

“Postmodern Politics” and the Reconstruction of Marxist Critical Discourse^{*}

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Marxist discourse is subject to incredulity and negative impact under the deconstructionist dissolution of “totality” and negation of historical “meta-narrative”. But the ideological tension of Marxism has constituted the theoretical basis of deconstructionist and postmodernist criticism of Capitalism and its culture. Furthermore, it is the radical hope of postmodernism. Within the scope of “postmodern politics”, Marxism still boasts critical competence and theoretical reconstruction capabilities under Capitalist global narrative. “Deconstructive Marxism” contains complex ideological contradictions, on which we should conduct in-depth criticism.

Keywords: postmodernism, deconstructionism, Marxism, ideological tension

Since the middle of the 20th Century, with the progression of postmodern deconstruction strides, every basic, entitative and meta-narrative discourse have suffered huge impact and challenges. The postmodern “deconstruction” represents a revolution of knowledge norms, which has devastated the powerful Western metaphysics tradition and ethical norms and challenged the knowledge foundation and academic systems of many disciplines. As a “grand narration” with huge influence on 20th Century Western knowledge and cultural construct, Marxism has also suffered impact from the deconstructionist dissolution of totality and negation of historical “meta-narrative”. However, postmodernism, including deconstructionism, has never rejected Marxist knowledge discourse, especially its critical theories, which even constitutes the main spiritual origin of radical postmodern aesthetic critics. Up until now, different ideological forces born from 20th century western political setup are still undergoing constant shift and restructuring. Ideologically, culturally and politically, a variety of sects are still undergoing gaming and contrast, which makes the clashes between deconstructionism and Marxism more prominent. Their covert or overt ideological tension has formulated a key node of 20th century Western ideological field. This essay attempts to explore the twisted relationship between deconstructionism and Marxism from the point of view of “postmodern politics” so as to offer a way of comprehending the mutation of Western philosophical spirits in the 20th century.

^{*} **Acknowledgements:** This paper was funded by China National Find of Social Sciences “the Research of Fundamental Problems of the Contemporary Aesthetic and Criticism Forms” (15ZDB023).

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Skepticism Toward “Mega-narration” and Deconstructionist “Political Impulse”

The concept of “meta-narrative” first appeared in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by the French philosopher Lyotard. Lyotard holds that postmodern condition is in its essence a knowledge condition in which processes of perceiving the world, obtaining knowledge, way of thinking and language expression have been reexamined. It’s an activity of “decoding” and “re-coding” the knowledge structure and discourse system, which means the end of universal discourse, or “meta-narrative” (1997, p. 138). In his opinion, “meta-narrative” refers to all kinds of grand narratives and theories, including religion, Marxism and Darwin’s evolution theory, which are compulsory and oppressive. This has created a contradiction. On one hand, production of modern knowledge requires a legitimate narrative; on the other hand, modern scientific knowledge is produced during the process of criticizing traditional knowledge. Now that the universal foundation of modern scientific knowledge has become a difficult problems, it’s necessary to completely deconstruct fundamental delusion of modern knowledge in order to “rewrite modernity” (1997, p. 138).

Lyotard’s description of postmodern condition of knowledge not only proposes postmodernists’ efforts to reexamine the foundation of modern scientific language, but also points out the essentials of postmodernism ideologically, mentally and culturally. In both theory and ideology, the one who has practiced these essentials most overtly is no others than deconstructionism, which is represented by Derrida. Derrida practiced “decoding” of knowledge structure and discourse system proposed by Lyotard from the angle of linguistic semiology theory. In his famous book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida proposes that since Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, language has always been viewed as a semiotic system in which the distinction between signifier and signified, or at least “parallelism”, constitutes an obvious “phonocentrism”. “Writing were considered intermediary of intermediary and was trapped in the externality of sense” (2005, p. 16). In his opinion, this linguistic view has never cast off the extension of “logocentrism” since Heidegger and “deeply hidden in the entire long age of metaphysics history” (2005, p. 16). In the metaphysics tradition, “logocentrism” belittles writing and endows prerogative to phonetic entity. Derrida challenges this traditional thinking in the name of Saussure’s “randomicity of signs”. He maintains that “Signs exist as long as there were sense. We only think with signs” (2005, p. 69). Presentation could only play their role through surrogates, which are signs themselves. Signs symbolizes “an absent presence”, which is purposeless. Yet meaning is scattered in the chain of signs, where it was continuously deferred. Writing and books represent the deferral of meaning, which is not “the diagram of speech” defined by Saussure. It’s at the outside and inside of speech. Writing is a linguistic game played with the “absent presence” of signs.

