**Lasse Thomassen (Madrid)**

# Deconstruction as Method in Political Theory

*Obwohl die Dekonstruktion seitens der Diskurstheorie und der normativen politischen Theorie mehrmals zur Anwendung gebracht worden ist, wird sie generell bei den PolitikwissenschaftlerInnen außer Acht gelassen. Der Artikel bezieht sich daher nicht auf das Verhältnis von Dekonstruktion und Politik, sondern erörtert die grundsätzlichen methodologischen Aspekte, die eine Anwendung der Dekonstruktion im Rahmen der politischen Analyse mit einbezieht. Es werden die Basiskriterien einer solchen Analyse dargelegt, indem, erstens, ihr Status als Methode und, zweitens, ihre wichtigsten Auslegungen und Prinzipien diskutiert werden.*

*Als Beispiele werden Derridas Begriff der „Iterabilität" und seine eigene Dekonstruktion von 9/11 einer Analyse unterzogen. Die Absicht ist jedoch nicht eine Art Gebrauchsanweisung der Dekonstruktion. Mit diesen Beispielen wird der Essenz der methodologischen Frage nachgegangen, nämlich der Frage, wie sich das Verhältnis von Methode und Theorie und deren jeweiligen Applikationen auffassen lässt. Der Artikel schlägt vor, dieses Verhältnis als eine reziproke Artikulation zu konzipieren. Dabei wird die aufklärende Rolle der Dekonstruktion für eine solche Artikulation hervorgehoben.*

*Keywords: Dekonstruktion, Derrida, Iterabilität, Methode*
*Deconstruction, Derrida, iterability, method*

## Introduction[1]

"What is deconstruction not? everything of course! What is deconstruction? nothing of course!" With statements like this by Jacques Derrida (2008, 6), it is perhaps no wonder that many philosophers and social scientists have been sceptical about the value of deconstruction for serious philosophical and social scientific work. It seems that Derrida is saying that deconstruction is just an empty term that can be made to mean anything and everything; indeed, one of the most common criticisms directed at deconstruction is that it leads to relativism. Similarly, the reception of deconstruction in political theory and political science has been characterised by at best ignorance and at worst scorn. One widely used textbook for students in political science is a good example of the lack of interest in deconstruction within political science. In Marsh/Stoker (2002), Derrida is mentioned once (ibid., 137) and deconstruction is placed under the rubric of postmodernism (ibid., 203, but see also 150), only to be discarded. Despite this lack of attention to deconstruction in mainstream political science, some work has been done using deconstruction within the discipline. This is the case in discourse analysis (e.g. Norval 1996) and in political theory (e.g. Butler 1997; Laclau/Mouffe 1985), and in addition some philosophers have tried to show Derrida's relevance for political issues (e.g. Bennington 1994; Cheah/Guerlac 2009). Finally, one must also mention Derrida's (e.g. 1990; 1992; 1994; 2005) own writings on political institutions and issues.

In this article, I build on some of this material, not in order to examine the larger question of deconstruction and politics, but to examine the narrower question of the methodological issues surrounding deconstruction as a method in political analysis. While Derrida's deconstructive analyses are often interspersed with methodological reflections, and while his interlocutors often raise methodological issues too, this is often done in an ad hoc fashion (although see Derrida 2008). Here I propose to pursue the issue of deconstruction as method in a more systematic way. In the first two sections, I lay out the basics of deconstruction, first, by considering its status as a method and, second, by examining the basic moves of a deconstructive reading. In the subsequent two sections, I use Derrida's notion of iterability and his analysis of the event of 9/11 to examine the relationship of deconstruction as theory and method to its particular applications. I shall argue that iterability provides a particularly useful way to shed light on deconstruction as method because iterability draws attention to the relationship between method and application as one of mutual articulation.[2]

Derrida's version of deconstruction is not the only one; for instance, Paul de Man has been influential within literary theory (Rorty 1995). However, when, in the following, I refer to "deconstruction", I have in mind the work of Derrida and those who have used Derridean deconstruction, and I shall use "deconstruction" and "Derrida" interchangeably. Sometimes it is said that only Derrida's later writings are political, starting with his article on deconstruction and justice, "Force of Law" (Derrida 1990). Derrida (1990, 921–35) himself rightly rejects this periodisation. While it is true that it is only in his later writings that Derrida (1992; 1994; 2005) has addressed political concepts and institutions such as democracy, cosmopolitanism and sovereignty, his earlier work – including that on iterability – can be shown to have political implications and to challenge the assumptions on which political theorising and political institutions rely.

