reevaluation, transformation in general, the future not as the logical outgrowth of the past and present, but as the indication of and relation to what has not been anticipated or programmed” (2). This opening to the unknown comes through the examination (even the exacerbation) of controversy, the study of incommensurability and unrepresentability, the probing of undecidability. The point for scholarly work, Carroll continues, is “to force open and undermine the traditional boundaries of the disciplines so that they will begin to admit serious, critical, theoretical investigations within themselves and thus be receptive to their own transformation and rethinking” (22). In contrast, eclecticism is not only conservative but restorative; it seeks stability and reconciliation, not innovation. Although hardly a coherent movement now (we are not yet witnessing an “eclectic turn”), today’s gesture towards eclecticism seems to have resonance with,

if not roots in, the work of the nineteenth-century French philosopher and educator Victor Cousin.

Victor Cousin's Eclecticism

There are, of course, precedents for Cousin's thinking in the writings of the ancient Greeks, but it is *his* articulation of eclectic philosophy and its historical-political implications that offer a striking parallel for us. Cousin was born in 1792 and died in 1867. His moment of influence came under the July Monarchy (1830 to 1848), during which time he not only served as professor of philosophy on the Faculty of Letters and as director of the *École Normale Supérieure* but also wielded important political clout as a Councillor of State, a member of the Royal Council on Public Instruction, a Minister of Public Instruction, and a Peer of France (see "Cousin"; Fauquet). These posts put Cousin in a position to implement his philosophical teachings in the college and university curriculum, where they outlasted their author for many decades. "The whole secret of this life," wrote his student Jules Simon (who became an important politician in the Third Republic), "is that Cousin loved and cultivated most of all the politics of philosophy" (213). Cousin offers an example—clearer than many perhaps, but not exceptional—of the close ties between the politics of philosophy and the philosophy of politics. Beyond that, I want to use him as a figure through which to think more broadly about politics and academic disciplines.

The intellectuals and politicians of the July Monarchy sought to create a *juste milieu*, an era of stability after the chaos of the Revolution and the instabilities of the Napoleonic and Restoration regimes. Their thought is characterized by the historian Jan Goldstein as "a cautious and conservative form of liberalism" ("Foucault" 101). "By the grace of God," Cousin wrote, "everything proclaims that time in its irresistible march will little by little unite all minds and hearts in the intelligence and love of this constitution [of the July Monarchy] which includes at the same time the throne and country, monarchy and democracy, order and liberty, aristocracy and equality, all the elements of history, of thought and of things" (qtd. in Mainardi 69). Cousin believed that one could take the principle of authority from monarchy and combine it with the democratic principle of equality before the law, "uniting into one happy family forms of government that have long been deemed hostile" (J. Simon 56). The philosophy that would provide the foundation for this reconciliation

of opposites, that would restore order by restoring the stability of meaning, was Cousin's rational spiritualist psychology, known as eclecticism (see Brooks; Thiers).

Eclecticism had many aspects, the first of which posited four successive systems in the history of philosophy: sensationalism, idealism, skepticism, and mysticism. Although they seemed to be irreconcilable, Cousin insisted that they were not. Each system, he said, was true by what it affirmed, false by what it denied. The point of eclecticism was not synthesis, but rather, to extract the partial truth from each system and cumulate them into the whole truth. Since human thought could invent no new system, philosophers must look to existing systems to find certain knowledge. "There was no more need to discover truth, but only to unite its fragments," J. Simon wrote (55). "Once infatuated with eclecticism," he commented, looking back critically on his own early attachment to Cousin, "a man is not only disinclined to think for himself, but he enters the schools of teachers utterly opposed to one another in a settled spirit of docility and conciliation which induces him to accept a little from each and to unite opposites" (82).

A second aspect of eclecticism involved the repudiation of the sensationalist psychology of Condillac (and Locke before him), a psychology that Cousin believed had underwritten the illusory revolutionary attempt to change the very nature of human subjects. As Goldstein describes it, Cousin objected to the sensationalist notion that a self was merely a collection of sensations, "located in an indeterminate 'somewhere' [. . .] nothing but a 'logical and grammatical subject,' a 'sign' affixed to an assemblage of floating qualities that is 'imagined' as a subject" ("Mutations" 103). In place of this mutable signifier, Cousin offered a substantial self that, he said, preexisted its experiences and could be found by conscious introspection, a science of internal observation. Here, he argued that metaphysics and science collaborated in the revelation of the truth of human subjectivity. The self was "real," he insisted, not imagined; and it was endowed with reason and free will. But reason, he told his students, "does not belong to you," it is not an individual trait (not the function of an ego); rather, it is "universal and absolute"—belonging to God. Reason thus conceived made possible the logic of mathematics and science as well as shared notions of the true, the beautiful, and the just. Goldstein notes that it offered "a powerful argument in favor of common standards and values and against the kind of social and political contestation that bred instability and revolution" (106). Cousin's eclecticism was also a strategic way of lifting the weight of Catholic orthodoxy from the teaching of philosophy.¹

