SIX

DERRIDA AND THE LIMIT
OF SOVEREIGNTY’S REASON

Freedom, Equality, but Not Fraternity

[A] questioning of sovereignty is not simply some formal or academic necessity for a kind of speculation in political philosophy, or else a form of genealogical, or perhaps even deconstructive vigilance. It is already underway. It is at work today; it is what’s coming, what’s happening. It is and it makes history.

—Jacques Derrida, Rogues

“What must be thought,” Derrida writes in the closing pages of Rogues, “is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude, in short, something like a passive decision.” To certain readers of Derrida, this passage, coming near the end of Rogues, written some two years before he passed away, would mark the ultimate failure of his thought. “What must be thought . . . ”: an exhortation, an ethical injunction, but seemingly also a final plea at the end of a long career that, many believe, aimed at destroying the very fundamentals of equality and freedom, namely subjectivity, autonomy, and self-sovereignty. “What must be thought” points also to the future, to the future of a thought beyond Derrida himself, one who would ultimately disappoint when it comes to thinking a freedom unaligned to all that we have freely taken it to be: a power, an ability, or at least the mark of a possibility of what one can accomplish, no matter the odds, no matter the political regime, circling divinely in an absolute quietism. Nothing would seem more unreasonable than that which is “inconceivable
and unknowable,” especially if we are to counter the problems of sovereignty in our day, in the “light and enlightenment of our day.”

Freedom and equality have been doubly positioned in a thinking of sovereignty. On the one hand, sovereignty has been seen as the *sine qua non* of freedom, since it is the self's auto-position, its autonomy, its ability to rule over itself through its own coercive force managing its passions that has been taken to be the predicate for the self's ability to carry its will into the world. The dignity of the person in Kant, on Derrida's account, but also going back to the ruling (*archein*) of the self in Plato, or the ultimate *autarkeia* of the sovereign God as pure contemplation in Aristotle, co-opted and affirmed by Agamben, has been aligned to the force of reason, to the reason of force over the turns of the self. It is this coercive ability of the self—whether enacted or not—that is the basis for thinking an equality of one to another, of one sovereign self to another. On the other hand, this sovereignty of the self, its own self-rule and its equality with others, has been grounded in national sovereignty, one that will protect individual sovereignty as a right of citizenship. There is no need to revisit here all that we have reviewed throughout our chapters on Rousseau, Arendt, and Foucault regarding the sovereign fictions of nationalism and natalism, which have done anything but protect the dignity, the sanctity, and finally the sovereignty of each one. But—and this move is all important in the light and darkness of our day—this does not mean that we must, at every turn, attempt to resuscitate human dignity against sovereign cruelty by way of the concept of individual sovereignty, the supposed invulnerability and indivisibility or *autarkeia* of the self. We cannot simply take on one sovereignty we find abhorrent in its insidious bio-political and nationalist forms (political sovereignty) with one that finds for us, in a part of ourselves, so much to like.

Certainly, we are often “in want of sovereignty [en mal de souveraineté],” wanting it even as its evil makes us ill. National or popular sovereignty and self-sovereignty have called for the elemental prosthesis of one to the other, even where, in sovereignty's very movement, it should never be in want; sovereignty should never need anything else, if it is to be sovereign. And yet the self and the nation-state is always already in want of sovereignty, always in want of the force and enforcement of its own law, its own autonomy. Sovereignty always, as we argued in the end of chapter 1, needs its supplement, needs something beyond itself, for example, government in the work of Rousseau, since “a democracy in the strict sense” could only exist, let us remind ourselves, “if there were a [sovereign] people of gods.” Sovereignty, as Foucault and Arendt argue, is also a power that is polyvalent, a force of law and law of force, as Derrida would call it, that has spread itself throughout the societies of modernity, sharing its “right over life and
death,” as Rousseau put it succinctly, a right that now means just as much to make live and let die as it does to make die and let live.

