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## Chapter six

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### Conversation

[pp. 108-125]

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[108] Neither the turn to lay explanation which was filtered through rationalist American social psychology, nor the attempt to raid sociology made by European social psychologists in order to develop an account of social representations, has succeeded in resolving the problems thrown up by the paradigm crisis. However, some sort of interdisciplinary work has to be generated to provide an alternative to the easy option of remaining fixed in the old terms of the debate. This chapter is concerned with the nearest social psychology has got to taking seriously the developments in post-structuralism. Some writers in the ethnomethodological strand of sociological social psychology (microsociology) have started to take advantage of the similarities between their own writings and those around deconstruction, mainly in literary theory. Ethnomethodology has been drawn on by new social psychologists, and recently has served as an important resource to those concerned with discourse theory (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

### Readings

Two purposes can be served by looking at the recent readings of deconstruction in microsociology. The first is that we can draw some lessons about the uses we can make of deconstruction. We will see once again how tempting it is to absorb a different system of thought into existing categories. Descriptions of ideology and conflict are excluded in the process of translating Derrida's work into the microsociological discourse. The second purpose is that it emphasizes the importance of drawing on *other* writings in post-structuralism and informing our reading of Derrida with the [109] historical perspective given by Foucault (1977, 1981) on power and resistance. We will then be in a position to understand the dangers of appealing uncritically to the notion of 'conversation', and taking the 'self' as given.

### *Conversation*

Conversation is becoming more popular in the human sciences, and many unwitting participants are being roped in. Both Hegel and Wittgenstein, we are told, shared the view that the activity of philosophy was that of a conversation (Lamb 1979). Heidegger and Dewey are brought together to support the programme for a 'post-philosophy' which would continue the conversation (Rorty 1982). Even behaviourists have jumped on the bandwagon and suggested that Skinner could join in (Lamal 1983). In social psychology, we have already heard Moscovici's plea that we should return to conversation as the exemplary form of a con-sensual universe. New social psychology has long advocated that good ordinary language could dissolve the neologisms which abound in the discipline: 'the fundamental human reality is a conversation' (Harré 1983: 20).

Images of circles of friends communicating in conversations, and by that activity alone

dissolving ideology and power, are appealing. If we could just keep talking and not panic, perhaps the social problems and culturally constructed divisions between us would disappear, or maybe they would be shut out of our little social worlds, 'moral communities' designed to survive the 'new dark ages' (MacIntyre 1981). However, not only are these images idealistic, they are also dangerously sentimental. This rhetoric which appeals to the notion of conversation *appears* to dissolve power relations but actually dissolves attempts to take those relations seriously.

Conversation does seem to be one of the most fundamental of human realities, and this idea is connected with the fact that it is a spoken form of interaction. It has a place in the conceptual infrastructure of western discourse as a more immediate, genuine form of communication than bureaucratic, dehumanizing, written documents. We should take care though, for here is another manifestation of the speech/writing hierarchy, one of the meta-physical oppositions deconstructed in Chapter three. An alternative [110] concept adopted in this book which subverts this hierarchy, and which blocks the return to individualistic notions of 'intention' which lie at its heart, is that of the text.

### *Text*

Our problem now is that deconstructive descriptions of the text are being drawn into an unhappy alliance with traditional notions of the conversation. Ethnomethodologists are coming across Derrida's writings and using them in sociology. Derrida's (1978) deconstruction of structuralism, which spearheaded the development of poststructuralism, is itself being reconstructed by ethnomethodologists who have taken up his ideas. The descriptions he purportedly provides of a continual escape of meaning from individual intention can be used to conjure up a social world in which an infinite variety of meanings is possible. Ethnomethodology, which has long been under attack for its pluralism and evasion of coercion in sociology, seems to draw on Derrida less as a topic than as a resource. Out of this blend of ideas has emerged what I term 'textual sociology', a strain of work which is in turn being borrowed by the new discourse theories in psychological social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

The characterization of deconstruction which this textual sociology promulgates - as encouraging a 'free play' of meaning and interpretation - does not, however, accord with that given in Derrida's own texts. In literary theory, where deconstruction has found the most active readership in America and Britain, there have been attempts to bring out the implications of the approach for an understanding of the social construction of power and subjectivity (Eagleton 1983). There are the resources available for us to produce an account of the forces operating on interpretations of ideological texts, and the power of the institutional frames which contain the discourses which inform texts.