A third aspect of eclecticism was its attempt to reconcile philosophy and religion. Here, Cousin sought to protect the freedom of inquiry associated with the teaching even of his brand of philosophy from anxious surveillance by the orthodox Catholics in the French Church and their advocates in the government. He rejected the idea that the only true doctrine was Catholic doctrine, since it excluded truths that other systems provided. Believing nonetheless that religion offered the surest grounds for morality as well as peace and happiness, he urged that philosophy must still be left free to pursue its thinking. That was because philosophy concerned the educated classes, religion the lower classes. But, he also assured his readers, “only false philosophy and false religion are at loggerheads” (J. Simon 152). The role of the teacher of philosophy was to demonstrate that this was the case. The natural truths taught by metaphysics, he told the Chamber of Peers in 1844, come from divine writing engraved on the soul; philosophy was meant to reveal those truths. Even Descartes’s doubt was provisional (not the same as dangerous skepticism), since it was necessary to establish the existence of the soul and of God. “A professor of philosophy,” he said, “is a functionary of the moral order, appointed by the State for the purpose of cultivating minds and souls by means of the most reliable aspects of the science of philosophy” (qtd. in Derrida, *Right 1*: 125).² This argument did not stop Catholic critics from attacking Cousin and discovering pantheistic heresy in his writings. As an educational administrator during the July Monarchy, he bent over backwards to prevent the teachers he supervised from calling Church teaching into question; neutrality was to be their position on religious dogma. When the reconciliation of opposites did not work in practice, he admonished his staff “not to get me into trouble.” “More than one of us,” J. Simon reports, “left philosophy for history or political economy, impelled by nothing save those warnings, which, though paternal, were express and clear” (165).

Many commentators have noted the opportunism of Cousin and, indeed, have dismissed his eclecticism as a simple attempt to curry favor with the Orleanist regime. At a café-philosophie in February 2004, the then Minister of Education Luc Ferry was denounced by someone who compared him to Cousin, “a man who changed his ideas as he rose in the ranks of politics” (“Café-philosophie”). And Jacques Derrida earlier had offered a similar characterization. Cousin was an intellectual functionary in the service of the state, he commented, who “never ceased to be political in the most literal and public sense of the word even as he denied it” (Papers, Box 92, Folder 11). In fact, although Cousin’s eclectic philosophy

was unquestionably geared to securing the *juste milieu*, it also had an important disciplinary aspect. It was not just a reflection of a particular political ideology but a theory of human psychology that took independent disciplinary form. Cousin's ability to institutionalize his philosophy, to bring his political skills to bear on what was above all a disciplinary contest, allowed eclecticism to triumph over its competitors (Idealism and Phrenology, according to Goldstein, "Advent"). Once his philosophy was made part of the academic curriculum in 1832, generations of students and teachers became apostles of eclecticism (see Cousin, *Cours*).

This had a double, paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it exposed students to a more inclusive history of philosophy than was allowed by Church teaching. On the other hand, it closed off the critical thinking typically associated with philosophy (think of those Critiques—of Pure Reason, of Human Understanding, etc.), substituting for it quasi-religious paeans to an ultimate divine causality. In place of an openness to fresh ideas, Cousin substituted a review of old ones; instead of the philosopher as experimental sower of new seeds, Cousin offered a gleaner gathering up true and useful ideas while tossing aside the bad ones. All of this was condemned at the time for blunting both the edge and the passion of creativity. Baudelaire, reviewing eclecticism's artistic manifestations at the Salon of 1846, expressed his disapproval this way: "However skillful an eclectic is, he's a weak man, without passion. He has no ideal, no position—no star or compass. He mixes four different processes and produces only an effect of darkness" (169). In Baudelaire's view, eclecticism lacked direction, purpose, and above all, the ability to generate heat and light.

Cousin's history of philosophy claimed that eclecticism necessarily followed a period of skepticism; its role was to restore belief in the possibility of achieving exact knowledge. Although eclecticism was meant to settle things once and for all, in fact Cousin understood its contingent nature (its history) as the product of a recurrent contest between the forces of change and the forces of order. This was a political contest to instill and preserve the hegemony of Cousinian metaphysics over the competing claims of Catholic orthodoxy (which insisted on the one true doctrine of the Church), on the one side, and sensationalist idealism (which entirely rejected metaphysics), on the other.⁵ I do not have time here to go into the complexities of this politics; it is probably sufficient to say (as I have already) that the lines between academic disciplines (in this example, philosophy and psychology) and institutions of the state (not only schools but legislatures and government ministries) cannot be clearly distinguished.

The interesting thing about political struggles of this kind is that they spill over the boundaries that we establish to study and contain them.