By interpreting and applying the “absent presence” property of signs, Derrida establishes its writing theory. In his point of view, the history of writing declares its absolute externality. It describes writing’s internalization of language, which is a huge “supplementary” for spoken language and voices. Thus, oral language and voice couldn’t represent a constant meaning. It will be perpetually put in the distinction and deferral caused by the “absent presence” of signs (1976, p. 313). That’s why text is not a self-sufficient world. And there is no binary oppositions between signifier and signified, writing and speech. Differences, deferral and transformations changes writing to a “non-being trail of sense”. From the point view of writing, Derrida subverts linguistic views since Saussure and challenges the powerful “phonocentrism” of the west and its metaphysics tradition. In his

book *Positions*, Derrida emphasizes that “Grammatology must destruct everything that binds scientific concepts, norms and being—theology, logocentrism and phonocentrism” (2001, p. 40). His provocative voices were echoed by the theories of J. Lacan, French philosopher, Yale School of the U.S. and another French philosopher Michel Foucault. Lacan combines deconstructionist theory with psychoanalytic theory, discovering Derrida’s sense from the relationship between language and psychology and deepening his decomposition of speech and writing to the level of subject and mind. He believes that what confines language is the whole language and cultural system, which constitutes a complex network where ego and subject are undoubtedly governed under. With Sigmund Freud’s unconsciousness concept, Lacan points out the “centralism” of this system’s “logocentrism” and by highlighting and modifying the mobility and rhetorical of “signifiers”, he disassembles the cultural system that restrains the expression process of language, deepening Derrida’s deconstruction theory. French philosopher Michel Foucault’s research represents the revolution of deconstructionist epistemology and historical theories. In the book *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault conducts profound analysis of the power mechanism and system that affects knowledge discourse from the angle of the historical generation of the knowledge discourse system, discovering the evolving mechanism of “knowledge hegemony” in the evolution of the history of western culture. Foucault holds that the generation of all the knowledge concepts and establishment of all the knowledge system are the process of completion of the domination of “discursive formation” by “knowledge hegemony” through differentiation, purification and exclusion. Thus, “discursive formation” represents the generative mechanism of knowledge discourse system, which requires the involvement of cultural mechanism, such as cultural publicity, ideology and education. But more importantly, it’s through power institutions such as schools, churches and prisons. He believes that the function of these power institutions is not organic or holistic, but filled with fragmentation and overlap, where correction facilities such as prisons, sanitariums and hospitals are its best examples. The fragmentation and overlap is where the energy of “knowledge hegemony” gathers, enabling it to permeate inside of knowledge system.

If Lacan relieves deconstructionism from Derrida’s “linguistic turn” to focus on the question of “subject construction” of “unconsciousness” and “language and cultural system”, then Foucault’s knowledge archaeology position brings deconstruction theory deep into the core of epistemology and historical theories. With their efforts, deconstructionism was not only able to destruct the powerful Western metaphysics tradition, but also completely dismembered the philosophy historical totality, shaking the universal foundation of modern scientific knowledge. However, it’s far from enough to interpret deconstructionism from the standpoint of epistemology. From the backdrop of knowledge theory, deconstructionism was an revolution of thinking in the field of philosophy, which is closely connected to the western social, political and cultural reality of the 1960s. As Derrida is not only a literary professional, his deconstructionism also demonstrates the purport of political criticism, which was what he meant by saying: “To think about philosophy, you have to go beyond philosophy in one way or another” (2001, p. 12). In Derrida’s deconstructionism, the writing of text inside language process brought by the randomness of signs is hidden with opposition of nonvariant sense. Though his writing theory was conducted within the scope of linguistics, its hidden opposition to consistent historical consciousness is inseparable to the transition of capitalist mode of social production and capital operation of the time. In Foucault’s knowledge archaeology, oppressive power is hidden in the relationship between knowledge and power, discipline and punishment, and craziness and civilization (1997, p. 12). He attempts to interpret the operation and expression mode of power mechanism in

capitalist society by exploring “the bizarre relationship between knowledge, academics, theories and authentic history”. Hence, deconstructionism is not only a revolution in philosophical thinking, it’s more a set of codes of cultural and political message, within which an impulse of “radical political aesthetics” is bred. British scholar Terry Eagleton suggests that Derrida and deconstructionism “does not seek to deny the existence of relatively certain truth, sense, feature and continuity; in contrary, he seeks to view these things as a historical result of something more broad and profound—language, unconsciousness, social system and practice” (2006, p. 144). Undoubtedly, the hidden cultural and political message of deconstructionism has been inherited and spread by postmodernism.