The main task of this chapter, then, is to prevent the notion of conversation from assimilating that of the text, and to insist that, to the contrary, our conversations are structured by texts and the power relations contained within the surrounding discourses. I will briefly outline the contribution of ethnomethodology, describe the convergences with deconstruction which have led to the development of textual sociologies, consider some of the misreadings of [111] Derrida, and then follow some more useful routes through literary theory.

### **Sociality and textuality**

Within microsociology and literary theory there is a new, thoroughgoing scepticism. Ethnomethodology and deconstruction put in question the verities of their own disciplines, and, in the process, unsettle received paradigms.

### *Ethnomethodology*

Ethnomethodology stakes a claim for small-scale social interaction. The focus is on everyday procedures people use to make sense and order in the social world - their *ethnomethodologies* (Garfinkel 1967). Notwithstanding its roots in traditional positivist American sociology, phenomenology has had a major influence, and when there is any structure to action, it is seen as the accomplishment of social actors. Ethnomethodology offers a critique of orthodox sociology which it sees as engaging in a particular construction of rationality. This sociological rationality explains away the creative activities of the subjects it studies. Sociology's interpretations are not of something 'outside' but are of other interpretations organized within a chosen (or an implicit) theoretical frame. Sociology imagines that its use of theory enables it to strip away the 'glosses' (presentational artefacts) at work in members' accounts, not realizing that what it finds underneath is simply a construct in its own explanation of social life.

Ethnomethodology turns to the practical sociological reasoning produced by society members. The ever-increasing number of interpretations layered upon interpretations in everyday life are the means by which life is rendered rational (rationally accountable). It is a mystification of this activity to degrade the importance of this common-sense accomplishment in favour of sociological categories such as 'class' or 'society'. In the accounts are the procedures that give a reality and solidity to social life. These are the rituals which make up 'a common sense knowledge of social structures' (Garfinkel 1967: vii). The study of the methodology people employ to bring about and reproduce this common-sense knowledge involves the elucidation of 'formal properties', but [112] these properties are understood as in process, "from within" actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings. The formal properties obtain their guarantees from no other source, and in no other way' (Garfinkel 1967: viii).

What Garfinkel calls 'the artful practices of everyday life' (Garfinkel 1967: viii) are the only bedrock for research, and these practices reproduce the reasoning produced in the 'indexical' expressions of the social actors. The notion of 'indexicality' is used to remind microsociologists that the terms used in members' accounts are bound to context. The meaning and force of an item of speech or of an episode can only be understood in its relation to the surrounding social world. The fact that expressions are irremediably indexical also undermines traditional sociology's attempt to gain an 'objective' understanding of what is going on. Sociological expressions which masquerade as 'objective' explanations are revealed to be so many instances of objectification, or reification, the treating of social accomplishments as if they had a reality separate from members' meanings. Ethnomethodology thus parts company with Durkheimian recommendations that social facts' should be treated as if they were things. At the same time it laments the inevitable process by which members appear to forget the indexicality of their products.

The social nature of meaning robs expression of any original purity the moment it finds itself in the world. Experiences are not the property of an individual, but can only be known through *others*. So language, which is in the domain of others, enables the actions of a person to be experienced, but language also simultaneously blocks any immediate contact with the reality or 'truth' of action. A consequence is that actions continually undergo a process of 'typification',

and 'The accounting process is automatically or, as Garfinkel says, "essentially" reflexive upon the experiences themselves, depriving them of their uniqueness and specificity at the very moment, and by the very process, that they become known at all' (Filmer 1972: 213). While ethnomethodology attempts to trace the networks of practical reasoning which weave this first-order objectification, the crime of traditional sociology is that it accomplishes, within its own reasoning, the raising of objectification to a higher, 'second-order'.

