How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?

Within the discourse on development, there has been a fundamental intransigence of neo-liberal principles and attitudes to development. At the heart of this discourse, is a fundamental judgement about the 'truth' of human nature. Humans are innately stable, pre-determined entities that generally behave as autonomous, egoistic, utility maximisers. Thus with this ontological question answered the building of structures, be they financial or ones of governance, should be based upon allowing the subject to flourish within this system. At the heart of this is the emphasis of '*le Politique'*, the smooth economic running of things, over '*la Politique*', the more philosophical debate about how we consider the ontological make-up of people, and if we can even do this<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[1]<!–[endif]–>.

Thus we have a situation where the 'big questions' are a mere frivolity, something to be consigned to university philosophy departments, and that do not form part of the *proper* conversation about 'who gets what' and 'who is listened to'. The main aim of this essay is to unsettle the basis of these assumptions, and see if it is better to re-think the 'scientific' discourse of neo-liberalism in a different manner. The essay will begin with an analysis of what neo-liberalism claims about the subject, and then a focus on the work of Jacques Derrida, explaining how his philosophy can be used to destabilise and question the assumptions made by the neo-liberal discourse and allow us to re-think development discourses.

First, this essay will examine what we mean by the neo-liberal subject. The principles of rationality and egoism of course date back a long time, mostly as part of the thinking that emerged with the classical liberal period, notably the 18th to 19th Century. Adam Smith and other classic economists produced statements about how economic rationality functions. Smith was one of the first thinkers to tie in the notion of how the pursuit of self-interest, in the right institutional environment can produce social good<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[2]<!–[endif]–>. Smith saw 'the invisible hand'<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[3]<!–[endif]–> of the economy at work here. Through functioning in this system with institutions that regulate the space of activity, the self-interested individual can function harmoniously with others. It is important here to unpack the attributes that Smith would talk about here. David Williams<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[4]<!–[endif]–> identifies three concepts that underpin this individual: *autonomy, reflexivity and calculation*. *Autonomy* refers to the economically rational individual, and this rationality strips away the cultural and social ties to leave the individual alone and autonomous to be self-sufficient. *Reflexivity* and *Calculation* refer to the ability of individuals to "monitor their preferences and to calculate the best course for satisfying them within the constraints of limited resources"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[5]<!–[endif]–>. This here is the most vital element of the discussion. This subject is not simply one form of different subjectivity that appears in different contexts, but a universalism. People everywhere in any context are inherently this subject. It does not matter if someone is from London or Lahore: fundamentally we are all the same<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[6]<!–[endif]–>. If we take this subject as being the truth of humanity, then it is reasonable to assume that in this context of the autonomous, reflective and calculating individual, the best place for him to exist is within the market place. If we make these assumptions about what people are on the ontological level, that is, on the status of their being, then logically it follows that when creating spaces or systems for them to function in we should allow this 'true' being to flourish. As shown by Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market, the aggregation of self-interested beings maximising their utility. The de-centralised status of the market is logically the only place for this being to properly function.

How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?

Written by Paul McGee

Thus if systems are not built in the context of this subject we risk distorting the inherent dynamism of 'free-trade'. The radical aspect of free capital is that within the context of the above elucidated subject, we have the possibility for government to act fully within the 'national interest'<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[7]<!–[endif]–>. While of course the neo-liberal would reject the notion of a concrete, collective interest, the notion of this aggregation of self-interests allows us build policies in order to meet this demand. By meeting this demand properly, efficiency is properly rewarded, and less efficient and more costly means are pushed by the wayside<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[8]<!–[endif]–>. State intervention inherently cannot succeed in this fast paced, individual led environment of supply and demand. Social welfarism thus moves beyond the functional scope of the state, as it cannot inherently assume what the individual truly desires, unlike the marketplace that instinctively moulds and regenerates with regard to the self-assured human agency<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[9]<!–[endif]–>. Markets "appear to provide the insulated arena of freedom and equality that which politics cannot be permitted to emulate"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[10]<!–[endif]–>. For this point of view, political systems are *a priori* unable to successfully distribute goods, as they lack the dynamic neutrality of the marketplace. Political systems of course are not based on neutral systems. What do I mean by this statement? Fundamentally, at this point we need to examine how the neo-liberal subject acts within the model of Rational Choice.