## Deconstruction as/of method

What is deconstruction? When asking for a definition of deconstruction, we are asking for the meaning or essence of deconstruction as expressed in the copula "is" in "what *is* deconstruction?" Derrida (2008, 5) says:

> *All sentences of the type "deconstruction is X" or "deconstruction is not X" a priori miss the point […] one of the principal things at stake in what is called in the texts "deconstruction" is precisely the delimiting of onto-logic and above all of the third person present indicative: S is P.*

Deconstruction puts into question any claim to essence and to stable definitions and meanings, and in this way deconstruction puts into question the assumptions behind the question "what is deconstruction?" We must keep this in mind when trying to specify what deconstruction implies as a method for political analysis. Despite these inherent difficulties in specifying what deconstruction implies as a method, I shall nonetheless attempt to spell out what deconstruction as method implies and to do so as systematically and schematically as possible. Later I shall return to the question of the definition of deconstruction.

Deconstruction as method arguably also implies the deconstruction of method (Gasché 1986, 123). Derrida (2008, 4; also 1996, 217) writes "that deconstruction could not be reduced to some methodological instrumentality or to a set of rules and transposable procedures". However, as

Gasché (1986, 123) points out, "[a]lthough a deconstruction of method, deconstruction is not a nonmethod, an invitation to wild and private lucubrations", and I shall first attempt a negative delimitation of what deconstruction is not.

Deconstruction is not analysis if by that is meant the breaking down of a text or a structure to its original or fundamental elements, for instance to show what a given structure consists of "at bottom". On the contrary, deconstruction is sceptical of any attempt to establish an origin or a foundation, whether these consist of a whole or of its parts (Derrida 2008, 4). Nor is deconstruction critique, which, in its traditional form, aims at making decisions by discerning between true and false and between right and wrong. Contrary to what is often thought, Derrida does not believe that it is impossible to make (conceptual) distinctions, although he does insist on interrogating distinctions in philosophical and political texts, and these distinctions turn out to be less clear and less easy to draw than the authors want us to believe. Importantly, for Derrida, a decision always comes hand in hand with undecidability. We cannot avoid making decisions, including political decisions, but there is no decision worth the name that simply follows a rule or a conceptual schema. For there to be a decision, there must be undecidability, and this undecidability does not disappear once the decision is made (Derrida 1990). As a result, deconstruction problematises critical decisions and distinctions; they are marked by undecidability and this undecidability cannot be eradicated or rationalised. In the context of deconstruction, the term "critique" would have to mean an incessant critique that must always be re-opened and is never on firm grounds. Political critique would not consist in establishing a firm set of concepts and distinctions, but rather in putting these into question. For instance, rather than identifying the essence of democracy, Derrida (1994) refers to a democracy to-come (*à-venir*). This is not a democracy that has not yet been realised, but will be so one day in the future (*avenir*). Rather, it is a democracy that will remain to-come, to be determined, but in the name of which any existent or present democracy can be questioned.

If deconstruction is neither analysis nor critique, what "is" it then? Etymologically, the word method comes from the Greek *hodos* meaning road. Method is precisely supposed to be, or to show, the road to the truth about an object (e.g. a text). The traditional view of method is that there is an object with an essence to be known, a method as a set of rules about how to gain knowledge about the object, and a subject who applies the method to the object in order to gain knowledge about it. However, deconstruction challenges this view of method in several respects.

Derrida refers to the objects of deconstruction as texts. The term "text" does not only refer to texts in the usual sense of written words. Instead it refers to any meaningful totality, and this includes practices, institutions and structures, whether philosophical, economic or otherwise; a text can be a text by Marx or the institutions of apartheid (Derrida 1988, 137, 148; 2002, 44, 59f.; Gasché 1986, 278–82). Importantly, a text is not a totality understood as a closed and coherent whole with an inside and an outside and whose limits can be clearly determined. Instead, texts are marked by tensions, contradictions or what Derrida calls aporias, which are irresolvable; that is, the aporias are not Hegelian contradictions that can be resolved at a higher level of rationality in the sense of *Aufhebung*.

Literally, aporia means non-passage, and aporias are blind spots where the reader of the text, even when faithfully following the conceptual schema governing the text, comes up against a limit where s/he must invent the road forward by making a decision between equally (un-) likely roads ahead in the interpretation of the text. Aporias are the places in the text where methodological appropriation of the text falters – the places where the road (method) comes up against

a non-passage (aporia). Thus the objects of deconstruction are not fully constituted as objects with an essence that can be appropriated or known. What is proper to the text is its non-appropriability because the text is not constituted as a coherent whole that can be determined or known, not even a coherent whole of otherwise contradictory parts. Indeed, the meaning of the text is partly constituted through the deconstructive reading, which should be viewed as an intervention involving a decision on the part of the reader: "Deconstruction […] is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*." (Derrida 2002, 93) A deconstructive reading is always an interested reading, and it never leaves the text intact, but disturbs – and thereby rearticulates – it.