“Postmodern Politics” and the Bleak Fate of Marxism

There is extreme unity between deconstructionist methodology and standpoint, which is in pursuit of that “feeling of non-stop, never-satisfied motion” (Miller, 1998, p. 132). This innate “uncertainty” method, at the end of day, makes deconstructionism a strategy of revolution. Postmodernism has made its way to contemporary cultural and political structure of the west with the help of this revolutionary strategy and inflicted the conversion of the context of contemporary cultural and political research, which is showcased in the following three aspects: firstly, from the angle of linguistics, deconstructionism provides strategic basis for postmodernism’s involvement in contemporary western cultural and political reality through edge instigation of the Western metaphysics tradition; secondly, from the standpoint of “differentiation”, deconstructionism challenges the voice of authority, providing ideological reference for postmodernism’s challenges of contemporary cultural and political pattern; thirdly and most importantly, the “political impulse” of deconstructionism offers spiritual guidance for the radical political orientation of postmodernism. It’s because postmodernist internal ideological consistency to deconstructionist political orientation that makes it showcases thick political connotation and tendency in terms of distinct revaluation, holding high the banner of “postmodern politics” on the cultural and political stage of the West.

One distinct feature of “postmodern politics” is cultural criticism, which first and foremost is a type of “cultural politics”, which has inherited multiculturalism in terms of reading and interpretation of literary and cultural text and insists on the absolute horizon politically and ideologically. Typical theorists are George Lucas, Fredric Jameson, Theodore Wieselgrund Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean-Paul Sartre. They focus more on the cultural changes and the operation form of social power in contemporary Western society. They also emphasizes that the alteration of social and political form and the shaping and conversion of potential social subject, which is a subversive way of discourse. In his book, *the Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism*, Jameson declared clearly that: “I have always been advocating reading art works from the angle of political, social and historical angles” (1997, p. 4). He holds that “Everything is social and historical. In fact, everything, “at the end of the day”, is political” (1994, p. 14). “Postmodern politics” is also a type of “micro-politics”. While questioning totality and grand-narrative, postmodern thinkers actively embrace micro-politics and view it as an important political field. Compared to multiculturalism of “cultural politics”, “micro-politics” holds the banner of “identity” and “difference”. It actively digs up “discrimination” in the reality of politics with micro perspective of “politics of difference” and “politics of identity”, such as women, people of color, members of alien races, and homosexuals. Lastly, “postmodern politics” is also a “replacement politics”. Among the voices of

anti-authoritarianism, anti-essentialism, anti-foundationism, and anti-centralization and its cultural criticism about differences, disruption, fragmentation and crushability, postmodernism successfully replaced the way of discourse of classic politics and surpassed certain classic political issues, such as class struggle, social revolution, violent struggle and nurtured new political subjects on a micro level, such as feminism, homoeroticism, race and identity, filling contemporary discourse with a overflow of the new type of political formality—sex, ethnicity and identity.

“Postmodern politics” has absorbed the “Anti-enlightenment” element of postmodernist discourse’s dissolving of the historic narrative of meta-discourse since deconstructionism, strengthening the practical significance of objective experiences from social reality in terms of thinking and construction of epistemology. Moreover, it has connected the idea of dissolving “historic meta-narrative” from knowledge construction with the revolutionary process of political entity, cognitive entity and individual spirit of the Western society, thus introducing the idea into the field of cultural and political debate as a way of influencing the mode of knowledge. During this process, the Marxist discourse was also impacted inevitably. As a type of knowledge discourse, Marxist philosophy’s prophetic criticism of modern social development is a holistic discourse deeply affecting the 20th century Western culture and philosophy. Its discussion on the rules of modern social development and the analysis of Marxist aesthetics into Capitalist aesthetic relationship represents a universal force of “grand narrative”. During the moment of crisis of Capitalist cultural expansion and facing new cultural and political pattern and cultural ecology, this “grand narrative” force had demonstrated its incomparable sharpness, penetrating its ideas deeply into the core of cultural production and knowledge construction of Capitalist society and playing important role in radical political stage. With the decline of Imperialism and the strengthening of radical forces in the third world, rebel movements of the working class had posed great challenge to the political foundation of Capitalist society in its own political habitat. Marxist social revolution had become a wide-spread anticipation. But given its political failure in the 1960s, Western ideological world “burst the Marxist fantasy” (Best, 2001, p. 32) with debates and reflections. People even reached the conclusion that Marxism is overly dogmatist and narrow-minded and its theories had lost its analytic capacity towards the diversified contemporary forms of power and political activities. In France, where the storm of revolution used to be the most fierce, Skeptical and pessimistic voices like this were particularly popular. Some rising philosophers even reproached Marxism as terrorist discourse and power discourse, attributing the failure of the radical revolution to the mistakes in the guidance of Marxist class struggle, social revolution and the theory of proletarian dictatorship. These skepticism views were promoted ideologically by postmodernism since deconstructionism. The rise of deconstructionism has also witnessed the discrediting and criticism of Marxism—“the essential Marxist modal was discarded” (Best, 2002, p. 10). Postmodernism “started to say farewell to the Proletariat and Marxism” (Best, 2001, p. 31). Claims like these could be found everywhere. However, more importantly, during the process in which postmodern thinkers turned their attention to “postmodern politics” featured by feminism, ecology movements, homoeroticism, race and identity, social and cultural context has nurtured new subject concept and political powers, making Marxist theories fell from “the once widespread peak of scientific enlightenment movement” to “a never convincing cultural phase that is full of contradictions” (Mulhern, 2002, p. 12). “Marxist dialectics about modernity is representing the the destiny of the society it has described and producing vitality and ideas that will lead to its own demise” (Berman, 2003, p. 135).