Rational Choice Theory is based on the same model of the self-interested subject that occurs within neo-liberalism. The subject is innately endowed with these attributes and members of political institutions, notably the bureaucrat, despite claiming to be working for the 'greater good' are in fact only following their own self-interest<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[11]<!–[endif]–>. All human behaviour thus can be reduced down to this paradigm of self-interest. Political systems where the state has a monopoly over a public service, for instance a nationalised energy industry, do not function for the public good, but are based within a context of egoistic managers running inefficient systems for their own personal gain, protected from the dynamic marketplace.

Thus for a truly efficient system of governance we should aim to maximise the ability for the subject to maximise his own autonomous interests. Within development discourse, claims were made that "persons were indeed economically rational, but conditions were such that this was only 'latent' or misdirected"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[12]<!–[endif]–>. Thus within development, the key is to 'unlock' this potential, to break out of inefficient systems that contravene the greater interest in favour of a select few at the top. Thus we see within the development discourse not only is development based on economic reform, but on changing the entire system in such a fashion that would allow this subject to be unleashed to create 'the harmonious society'.

At this point, we need to ask, what does this mean? Quite simply, if we go along with neo-liberalism's ontological assumption, we move from *la Politique* to *le Politique*, from the philosophical study of how we think about how people are, and fundamentally who we listen to and who we do not, to the smooth running of economic systems. Thus the primary concern for governments and international institutions is not the big picture of who gets what and who is listened to, but the micro-level, management of these secure beings and how it is best to allow these people to fulfil their potential. This principle is at the heart of the poverty reduction discourse, manifesting itself within micro-credit and so called 'good-governance' initiatives. Notably these schemes function under the rubric of neo-liberalism, or in the words of Heloise Webber, "[these schemes] may need to be managed through disciplinary neo-liberalism"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[13]<!–[endif]–>. The point being made here is that this trans-national development discourse indicatively seems be under the spell of problem solving, economical, '*le Politique*'. As we now have these ontologically secure beings that populate the entire planet, we can now leave the metaphysical 'frivolous' debate about the ontology of the subject behind, for the answer is here and it is clear.

The consequence of this decision is pretty clear. The non-ideological basis avoids the real questions of how we distribute goods and services, and who the voices are that we listen to. To use a rather vulgar turn of phrase, "it's the economy stupid!" The distribution of goods thus comes down to how well one can open up the market to the harmonious pandemonium of different activities that via the 'invisible hand' create that social good that Adam Smith talked about earlier. At this point it is prescient to unsettle this rather elegant economic theory, and ask what *really* is going on here. Maybe this 'non-ideological', scientific, rational theory that has been presented is in fact based on a real, political relationship of force. That this rational, *homo oeconomicus* is in fact a metaphysical creation that allows those creating systems to marginalise and avoid the real political questions. This is of course the irony of the position made by neo-liberals, that the non-political aspect of their work is the political move *par excellence*; the real and

How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

prescient '*la Politique*' is pushed out of the debate in favour of '*le Politique*'.

Now we enter the second part of this essay, by examining the work of Jacques Derrida. First it is important to clarify why this move has been made. Richard Devetak's critical assault on neo-realist conceptions of International Relations mirrors in many respects the argument made here. When he makes the claim that "an understanding of how the 'inside' is constituted must begin with the 'outside'"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[14]<!–[endif]–>, it is impressed upon us that a critical analysis on what makes a system (the inside) is dependent on what it excludes (the outside). This of course is the thing that neo-liberalism would inherently defy, as we are *all* radically the same then there is no exclusion, everyone innately is able to function within the system of the marketplace. Those who are left out of the equation are those in the wrong socio-economic architecture, or who have not been educated in the rules of the game.

The power of Derrida's work here is to show us that the assertion of the neo-liberal subject as natural, it is the inverse, something unnatural. It allows us to clear out the ontology created by neo-liberal discourse, and invert the principle that the subject occurs before the system. Before we fully flesh out this claim, it is important to briefly examine the theories of Derrida.