The deconstructive reading is marked by a double bind. Derrida (2002, 6) writes: "I try to respect as rigorously as possible the internal, regulated play of the philosophemes or epistemes by making them slide – without mistreating them – to the point of their nonpertinence, their exhaustion, their closure." The reading will be caught in a double bind because it must, on the one hand, respect the text ("the internal, regulated play of the philosophemes"), that is, be fair to the text in the sense that the reading must be just *qua* exact. On the other hand, the reading comes up against an internal limit to this, namely the aporias, where the reading can no longer simply follow the logic of the text. These are not two temporally distinguished steps (first follow, then disrupt); from the beginning, the deconstructive reading intervenes with certain questions and interests in mind.

The above may suggest a subject actively trying to appropriate or disrupt the text. There is something to be said for such an interpretation; deconstruction is clearly an intervention, and it would not take place without this active intervention. However, as Derrida (2008, 4) also writes, deconstruction

> *does not return to an (individual or collective) subject who would take the initiative and apply it to an object, a text, a theme, and so on. […]* It deconstructs itself. It can be deconstructed *[Ça se déconstruit]. The "it" [*ça*] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity.*

There is something passive about a deconstruction because there are already deconstructable tensions and aporias in the texts themselves which means that the text is never in harmony or equilibrium with itself.

Finally, deconstruction is not a method in the sense of a set of procedures or techniques to be applied to an object (Derrida 2008, 4). We should speak of articulation rather than application, because each time deconstruction is put to use as a "method", both the object (that is, the text being deconstructed) and the method (the procedures, concepts and moves that can nonetheless be identified) are rearticulated.[3] Thus, deconstruction as method is not given *to* the individual deconstructions but partly articulated and, hence, constituted *through* them. This is reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1958) point that the use of a rule also constitutes its meaning.

The argument here has implications for how ones does research and writes in a deconstructive fashion. If the object (the text) and the method/theory are rearticulated in the process of a deconstructive reading, then no two uses of deconstruction are identical. Deconstruction is not something to be taken down from the shelf, applied and then put back up on the shelf again. We do not start from a given method or set of procedures; that is, deconstruction is not method driven research, even though no research can be non-methodological or non-theoretical because our intuitions are informed by theories and interpretative schemas. Finally, the argument also has implications for the research and writing process. We do not first find a method or theory and

then apply it and do empirical research. Rather, there will be a sort of back and forth between method/theory and "application", whether the application is to empirical cases or to theoretical issues. There is no hard logical or temporal distinction between the two things. In these ways, deconstruction as method is also the deconstruction of method.

It is important to be clear that deconstruction is not simply negative. The term "deconstruction" may easily convey an idea of negation, of taking apart and breaking down, dismantling and destroying. However, deconstruction is also affirmative and "constructive". It is affirmative in that it rests on an affirmation – a "yes" – to philosophy, justice and democracy, and in that it proceeds in the name of these ideals even while also putting conventional notions of them into question (Derrida 1990; 1992; 1994). Deconstruction is "constructive" too in that it attempts to account for the aporias and undecidabilities in texts through what Derrida calls infrastructures, which I shall return to below.

## Deconstructive moves

Where does one start a deconstructive reading? Derrida (1997, 162) states: "We must begin *wherever we are* and […] it [is] impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely." He adds:

> *The opening of the question, the departure from the closure of a self-evidence, the putting into doubt of a system of oppositions, all these movements necessarily have the form of empiricism and errancy. At any rate, they cannot be described,* as to past norms*, except in this form. (ibid.)*

We can give reasons for our starting point, for instance that it is a canonical text within political philosophy or, conversely, an overlooked work that challenges the canon. We find ourselves within one or more traditions that we inherit but also continue and reinterpret. Take for example Laclau and Mouffe's deconstructive genealogy of the concept of hegemony in Marxist theory which speaks at once to their own past and to their concerns when writing the book (how to develop a Leftist theoretical and political alternative at the time of the neo-conservative hegemony in the early 1980s). So they write that "Marxism is *one* of the traditions through which it becomes possible to formulate this new conception of politics. For us, the validity of this point of departure is simply based on the fact that it constitutes our own past." (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, 3f.)

