

# Nietzsche And The Machine

Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida

RB: I recall that in *Of Spirit*, in what is an extremely dense and complex passage, you criticize virulently the effects of Heidegger's founding 'spiritualisation' of biological racism. Whereas elsewhere (*Spurs*) you have recognized a certain necessity to Heidegger's philosophising gesture - at least concerning Nietzsche's empiricism - here the problems of this gesture - as one which spiritualizes biologism - is explicitly analysed within the political context of Heidegger's engagement with Nazism. Let me quote the passage in full:

Because one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism in its genetic form, one cannot be opposed to them except by re-inscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectivity, even if in its voluntarist form. The constraint of this program remains very strong, it reigns over the majority of discourses which, today and for a long time to come, state their opposition to racism, to totalitarianism, to nazism, to fascism etc., and do this in the name of spirit, and even of the freedom of the spirit in the name of an axiomatic, for example, that of democracy or 'human rights' - which, directly or not, comes back to this metaphysics of subjectivity. All the pitfalls of the strategy of establishing demarcations belong to this program, whatever place one occupies in it. The only choice is the choice between the terrifying contaminations it assigns. Even if all the forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are irreducible. The question of knowing which is the least grave of these forms of complicity is always there - its urgency and its seriousness could not be over-stressed - but it will never dissolve the irreducibility of this fact. This fact, of course, is not simply a fact. First, and at least, because it is not yet done, not altogether: it calls more than ever, as for what in it remains to come after the disasters that have happened, for absolutely unprecedented responsibilities of 'thought' and 'action'... In the rectorship address, this risk is not just a risk run. If its program seems diabolical, it is because, without there being anything fortuitous in this, it capitalizes on the worst, that is on both evils at once: the sanctioning of nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical. (Of

Spirit. Heidegger and the Question, Chicago 1989, p. 39-40) As Dominique Janicaud has noted in his *L'Ombre de cette pensée. Heidegger et la question politique* (Grenoble 1990), it would be difficult to find a greater accusation of Heidegger. My question concerns, however, the so-called 'programme' of logics which you allude to in this passage. I note that you make a similar, if more local, intellectual gesture in *Autobiographies* concerning the necessary contamination of Nietzsche's text by Nazi ideology. There it is a question of a 'powerful programming machine' which relates, before any human intention or will, the two contrary forces of regeneration and degeneracy in Nietzsche's early "On the Future of Our Educational Establishments", determining in advance, before any historical eventuality, that each force reflects, and passes into, into its other. We are here, perhaps, at something like the 'heart' of deconstruction given its concern with what you call in 'Violence and Metaphysics' "the lesser violence" (*Writing and Difference*, note 21, p. 313)

My question, after this necessary preamble, is short: in what sense have, for you, all thought and all action up to today been inscribed within this machine? And, how do you understand those enigmatic words 'absolutely unprecedented responsibilities' of thought and action? In what sense, 'absolutely'?

JD: First, I certainly believe that the contaminations discussed in this passage are absolutely undeniable. I defy anyone to show a political discourse or posture today which escapes this law of contamination. The only way to do so is in the form of (de)negation (*Verneinung*), the law of contamination can only be (de)negated. If it is true that these contaminations are inevitable, that one cannot side-step its law whatever one attempts to do, then responsibility cannot consist in denying or (de)negating contamination, in trying to 'save' a line of thought or action from it. On the contrary, it must consist in assuming this law, in recognizing its necessity, in working from within the machine, by formalizing how contamination works and by attempting to act accordingly. Our very first responsibility is to recognize that this terrifying programme is at work everywhere and to confront the problem head-on; not to flee it by denying its complexity, but to think it as such.

Second, this means that the political gestures which one will make will, like all political gestures, be accompanied necessarily by discourse. Discursivity takes time, it implies several sentences, it cannot be reduced to a single moment or point. On each occasion one will have to make complex gestures to explain that one is acting, despite contamination, in this particular way, because one believes that it is better to do this rather than that, that a particular act chosen is in such and such a situation more likely to do such and such than another possible act. These gestures are anything but pragmatic, they are strategic evaluations which attempt to measure up to the formalisation of the machine. To make such evaluations, one has to pass through thought - there is no distinction here between thought and action, these evaluations are actions of thought. Whoever attempts to justify his political choice or pursue a political line without thought - in the sense of a thinking which exceeds science, philosophy and technics - without thinking what calls for thinking in this machine, this person isn't being, in my eyes, politically responsible. Hence one needs thought, one needs to think more than ever. Thinking's task today is to tackle, to measure itself against, everything making up this programme of contamination. This programme forms the history of metaphysics, it informs the whole history of political determination, of politics as it was constituted in Ancient Greece, disseminated throughout the West and finally exported to the East and South. If the political isn't thought in this radical sense, political responsibility will disappear. I wouldn't go so far as to say that this thought has become necessary only today; rather, today more than ever, one must think this machine in order to prepare for a political decision, if there is such a thing, within this contamination. Very simply, then, what I'm trying to do is to prepare for such a decision by tackling the machine or law of contamination. For reasons that should now be clear, what I say is always going to run the risk of being taken in an unfavourable light, it cannot fail to lead to misunderstandings, according to the very same law of contamination. There's no way out. As to the criticisms of deconstruction brought up earlier, one has indeed to assume the risk of being misunderstood, continuing to think in modest terms what is after all exceedingly ambitious, in order to prepare for these responsibilities - if they exist.