The focus of Derrida's theory is on the notion of the binary opposite. Put simply:

> "*This structure of the* double mark *(caught – both seized and entangled – in a binary opposition, one of the terms retains its old name so as to destroy the opposition to which it no longer quite belongs, to which* any *event it has* never *quite yielded the history of this opposition being one of incessant struggles generative of hierarchical configurations) works at the entire field within which these texts move.*"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>**[15]**<!–[endif]–>

Language, or text, for Derrida is based on these oppositions. Light/dark, presence/absence, good/evil, for example, are all configurations of this functionality of language. The first term, for instance 'presence', is intuitively assumed to be the originary, foundational term. This thing is *in-itself*, the thing that is prior to the other, the opposite is simply a negation of that prior present entity. Absence thus is a sort of parasitic 'addition' after the origin of the previous term that finds its presence by its very negation of the previous term. The move Derrida makes, shown above, is to invert and problematise this distinction. Language is *a priori* a *system* of difference, to think of terms outside of context would be to eliminate any sense of meaning. Jonathon Culler's example of the paradox of Zeno's arrow is useful here. If we view the movement of the arrow through the air and simply look at each 'moment' in its singularity, then in accounting for the motion is impossible. "We want to insist, quite justifiably, that the arrow *is* in motion at every moment from the beginning to the end of its flight, yet its motion is never present at any moment of presence"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[16]<!–[endif]–>. Terms themselves do not exist *a priori*, but the system itself generates the 'motion' or meaning of the term. "The presence of motion is conceivable, it turns out, only insofar that every instant is marked with the traces of the past and future. Motion can be present… but [as] a product of the relations between past and future"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[17]<!–[endif]–>.

As we can see, things are not present; the term 'presence' is not this stable rock of a category, but something that floats around on the system of signification. Another way of putting this is that terms are continually differentiated from one another. Something can only *be* because of its opposition to another, to put in primitive terms; the first grunt to demarcate 'food' creates the system of language based on the grunt and the non-grunt<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[18]<!–[endif]–>. The grunt does not give presence to the concept of food, but instead create a system that would give the opposition between food and non-food. Inherently the problem occurs that no system can truly have a point of foundation, origin. There is no singularity that breeds meaning, but the system *retroactively* gives a sense of this meaning.

But what precludes this system in a hierarchical structure, as Derrida points out above? Derrida claims, "These oppositions have never constituted a *given* system… but rather a dissymmetric, hierarchically ordered space whose closure is constantly being traversed by the forces, and worked by the exteriority, that it represses"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[19]<!–[endif]–>. The last part of the sentence here is vital; the 'prior' term represses its supplement, light claims full presence over its absence, darkness for example. To finish the previous quotation, "…

How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

that is, expels and, which amounts to the same, internalises as one of its moments"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[20]<!–[endif]–>. Deconstruction, the Derridian strategy of reading, thus wishes to invert this hierarchy and to destabilise this violent sub-ordination. At the heart of this is *Différance*, "the movement that replaces presence"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[21]<!–[endif]–>. Différance, a neologism of the French verb *Différer* that means to differ and to defer, conjoined with –ance used to create verbal nouns<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[22]<!–[endif]–>, describes this status of words, never fully present as things in themselves, but the product of this movement, the sliding or play differences that elements relate to one another<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[23]<!–[endif]–>. It is precisely this movement that creates a 'void' of ontology. This is a bold statement and thus requires a certain level of un-packing before we can confidently use it to challenge the neo-liberal rational subject.

Fundamental to this notion of Différance is that things cannot be things *in themselves*, to gain knowledge of something, inherently we have to function with this system of one thing referring to another, disavowing any sense of solidity or presence. If we take this right down to the ontological level, any assumption that the being is something is based on a notion of presence, that using Derrida's diagnosis we can deconstruct. Thus in regards to neo-liberal rationality, the subject cannot *be* rational and just that. For even the term 'rational' to exist, it must refer to something else, in this case its binary opposition, 'irrational'. Thus we have this deconstructable position, the subject cannot *be*, in the singularity, the a-temporal fixed notion, rational. The subject is thus inherently deferred and differentiated. The full sense or meaning of this term can never come into full presence because "the irreducible non-originary origin that differentiates meanings is always deferred because of the erasure that is implicit in iterability"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[24]<!–[endif]–>. Fundamentally here, we can observe that there is no fixture to meaning, no position that allows meaning to be coherent as a thing in itself. Différance thus occupies this strange place as an undeconstructable condition of all deconstruction<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[25]<!–[endif]–>.