Garfinkel's challenge to sociology has therefore entailed a shift in microsociology's understanding of the development of [113] knowledge and of individual experience. Ethnomethodology's refusal to root the practices it studies in the cognitions of individual members, or to take those cognitions as the source of social life, has facilitated a convergence with writings in post-structuralist philosophy and literary theory. Attempts to centre the creation of sense in the cognitions of speakers, listeners, writers, or readers are rebutted in Derrida's deconstructions. Garfinkel's writings are also important because his radical objections to sociological reasoning apply just as much, of course, to social psychology, where new social psychologists have used them to good effect (Shotter 1984). However, the textual sociologists are only willing to follow this process part of the way.

### *Convergences with deconstruction*

There are a number of points of contact between ethnomethodology and deconstruction. It will be sufficient, for the moment, to identify three of them.

1: *Methodology*. How is it possible to uncover the rules, the common-sense network of presuppositions, that comprise social life? The technique of 'garfinkeling' is one attempt to make present the unspoken assumptions of interaction by breaking down rituals from within. The tacit becomes seen as necessary, and its pattern is thrown into relief when people try to reconstruct it. The self-conscious repairs of the order disrupted by the 'garfinkeling' ethnomethodologist allow the researcher to see how that order works. So ethnomethodology, having recognized the dangers of attempting to construct a theoretical frame around the theories of those it studies, works inside social life, disrupting and forcing clarification by the social actors themselves. Just as ethnomethodology works from within the social rules, so deconstruction insinuates itself into the terms of the text it interrogates. Deconstruction is also sensitive to the way overarching theoretical constructs can unwittingly reproduce what they had hoped to overthrow. Deconstruction breaks apart the architecture of the text, 'using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house' (Derrida 1982:135).

2: *The social construction of meaning*. Indexicality of expression involves the wedding of meaning to language and to the context in [114] which it is employed. The 'glossing' (interpretive) practices of speech make the person giving the interpretations part of *shared*, and fluid, 'intentions'. This puts into question the notion of the individual as cause, and it becomes impossible to turn to events inside the head of an actor for the explanation of action. Instead of being a property of the individual, for example, 'motives' are taken to be public and collective. What orthodox sociology and psychology take as a cause is redefined as an effect, and this in turn effects the social construction of selves: 'For any member to ascribe a motive is thus to do no less than to generate a person' (Blum and McHugh 1971:108). This move is effectively a deconstruction of causality which calls the old Cartesian opposition inside/outside into question

The 'outside' is not reinstated as the final cause, but the relationship between the two terms is overturned. Ethnomethodology and deconstruction are thus subverting appeals to an inner essence, whether it is defined cognitively (mechanistically) or phenomenologically (experientially).

3: *Errors*. An extreme form of the forgetting of indexicality and the misattribution of origins of meaning is found in academic sociology. An example is the labelling of 'deviance', of the 'errors' of others. The trap is that ethnomethodologists are often led to imply that the 'ordinary practical reasoner' is always pathologically deviant. 'Labelling' risks being seen itself as a pathology. It is difficult for ethnomethodology to conceive of cultural circumstances in which the reification contained in rational discourse may be absent. A similar gloom pervades Derrida's work. For all the liberation of meaning deconstruction seems to promote, the lures of metaphysical discourse are ever present. Deconstruction finds itself engaged in perpetual house-cleaning. In the case of 'madness' as a form of deviance, for example, Derrida argues (against Foucault's romantic descriptions of unreason before the advent of modernity) that all discourse presupposes 'normality' and an 'other', the unreasonable thought outside. Deconstruction and ethnomethodology share the thankless task of exposing the forms of error that govern discourse, and neither can pretend ever to offer a final escape route.