This insight applies not only to Victor Cousin and nineteenth-century France but to the way “eclecticism” signifies in the present. I think the current invocation of eclecticism will have something of the same effect that Cousin’s philosophy did: it will serve to efface critique. This time, it is an effort to assuage the anxiety produced, for some academic disciplines and for the society at large, by antifoundationalist philosophies in the last decades of the twentieth century, particularly as they were employed to call into question disciplinary orthodoxies that had long naturalized both intellectual and social exclusions.

The New Quest for a Juste Milieu

When I, or the scholars I referred to at the beginning of this paper, explain our approach as “eclectic,” it is as a strategy to cover the subversion we think we are engaged in and hope still to get away with. We think we can in that way slip under the radar of orthodox disciplinarians who, along with journalists, politicians, and some public intellectuals on the right and left, have declared “theory” to be dead. And not only dead, but thankfully so, since it is held responsible for all manner of outrages ranging from the decline of academic standards (plagiarism, lack of attention to factual accuracy, political correctness that stifles free speech in the classroom), to the vagaries of multiculturalism and the injustices of affirmative action, to the loss of a moral center in our society, to tolerance for violations of universal human rights in the name of cultural relativism, and even to the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. (The very contradictory nature of these accusations—that poststructuralism is both subversive and politically correct at the same time—is symptomatic of the hysteria of the accusers.)

The onslaught has been ferocious: even dead Jacques Derrida merited only mocking and ill-informed slander in obituaries and articles in the *New York Times* (see Eakin, Kandell, and Rothstein). The call for certainty and stability, long muttered, is now very confident and loud. Among historians, it takes the form of a renewed emphasis on empiricism and quantitative analysis, the rehabilitation of the autonomous willing subject as the agent of history, the essentializing of political categories of identity by the evidence of “experience,” the turn to evolutionary psychology for explanations of human behavior, and the trivialization and

denunciation of the “linguistic turn”—an attempt to deny it a serious place in the recent life of the discipline.⁴ Often the return to disciplinarity is depicted as innovation (as in the “new empiricism”), but this should not mislead us; despite any number of interpretive quarrels about the causes of the Civil War or the French Revolution, it is the old rules about the transparency of language (words mean what they say, analytic categories are objective) and the equally transparent relationship between social organization and individual self-perception that are being asserted as the only acceptable rules of the game. (The return of the sociobiology of the 1970s as the all-new evolutionary psychology is a similar phenomenon.) Throughout the 1980s and 1990s—the supposed heyday of “theory”—there were, to be sure, resistances in the name of the right way of doing history; but these have now become triumphalist proclamations that do not engage debate; they simply declare victory. Is it any wonder then, that those still informed by “theory,” those critically interrogating the premises of the discipline through their substantive work, look for an innocuous way of describing what they do? The problem is that the invocation of eclecticism is not so innocuous because it plays into a disturbing national trend that has two apparently contradictory sides: on the left, there is a move toward consolidation of the gains of the last decades, a tendency to want to authorize what are and are not politically acceptable knowledges; on the right, diversity and balance are being evoked by conservatives to drive critical thinking out of the classroom and put an end to the university teacher’s role as a gadfly.

I have been arguing not that all disagreement is a challenge to disciplinary orthodoxy, but that a more fundamental kind of disagreement, critique, is what’s at stake: internal antagonism, the questioning of all the assumptions, categories, and explanatory models that we take for granted—what Clifford Geertz once characterized as “a thorn in the side of the main direction of things” (IAS Archives). The point of critique is to unsettle received wisdom and so provide an irritant that leads to unforeseen ideas and new understanding. I use the word irritant deliberately: it is not pleasant to have one’s premises called into question; it is destabilizing, disorienting. This kind of critique is under siege from many directions right now. The return of a certain disciplinary orthodoxy, often accompanied by a recourse to supposedly scientific models of investigation, is only one form it takes. Another is the impatient dismissal of any critique that is not accompanied by a practical solution to the problems analyzed. Yet another is the closing of the borders of what were once critical interventions: the formalizing of “theory” and the loss of its critical

responsibilities, or the emergence of orthodoxies in areas like women's studies. Still another quite different and far more disturbing attack has been launched from the right and from outside the academy: this is the demand for "balance" across the curriculum. Its architect and main protagonist is David Horowitz, who is campaigning, with the support of campus Young Republicans, at the state and national levels for passage of what he calls a student "Academic Bill of Rights."