Conceptually, a sharing (partage) of sovereignty is impossible, since sovereignty in its most decisive moment is to be shared neither de jure nor in fact. It cannot, without being in utter want (en mal), share itself in language or give an account of itself, making itself accountable and measurable, which sovereignty in its utter want always already wants to avoid:

A pure sovereignty is indivisible or it is not at all, as all the theoreticians of sovereignty have rightly recognized. . . . This indivisibility excludes it in principle from being shared, from time and from language . . . and thus, paradoxically, from history. . . . There is no sovereignty without violence, without the force of the strongest, whose reason—the reason of the strongest—is to win out over [avoir raison de] everything. . . . If sovereign force is silent, it is not for lack of speaking. 

It is alone: it absents itself from the political such that “there is no contrary of sovereignty,” and one mistakes the stakes of this political artifice, to take up the terms from chapter 1, if one thinks one can simply oppose sovereignty. We are used to such binary pairs, but sovereignty, as exceptional and alone, does not leave itself to be easily opposed, especially when one risks the worst when opposing all sovereignty tout court. What is the lesson here? Perhaps that the dream of a non-sovereign future is but the most lasting sovereignty fiction:

There is no contrary of sovereignty, even if there are things other than sovereignty. Even in politics (and the question remains of knowing if the concept of sovereignty is political through and through) the choice is not between sovereignty and nonsovereignty, but among several forms of partings, partitions, divisions, conditions that come along to breach a sovereignty that is always supposed to be indivisible and unconditional. 

This will be what Derrida calls sovereignty’s constitutive and performative autoimmunity: the moment it sets out to immunize itself, to protect itself from the outside through its spreading out of force or by its use of language and sovereign fictions, it also brings about its demise as sovereignty. There is, in a sense, an impotence at the heart of power’s height as sovereignty. But, as I’ve suggested through this book, I want to be careful here to note that this should not bring a false hope for the final denoue-
ment of sovereignty. We have seen too much of that in recent years: the stories of the fall of sovereignty in the modern or “postmodern” age, in terms of the subject or the nation-state, had become for a time part of the reveling of a new world order. This, in a sense, is where the lessons of sovereignty and a pure non-sovereignty in this book have circuitously led. There has been, for example, a structurally similar critique of all forms of representation—whether in politics or in language—as ever disruptive of the pure moment of self-presence and sovereignty, or contrariwise, in terms of re-presentation of the self that is said to be the mark of tyranny. Inversely, we have also seen concerns over the fall of sovereignty in light of the rise of other forms of power—economic (the rise and ubiquity of capitalism) or otherwise (disciplinary power, societies of the code, and so on). This means that we need to think sovereignty both in terms of its constitutive, performative autoimmunity and also, as I have argued throughout this book, in terms of the ways in which, as Derrida puts it, sovereignty has changed “its shape and place.”

This change in “shape and place” is not simply due to the “state racism” by which the state sees as its work the saving and salvation of a nation of people. Nor is this change due only to the transformation of monarchical sovereignty into national and popular sovereignty. With the “loss of authority” in the modern age, the performative backstop for sovereignty has been laid aside. Each performative utterance—the words that are authorized to declare an end to democratic debate, to declare war, and so on—relies on previous performative utterances in a near-endless cycle: the performative utterances of oaths and so on that still mark the ceremonies and glory of power. These utterances then rely on previous performatives going back, for example in the United States, to the foundational ex post facto delineation of a right to declare a United States in a declaration of independence. But the latter could still authorize itself, as does the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, in terms of a beneficent Creator, an inverted divine right used against King George III by the American colonies. With the loss of authority in the modern age, about which Arendt writes, there is no ultimate legitimating authority. Sovereign fictions of pastoral power and oikonomia aside, the performances and performative utterances of sovereignty are no longer authorized per se by theological narratives; however much they are still used, they have, Arendt claims, lost much of their force, except as a shadowy set of complaints by religious reactionaries fully aware of this loss of force. They are “authorized” by previous performative utterances and performances of power, all of which is to say that, to put it simply, the “divine right of kings” and its self-authorization has been replaced by the performances of the sword of the Leviathan, the police and its apparatchiks.
that are the coercive force of the law and the law of force in modernity—on this point, Agamben argues persuasively. The Enlightenment, then, not only brought to the fore reason, but also, with the concomitant loss of authority, the reason of force, the raison d’État we have been tracking, whereby “[a]
buse of power is constitutive of sovereignty itself.”