Some ethnomethodologists have sighted a sister soul in deconstruction, and so far there have been two aspects to the desired communion of the two. There is, first of all, a series of attempts to [115] use Derrida's work as ammunition against orthodox sociology. This is a paradoxical exercise in theoretical buttressing, because both deconstructive and ethnomethodological approaches eschew theory. It is, though, precisely the common antipathy to any overarching 'metaphysics' (in deconstructive jargon) or 'programmatising' (in ethno-speak) that attracts each to the other. The other aspect of the attraction is the increasing importance accorded to language in the human sciences in general, a phenomenon attributable to the influence of structuralism in different disciplines. The varieties of ethnomethodology which draw on literary theory have been given an extra boost by the development of post-structuralism (and the more mechanistic structuralist method has continued in the conversation analytic studies which do purport to discover formal properties of speech).

### *Textual sociology*

The turn to language, and the interest in deconstruction, has produced a new blend of critical work. This emerging textual sociology will now, as it grows, form a powerful pole of attraction for psychological social psychologists (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This is all the more reason why we must ask whether the burgeoning textual sociology can cope with the old, justified, sociological criticisms levelled against ethnomethodology. There are problems relating to power and ideology that are still avoided. It is useful to recall the argument advanced in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (Gouldner 1972) that ethnomethodology lacks any conception of the world as structured in favour of certain interests, and that it gives instead a sense of life as 'a diffuse multiformity of values rather than a clearly-structured conflict of political and ideological groups' (Gouldner 1972: 391). There have been changes in the surrounding political and academic climate. While the 'almost Nietzschean hostility to conceptualization and abstraction' (ibid.) was raised once as a charge to damn ethnomethodology, now Derrida's declared debt to Nietzsche gives the textual sociologists a defiant confidence in their position.

However radical and outrageous the first burst of ethnomethodology in sociology had been, the complaints in that discipline's 'crisis' literature were never adequately answered. A major failure has been that the supposed 'decentering' of the individual as an [116] imagined unitary 'self' was not completely accomplished. There was a loss of nerve at the prospect of a thoroughly constructionist view of subjectivity, and the individualism sociologists claim to avoid was, as ever, protected. This is the individualism that lies at the heart of textual sociology's keeping with conversations instead of tackling texts.

One of the advantages of new social psychology was that it opened up further the questions which had been raised about the historical specificity of social-psychological phenomena (Gergen 1973) and gave accounts of the 'self' as culturally-produced (Heelas and Lock 1981). In Harré's (1983) writings there is an emphasis on the way that language (organized in the 'primary structure') allows individual responsibility to come into being in different ways in different societies. Post-structuralism takes this account even further. Derrida (1976) shows how subjectivity is produced not outside, but within texts. Foucault (1981) explores the notion of individual subjectivity as an historical construction bound up with discourse and with power. I want to emphasize this constructionist view of individuality, and the way it must be linked with an account of power and ideology. The activities of the textual sociologists provide an object lesson on how to *evade* these most radical aspects of post-structuralism by appealing uncritically to individualism. They do this in their accounts of the roles of speakers and listeners in conversation.

### **Speakers and listeners**

I will mark three points on the road to the new literary-theoretical pole of microsociology. The studies which fall at those points will serve to illustrate the limit to the 'decentering' of the individual that has taken place. To varying degrees, the three positions retain a confidence in the 'self' and its ability to reflect upon, to produce, and to control meaning. Although the movement of language in 'texts' is taken into account, the assumption remains that underneath the constraints of language there is, finally, individual expression. The 'subject' as speaker or as listener is guaranteed its meaningful place. I have selected texts by Coulter (1979), Liberman (1982), and Silverman and Torode (1980) because the three operate as conceptual reference points for my narrative. [117]

#### *'Conceptual phenomenology'*

Coulter (1979) does not directly encounter literary theory. His work, however, has been influenced by the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, and his translation of psychological attributes back into the social domain echoes deconstruction's suspicion of essentialism. He shows that our experiences of our 'selves' 'are constituted for us by intersubjectively-shared reasoning procedures and modalities of situated language use' (Coulter 1979: 34). Thought is seen as mapped within ordinary language rather than being viewed (as in most cognitive psychology and social cognition research) as having 'the same ontological status as an object hidden in a box' (Coulter 1979: 14). Emotion is described as resting in a network of 'affect-concepts', and varieties of emotion are depicted as being dependent on 'specific arrays of meaningful circumstances' (Coulter 1979:127).