Dedicated to securing "freedom" for all points of view, the academic bill of rights claims to rest upon our most hallowed liberal principles: freedom of expression, freedom from indoctrination, respect for diverse points of view, pluralism. In fact (like the Bush administration brandishing the sword of freedom to advance its imperial interests), this is a stealth attack on the very concepts the bill purports to defend: it appeals to liberal ideas to advance a conservative agenda. That agenda is aimed at overturning the supposed leftist bias of universities (as measured by the number of registered Democrats and Republicans on faculties) in several ways, the most dangerous of which is to bring legislative and judicial scrutiny to bear on the hiring and promotion of faculty, the conduct of teachers in their classrooms, and the awarding of grades to students. These activities, now understood to be functions regulated and monitored by disciplinary communities and governance mechanisms internal to university life, would—under the academic bill of rights—be turned over to external political bodies with little or no understanding of how universities work. Listen to the University of Colorado regent, Thomas Lucero, on the Ward Churchill controversy:

My displeasure with Mr. Churchill's essay should be abundantly clear, however, the issues regarding faculty responsibilities are still my focus. While the language in the Laws and Policies is in place, setting the standards for faculty expectations and the grounds for discipline, I would argue that they are subjective and dependent on the faculty for interpretation as to whether a professor has crossed a line. I would suggest that the time has come for a revision to the Policies that allows for other forms of adjudication that are not reliant on the faculty for determining subjectively the fate of one of their own.⁵

The expertise of scholarly communities upon which self-governance rests is redefined by Lucero as an unacceptable subjectivity; the political test he offers in place of scholarly evaluation is, in contrast, deemed objective!

The academic bill of rights enjoins colleges and universities to appoint faculty “with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives.” On the face of it, there’s nothing wrong with this kind of call for diversity; it echoes the call to end discrimination based on race and gender that many of us have long supported. But it is, in fact, the opposite of that demand because it substitutes political criteria (the numbers of conservatives or liberals measured by Republican or Democratic party affiliation) for social criteria (how many women, African Americans, etc. are employed) and so changes the terms of what counts as a measure of discrimination. Moreover, it imposes a rule that supercedes the intellectual criteria established by a faculty or discipline. In the idealized version of the liberal university, it is left to the collective judgment of scholarly communities to decide what counts as responsible knowledge; whether, for example, Holocaust deniers should be included in history departments or creationists in biology departments. There is plenty of room within these communities for debate and change; critical voices emerge, are listened to, and are often accepted in a new consensus. (I do not mean to minimize the intensity of conflict that can occur, nor the “politics” involved, nor the punitive ways in which disciplinary orthodoxies exclude challenges to their hegemony—certain forms of interdisciplinarity have emerged as alternatives to this orthodoxy⁶—but I do want to insist on the process, a process which, by the way, has not only brought us women’s, ethnic, post-colonial, and queer studies but has also made game theory dominant in many political science departments and driven Marxism and other political economies from economics departments; a process that has resulted in certain departments deciding to specialize in only one approach or methodology as a way of distinguishing themselves in the academic marketplace—the Business School at the University of Chicago, a conservative stronghold, or the Law Schools at Duke or Yale, liberal strongholds; a process in which certain colleges and universities have emerged as exemplars of traditionalist education—St. John’s or Grove City—and others as liberal—Brown, Wesleyan—or wildly experimental—Sarah Lawrence, Reed, Hampshire.) The process takes time; it is in perpetual flux, as it should be, and it is neither smooth nor kind, but it is internal to the academy. The academic bill of rights seeks to highjack the process and force acceptance of the views of political conservatives without following the usual course. Instead of allowing the play of critical forces and living with the results (inevitable inclusions and exclusions, an uneven pattern within departments and across the academic spectrum), the academic bill

of rights would eliminate critical exchange in the name of an imposed balance and a stultifying sameness: all points of view, whatever their merit, equally represented in every classroom (see Cole).

Pointing to the “uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge” in the humanities and social sciences, the academic bill of rights mandates not only that course syllabi provide “dissenting sources and viewpoints where appropriate,” but also that “academic institutions and professional societies should maintain a posture of organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.” These requirements gesture to the antifoundationalism of poststructural theory and distort it at the same time. They refuse to recognize that a certain sense of social and political “responsibility” drove many of the philosophers who articulated it; that judgments of quality and ethics are part of academic discourse; that scholars do their work precisely by making such judgments; and that the pursuit of knowledge advances through these kinds of engagements. Knowledge may be “uncertain and unsettled,” but it is also stabilized by agreed-upon procedures and conventions. All information whether in science, social science, or humanities is not equally valid. To assess its validity, we must understand the interpretive premises upon which it is based. For many of us, poststructuralism offered a way of analyzing these premises. It provided an epistemological critique that exposed the power effects of disciplinary standards of neutrality and objectivity, the ways in which representations of “the historian,” for example, excluded women and minorities both from the profession and the historical record.