Yet the starting point can never be fully justified or rationalised. Other starting points and openings of deconstructive questioning are always possible. In addition, given the performative and transformative nature of the deconstructive reading, it is not sufficient to refer to existing codes and norms (what Derrida above calls "*past norms*") about how one ought to pursue the reading of a text, because those codes and norms are themselves put into question by the deconstructive reading. Yet this limitation to the justification and rationalisation of one's starting point is no justification for not studying carefully. On the contrary, if we must start from "wherever we are", then we must know where we are, which is to say that we must carefully study the canon and the particular texts to be deconstructed. Thus, deconstruction involves a lot of preparatory close and analytical reading.

A deconstructive reading must start with one foot in the text to be deconstructed. It cannot start from a point outside the text, because this is one of the things the deconstructive reading

puts into question: the possibility of conceptual closure of the text. Given the impossibility of establishing an inside and outside to the text, the reading can start neither simply inside nor simply outside the text. Still the reading must borrow its resources for the deconstruction from the text itself. For instance, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) borrow the concept of hegemony from the history of Marxism even as they displace that concept and that tradition.

The deconstructive reading works on the limit of the text, or rather its non-limit. It is put to work against the attempts to establish the coherence and the limits of the text, for instance through the rationalisation of central conceptual distinctions between, say, base and superstructure. Importantly, the reading does not simply negate, or proceed in opposition to, the text in question. Thus, Derrida (2002, 6) says about his deconstruction of philosophical texts: "I try to keep myself at the *limit* of philosophical discourse. I say limit and not death." The deconstructive reading does not aim to negate or reject for instance philosophy, but to show the non-closure of philosophical texts by highlighting its undecidabilities and aporias.

It is also in this context that we can understand the (in)famous quote from Derrida (1997, 158; see also 1988, 136): "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]." Here Derrida is saying, first, that the text is not a closed whole with an inside and an outside; that is, the limits of the text cannot be clearly identified, and so a point *outside* the text cannot be easily identified either. Second, the quote means that nothing can determine the meaning of the text once and for all, neither the text as a coherent totality with determined limits (for instance, a closed structure) nor something outside the text, such as its context of enunciation or the intentions of the author.

A deconstructive reading looks for aporias in the text, aporias that cannot be reduced to either mistakes on the part of the author or to logical contradictions that can be dialecticised in a Hegelian fashion – in brief, aporias that cannot be rationalised or reduced in any way. The aim is not to reconstruct or reconstitute the unity of the text, but instead to account for the aporias with what Derrida calls infrastructures (Gasché 1986, chapters 8–9). Here, infrastructure should not be understood as Marxist infrastructures; rather, it is "a transformed concept of 'infrastructure,' […] an 'infrastructure' of which the *general text* would no longer be an effect or a reflection" (Derrida 2002, 90). A Derridean infrastructure is not an underlying structure determining the meaning and reading of the text, and it only accounts for the aporias in a very loose sense of the word (Gasché 1986, 142f.). Infrastructural accounting takes the form of a double gesture of reversal and displacement (or reinscription), which can also be described as two steps although they are not sequentially ordered. The two steps are best explained in the context of the deconstruction of a hierarchical conceptual distinction (Derrida 2002, 41–44).

In a first step, a conceptual hierarchy is reversed, for instance presence/representation or speech/writing, where the first of each pair is usually valued higher, and thought to be more original, than the second. For instance, speech is thought in terms of presence and thought to be more authentic because supposedly immediate, whereas writing is supposedly secondary and derived as the representation of speech. In political philosophy as well as in ordinary discourse, representation is usually thought to be a second best to the presence of the voice of the people, as most famously evidenced in Rousseau. The reversal of the hierarchy can have the strategic effect of making us see things differently, but the reversal still operates within the conceptuality of the conceptual hierarchical structure itself; that is, the reversal does not disturb the hierarchical distinction as a conceptual hierarchical distinction.

This is why the second step of displacement, or reinscription, is necessary. The displacement generalises otherwise repressed traits. It generalises as a general structure what the old conceptual

hierarchy had to repress in order to establish its conceptuality, and, in doing so, it makes visible the traits that make possible and limit the conceptual hierarchy. This generalised structure – e.g. "writing" – is the infrastructure, which we can also think of as what is simultaneously the condition of possibility and condition of impossibility of the conceptual hierarchy. The displacement, or reinscription, does not consist in a simple break with the old conceptual hierarchy, but instead borrows an old name and marks it in order to show the displacement from the older hierarchy.