The changing shape and form of sovereignty is one often missed in its conceptualization in light of the claims of Derrida, Agamben, and others in recent years. To take one example, Jean-Luc Nancy, in a treatment of sovereignty in The Creation of the World, or Globalization (2002), follows up on the logic of sovereignty’s self-presumption as Le Très Haut, as that which is higher than height, but also as the highest in a system in which it can be categorized within a vertical hierarchy. Nancy argues rightly that sovereignty has been figured as the summit, as the height of the political that is both higher than height, but also the summit by which it is the sovereign in a given politics. He is clear that “sovereignty essentially slips away [échappe] from the sovereign.” Echoing Kantorowicz’s The King’s Two Bodies, Nancy argues that the sovereign body belongs within a hierarchy of a political system, for example, feudalism, in which it is primus inter pares. But sovereignty itself must escape this hierarchy; it cannot exist as the body at the height of a hierarchy since it “depends on nothing,” is closed in upon itself, and founds itself through its own self-legitimation. Sovereignty itself is le très haut as the detached summit, where it is “the Unequal itself. It is unequal to all kinds of equality or inequality.” It is, in sum, the “apprehension of the incommensurability between the horizontal [equality] and the vertical [hierarchy], between the base and the summit”; it does not even share with others finitude or mortality. This at least is our worst apprehension about sovereignty, namely its taking itself as the place beyond the spacing of the political, there where it has only a “relation to itself [rapport à soi]” through which it gives itself its own laws, constituting its “auto-positioning.” Sovereignty thus is always ex nihilo, founding itself on nothing other than its own rapport to itself. I won’t go into all the semantic and powerful valences of sovereignty and its “twins” that Nancy treats well and at some length: summus, superanus, supremus, but also summation, the capital and capitalism that figures along and beyond the summa linea, which is to say, all the powers of measuring and the measuring up to itself of and as sovereignty. Thus, he writes in The Truth of Democracy, “sovereignty is not located in any person; it has no figure, no contour; it cannot be erected into any monument. It is, simply, the supreme. With nothing above it. Neither God nor master.” I bring up Nancy’s analysis because it takes up a continuous line of thinking of sovereignty from Plato to Bodin and Hobbes, one which he
rightly describes as a sovereignty that takes place in thought and as thinking. But what worries me is that this conceptualization of sovereignty gives sovereignty too much and too little at the same time. While it recognizes its ultimate failure, it also still sees sovereignty in terms of its medieval conceptualization; it repeats the thèse royale of the French monarchies, and Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben would be right to call on us to think sovereignty in its multivalent forms. Sovereignty is not just le très haut, as Foucault argues quite well, but also the lowest, le plus bas, the most vulgar and “democratic” of forces in modernity. It is more or less than the lowest: it is a vulgarity to the political in its most obscene and, as Derrida rightly suggests, also its roguish power. In thinking about democracy, as we will come to it, it is important to keep in mind democracy’s vulgar elements: the démos that would make up a democracy. Another problem arises in Nancy’s account. Let me quote from him on a thinking beyond or without sovereignty, of a “sovereignty without sovereignty,” as he poses it, since though his intervention against sovereignty has much to offer, it also must give us pause, since it brings us back to some of the problems of natalism and nationalism that Derrida confronts in his deconstruction of sovereignty in his later work:

