

BOOK REVIEWS

The Beast and the Sovereign volume 1

by Jacques Derrida (2009)

Reviewed by Matt Applegate¹

Volume one of *The Beast and the Sovereign* offers the first of two seminars given by Jacques Derrida from 2001-2003 on the relation between animality and sovereignty. As such, it also offers insight into Derrida's intellectual trajectory and body of published work: *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, *The Work of Mourning*, *Acts of Religion*, and *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* are just some of the works published during the period in which the lectures were given. Derrida also refers back to *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, published in 2004, where he performs an interrogation of sovereignty in an inverse fashion to that featured in lectures, briefly focusing on the relation of the werewolf to the outlaw, of the animal to the *voyou* in its communal and political formation, what he terms the *voyoucracy* (69). Arguably, however, *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures are not merely supplementary materials to the published works or minor inquiries within Derrida's corpus into sovereign formation. Rather, arguments posed in volume one of *The Beast and the Sovereign* can be located at the heart of dominant themes in Derrida's later work including, but not limited to, a democracy to come, conditional and unconditional hospitality, calculability and incalculability, and the relation shared between state sovereignty, terrorism, and rogue states. Moreover, *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures complicate these themes as Derrida locates the relation between animality and sovereignty as central to a deconstruction of the nation-state and central to a

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deconstruction of the logic by which it persists. In the third session of the lectures, Derrida states this intention explicitly:

What I am seeking, elsewhere but in particular in this seminar, is a prudent deconstruction . . . of the dominant, classical concept of nation-state sovereignty (which is Schmitt's reference), without ending up with a depoliticization, a neutralization of the political (*Entpolitisierung*), but with another politicization, a repoliticization that does not fall in the same ruts of 'dishonest fiction'—while what an 'honest fiction' can be, and on which concept of fiction one is relying, remains to be found out. (75)

Derrida would echo and reformulate this sentiment three years later in *Rogues*, citing the process of deconstruction to be simultaneously the recreation of rationality, of its conditions of possibility, and thus the methods by which it would operate:

Can we not and must we not distinguish, even when this appears impossible, between, on the one hand, the compulsion or aut positioning of sovereignty . . . and, on the other hand, this postulation of unconditionality, which can be found in the critical exigency as well as the (forgive the expression) deconstructive exigency of reason? In the name of reason? For deconstruction, if something of the sort exists, would remain above all, in my view, an unconditional rationalism that never renounces . . . the possibility of suspending in an argued, deliberated, rational fashion, all conditions, hypotheses, conventions, and presuppositions, and of criticizing unconditionally all conditionalities, including those that still found the critical idea, namely, those of the *krinein*, of the *krisis*, of the binary or dialectical decision or judgment. (142).

It is then clear that Derrida's inquiry into the relation of sovereignty and animality is a radical philosophical inquiry positioned against and beyond state sovereignty. It is also clear that Derrida characterizes the *logos* and nation-state sovereignty to be intertwined, material constructs, contingent, and thus deconstructable. But in what ways does a consideration of the animal inform processes of deconstruction? How is a consideration of the animal central to a deconstruction of the *logos* as reason and to the sovereignty of the state?

While Derrida covers much in the thirteen sessions comprising the first seminar, two sections in particular address the problems and questions established above. In session two, Derrida announces the importance of a political dissymmetry expressed in the phrase “the sovereign *like a God, like a beast*” (57). On Derrida’s view, the formation of sovereign power and the methods by which it operates have historically been assumed to be both ‘proper to man’ and positioned in-between two figures: God, a figure of absolute sovereignty above the law, and the beast or the animal, a figure below the law, without recourse to sovereign power or right. The relation between the beast and the sovereign thus rests on the operation of sovereign power as a relation of force. And it is from this sovereign formation, the sovereign *like a God*, the sovereign *like a beast*, that the relation between sovereignty and reason, between arguments posed in *The Beast and the Sovereign* and, later, in *Rogues*, become enmeshed. In this eighth seminar, Derrida writes:

The word “reason,” *on the one hand*, the reason given, alleged presumed by the stronger, whether or not he be right [*avoir raison*], whether or not this reason be rational or not . . . and “reason,” *on the other hand*, can name the right that he has [*la raison qu’il a*], the good and just reason he has to exercise his force and make it predominate, his greater and higher power, his sovereign power, his all-power, his superlative power, his sovereignty. Whence the third means or third implication of the idiomatic use the word “reason,” namely that the sovereign . . . acts as if he had reason to judge and legitimate the reason he gives because he is the strongest . . . (208).