Dilemma of Deconstructionism and Critical Reconstruction of the Marxist Philosophy of Totality

In the Western ideological and cultural world since 1960s, with the beginning of the bleak fate of Marxism, alteration and reconstruction of various ideological forces had been more obvious and the game and contracts of different schools ideologically and culturally more prominent, which means the bleak fate of Marxist discourse was not only a decline of epistemology, but a more broad and profound conversion of cultural and political context. Also, more remarkably, though deconstructionists were unsatisfied with Marx and Engels' totality proposal, they showed preference for Marxist “revolutionary discourse” every now and then, which had showcased the power of thinking of Marxist discourse and the ideological connections between deconstructionism and Marxism on the cultural and political stage.

From 1970s, there were some people in the Western academic circle who had noticed the connection between deconstructionism and Marxism. In 1990s, leading deconstructionist, French scholar Derrida's book *Specters of Marx* reignited discussions on this important topic. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida actively discusses a kind of Marxist spirit and takes the so-called “Marxist spirit” as an opportunity of summoning “heteroplasmy” (1999, p. 8). Derrida says emotionally: “Upon rereading the Manifesto and several other great works of Marx, I said to myself that I knew of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson appears more urgent today if we think about their Marx and Engels' words about themselves might becoming outdated and their innate insurmountable historicalness”. “it would always be a mistake not to read, reread and discuss Marx—among others - beyond scholarly. And it would be increasingly wrong in terms of responsibility theoretically, philosophically and politically” (1999: 21). Derrida favors the critical spirit of Marxism and focuses on how to inherit a Marxism as a kind of critical spirit in an opposing way of thinking. Derrida's view typically demonstrates deconstructionists' efforts to “write” Marxism, which is high identical to the tendency of postmodern thinkers' “rewriting Marxism” from the perspective of “deconstructionism”, such as Michel Foucault, Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Edward Said, Fredric R. Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, constituting the radical and sharp ideological trend of “deconstructive Marxism”.

With the overwhelming contemporary cultural study and the rise of mass culture, diminishing elite cultural modal and the dominating culturalism, “deconstructive Marxism” plays important role. “deconstructive Marxism” values the Marxist way of raising questions and critical spirit in the backdrop of capitalism culture, embodying a kind of “post-Marxist” tendency “engraved” with Marxist discourse in the context of “post-modern politics”. With emerging eschatological ideas and the all-time low of Marxist spirit, many left-wing scholars were hopeful about this “engraving”, deeming it an effort to rejuvenate Marxism. This is quite obvious among many philosophers, such as Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Laclau, and Mouffe. This way of thinking was also reproached. Contemporary British Terry Eagleton decisively rejected the stand of “deconstructive Marxism”. When Derrida shows his willingness to get intimate with Marxism in *Specters of Marx*, Eagleton said ironically: “Just when Marxism gets to the edge, Derrida tries to get close to it”. “We couldn't help but ask, during the long night of the Reagan-Thatcher Age, where is Jacques Derrida when we needed him?” (1999, p. 121). Eagleton believes that the radicalness of deconstructionism represented by Derrida is skeptical—“No matter what Derrida would like to think, in practical operation, Deconstructionism is nothing