However, the process of giving meaning lies at the core of Coulter's understanding of

intentionality. This leads to his failure to understand the coercive aspects of language. According to Coulter, language as a shared net of meaning does not *necessarily* distort individual expression. There is, rather, 'a kind of solidarity built into the orderly functioning of talk' (Coulter 1979: 22). Although power may enter, although 'asymmetries' could occur, the intelligibility of communication ensures that these are exceptional circumstances. Coulter is led to advance a position which rests on the plurality and goodwill of language (and the good will of those within it). This leads to a cosy view of human interaction, and it folds comfortably into the concept of symmetrical 'conversation' as a haven from coercion. Coulter successfully describes the organization of different realities in discourse and the way appropriate mental predicates are reconstructed in talk, but the operation of power is an issue that is foreclosed: he says 'There are no such things as social "forces" triggering or coercing cognitions -only social procedures (which may or may not be followed) and culturally-conventional orientations (which may be violated or ignored)' (Coulter 1979:156).

### *'Semiotic sociolinguistics'*

With Liberman (1982) we move a little closer to deconstruction and a little further from the intentions of speakers. Liberman [118] moves beyond phenomenology to hermeneutics and hopes to radicalize it by explicitly combining Garfinkel and Derrida. The project for a semiotic sociolinguistics, then, also takes us into the realm of 'social texts', and the expressive work of the speaker is always reciprocated by the creative work of a listener.

Not surprisingly, the picture Liberman constructs is close to Garfinkel's own formulations. The spoken word immediately becomes a 'public facticity' and so 'the orator's speech is his thought' (Liberman 1982: 307). Understanding is described as dependent on the reflexivity of members' accounts. Liberman's paper does take up some of the shared concerns of ethnomethodologists and post-structuralists. One of these is the suspicion of metaphors of 'depth'. Liberman quotes Garfinkel as commenting that 'There is nothing behind the looks of things - things are what they appear to be' (Liberman 1982: 307), which is a sentiment central to poststructuralist literary theory: 'there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced' (Barthes 1977:147).

However, Liberman's characterization of his approach as being hermeneutic is unfortunately all too accurate, and it is here that he breaks with deconstruction. Language is not meaningful because it can be interpreted to uncover deeper truths but because it is a *text*. Liberman falls back to the assertions in traditional hermeneutics that underneath meaning there is a basic level of pre-linguistic sense. He rather sentimentally contrasts 'open', 'global', 'non-autonomous' Australian Aboriginal expression with 'restrictive', 'linear', 'autonomous' English. Not only does he romanticize Aboriginal expression, the biggest problem in English, he says, is that the *listener* risks being 'stripped of part of his [sic] communicative role' (Liberman 1982: 302)

Liberman here reproduces the move that Lévi-Strauss made in structuralist anthropology when he blamed writing for threatening the authenticity of speech. As Derrida (1976) pointed out, this judgement appeals to a conception of 'the natural' as a 'presence' which guarantees 'true' meaning. The rhetorical appeal to 'the natural' occurs not only in biologicistic forms in psychology and sociology, but can reappear in critical texts when they appeal to natural states of conversation. Liberman, then, partially deconstructs the role of the individual speaker in controlling meaning, but passes part of the task of commanding meaning over to the [119]

individual listener. 'Conversation' is presented (as in Moscovici's work) as an ideal which the reified world of the West has almost suffocated, but which speakers and listeners together can keep alive.

### *'Interruption'*

Finally we move on to the third and ostensibly most radical attempt in microsociology to dislodge the individual from the centre of the social world. Silverman and Torode (1980) range over a number of theories of language, and while the general framework stems from Garfinkel, it is Derrida who is acknowledged as the direct inspiration for their study. They argue that the notion of 'interpretation' itself presupposes a reality underneath social meaning, and that it should be replaced by the term 'interruption'. Garfinkel's interruptions then provide models for 'powerful ways of transforming the everyday world' (Silverman and Torode 1980: xii). They refuse to set up any hierarchy of texts and would, for example, be supportive of deconstructive objections to Liberman's differentiation between creative and restrictive conversation.