Inherently, if we can engender any sort of conclusion out of this, is that politics is inherently *undecidable*. Concepts, positions, assumptions, *ontological 'truths'*, all shift around on the surface of this sea, never becoming fully present, fixed or inevitable. A political *modus operandi* based upon fixed ideas is thus something that can be deconstructed. As soon as we try to probe rationality, self-interest, egoism we find nothing but this Différance that defers and differentiates these 'stable principles'.

At this point it is useful to allude to Derrida's notion that binary oppositions are not simply two things in a symmetrical relationship, but part of a 'violent' hierarchy. Good and Evil are not two separate, equally privileged terms, but one in a violent suppression of the other. Jenny Edkins makes this clear when she claims, "The value of 'presence' is embedded in our thinking"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[26]<!–[endif]–>. Thus in taking a position, to make a claim about the presence of something, we must suppress its opposition, that ironically is the thing that is required and denies its presence. For example, one can only be 'rational', insofar that the term is differentiated by 'irrationality', and in this relationship, 'rationality' suppresses and maligns 'irrationality'. To be rational, one has to disavow inherently the possibility of 'irrationality', but paradoxically 'rationality' only re-presents itself via this hierarchical relationship. Thus the ontological security that neo-liberalism claims, that the assumptions that constitute the subject inherently are present, is deconstructable. We thus have to take this to the logical point, that the ontological level is inherently undecidable. We cannot have a stable notion of the subject, if Différance structures language. The subject is both discursive produced by linguistic oppositions, suppressing other terms in order to gain 'presence' and by radical un-decidability. The subject, like language, is differed and differentiated it is never present. Thus making an assumption about what the subject is, the task undertaken by neo-liberalism, is fundamentally a violent, hierarchical endeavour. Instead of 'unlocking the ontological truth of the subject', neo-liberalism in theoretical terms, maligns and suppresses other positions that may or may not constitute the ontology of the subject.

At this point, we can now make our diagnosis of neo-liberalism. We can now re-conceive of the subject not as something prior to the structure he or she inhabits, actively structuring it by his or her agency, but the inverse. The subject is retroactively moulded or *disciplined* by the structure. The ontological consistency of the subject is not a present thing that is solidly there, but something that is presented from suppression and promotion of certain external characteristics, themselves undecidable, to produce this subject. In reference to the dichotomy elucidated to above, through this destabilising of the ontological 'certainty' that lay behind neo-liberal discourse and '*le Politique*' that lays behind it, we radically offer the chance to re-habilitate '*la Politique*' and now fully question what is claimed within neo-

How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

liberalism.

Can we see this issue appearing in the discourse of neo-liberal global governance? The usefulness of Derrida's argument allows us to unpack some of the phenomena that have appeared within this discourse. Notably I want to analyse the movement towards the increasing 'micro-isation', the increasing depth of reach of neo-liberal global governance, evident in the movement from Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) to good governance initiatives and 'microcredit' schemes. Behind the 'non-ideological' economical façade lies a violent discourse that marginalises and excludes. Here we can connect with David William's in his work on disciplining within global aid architecture. His assertion is that despite the 'naturalness' of the economy, economic rationalism has to be constructed "all the way down"<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[27]<!–[endif]–>. Heloise Webber makes a similar assertion, that instead of microcredit schemes allowing a rational economic being to be 'unleashed', it is part of a disciplining mechanism<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[28]<!–[endif]–>. Without analysing the specifics of each argument, it is pretty evident that the move towards increasing vertical penetration into societies via microcredit and good governance schemes show that the neo-liberal ontology has to be forced out more and more. What the discourse fundamentally ignores is that this ontology is simply *not there*, there is no innate quality to all humans that allows these structures to function harmoniously.