Examples of infrastructural accounting include representation and hegemony. With regard to the hierarchical distinction between presence and representation, Derrida argues that there is no presence *qua* immediacy, only representations where one signifier (or symbol) takes the place of, and refers to, other signifiers. There is no original people, for instance, and representative democracy is not a second best, but the only one we have got (Derrida 1997). In a similar vein, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) put hegemony at the centre where it was once at the margins. But they also displace the concept of hegemony so that it is now a general logic of the political that explains how practices, institutions and structures are structured in the first place; in short, hegemony is no longer opposed to, or marginalised vis-à-vis, structures.

## Iterability and the event

This is not the place for a full linguistic and philosophical explanation of Derrida's (1988) notion of iterability, which he develops in the context of a discussion of the distinction between performative and constative speech acts. Briefly, Derrida argues that there can be no pure or absolute origin because every act of institution – whether an act of naming or the founding of a nation – draws upon a context of norms and must be repeatable in other contexts. Take for instance the act of declaring a nation to be independent (Derrida 1986). At first sight, this appears to be a pure performative act that brings into being what it declares, namely the independent nation. Yet, the declaration of independence must be recognisable as a declaration of independence, and so those doing the declaration must be authorised to do so, and for this purpose they must refer to natural rights or existing legal norms. In other words, it must be possible to recognise the performative act of declaration in other contexts. As such, and paradoxically, the performative act refers to norms or facts in a constative fashion, and the norms or facts are taken to pre-exist the performative act. The performative gets its force as a performative in part from this constative reference as well as from the references to it in other contexts as the act that created the new nation. Thus there is no pure performative or original because they rely for their condition of possibility on the constative and on repetition.

However, there can be no pure constative or repetition either; every speech act contains something original. Repetition is never pure, but always involves alteration. This is so because to repeat something is to place it in a new context, and meaning is contextual and constituted through relations of difference. Thus to repeat something is to make a difference, to alter it. At the same time, for something to have a meaning that can be communicated from one context to another, it must be repeatable. Repetition is thus internal to every-thing (every "it"-ness, every "is"-ness or essence) and so to every concept and category, for instance the concept of "deconstruction" or the category of "event". Yet, this necessary repetition introduces alteration and difference at the heart of the thing, concept or category. To summarise, it is not just that it so happens that there is always both repetition and alteration; rather iterability refers to the mutual implication of repetition and alteration: there can be no repetition without alteration, and *vice versa*.

In the next section, I use iterability to address some methodological issues surrounding deconstruction, including the relationship between deconstruction as a method and its particular uses. In the present section, I will use Derrida's analysis of the event of 9/11 to show how the notion of iterability can be put to use in the analysis of political phenomena.

Derrida's (2003, 85–94) comments on the event of 9/11 come in the context of an interview with Giovanna Borradori, who describes her experience of 9/11 in New York City in the following way: "I lived 9/11 first hand: I was separated from my children […] From my perspective, the unthinkable broke out of a glorious late summer morning, which inexplicably turned into something close to apocalypse." (Borradori 2003, ix) This is what Derrida then deconstructs: the references to "the unthinkable", "a glorious late summer morning", "inexplicably", and "something close to apocalypse", all of which suggest an absolute break. Borradori takes on board what was, and still is, a commonplace conception of 9/11, namely: first harmony and innocence and then catastrophe and terror, the event of 9/11 being the threshold between a before and an after. There are three problems with this characterisation of 9/11. It is, first, a wrong diagnosis since 9/11 was nothing close to the end of the world or of American society. Second, it relies on a dichotomy of before and after, peace and war, which wrongly suggests that there was no terror in the United States before 9/11. And, finally, it suggests that 9/11 was an absolute and singular event, and Derrida wants to challenge the kind of policies pursued by the Bush administration in the name of this supposedly absolute event. Thus he wants to challenge the way we think and talk about the event of 9/11 in order to open up new possibilities for political action.

This takes us to the way in which we can speak of an event. Borradori starts her interview with Derrida by referring to 9/11 as a "*major event*" (Derrida 2003, 85), which suggests a discontinuity between the time before and the time after 9/11. Derrida questions this discontinuity and the event-ness of the event of 9/11. Here it is noteworthy that Derrida starts by talking about how to talk about 9/11. The reason is that the way we talk about things – the concepts and names we use – cannot be dissociated from "the thing itself" or from relations of power, and so we should not uncritically accept received ways of talking about 9/11. Thus, three pages into the interview, Derrida (ibid., 87) says that "for the moment we are simply preparing ourselves to say something about it [i.e., 9/11]". Indeed, we are never completely ready to approach the event in an unmediated fashion or with the correct vocabulary, and the deconstruction of the event of 9/11 also creates the language with which to speak about the event. Deconstruction is always world disclosure, even when it aims at problem solving.