Nevertheless, they endeavour to champion the authenticity of *all* everyday language, and this returns them to precisely that aspect of ethnomethodology which denies the force of constraints, of power relations: 'the reality is a play of speeches, referring to each other in contradictory ways which permit no speech dominance over others' (Silverman and Torode 1980: 135). Furthermore, in the pluralistic 'play' of speeches are the possibilities for 'interruption' by *listeners* (who then become speakers). This means that although they have refused to speculate about the nature of 'Being' or ontology (preferring to stick to the 'ethno-ontology' of the 'folk'), they still save space for an individual who is free to 'interrupt'. This idealized listener, and the activity of interruption, are predicated on the supposed 'free play' of the text which allows unlimited room for manoeuvre. A pluralistic reading of Derrida is presented, then, and while the intentions of the speaker might have been deconstructed more radically than in Coulter's (1979) and Liberman's (1982) texts, the price Silverman and Torode pay is to assume that all restraints could be lifted from the persons [120] weaving within it. They are the last of the reference points on the roads to deconstruction, but we are left with a pluralism that pretends that *anyone* may interrupt the text.

As textual sociology develops, then, the absolute freedom of the text is assumed to enable the listener's as well as the speaker's role to blossom. Coulter supposes that there is a symmetry between speakers and listeners resting in the solidarity of talk: Liberman protects the meaning-giving role of the listener in creative speech; and Silverman and Torode create the listener who interrupts and overturns at will the speaker's position. While the self-conscious activity of the individual who produces texts has been questioned, they have yielded to the temptation to replace it with the individual who consumes. All the while this dissolves the value of deconstruction in the service of an idealized notion of communication and conversation. If we turn to the uses of deconstruction in literary theory, however, we will see conceptions of coercion in the texts that contribute to conversations.

### **Writers and readers**

Within literary theory, the consequences of deconstruction have included a demotion of the texts ordinarily deemed to be properly 'literary', and it has become necessary to explain how the canon of literature came to be demarcated from 'lesser' writing (Eagleton 1983). This has led to

a concern with the way the institutions which frame the texts also coerce writers and readers within them. Literary theorists who have used Derrida's post-structuralist work have also had to deal with the switch of emphasis from the writer to the reader in high structuralism, and the way that all the while the notion of a final 'authority' for true meanings remained. I will briefly sketch out the debates that parallel textual sociology's shift from speakers to listeners before defending Derrida.

### *Literary texts*

The first wave of structuralism involved, in a famous phrase, the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977). The codes of literature were seen as being reproduced regardless of the intentions of the person who committed them to paper. The meaning of a text, then, could not be explained by reference to the wishes and thoughts of the [121] individual whose signature appeared at the end. Instead, structuralist analysis promised to transform literature into a scientific discipline which would unearth the underlying laws. Far from defeating dualism, though, this opened up a dichotomy between author-based and reader-based criticism. Because the intentions of the writer as author had been ruled out of court, a *reader-based* analysis came into its own.

Not only could the literary 'scientist' imitate what she presumed to be done in other sciences, but the positivist division between 'facts' and 'values' was also reproduced. The analysis could be handed on to other readers so that they too could gain insight into the text. The genius of the author was replaced as the touchstone of truth with an ideal competence or mastery of the reader. A 'correct' reading of texts was thought to be possible, and so a careful schooling was required to initiate an aspiring reader into the necessary techniques. Some advocates of structuralism attempted to open up the codes of the text to competent readers.