In the passage you quote I call these responsibilities "unprecedented" (inédites). What does this term mean? In your terms, what is their 'time'? Rather than implying a heroic pathos of originality, the term testifies to the fact that we find ourselves in an unprecedented situation. After recent events - whether one gives them the name of Nietzsche, of Heidegger, of the Second World War, of the Holocaust, of the destructibility of humanity by its own technical resources - it is clear that we find ourselves in an absolutely unprecedented space. For this space one needs equally unprecedented reflections on responsibility, on the problematics of decision and action. To say this is not a piece of speculative hubris. It simply acknowledges where we are. We need the unprecedented; otherwise there will be nothing, pure repetition... The unprecedented is, of course, very dangerous. Once on these paths of thought, one is liable to get shot at by people who are in a hurry to interpret texts, who call you a neo-Nazi, a nihilist, a relativist, a mysticist, or whatever. But if one doesn't take such risks, then one does nothing, and nothing happens. What I'm saying is very modest: without risk, there is nothing.

RB: Why did you write "absolutely unprecedented"?

JD: It was just a form of emphasis. Of course, the unprecedented is never possible without repetition, there is never something absolutely unprecedented, totally original or new; or rather, the new can only be new, radically new, to the extent that something new is produced, that is, where there is memory and repetition. The new cannot be invented without memory or repetition. So, two things: first, there can be no break, no experience of the break which does not presuppose a non-break, which does not presuppose memory. Second, contamination follows from this iterability which is constitutive of the unprecedented. Contamination happens because iterability inhabits from the very first what is not yet thought. One has to confront this paradoxical logic to be able to think the unthought.

(...)

R.B.: How does a certain affirmation of technology relate to what you have called in The

Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe "the promise of democracy"? I recall that for Nietzsche democracy is the modern reactive fate of calculative reason and that for Heidegger (both 'early' and 'late' Heidegger) democracy is "inadequate to confront the challenges of our technological age" (Spiegel interview of 1966). In distinction, and differently, to both Nietzsche and Heidegger, your work can be seen to affirm both technology and democracy. Although the promise of democracy is not the same as either the fact of democracy or the regulative idea (in the Kantian sense) of democracy, deconstruction does "hear" difference more in a democratic organisation of government than in any other political model; and there are no new models to be invented. If I understand you correctly, your affirmation of democracy is, in this respect, a demand for the sophistication of democracy, such a refinement taking advantage, in turn, of the increasingly sophisticated effects of technology. I pose the above question, then, with the following points in mind. First of all, democratic institutions are becoming more and more unrepresentative in our increasingly technicised world - hence, in part, recent rejections of "la classe politique", not only in France and the United States; the anxieties which the question of a centralised European government raise form part of the same rejection. Then, in the second place, the media are swallowing up the constitutional machinery of democratic institutions, furthering thereby the de-politicisation of society and the possibility of populist demagoguery. Thirdly, resistance to this process of technicisation is at the same time leading to virulent forms of nationalism and demagoguery in the former Soviet empire, forms which are exploiting technology in the domains of the media, telecommunications and arms, whilst denying the de-localising effects of technology, culturally, in the domain of ideology. And, finally, the rights of man would seem an increasingly ineffective set of criteria to resist this process of technicisation (together with its possible fascistic effects) given this process's gradual effacement of the normative and metaphysical limit between the human and the inorganic.

J.D.: Your question concerns the contemporary acceleration of technicisation, the relation between technical acceleration (acceleration through, and of, technics) and politico-economic processes. It concerns in fact the very concept of acceleration. First, it's more than clear the idea of the acceleration of history is no longer today a topos. If it's

often said that history is going quicker than in the past, that it is now going too quickly, at the same time it's well-known today that acceleration - a question of rhythm and of changes of rhythm - doesn't simply affect an objective speed which is continuous and which gets progressively faster. On the contrary, acceleration is made up of differences of rhythm, heterogeneous accelerations which are closely related to the technical and technological developments you are alluding to. So, it makes no sense to "fetishise" the concept of acceleration: there isn't a single acceleration. There are in fact two laws of acceleration: one derives from the technosciences, it concerns speed, the prodigious increase in speed, the unprecedented rhythms which speed is assuming and of which we are daily feeling the effect. The political issues which you evoke bear the stamp of this form of acceleration. The second is of a quite different order and belongs to the structure of decision. Everything that I was saying earlier can now be said in these terms: a decision is taken in a process of infinite acceleration.