Here, we are witness to the ongoing coproduction of rationality and sovereign power, to the coproduction of the law and to the material conditions of possibility for rationality itself. However, within Derrida’s schema, the coproduction of the law and of rationality concomitantly produces sovereignty as both the reason of the stronger and an irrational and ambiguous figure. One is unable to discern between the sovereign beyond the law as God, as the individual with the right not to respond to the law, to suspend the law, and to stand beyond the law in silence, or as the beast, the form of life that the law does not recognize, is not allowed to accept, and thus forcefully positioned outside of it in silence.

The work of sovereign power is at once twofold. On the one hand, Derrida provides a description of the ways in which sovereign power understood as the reason of the stronger operates. On the other hand, Derrida provides a description of the formation of sovereign power as the reason of the stronger that reveals the beast or the animal to constitutive of it, and thus internal to it. Here, we are reminded of the figure of the Other in *The Other Heading*, the figure of the enemy in *Politics of Friendship*, or the figure of the foreigner in *Of Hospitality*. It is accordingly the function of sovereign power, its actual operation, that provides the conditions for its deconstruction and, as Derrida will argue, provides the conditions for the deconstruction of what is thought to be ‘proper to man.’ Thus, the animal emerges in the seminar as something more than a trope or a figure against which sovereign power is established.

As the lectures move toward their conclusion, an interrogation of the material existence of sovereign power and its philosophical construction with and against God and the animal, calls what is ‘proper to man’ into question. The twelfth seminar, largely dedicated to a critique of Giorgio Agamben’s formulation of *bios* and *zoe* in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, lays the groundwork for a deconstruction of ‘what is proper to man,’ a deconstruction of sovereign power as the reason of the stronger, and thus the logic by which it persists, in and through a critique of Martin Heidegger. On Derrida’s account, Heidegger’s task in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* is to “rethink in an original way the relation between *logos* and *physis*,” between what we can roughly call reason and nature and one’s ethical obligation to nature (317). Further, this project leads Heidegger to question how “*logos*, as reason and understanding, [came] to reign . . . over Being at the beginning of Greek philosophy” (318). These tasks operate in and through a double movement that, on the one hand, attempt to liberate Being from the violently imposed sovereignty of *logos* as reason, but, on the other hand, establish a line of demarcation between the human and the animal that reserves ethics for the human as the human is distinguished from the animal absolutely. Here, Derrida identifies two projects in Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* that provide the basis for his critique.

1. *First stage*. Heidegger wants first of all to show that the determination of man as a *rational animal* is insufficiently humanist, as it were, that is misses the

humanity of man, what is proper to man. And what thus misses the essence of man is metaphysics. 2. *Second stage*. Heidegger denounces the biologism, the biologicistic reduction of this definition of man. And that means that the metaphysics of classical humanism, the metaphysics that is not humanistic enough, is deep down, the ally of, accomplice of biologism and zoologism. (322)

It is thus, for Derrida, the relation of biologism and zoologism, *bios* and *zoe*, that prefigures the relation shared between sovereignty and reason.

It is precisely in the relation of biologism and zoologism, what others have termed bio-power, that, following Heidegger, works to establish 'what is proper to man,' that attempts to liberate the 'humanity of man' from its relation to the irrational, the inhuman, the unclean, the animal, and return it to its pure Being. However, the intervention that much of the lectures works toward is precisely that in the relation of biologism and zoologism another politicization, a repoliticization against the nation-state, against 'what is proper to man,' against sovereignty as the reason of the stronger, can be fomented. And it is through the relation of biologism and zoologism in favor of politicization against and beyond the state that the question of the animal is established as central to processes of deconstruction. *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures thus provide a fertile complex of philosophical and political relations that works to position the question of the animal centrally within philosophical discourse itself and necessitates a consideration of the animal within radical or anti-statist philosophical and political projects. Finally, *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures complicate both the formation and operation of bio-power and bio-politics, illustrating that a consideration of biologism and zoologism without concomitantly thinking the relation of animality and sovereignty lacks a critical insight into the operation of bio-power and into possible positive projects for bio-politics. In this way, Derrida positions his later philosophical work in conversation with Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Antonio Negri while laying a clear path of inquiry for the second seminar.