Behind these knowledge claims made by neo-liberal discourse, we experience a level of concealment. Anthony Giddens in the 'Third Way' makes a claim about a 'world without enemies'<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[29]<!–[endif]–>. This claims inherently that there is one, natural way of doing things, and that antagonism, or the suppression of the other does not exist. The other of the 'advance of the global marketplace' inherently is a project without an other; it is a stable 'present' entity that *a priori* does not rest on a system of antagonism and opposition. Derrida's work allows us to transcend this and see what inherently this system manufactures. It is a function of marginalising other ways of doing things, other systems of economic and social organisation and the possibilities that may ensue from them. By making the jump purely into economical functioning of systems based on secure ontological assumptions, one performs the act of silencing and suppressing the other*La Politique* is still as real and prescient here, not a 'frivolity', and claims that it is such a thing conceal an antagonistic relationship based on force and silencing.

The forcefulness and marginalisation of increasing penetration of neo-liberal discourse into global life has to be viewed in this context. The claim that it simply allows the 'truth' residing in all people to emerge is a deconstructable position. On the contrary, mirroring the work of Webber and Williams, we should view this as a disciplinary function, the active formation of a particular, western subjectivity at the expense of the subjectivity of the other. Not only does neo-liberalism claim that the ontological consistency of the subject is based on the presence of a number of concepts, rationality, egoism and self-reliance, but the opposites of these that provide their presence are concealed, much in the same way that oppositions to neo-liberal discourse are concealed. By affirming a problem-solving,*le Politique* position, alternatives emanating from a different consideration of humanity. Webber makes the relevant point that the fundamentals that lay behind the Washington Consensus and the Post-Washington Consensus are the same. While on the one hand, the World Bank called for 'development with a human face'<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[30]<!–[endif]–>, the fundamental objective assumptions behind this discourse are fundamentally the same. The movement now instead of reconstituting development as a more equitable and listening discourse, simply includes a more disciplinary current. The movement thus seems to want to push this ontology out more and more. The problem inherent here though is that *the ontology is a product of a discursive fiction* (RE-ORDER THIS WITH ZIZEK REFERENCE), and that the institutions intransigence to neo-liberalism means that the core problem of dominance in development relationships cannot be resolved. Fundamentally if global financial institutions want a more *just* system in development, acceptance not only of the radical *undecidability* of human nature but to allow the platform of different ideas about development, and instead of disciplining persons within structures that may or may not run contrary to local systems of collectivity and personal senses of subjectivity. Fundamentally we need to re-politicize this situation, to try and move beyond the concealing notion that we are all the same, and embrace the radical difference that inhabits humanity. As we have shown the idea of a *homo oeconomicus* is not only a fiction, but also part of a wider system of power and marginalisation. If this is evident, they why should we structure governance in such a fashion?

How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

This essay has examined the assumptions of a present ontology of the subject, based on rationality, egoism and self-reliance, made by neo-liberal discourse. Through the analysis of the work of Jacques Derrida, with the work on *Différance* and deconstruction, the essay has been able to unpack and destabilise many of the ontological 'truths' asserted by neo-liberal discourse. Fundamentally, the presence and security of the concepts are not only a fiction, but also based on a relationship of force, a violent suppression of the other. Using this analogy, the essay has shown that within development discourse, the movement from macro-economic re-structuring to more micro-economic and governance restructuring conceals the suppression of difference and pluralism. The 'true' discourse of neo-liberalism in this context by-passes *la Politique*, the philosophical and political debate about who gets what and who is listened to, and does straight to the economical functionalism of *le Politique*. The essay has shown that within this movement, other systems of development from different sources are maligned and actively suppressed by the dominant source that emanates from a single particularity. If development discourse, within the context of this critique, wishes to be the 'development with a human face' it is required to open-up, be more receptive to local particularities and embrace 'the other'.

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How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

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How can the Theories of Derrida Unbalance the Stable Subject Assumed by Neo-Liberalism?
Written by Paul McGee

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