

# Editorial:

## Deconstructing Deconstruction

By M. Ali Lakhani

'...are many things more futile than trying to use the mind to limit the mind?'

(Huston Smith: *Beyond the Postmodern Mind*)

'...some people have come ultimately to abolish the very idea of truth, for the truth can only be conceived of as the end to be reached, and these people want no end to their research.'

(René Guénon: *Orient et Occident*)

**P**ostmodern philosophy introduced to critical thought the grammatical tool of deconstruction as a way to penetrate and critically examine complex structures of textual meaning. If the Enlightenment project of modernism and the premodern thought that preceded it had led to enclosing the human mind and its societies in intellectual and social structures, the postmodernist project aimed to deconstruct them. By perceiving every context as a text (as Jacques Derrida, famously announced, '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*', or 'there is no external text' or, as it is sometimes rendered 'there is nothing beyond the text', a phrase which has been interpreted perhaps more broadly than he had intended), all structures, intellectual and societal, among others, were subject to its scalpel. Because it perceived those structures to be endlessly reducible, deconstruction was conceived to be a never-ending process of unraveling. As a tool, its scope was, on its face, limitless. When applied to the architectures of society and culture, it yielded a potent critique of authority, hierarchy and power. Among its many influences, it threw light on how sclerotic modes of thought and fixed institutional constructs operated to condition various elements of societies. It also exposed ways in which distorted perceptions of alterity engendered false stereotypes and arbitrary categorizations, and thereby advantaged institutionalized power in ways that rationalized the subjugation of others. This exposure resulted in a greater awareness of forms of thought

and structures of power, and contributed to various reforms to redress political, social, cultural, economic, and religious modes of oppression and inequity. In diverse ways, deconstruction has been employed as a tool to enhance societal freedoms and social equality, creating an appreciation of plurality and of the necessity for more open spaces to accommodate its diverse expressions.

But deconstructing the world has also resulted in a myriad of excesses ranging from an unhealthy obsession with repressive political correctness and identity politics to an anti-metaphysical disdain for both faith and authority. It has led to both cognitive and moral relativism, to a degradation of forms, and also to a levelling-out of hierarchic orders in the pursuit of equality, promoting, in effect, a hyper-equality or an exaggerated egalitarianism that curtails freedom and qualitative hierarchy. When employed without regard to grounding spiritual principles (themselves, according to grammatological surgeons, to be deconstructed), deconstruction can become a never-ending process of dismantling leading to nihilism. In this sense, it is radically anarchic and can risk undermining the very fabric of societal and metaphysical cohesion. By denying logic its ontological foundations, it possesses an overreaching tendency which presumes to deconstruct the very ground of its being, to lop off the branch that supports it, to absurdly stand on no ground but itself, as though deconstruction were an end in itself.

Despite assertions to the contrary by those who view it as being beyond definition or analysis, deconstruction can be viewed as, simply stated, a tool to critically examine language and structures by locating and penetrating their points of instability and differentiation (what Derrida terms ‘différance’, a term which, in typical postmodernist fashion, he says ‘can refer to a whole complex of its meanings at once, for it is immediately and irreducibly multivalent’<sup>1</sup>). Derrida has cautioned that deconstruction is not a method, theory, or operation, lest, in itself, it become a defining (structure-imposing) approach. If deconstruction can itself be deconstructed – although some postmodern theoreticians would deny even this possibility, thereby ironically absolutizing it – it should, as with any tool, be found to be value-neutral and to have no necessary adherence to principles. However, it possesses anti-normative tendencies, which derive from an inbuilt destabilizing feature, what

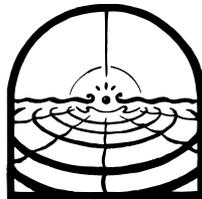
<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. D.Allison, p. 136.

we might call its inherently anarchic metaphysical skepticism. Granted that penetrating texts and structures to open them up to new spaces, vantages and meanings can, in a certain sense, be regarded as a metaphysical exercise, yet it is the postmodernist disdain for metaphysical foundations themselves, which it dismisses as 'logocentric' constructs or 'meta-narratives', and its denial of the possibility of any stable or ultimate foundation of meaning, that determines the anti-metaphysical nature of deconstruction. Derrida points out that all language is inherently metaphysical because signifiers point beyond themselves and that all truth is, at best, provisional. In this, he can be seen to be in a certain sense in line with an aspect of traditional metaphysics illustrated, for instance, in the Buddhist analogy of 'the finger pointing at the moon' or the metaphysical analogies of cosmic sheaths or veils that are onion-like layers covering over truth. An important distinction, however, is that traditional metaphysics is rooted in spiritual and intellectual foundations that postmodernists reject. For traditional teachers, meaning is foreclosed without the possibility of a symbolic and archetypal foundation in spiritual substance, a dilemma that postmodernism, which rejects the reality of spiritual substance, fails to overcome. By de-mythologizing the world, postmodernists also de-spiritualize it.

Derrida has maintained that deconstruction does not renounce truth as a value, yet its radical reduction of truth to, at best, liminality and its skepticism of the humility of grace, betrays a fundamentally destructive and nihilistic tendency. This can be noted in its relentless quest for and continual dismantling of meaning which, on its own terms, is ultimately unattainable and seen to be merely provisional. As an approach to truth and meaning, it is constantly seeking to destabilize without affirming. As René Guénon has observed in a different context<sup>2</sup>, 'While the rest of mankind seeks for the sake of finding and knowing, the Westerner of today seeks for the sake of seeking; the Gospel sentence, *Quaerite et invenietis* ("Seek and ye shall find"), is for him a dead letter, in the full force of this expression, since he calls "death" anything and everything that constitutes a definite finality, just as he gives the name "life" to what is no more than fruitless agitation.' In its failure to distinguish between the healthy dogma which apprehends the all-encompassing ground of

<sup>2</sup> René Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, p. 78, quoted by Whitall N. Perry in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Perennial Books, 1981), p.732.

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