The shift to post-structuralism and deconstruction involved a critique of such a scientific search for 'structure' that fixes the meaning of a text and 'dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play in the order of the sign' (Derrida 1978: 292). This did not automatically solve all the problems of course, and even some of the outlines of deconstruction have set up dichotomies between 'theory' and 'practice' which look to the ingenuity of the individual user as the most important determinant of its success: 'The truth is that deconstructionist theory can only be as useful and enlightening as the mind that puts it to work' (Norris 1982). As in microsociology, the adoption of a 'correct' approach does not guarantee that it will not be understood incorrectly'.

What the textual sociologies extract from the debates in literary theory is the notion of indeterminacy of expression and plurality of meaning. If this were right, the individual would be left with the freedom to interpret (or interrupt) whenever and whatever she liked. Deconstruction is depicted as allowing for this when it resists attempts to place truth in structures or in persons and instead 'affirms play' (Derrida 1978: 292). It does look like a warrant for the extreme subjectivist strand of sociology, and Derrida's opponents claim that he paints a relativistic picture of perpetual and unrestricted interpretation. [122]

### *Coercive texts*

Despite Derrida's detractors, there are forces in the text that deconstruction takes into account. Three points about the deconstructive view of coercion in texts should serve to show why texts cannot be thought of as components of the power-free conversations idealized of late in

microsociology and social psychology.

First, there are issues to do with *power*. When post-structuralism insists that '*there is nothing outside of the text*' (Derrida 1976:158), this has the function of ensuring that interpretations cannot proceed with an external referent, model, or 'transcendental signified' which is apart from texts. All that we understand about the world is, by virtue of that understanding, endowed with meaning. It is, in some way, part of a text. However, this does not mean that what lies beyond the text does not affect what can be said. What is 'pre-text' insinuates itself in the contours of the text. The practical order affects the way power is distributed in the expressive realm of society. Take the example of Derrida's discussion of Lévi-Strauss's idealization of the time long ago before 'writing' poisoned 'speech'. Central to Lévi-Strauss's case is a romanticized picture of the Nambikwara people before writing arrived, and 'the nature of the organism submitted to the aggression of writing' (Derrida 1976:119). Derrida makes the point that far from this being a good and happy time, it was a strictly hierarchical society with relationships 'marked with a spectacular violence' (Derrida 1976: 135).

The deconstruction of the speech/writing hierarchy proceeds (as described in Chapter three) by positing a 'writing', or *text* which includes speech, so saying that all society necessitates some kind of 'writing'. The correlate of this is that no society exists without some kind of violence. The two-fold consequence of this is that Derrida does not deny the existence of extra-linguistic coercion: 'military or economic violence is', he says, 'in structural solidarity with "linguistic" violence' (Derrida 1976:135). The violence then gathers a particular quality when it becomes embedded in the shared worlds of meaning that texts (spoken or written) make possible: 'writing cannot be thought outside the horizon of inter-subjective violence' (Derrida 1976:127). The second point is to do with the question of *ideology*. Within the text the notion of '*différance*' (Derrida's neologism for the way [123] items differ from one another and defer a final meaning) involves conflict. This *différance* is characterized as an active 'discord of... different forces and of the differences between forces' (Derrida 1973:149). The much-advertised 'free play' of meaning does not necessarily licence an endless and infinite variety of interpretations ready to be plucked out from any text. There is no fixed meaning in the text (as structuralists claimed), yet the shifts in meaning are determined. The relationship between the reader and the text, and the constellation of texts available at any particular time, result in an intertextual matrix which constrains and constructs what can be produced. The different intertextual matrices which hold human society together are termed 'discourses' in this book. Derrida quite rightly denies that he is a pluralist, and does argue for a 'hierarchy' of plausible interpretations. In a deconstruction, 'meaning is determined by a system of forces which is not personal... the field of different forces, the conflict of forces ... produce interpretations' (Derrida 1980: 21).

It is therefore a mistake to think that deconstruction sanctions the individualist shift from writers to free interpretations 'based only on the fantasies of the reader' (Derrida 1980: 22) (or from speakers to the free activities of listeners). Some interpretations are more plausible and powerful than others, and the deconstructive approach must be part of a theoretical understanding of the work of texts, whether they be literary texts or texts in spoken conversation. In addition, this means that the theory/practice distinction dissolves. Deconstructions are not formulated first and then 'applied' afterwards: 'Deconstruction is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*' (Derrida 1981: 93).