'9/11' is the name of the event in this case, and iterability can help us understand the ways in which the event-ness of the event is both created and undercut. "9/11" is first of all a particular date, and this is a way to mark the singularity of the event because there is only one 11 September 2001. If it were to be repeated, it would be something else, a different date. Yet, the dating of the event also makes it possible to draw parallels to previous events, for instance 11 September 1973 in Chile, and "9/11" has become a reference point for subsequent terrorist attacks in Madrid, London and Mumbai that were signified in analogous ways by their dates.

The singular cannot be expressed in language, because that would mean that we had a category (after the fact) that would assimilate the event to similar events, or that we were prepared for it in advance and already knew what to call the event and to call it an event. If it is to be an event, then the event must be singular and unprecedented, and we must be unprepared for it so that it takes us by surprise, as if nothing like it happened before, nothing it could be compared to and no category of which it could be an instance. What is proper to the event – namely its singularity – cannot be appropriated. Derrida (ibid., 90) says:

> *The undergoing of the event […] is, it seems to me, a certain* unappropriability *of what comes or happens. The event is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all* that which *I do not first of all comprehend.*

The very possibility of speaking of the event as event presupposes a category of "event" which is not singular and which does not belong to any particular event. Were this not the case, we could not signify and communicate about events. Derrida (ibid.) continues:

> *That is the limit, at once internal and external, on which I would like to insist here: although the experience of an event, the mode according to which it affects us, calls for a movement of appropriation (comprehension, recognition, identification, description, determination, interpretation [of it as an event] on the basis of a horizon of anticipation, knowledge, naming, and so on), although this movement of appropriation is irreducible and ineluctable, there is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation* falters *at some border or frontier.*

In order to use the term or concept of "event" for 9/11, it becomes an instance of "event-ness". What we have here is an aporia: the condition of possibility of declaring the singularity of the event, the event-ness of the event, is to take away from this singularity and event-ness. It is only recognisable as an event insofar as it can be subsumed under the category of "event". The condition of there being events is their impurity, which is to say that the condition of possibility of an event is simultaneously its limit – hence the aporia. Notice that "the limit" – or aporia – that Derrida talks about here is not some misfit between language and the world out there, as it were, but an internal limit to the very concept of event.

This deconstruction of the event of 9/11 has implications for how we think of 9/11. According to Derrida (ibid., 86f.), the event-ness of 9/11 was not something natural about 9/11 as such, but was produced, especially in the media. However, it was only produced through its repetition in words and especially in images. Repetition neutralises and relativises, however. For instance, the repetitions of the images of 9/11 both remind us of the event-ness of the event and give us a certain distance from the event, which may easily turn into trivialisation. Politically, the event-ness of the event of 9/11 has been used to signify a break and to justify a break in policies. Political agents may repeat the event for their own ends, but this also carries a risk for them, because the repetition neutralises the effects of the event and because one cannot control the way the repetitions are taken up by others (ibid., 87). With repetition there is always the possibility – or risk – of alteration because the repetition is open to rearticulation. Thus, even if the Bush administration was very successful in signifying 9/11 in a certain way and in doing so through constant reminders of 9/11, there remains the possibility of resignifying what 9/11 means, for instance as the failure of the Bush administration to protect the US. This would be the political import of iterability: a politics of resignification that works within existing structures but is also able to resignify and change these (Butler 1997).

## Iterability and deconstruction

If we want to use deconstruction and Derrida's work, we must know what deconstruction is and what Derrida means, yet iterability challenges this in three ways.

First of all, we cannot refer to an essence of deconstruction. We can refer to a "minimal remainder" (Derrida 1988, 53) of any concept, including deconstruction, and this makes it possible to recognise the concept across different contexts and uses. However, this minimal remainder is not some hard core that transcends every context, but an effect of iterability. If it must be possible to repeat deconstruction across different contexts, and if the meaning of deconstruction changes with these repetitions, then no essence of deconstruction can be identified independently of and transcending these repetition-alterations. Meaning is produced through iterability. This is important because it means that what deconstruction "is" is constituted through its particular uses. Deconstruction does not simply precede its particular uses. What deconstruction "is" is (re-)articulated through the particular uses of it, a point reminiscent of Wittgenstein's (1958) point that the meaning of a rule is constituted through its particular uses. This does not mean that any particular use of deconstruction singlehandedly constitutes what deconstruction is, because any particular use must claim to be what others have called, and will call, deconstruction. To invent deconstruction anew and from scratch each time with no reference to previous uses of deconstruction, would be like a pure performative or like a private language in Wittgenstein's (ibid., §269) sense. Deconstruction cannot be reduced to a single use of it, yet it does not exist outside its particular uses. Thus, we cannot refer to an essence of deconstruction that can simply be applied in different contexts.