like radical Marxism. Instead, it's like a form of replacement of textual politics" (1999, p. 121). Eagleton's political interpretation is extremely profound. In his sarcastic criticism, the purpose of deconstructionism's coziness to Marxism is crystal clear: for deconstructionism, critical spirit of Marxism was a strategy for struggle. But it only praised Marxism as a "spirit" in terms of radical strategy and didn't form an ally in term of in-depth ideology. Moreover, as a modal of "grand narrative", the Marxist thinking of a general plan for the development of human society was one of the general ideology that deconstructionism attempted to destroy. When Marxism was confronted with the most severe challenges by postmodernism since deconstructionism, Derrida could borrow Marxism's critical spirit to plant the wedge of revolutionary radicalness in deconstructionist thinking. Eagleton was unhappy about deconstructionist move of "political speculation", which was why he spared no efforts in criticizing Derrida's deconstructionism. He maintained: "Marxism not only attracting Derrida with its marginal position. The plainness of its alternative political theories make it more charming for Derrida" (1999, p. 122). This has pointed out the contradictions of "deconstructive Marxism". Since in the context of "postmodern politics", Derrida and his deconstructionism didn't go deep into the contemporary Western cultural and political reality, which was why they couldn't provide contemporary real-time politics with steady theoretical foundation and ideological conviction. Though ideologically, deconstructionism, especially Derrida poses enormous challenges to modern Western capitalist ideology with skeptical voices. His subversive and critical spirit appealed the ambition to challenge a political structure with increasing hegemony and power centralization in a centrifugal political practice. But it is divorced from profound historical awareness and actual practical standing, the "madness and violence" of "deconstructive" "politics" is left with nothing but "a hair-raising radicalism" (1981, p. 134).

Eagleton's criticism is not random or groundless. Since the 1960s, due to the turn of realistic context, "deconstructive Marxism" has been trying to insert the wedge of revolutionary radicalness in its thinking norm by the process of dissolving the concept of "totality" and "grand narrative" theories, which aims to obtain legitimate face of "revolution". This, by itself, is a suspicious political practice. During a period when left-wing cultural and political studies were at an all-time low, "deconstructive Marxism" was leading the cultural trend. But, from the point of view of contemporary capitalist cultural and political reality, "postmodern politics" supported by deconstructionists is not a rational and ideal spiritual conviction and practical formality. When postmodernism was comprehensively penetrating cultural, political and aesthetic fields of studies in contemporary Western society with a radical face, its flaws were also completely exposed. American scholar Derrick Ferre says that when using the concept of "postmodern", we hope "to endow it with certain content and a series of ethical and epistemological features as if we have know what the world is going to be like after modern. But actually, we know very little about it" (David Griffin, 1998, p. 210). Another scholar from the United States, Albert Borgman, also maintains that "Postmodernist words boasts cruel critical power. But most of them hardly make any sense in that it couldn't show us the boundary of postmodern, or anything beyond it" (2003, p. 4). While "postmodernist discourse" since deconstructionism were getting spectacular, Marxist discourse demonstrated consistent ideological tension and critical cultural influences. When the Marxist concept of totality and "grand narrative" discourse are under fundamental impact, Marxism still upholds its critical capacity and theoretical reconstruction competence in the capitalist global narrative. American scholar Marshall Berman values this ideological tension and influence of Marxist philosophy and thoughts very much. He proposes: "There is tension between Marx's

critical vision and radical hopes” (2003, p. 154). This indicates that under capitalist global narrative, Marxism is not an ideological heritage to be neglected. This ideological heritage is not Derrida’s “deconstructive Marxism”, but Marxist’s spirit of cultural practice and criticism. American scholars Douglas Kellner and Steven Best point out: “Although the postmodern emphasis of micro politics, New Social Movement and the diversity of struggle is inspiring, its interrogation of macro politics, trade unions, economic struggle and traditional politics is biased and dogmatic, just like modern theories it is opposed to” (2001, p. 237). This bias and dogmatism has damaged the reputation of postmodernism as well as rousing suspicion on the values of “postmodern Marxist thinkers”. At present, the ideological trend created by “postmodern politics” is not over yet while radical impulse of deconstructionism is still prominent, which is why such a moment is quite vivid and essential to rethink the Marxist ideological tension and critical stand, reconstruct Marxist concept of totality and further deepen and strengthen Marxist theological inspiration. Just like Adorno put it, “postmodern politics” is “the Enlightenment of Enlightenment” and “Marx is the son of Enlightenment in many ways” (David Harvey, 2003, p. 23).

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