Conflicts of values and ethics are part of the process of knowledge production; they inform it, trouble it, drive it. The commitments of scholars to ideas of justice, for example, are at the heart of many an important investigation in political theory, philosophy, and history; they cannot be dismissed as irrelevant “opinion.” And because such commitments cannot be separated from scholarship, there are mechanisms internal to academic life that monitor abuses, distinguishing between serious, responsible work and polemic, between teaching that aims to unsettle received opinion and teaching that is indoctrination. They are not perfect by any means, but they will not work better if government oversight is substituted for community self-surveillance. This is how John Dewey and Arthur Lovejoy, founders in 1915 of the American Association of University Professors, understood the need for academic freedom. Precisely because

academic work might call into question received wisdom and contradict popular opinion, there was a need to protect faculty from outside interference (the disapproval of trustees and politicians); it was that protection (a protection based on respect for self-regulating communities of scholars) that they called academic freedom (see Menand).

In the name of neutrality, the academic bill of rights would prohibit professors from expressing judgments about the material they teach, as well as about matters not directly relevant to course material; instead they are simply to transmit stores of undisputed information and refrain from expressing their points of view. Aside from the fact that this denies the role judgment must play in scholarly work, it cancels the important critical role that higher education should fulfill. The best teachers, in my experience, are usually those whose commitment and point of view, grounded to be sure in a command of information and knowledge of a field (a command certified by their degrees, refereed publications, and departmental reviews), inspire students to think differently about the world; whose teaching calls into question the pieties and certainties students have imbibed elsewhere. It is precisely the experience of education as critique that opens students' minds and engages them in learning, sets them out on paths they never knew they could take—or at least that is the way it used to be. The academic bill of rights would shield students from this process, allowing them to reject ideas they do not like as “indoctrination” and leaving them free to listen only to those viewpoints they agree with, thus comfortably confirming what they already believe rather than subjecting it to illuminating doubt (see Jacobson).

Like Victor Cousin's eclecticism, David Horowitz's call for balance aims to bring intellectual life under conservative control. This means not so much imposing an outright orthodoxy—Horowitz's minions claim that is what they are combating on the left—as it does insisting that there is some objective measure by which the pursuit and teaching of knowledge can be separated from the values and ethical commitments that motivate it. In place of competing ideologies, we are offered a formalist pluralism. And the ongoing conflicts of ideas and values that some of us think have historically been and ought to continue to be the responsibility of university teachers are ruled out of order in the name of fairness and balance. The very same voices that two decades ago denounced the left for unleashing an amoral relativism now appeal quite cynically to that same relativism to advance their own ends. As the conservative revolution sweeps the United States, it wants to secure its hegemony by disarming critique: silencing

critical or even mildly skeptical legislators and journalists by impugning their patriotism, their loyalty, and their objectivity. The university is the last redoubt of critical thinking, the last place whose mission it is to offer some resistance to the ideas and policies that are now being touted as the unilateral “American way.” And the academic bill of rights is the strategy for breaching its walls. If successful, this strategy will not only silence those of us who ought to be speaking out, but it will secure the *juste milieu* for generations to come.⁷

Jacques Derrida’s “Defense of Philosophy”

When scholars whose work critically interrogates the foundations of knowledge claim that they are only being eclectic, their prudent pretense unwittingly capitulates to or even joins forces with the conservatives whose wrath they are trying to avoid. They seem to endorse the neutralizing idea of balance as the absence of basic conflicts of values and ideas, hoping that their own critical projects will be mistaken for objective empirical expeditions. This may indeed be a good way to get or hold a job, but I am worried that it will not achieve the desired end. What we need now is a reassertion of the value of critique, a defense of its scholarly integrity, and an articulation of its philosophical presuppositions. We do not have to invent this defense; there are many historical precedents for it. The one I want to examine is the campaign undertaken beginning in 1974 by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, some of his colleagues, and a group of students and teachers to save philosophy as a critical discipline in the academic curriculum.⁸

The attack on philosophy came in the wake of the uprisings of May 1968. A government report in 1973 recommended increasing time and resources spent on science and diminishing them for philosophy; in 1975, the Minister of Education, René Haby, proposed the implementation of these recommendations.⁹ Conservatives were in power at the time and their emphasis on technical mastery (not only in science and technology but in the social sciences and especially in economics) was aimed at transforming secondary schools (*lycées*) from centers where protest and political dissent had been encouraged (among other things through the reading and interpreting of critical texts) to places where more passive forms of learning would take place. In response to the report, a group of philosophers, teachers, and students began meeting “in defense of philosophy.” They crafted a statement of purpose and, in 1975, formally

constituted themselves as the Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique (GREPH). In 1979, they organized a meeting in Paris, the Estates General of Philosophy, which was attended by some 1,200 people, academics and nonacademics alike.¹⁰

For the members of GREPH and the participants in the Estates General the issue was not to defend the status quo by joining forces with traditional members of the discipline of philosophy who were also upset at the Haby reforms. Instead, the outcry against Haby became a time for rethinking the place of philosophy in the curriculum and beyond that, the whole system of education and its philosophical presuppositions. Defining philosophy not as bodies of writing or contained systems of thought, GREPH members instead described it as critical thinking and insisted that it be expanded beyond one course in the last year of secondary school to take in the entire curriculum, in the lower grades as well as in the lycées. "The defense of the teaching of philosophy," wrote Georges Canguilhem, "would require a critical philosophy of teaching" (qtd. in Derrida, *Right 1*: 196n14). And the report of a Committee on Philosophy and Epistemology, cochaired by Jacques Bouveresse and Jacques Derrida, explained its recommendations this way: "The teaching of philosophy must be conceived no longer as a final crowning *but as a series of constitutive moments indispensable for all intellectual development starting from a certain level of knowledge and culture*" (Derrida, *Right 2*: 255).