Another way to decide what deconstruction is and what Derrida means is to refer to Derrida's intentions as the origin of deconstruction. Identifying Derrida's intentions may help us understand what deconstruction is and what Derrida means, and so we might read Derrida's own comments, for instance in interviews, on his own intentions. However, looking for Derrida's intentions cannot guarantee understanding of deconstruction and Derrida's texts. This does not mean that intentions do not exist: "the category of intention will not disappear: it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance." (Derrida 1988, 18) We may be able to identify intentions, but doing so cannot guarantee understanding of, for instance, Derrida's texts. No intentions, and no consciousness, can arrest the production of meaning through iterability. Whatever the intentions with a text or a signifier, iterability implies that they can always be taken up, repeated and thereby altered, in different contexts; and the uptake cannot be controlled from any particular place, including that of an author's intentions.

We can think of iterability in terms of translation. Translations are transformative, translating from one idiom to another, but they must also make reference to an "original", that is, they must also make a claim to be a correct reflection of an original. Translations both have a constative and a performative aspect, both repeat and alter. The transformative and performative character of translation – and of communication – does not mean that we should not read the original, however, and often Derrida's translators keep some terms in French in the translated text. This reflects the idiomatic character of Derrida's French and adds a layer of understanding, for instance of Derrida's puns in French.

Finally, can the meaning of Derrida's texts be determined with reference to the context of their enunciation? One must certainly take the context into consideration when reading a text. This much follows from the deconstructive notion of meaning as constituted through relations

of difference, which is to say, through context. There is nothing outside context. However, iterability implies that a signifier must be repeatable across different contexts, and so no single context can determine its meaning. In addition, no particular context can be determined, because, in order to do so, one must determine the totality of all contexts, which is in turn impossible. So again no particular context can determine the meaning of a signifier.

The upshot of the argument from iterability is that deconstruction is (re-)articulated through its particular uses in particular contexts. "There is no one, single deconstruction" (Derrida 1988, 141) – there are only deconstruction*s* in the plural. Similarly, it is impossible to determine once and for all what Derrida "really" meant. Each reading is a translation in the same way that each use of deconstruction is a rearticulation, even if both translation and rearticulation must also refer to some "original" preceding it.

We can now make sense of the Derrida quote at the beginning of the article. If we ask "What is deconstruction?", then the answer is "nothing of course!", because there is no essence to deconstruction, and therefore we cannot say what it *is*. Yet, we must try to answer the question because deconstruction must have some specificity in order to be a label we can meaningfully apply to a reading or an approach. Hence, if the question is "What is deconstruction not?", then the answer is "everything of course!" Deconstruction cannot be just everything if we are to communicate meaningfully about it. To be a meaningful label, particular uses of deconstruction must make a claim to be instances of something common to each one of them, namely deconstruction, something that can be distinguished from other approaches.

There is no single correct reading that exhausts the meaning of Derrida's texts or the meaning of deconstruction as a theory or method. New readings and uses are always possible. How, then, can one make judgements about different readings and understandings? Can one reading or understanding be better than another? I would suggest that a good – or perhaps: a better – reading is one that, first, is justified with references to texts, context and intentions, where just means precise and fair; second, marks its own incompleteness; and, third, is submitted to contestation within the academic community. Ultimately, the problem of the validity of different readings and understandings cannot be resolved, and these suggestions raise new issues in turn, such as how the academic community and its norms are constituted. But the suggestions at least give us a way to start addressing these issues.

## Conclusion: deconstruction, application and articulation

As I have tried to argue, a deconstruction is an intervention and does not leave its object intact, nor is deconstruction itself left intact by its particular uses. Rather, deconstruction is rearticulated each time it is used; it "is" through its particular uses, and it can always be put to new uses, so what it "is" is never stable. We should think of deconstruction in terms of rearticulation. It is not a set of procedures or techniques to be applied, as if it were a given method applied to an object from the outside. Rather, we are dealing with a relation of rearticulation, where deconstruction as a method is not given prior to its particular uses. Or, if we were to use the term application, we would have to say that it is aporetic: on one hand, deconstruction can*not* be applied because it is not given as a method prior to its applications; on the other hand, deconstruction can *only* be applied because it only exists through its particular applications, and does not exist independently of these (Derrida 1996, 218).[4] The relationship between deconstruction as a theory or method and its particular uses is one of both exteriority and interiority. On the one hand, each

use of deconstruction cannot simply be subsumed under an existing definition of deconstruction; on the other hand, "each deconstructive 'event' remains singular" (Derrida 2008, 4) and redefines what deconstruction is.