The difficulty is to think the political without a subject: not without authority or the power of decision. . . . This is an announcement of the problem of equality with which modern politics has been concerned, and sovereignty itself, which is defined as a summit that is not measured by any given height. Together, liberty and fraternity could represent this absence of the given height (of the origin [fondement], of the father). What Nancy brings us back to is the second part of the quotation from Derrida with which we began, namely, thinking a non-sovereign and therefore nonsubjective freedom. The task of the remainder of this chapter will be to tease out just what Derrida means by a “nonsubjective” and non-sovereign freedom, one that needs to be thought with and against conceptions of sovereignty either as le très haut or as the most roguish element, le plus bas. For Derrida and Nancy, freedom is an unconditional demand put upon the political itself, one that for politics and democracy (and there is no former without the latter, for Derrida) does not mean returning to a thinking of the subject in the classical sense. But neither does it mean thinking a “sovereignty without sovereignty,” an unconditional freedom, along the lines of a thinking of fraternity and fraternalism, a Christian thinking of the sharing-out of the political in terms of the dead father, one that brings us back to thinking community as communion.
Before approaching Derrida’s discussions of freedom and equality, it is necessary to broach the distinction between the “unconditional” and sovereignty. There is no doubt, as Derrida makes clear time and again, that sovereignty, as mastery and making, as a wanting of the functionalization of the political as its own prosthesis, takes itself to be an unconditional power for the work of politics. Nevertheless, what he “affirms” is that it is “necessary that there be reference to some unconditional, an unconditional without sovereignty, and thus without cruelty.” Throughout his later texts, Derrida takes up a number of “unconditional” demands placed upon each one, and he argues that politics is the aporetic decision made in the face of these unconditional demands, such as justice, which are “undeconstructible.” For Derrida, politics takes place at the interstices between and arriving from these unconditional demands: claims for unconditional forgiveness beyond reconciliation, justice beyond the letter of the law, hospitality beyond its conditional forms, the gift beyond the economy of giving, but also unconditional demands for equality and freedom. It is unconditioned freedom, I will ultimately argue, that is the sine qua non for any response and responsibility in the face of these demands, all of which can be summed up, if too quickly, under the heading of what Derrida calls the “democracy to come.” The “passive decisions” made in the face of who or what comes, in the face of demands and counterdemands for justice, hospitality, and so on, are a mark of “freedom,” if not, however, the sovereign subject:

...
the extent that I cannot foresee, predetermine, prognosticate. This can be called freedom.22

As we have seen in the work of Arendt, there is no thinking the event of natality wherever the political is pre-programmed, prefabricated, where each way, each decision is already predetermined in the shadow of sovereignty's hold over the polis. The exposure of freedom, as Arendt and Derrida both argue, is a place of non-mastery, of non-sovereignty. “Freedom without autonomy” is the condition of possibility for sovereign freedom under discussion in the tradition. What Derrida supplements to Arendt’s account, a prosthetic that is not just one prosthetic among others, is the supplemental non-figuring of the other to whom I am always already responsible, to whom I must give without condition, to whom I must offer hospitality beyond and before any conditions, to whom I must be just beyond and before any making of the law. It is thus not a simple calculation of needs among these demands, but rather in each context living up to—and this, for Derrida is the trembling of living—the decision that risks passing us by with regard to our responsibilities. This thinking is inimical to sovereign self-possession:

The concept of sovereignty will always imply the possibility of positionality, of this thesis, of this thesis of the self, of this autposition of what poses or poses itself as ipse, as the self or same (le même), the self-same or itself (soi-même). . . . Dictatorship (and in a minimal and strict sense, sovereignty is always a dictatorial moment, even if one doesn’t live in a supposedly dictatorial regime) is always the essence of sovereignty, where it is linked to the power to speak in the form of dictation, prescription, order or diktat.23

Derrida’s thinking of the political is not, then, a politics that leads to bonne conscience, but rather one in which, to borrow the metaphors of Arendt, one is always already caught in a web of unconditional demands to which one is already responding (even if the response is no). This is not to say, however, that Derrida’s work dreams of a pure politics in which our everyday politics is but a falling or decaying (Verfallen) of the political, that is, that there would be a pure giving, a pure hospitality, a pure justice if not for the fact that all have been broken down, somehow, by language, by laws, and by the measuring that is part of the political.