In the wake of the Estates General, and as a campaign for the presidency of the Republic took form, the socialist presidential candidate François Mitterrand endorsed the general theme of the defense of philosophy. When he won the election in 1981 (and with the Socialist Party now also a majority in the parliament), it became possible to implement some of the proposals that had been made. One of these was for a new institution for the practice and teaching of philosophy, a place that could realize some of the ideas offered by GREPH and its supporters, a place where philosophical thinking would not just be expanded but critically interrogated. In 1982, the Minister of Research, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, set up a "mission" (a committee in American terminology) to explore the founding of what would become, a year later, the Collège International de Philosophie (CIPH). Jacques Derrida directed the college in its first year, followed by Jean-François Lyotard and then Michel Abensour.

Reading the position papers put forward "in defense of philosophy" gives insight not only into this heady moment of intellectual/institutional engagement on the French scene but also into the aims of

deconstruction as both a philosophical and political movement. This reading refutes many of the misconceptions that have attached to deconstruction (empty formalism, dangerous nihilism) and helps explain the powerful attraction it had (and still has) for many of us who were trying to analyze and change the systems of knowledge production into which we had been disciplined. In the rest of this paper I want to argue that deconstruction is still among the best and most original responses we have to orthodoxy and to the closing off of possibility that it represents. At a time when teleology and its promise of redemption by history has been replaced by short-term strategies of instrumental rationality, deconstruction offers not a plan for the future, but a means of getting there. This I take to be Derrida's gift.

In the minds of its architects, the CIPH was not a self-contained institution, but one meant to comment on the limits of the existing university system. In this sense, it was a supplementary institution in the terms that Derrida had theorized. The *supplément* was one of those words—he had a knack for finding them—that simultaneously signified contrary meanings. A supplement is at once an excess, an add-on that is not necessary to establish full presence (in this case, of the established university system). At the same time, it is necessary because it reveals insufficiency or lack in that which it supplements; it calls the claim of full presence into question, revealing the cracks in its edifice and the facades that have been put in place to conceal them.

Although philosophy was the object of the college's attention, it was in the sense of "thinking"—critique—that its mission was defined. This "thinking" was what established pedagogies had neglected; it was time to restore it to national prominence. Not for narrow disciplinary reasons—this was not philosophy for its own sake. There was a larger political and social purpose. Critical competence was a weapon of resistance against such things as human rights violations, abuses of political power, and all manner of injustice—the proper concerns of citizens of a democratic republic. Derrida expressed it clearly at the Estates General: "Briefly put, the more the field of philosophical training is restricted in this country, the less critical competence there will be outside the academy; the less critical formation and information there is, the easier it will be to pass off, even to inculcate, the anything-at-all that is never just anything at all" (*Right 1*, 185).

What was needed was a philosophy, a "thinking," that was not only critical of other areas of thought but self-critical, willing to

undermine even its own authority, to question “the limit between the inside and the outside, the proper and the improper, what is essential and proper to philosophy and what is not” (Derrida, *Right 1*: 41). The CIPH was to provide a recognized space “where new problematics will be able to be elaborated at the crossing of philosophical reflection and scientific, artistic, social and cultural thinking and practice” (Leith 113). It was to be a space where research that was marginalized or excluded from traditional institutions could be pursued. “What we propose,” Derrida wrote, “is not the utopia of a wild non-institution aside from all social, scientific, philosophical, etc. legitimation. It is a novel apparatus, the only one capable of liberating, in a given state of affairs, what the mass of present-day apparatuses still inhibits” (*Right 2*, 227). Work was to be conducted at six intersections (philosophy and science, philosophy and art/literature, philosophy and politics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, philosophy and internationalities, philosophy and philosophy). In each case, “philosophy” meant critical engagement with the premises of the endeavor. In this sense, the college’s program was not interdisciplinary, for that meant leaving in place the boundaries of each discipline as they collectively examined definable objects. Instead, its teaching would “always problematize, that is put forward its own limits and conditions in order to draw attention to them, to make them the theme of research” (Derrida, *Right 1*: 6).