Something analogous goes for the relationship between deconstruction as theory and method and its particular applications. Deconstruction as theory/method is not left intact by its application to a particular case or issue. Rather, the application rearticulates the theory/method, among other things because it helps us see limitations in the theory or method and develop new theoretical and methodological insights. Nor is the case left intact, because the deconstructive analysis of it shows the undecidabilities and aporias in the discourses under analysis.

These conclusions can be generalised to apply to any instance of the application/articulation of a theory or method, whether the theory or method recognises this or not. With its problematisation of method and conceptual tools such as iterability, deconstruction is well placed to address this issue of application/articulation. This is no less so when dealing with the application/articulation of an abstract theoretical vocabulary such as that of Derrida which only accentuates the problem of the mutual articulation of theory/method and concrete uses. Deconstruction *as* method incorporates the deconstruction *of* method, and the task is to continue doing so while also putting deconstruction to use and, in this way, develop deconstruction as a method for political analysis. As Derrida (1988, 141) writes: "Deconstruction does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts; it 'is' only what it does and what is done with it."

NOTES

1 I first presented some of the ideas in this article at the Institut für Politikwissenschaft at the University of Vienna, 28–29 June 2007. I would like to thank Karin Bischof, Julia Mourão Permoser and the anonymous referee for the Journal for their comments on an earlier version.

2 In the following I do not distinguish between theory and method, but use these terms interchangeably. This is not to deny the difference between the two, but my interest is in the relationship between theory/method and their particular applications, and in both cases I will argue that this relationship is one of mutual articulation.

3 This is what Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 105) mean by articulation: "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice."

4 This point can also be made in terms of the example, which articulates, but is not simply subsumed to, the universal rule (see the introduction to Derrida 1992).

REFERENCES

*Bennington*, Geoffrey (1994). Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction, London.

*Borradori*, Giovanna (2003). Philosophy In A Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Chicago.

*Butler*, Judith (1997). Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, New York.

*Cheah*, Pheng/Suzanne *Guerlac* (eds.) (2009). Derrida and the Time of the Political, Durham, NC.

*Derrida*, Jacques (1986). Declarations of Independence, trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, in: New Political Science, Vol. 7(1), 7–15.

*Derrida*, Jacques (1988). Limited Inc, Evanston.

*Derrida*, Jacques (1990). Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority", trans. Mary Quaintance, in: Cardozo Law Review, Vol. 11(5–6), 921–1045.

*Derrida*, Jacques (1992). The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, Bloomington.

*Derrida*, Jacques (1994). Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York.
*Derrida*, Jacques (1996). "*As if* I were Dead": An Interview with Jacques Derrida, in: John *Brannigan*/Ruth *Robbins*/Julian *Wolfreys* (eds.): Applying: To Derrida, Basingstoke, 212–26.
*Derrida*, Jacques (1997). Of Grammatology, 2nd ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore.
*Derrida*, Jacques (2002). Positions, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Bass, London.
*Derrida*, Jacques (2003). Autoimmunity, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in: Giovanna *Borradori* (ed.): Philosophy In A Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Chicago, 85–136.
*Derrida*, Jacques (2005). Rogues: Two Essays on Reason, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford.
*Derrida*, Jacques (2008). Letter to a Japanese Friend, in: Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume II, ed. by Peggy *Kamuf* and Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford, 1–6.
*Gasché*, Rodolphe (1986). The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection, Cambridge, MA.
*Laclau*, Ernesto/Chantal *Mouffe* (1985). Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, London.
*Marsh*, David/Gerry *Stoker* (eds.) (2002). Theory and Methods in Political Science, 2nd ed., Basingstoke.
*Norval*, Aletta (1996). Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse, London.
*Rorty*, Richard (1995). Deconstruction, in: Raman *Selden* (ed.): The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume 8: From Formalism to Poststructuralism, Cambridge, 166–96.
*Wittgenstein*, Ludwig (1958). Philosophical Investigations, 2nd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford.

AUTHOR

Lasse THOMASSEN, Senior Lecturer in Political Theory in the Department of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London and García Pelayo Fellow at Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid. At present he is working on a research project on "deconstructing tolerance discourse".

Contact address: Centro de Estudios Politicos y Constitucionales, Plaza de la Marina Española 9, 28071 Madrid, Spain.

E-Mail: lathomassen@cepc.es