The third and last point about coercion in texts is to do with the relationship between deconstruction and history. Some writers in literary theory have made connections between the activities of writing and reading and the economic structures of society (Eagleton 1983). The

deconstruction of conceptual structures depends on historical circumstances (as we saw in the deconstruction of attribution theory in Chapter four). The 'conflict of forces' permits certain interpretations and reveals certain conceptual hierarchies in texts and discourses. The political thrust of deconstruction, then, is toward a critical social theory which would have as its aim the subversion of constraints rather than a simple redescription that would leave things as they are. [124]

### *Institutions*

The historical dimension is highlighted when deconstructions connect with the intersection of different texts found in institutions. The important function of institutions in the interpretation of texts has recently come to the fore in literary theory, with Derrida being cited as an ally in the process of deconstructing them. Derrida argues, for example, that 'It is by touching solid structures, "material" institutions, and not merely discourse or significant representations, that deconstruction distinguishes itself from analysis or "criticism"' (cited in Weber 1982: 60). These institutions come into being at certain moments in history, produce certain texts to buttress them, and then resist attempts to dismantle them to make way for something better.

The question of the institution as a frame for readings (with the term 'frame' holding pictorial and criminal connotations) is also broached by deconstruction. What is normally taken to be an external limit enters into what it encloses. The frame works to affect everything that lies within it. Once again the conceptual stakes are that the hierarchy inside/outside is taken apart and what deconstruction unravels are the texts which support varieties of essentialism. The political stakes are that institutional struggles are constituted by external relations between them and other institutions.

The structuralist attempt to fix meaning in a text or a behaviour (as in experimental social psychology), or phenomenological attempts to fix meaning in individuals or accounting subjects (as in new social psychology) is not just an academic issue. The activity of deconstruction has a political relevance. Fixing meaning in the writer or reader or in the speaker or listener always involves some degree of coercion. Micro sociologists attempting to recuperate deconstruction refuse to recognize this, and so they find the notion of 'conversation' appealing. They ignore a key lesson from deconstructive literary theory in their selective readings of the literature: 'To establish or institute a state of mind, a particular interpretation can only involve an exercise of force, even violence, in order to arrest the inherent tendency of signs to refer to other signs, *ad infinitum*' (Weber 1982: 62). My proposals at the end of Chapter eight are designed to help radicals break out of the 'state of mind' which holds the institution of social psychology together. Social psychology has, since it was constituted in America in the [125] early years of this century, at the temporal centre of the Modern Age, been trapped in the same institutional vice which grips all individuals in this culture. Inside academic social psychology, those radicals who appeal to the 'ordinary', 'consensual', or 'everyday' world are trapped between the categories provided by psychology or sociology. Even in the textual sociologies, texts reproduce images of individuals *separated* from social relations. These are power relations which determine the types of resistance that can be developed. Social-psychological texts are not innocent 'misrepresentations' of social action. They nourish the discourses outside the discipline which construct objects (such as 'attributions', 'prejudices', or 'emotions'). They reproduce models of people who are only rational and trustworthy when alone, and become irrational and dangerous when they engage in collective action, and it is here that social psychology as an *ideology* works.

It is here that conflict in society is covered over or 'resolved', and that we see ideology as the combined effects of power relations in discourses and texts.

I have struck a critical distance from social psychology in Parts one and two of this book, and this has involved a historical analysis and critical distance from modern culture. This has been possible because within society there are always spaces for resistance. In recent years there have been suggestions by poststructuralists (and others influenced by them) that modern culture is finally breaking down. Even texts in social psychology (those influenced by the textual sociologies) have been celebrated as the heralds of *postmodernity*. This description of culture can provide a critical vantage point for the conceptual issues arising from the paradigm crisis in social psychology. Whether or not this is sufficient and whether the notion is a useful point of resistance for *political* issues, are matters that I will now turn to in Part three. [end of page 125]