The problematizing extended beyond “the conceptual content of philosophical teaching” to “take on its setting as well as its norms, institutional forms, and all which makes them possible” (Ungar 22). As Steven Ungar notes, the “text” to be deconstructed (for which Derrida had famously said there was no “outside”) already included “social life in its concrete forms and institutions” (22). Here is Derrida:

Deconstruction is never a technical set of discursive procedures, still less a new hermeneutic method working on archives or utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution; it is also, and at the least, the taking of a position in the work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competences and our performances. Precisely because deconstruction has never been concerned with the contents alone of meaning, it must not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic, and has to require a new questioning about responsibility, a questioning that no longer necessarily relies on codes inherited from politics or

ethics. Which is why, thought too political in the eyes of some, deconstruction can seem demobilizing in the eyes of those who recognize the political only with the help of prewar road signs. Deconstruction is limited neither to a methodological reform that would reassure the given organization nor, inversely, to a parade of irresponsible or irresponsibilizing destruction, whose surest effect would be to leave everything as is, consolidating the most immobile forces of the university. (Right 2, 102)

This kind of reflexive stance addressed one of the paradoxes faced by the CIPH: its existence questioned the terms by which normative teaching acquired its legitimacy, but it also needed to establish a legitimacy of its own, within the existing framework. The college was founded and funded by the state, though it was granted a certain autonomy. That autonomy nonetheless depended on establishing credibility.

The most ruthless critique, the implacable analysis of a power of legitimation is always produced in the name of a system of legitimation. [. . .] We already know that the interest in research not currently legitimated will only find its way if, following trajectories ignored by or unknown to any established institutional power, this new research is already underway and promises a new legitimacy until one day, once again [. . .] and so on. We also know—and who wouldn't want it?—that if the Collège is created with the resources it requires and, above all, if its vitality and richness are one day what we foresee, then it will become in its turn a legitimating instance that will have obligated many other instances to reckon with it. It is this situation that must be continuously analyzed, today and tomorrow to avoid exempting the Collège from its own analytic work. (Derrida, Right 2: 126–27)

There was no solution to this conundrum; there could not be. But recognizing it might keep the college from becoming ossified, producing an orthodoxy of its own.

The kind of legitimation the founders of the college had in mind respected the measurement and certification of competence. “I believe,” wrote Derrida, “in the indestructibility of the ordered procedures of legitimation, of the production of titles and diplomas, and of the authorization of competence,” although not necessarily in the terms universities had

established (*Right 2*, 121). Moreover, the interrogation of the traditional organization of teaching did not mean abandoning training or turning away from canonical texts. “One must no doubt read Kant differently,” Derrida observed, “but one must not stop reading him” (*Right 1*, 50). And there had to be training if this different reading was to be accomplished. “For philosophy [. . .] one must be trained to recognize connotations, so-called stylistic or rhetorical effects, semantic potentialities, virtual folds and bends, a whole economy at work in what is perhaps, under the name of philosophy, only the most economical practice of natural language” (*Right 1*, 29). One must be taught to ask of a concept or text or institution not what does it mean, but how does it work? One must not be limited to the terms of a particular dispute, but extend analysis to the significance of the dispute itself: how do its terms limit the possibilities for resolution? Are there ways to displace what seem to be fixed oppositions, thereby opening the way for different approaches? Understanding the operations of language, reading beyond the literal and thematic, were crucial if one were to be able to specify how a text worked and what its stakes were. These analyses were, moreover, always local, “singular movements, heterogeneous from one place to another.” To ask questions about the epistemological foundations of power required not knowing the answers in advance.

Yet the theme of responsibility runs through Derrida’s writing on deconstruction.¹¹ It is a difficult and curious notion because it prescribes no external ethical standard, no assured place of judgment. “It is not irresponsibility that is demanded [. . .] but the right not to have to account—in the final analysis—to this or that apparatus of judgment, before this or that regime of appearing” (Derrida, *Right 1*: 18). The idea of perpetual critique is not about overthrowing the foundations of democratic societies (these are the “politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice”), but about maintaining their dynamism, examining the ways they have been operationalized in order to be able to think them differently. It is about the responsibility of philosophy to itself, to engage in a project that interrogates the positive force as well as the dogmatic limits of such hallowed principles as those contained in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man but also of “the philosophical determinations of responsibility, the imperative, or the unconditional, which is also to say, their socio-institutional determinations” (Derrida, *Right 1*: 54). This does not mean discarding those principles, but being willing and able to think critically about their implementation. “Deconstruction is an institutional practice for which the concept of the institution remains a problem”; it is not about thought detached from its institutionalizations (53). Rather,

institutional frameworks (of the state, the republic, the school, and the university, the discipline of philosophy, the *CIPH* itself) are integral to any critical philosophical analysis. For “there is *no* pure instance”; one thinks *through* these frameworks.