Second, taking into account these two laws of acceleration which are heterogeneous and which capitalise on each other, what's the situation today of democracy? "Progress" in arms-technologies and media-technologies is incontestably causing the disappearance of the site on which the democratic used to be situated. The site of representation and the stability of the location which make up parliament or assembly, the territorialisation of power, the rooting of power to a particular place, if not to the ground as such - all this is over. The notion of politics dependent on this relation between power and space is over as well, although its end must be negotiated with. I am not just thinking here of the present forms of nationalism and fundamentalism. Technoscientific acceleration poses an absolute threat to Western-style democracy as well, following its radical undermining of locality. Since there can be no question of interrupting science of the technosciences, it's a matter of knowing how a democratic response can be made to what is happening. This response must not, for obvious reasons, try to maintain at all costs the life of a democratic model of government which is rapidly being made redundant. If technics now exceeds democratic forms of government, it's not only because assembly or parliament is being swallowed up by the media. This was already the case after the First World War. It was already being argued then that the media (then the radio) were forming public opinion so

much that public deliberation and parliamentary discussion no longer determined the life of a democracy. And so, we need a historical perspective. What the acceleration of technicisation concerns today is the frontiers of the nation-state, the traffic of arms and drugs, everything that has to do with inter-nationality. It is these issues which need to be completely reconsidered, not in order to sound the death-knell of democracy, but in order to rethink democracy from within these conditions. This rethinking, as you rightly suggested earlier, must not be postponed, it is immediate and urgent. For what is specific to these threats, what constitutes the specificity of their time or temporality, is that they are not going to wait. Let's take one example from a thousand.

It is quite possible that what is happening at present in former Yugoslavia is going to take place in the Ukraine: a part of the Ukrainian Russians are going to be re-attached to Russia, the other part refusing. As a consequence, everything decided up to now as to the site and control of the former Soviet Empire's nuclear arms will be cast in doubt. The relative peace of the world could be severely endangered. As to a response, one that is so urgently needed, that's obviously what we've been talking about all along. And yet, it's hardly in an interview that one can say what needs to be done. Despite what I've just said - even if it is true that the former polarity of power is over with the end of the Cold War, and that its end has made the world a much more endangered place - the powers of decision in today's world are still highly structured; there are still important nations and superpowers, there are still powerful economies, and so forth.

Given this and given the fact that, as I've said, a statement specific to an interview cannot measure up to the complexity of the situation, I would venture somewhat abstractly the following points. Note, firstly, that I was referring with the example of the Ukraine to world peace, I was not talking in local terms. Since no locality remains, democracy must be thought today globally (*de facon mondiale*), if it is to have a future. In the past one could always say that democracy was to be saved in this or that country. Today, however, if one claims to be a democrat, one cannot be a democrat "at home" and wait to see what happens "abroad". Everything that is happening today - whether it be about Europe, the GATT, the Mafia, drugs, or arms - engages the future of democracy in the world in

general. If this seems an obvious thing to say, one must nevertheless say it.

Second, in the determination or behaviour of each citizen or singularity there should be present, in some form or other, the call to a world democracy to come, each singularity should determine itself with the sense of the stakes of a democracy which can no longer be contained within frontiers, which can no longer be localised, which can no longer depend on the decisions of a specific group of citizens, a nation or even of a continent. This determination means that one must both think, and think democracy, globally. This may be something completely new, something that has never been done, for we're here talking of something much more complex, much more modest and yet much more ambitious than any notion of the universal, cosmopolitan or human. I realise that there is so much rhetoric today - obvious, conventional, reassuring, determined in the sense of without risk - which resembles what I'm saying. When, for example, one speaks of the United Nations, when one speaks in the name of a politics that transcends national borders, one can always do so in the name of democracy. One has to make the difference clear, then, between democracy in this rhetorical sense and what I'm calling a "democracy to come". The difference shows, for example, that all decisions made in the name of the Rights of Man are at the same time alibis for the continued inequality between singularities, and that we need to invent other concepts than state, superstate, citizen, and so forth for this new International. The democracy to come obliges one to challenge instituted law in the name of an indefinitely unsatisfied justice, thereby revealing the injustice of calculating justice whether this be in the name of a particular form of democracy or of the concept of humanity. This democracy to come is marked in the movement that has always carried a present beyond itself, makes it inadequate to itself, "out of joint" (Hamlet); as I argue in *Specters of Marx*, it obliges us to work with the spectrality in any moment of apparent presence. This spectrality is very weak; it is the weakness of the powerless, who, in being powerless, resist the greatest strength.