“Thinking” [. . .] must even, in the name of a democracy still to come as the possibility of this “thinking,” unremittingly interrogate the de facto democracy, critique its current determinations, analyze its philosophical genealogy, in short, deconstruct it: in the name of the democracy whose being to come is not simply tomorrow or the future, but rather the promise of an event and the event of a promise. An event and a promise that constitute the democratic: not presently but in a here and now whose singularity does not signify presence or self-presence. (42)

The teacher of this “thinking” necessarily takes a side: “[E]very relation to the institution, then, calls for and, at any rate, implies in advance taking sides in this field [. . .]. There is no neutral or natural place in teaching” (69).

Derrida distinguished deconstruction from classical examples of critique which, he argued, interrogated the foundations of everything but philosophy (or reason). Kant, he thought, left unquestioned the power of philosophy to establish itself as the adjudicator of the law, the giver of “the law of the law” (*Right I*, 55). Deconstruction took critique one step further, he insisted, by thinking critically about philosophy itself—its substantive teachings as well as its institutional position, in this case the university’s relationship to the state. Such thinking did not mean inaction or paralysis in the search for a pure position. Rather—and this has been true for my feminist work over the years—it has been a help for analyzing premises offered by politics as well as philosophy, for sorting out options and trying (never entirely accurately) to anticipate the effects of the actions one knows one must take. There is a difference, of course, between politics—action based on choices among options, action that takes decisions even in the face of a recognition of undecidability—and theory—the ability to think critically about the presuppositions of the options and recognize their limits—but one does not preclude the other. Rather, as Wendy Brown points out, theory and politics exist in productive tension; they “effectively interrupt each other” (*Politics* 41).

The need to engage in politics was not alien to Derrida and the GREPH activists who organized in “defense of philosophy.” Although the university was historically deeply connected to the power of the state, Derrida pointed out, a direct attack on it might play into the hands of those who sought its disappearance for different reasons. “Whence the necessity for a deconstruction not to abandon the terrain of the University [. . .] not to abandon the field to empiricism and thereby to whatever forces are at hand. Whence the political necessity of our alliances, a necessity that must be constantly re-evaluated” (*Right 1*, 149). Indeed, as a new standard of performance was taking over, one that valued science and technology at the expense of the liberal arts, Derrida suggested that the institution that had once represented state rationality could become “curiously, in its very old age, a kind of refuge of liberalism,” a place to which those might go who wanted to continue to think beyond the limits and boundaries being put into place with corporate models in mind (*Right 2*, 164; see also Readings).

The terrain of our own university is currently the site of a contest about the future of teaching and the control of the processes by which knowledge is produced and transmitted. It is time now for a campaign here in defense of critical thinking—what Derrida and his associates meant by “philosophy” and that need not mean only deconstruction. It will not do to concede the ground to the forces of balance and neutrality in the name of eclecticism—a compromise that secures only an illusory peace. Instead, we have to defend critique as the traditional mission of the university, and we have to practice it openly—in our own research and writing, in our teaching, and in the public replies we offer to those who want to put a stop to it and so close the openings to a future that might be imagined differently.

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Notes

- 1 The attempt to get around Catholic orthodoxy shares resemblances with the strategies of contemporary scholars to get around disciplinary orthodoxy.
- 2 Derrida's extended discussion of Cousin is in this same volume (119–25).
- 3 A later struggle pitted Cousin against the positivism of Auguste Comte. See W. M. Simon.
- 4 For a critical response to one such effort, see Hesse. It is important to note that conservative disciplinary trends are not the same as the political conservatism of David Horowitz and others described in what follows. It is the conjuncture of these distinct developments that I want to draw attention to.
- 5 This quotation from Lucero's public statement is in Pérez. Other excerpts from Lucero's statement can be found at <www.cusys.edu/regents/BoardMeetings/MINUTESFEB020505.htm> and in Brennan. For other stories on Ward Churchill see, among other places, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the website of the American Association of University Professors <www.aaup.org>.
- 6 For a critique of interdisciplinarity, see Mowitt.
- 7 It is important to note that Horowitz's campaign for "balance" and "fairness" does not extend to notoriously unbalanced corporate boards, law firms, and state and national legislatures. Why not a campaign to have as many Democrats as Republicans in those strongholds of conservative power? On the issue of "balance" in the academy, see Hollinger.
- 8 There is a certain irony in the fact that Victor Cousin, too, called his crusade a "defense of philosophy." But while Cousin's aim was fundamentally conservative—to institutionalize the wisdom of the ages in the curriculum—Derrida's was not. For him, the "defense of philosophy" was not a defense of received truth, but a critique of any claim to it.
- 9 In the end, because of opposition and a change of governments, Haby's proposals were not put into effect.
- 10 This history is recounted in the introductions to both volumes of Derrida's *Right to Philosophy*.
- 11 See especially the essay called "Privilege" in *Right 1* (1–66) and the final interview with Derrida, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même."

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