What I am seeking . . . is a prudent deconstruction of the logic and the dominant, classical conception of nation-state sovereignty without ending up with a depoliticization, a neutralization of the
political. . . . What I am looking for would be a slow and differential deconstruction of this logic without ending with a de-politicization, but an other politicization, a re-politicization and therefore another concept of the political.24

Where Rousseau, for example, dreamed of a community immanent to itself, revolving without communication from one to another and where Agamben dreams of a pure gesture without remainder circling in the noo-politics of its messianic halo, Derrida insists that politics is always already contaminated, that there is never a pure justice, a pure hospitality, and so on—nor could it be had except by giving up on the future itself. He argues that wherever hospitality and immigration come to the fore, for instance, one must recognize the measuring underway of the immeasurable responsibility that at the same time cannot be denied: where measures are called for, the immeasurable always contaminates this thinking in turn, since it calls into question the self-authorization of such a measuring, of such a stopping of the resources of the political for the other. Wherever I say that I can give no more, that I can be no more hospitable, it is always in the background that, whatever the hardship, whatever the danger, I can in fact give more, I can in fact be more hospitable, I can in fact be more just. Politics is in the end the only chance for the unconditional, even where it is conditioned, where it is measured, and where justice as an unconditional claim from the other becomes the law of justice as fairness. Ethics and politics is the negotiation, the forever-without-leisure (the non-otium of neg-otiation) of the conditioning of these unconditional demands, the calculation in the face of the incalculable singularity of the other. It is precisely this negotiation that marks “what is happening,” he argues in La bête et la souverain, as always disruptive in and around sovereignty:

There are different and sometimes antagonistic types of sovereignty, and it is always in the name of one that one attacks the another: for example, it is in the name of a sovereignty of man, or even of the personal subject, of his autonomy (for autonomy and liberty are also sovereignty, and one cannot without warning and without threatening by the same token all liberty, purely and simply attack the motifs or the rallying cries of independence, autonomy, and even nation-state sovereignty, in the name of which some weak peoples are struggling against the colonial and imperial hegemony of powerful states. . . . Even in politics, the choice is not between sovereignty and non-sovereignty, but between different forms of parting, partitions, divisions, conditions that come along to broach a sovereignty that is always supposed to be indivisible and unconditional.25
In the relation between law and justice, for example, the law cannot live up, cannot measure up, to justice, since “justice always addresses itself to singularity.” Justice, as such, is unpresentable in the law, the universalizing laws of politics or even in language. We are beginning to perceive, perhaps too closely, the relation of the exception with regard to justice, hospitality, that is to say, the unconditional, and the exception of sovereignty, which is also unsharable in language. However, it is in the difference between the two, in the interminable negotiation between mastery and its other, where politics occurs. And this interminable demand of the unconditional—for example, the justice always exceptional to law—does not lead to a political quietude. Its demands are hic et nunc, even when we would rather simply call it a day, take our measure over the political, and thus leave it to a certain sovereignty. It is here that another thinking of the decision, beyond the decisionism of the sovereigntists, announces itself:

Justice, however unpresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. A just decision is always required immediately, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of decision as such, what must be just, must [il faut] always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation. . . . The instant of decision is a madness . . . a madness because such a decision is both hyper-active and suffered [sur-active et subie], it preserves something passive, even unconscious, as if the one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other.27

The measures of the political come with their enforcement measures, with their laws of force and force of law, the violence of political measures: “Law is inseparable from violence, immediate or mediate, present or represented.” This is not to offer an apologia for these enforcement mechanisms, but rather to recognize that each law arrives with its enforcement in those places where we expect that justice be done. And it is here that we must split the impossible difference between sovereignty and the unconditional, since it is the unconditional that offers the least assurance—and we must recall all that Arendt wrote about the problems of assurance in philosophical modernity—in the always open wound of the political.

Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving [donatrice] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can
always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation, [which]
is always possible. . . . An absolute assurance against this risk [the
risk of sovereignty and sovereigntism] can only saturate or suture
the opening of the call to justice, a call that is always wounded. But
incalculable justice commands calculation. . . . Not only must one [il
faut] calculate, negotiate with the relation between the calculable
and the incalculable, and negotiate without a rule that would not
have to be reinvented there where we are “thrown,” there where
we find ourselves.29

This is, no doubt, a difficult freedom, a free-play between two logics,
two imperatives: the demands of law and the unconditional demands for
hospitality, for a giving (up) of the self, for freedom of the other, for equality,
in a word, for justice. There is no justice present to us, true, but there is no
chance for justice without the affirmation in the face of the other, the “yes”
in the face of who or what comes, without alibi and without yet perceiving
whether the other is my brother or son or neighbor, my semblable. This would
be the “Here I am” in the face of the other’s singularity, a welcoming that
would be the arché of the political rethought as other than, as Derrida writes,
picking up its Latin translation, a “principle, a princedom, a sovereignty.”30

Michael Naas touches upon this when discussing the aporias
of hospitality, in which one must always already welcome the other, no matter who, but
must also attend to the welcome of the particular, that is, one with a name,
a history, a specificity that is also beyond the property of a name:

Between the welcoming question, “Hey, you there, what’s your name?”
and the police interrogation, “Hey you there, what’s your name?,”
the difference is subtle but fundamental—a difference between two
inflections. The difference is fundamental yet unmasterable, impossible
to regulate or determine once and for all by any science or law.
Welcoming some particular other, calling him or her by name, can
thus turn into an identification that would allow one to exclude
that other, or at the very least to make sure in advance that this
other is not going to abuse our hospitality. No code or context can
ever prevent the welcoming gesture from turning ugly. Yet for this
gesture to become effective, the other as stranger—as essentially
vulnerable and destitute—must be identified, and so never wel-
comed as a stranger. . . . The double imperative prevents one from
ever achieving good conscience, from ever saying “I do enough,”
since by definition “doing enough” is never enough. Between our
responsibility and our actions, the passage is never given in advance
but must be reinvented with each welcome.31
The logic of “reinvention” implied in all of this is what has given deconstruction itself a bad name: a relativism, a nihilism, and so on. Nevertheless, it is the imperative of the other that calls into question any right to sovereignty, any sovereigntism that would interrogate and always already identify the other, and the other within oneself, thus foreclosing the arché of the political in the name of its functionalization, its complete measurement and mastery, in which there would be no freedom, no decisions, and no welcoming of the other in the name of justice, a universal claim made on each one. And as Naas suggests, the difference may be nothing other than a difference of inflection, a certain passing in and out of a passages of a text, a life, an institution. Let me cite one text, one political pedagogy after so many others in this book, one that has been particularly troublesome for the fate of the political, there from its ex post facto declared beginning in a scene sometime before Moses, but not monotheism. Let me quote the passage, though it is well known:

Genesis: 22 [1] . . . And it came to pass . . . that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. [2] And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. [3] And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. [4] Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. [5] And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you, [6] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. [7] And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? [8] And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. [9] And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. [10] And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. [11] And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. [12] And he said, Lay not thine
hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. [13] And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. [14] And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen. [15] And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, [16] And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: [17] That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; [18] And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. [19] So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba. (King James Bible)

This passage is a fabulous morality tale, the lesson of which, as Derrida and Kierkegaard argue, is the lesson of a lesson, the moral of a moral to a story, in short, the ultimate lesson of sovereign fictions. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard argues that Abraham performs a terrifying “teleological suspension of the ethical” in his sacrifice of Isaac. That is, he suspends his commitment to universal ethical standards (not to kill) for a higher end (telos), his faith in God. Kierkegaard comes back time and again to this paradoxical situation, in which the person of faith is called upon to follow a higher law (for his love of God) while rejecting all laws. The person who does this is dubbed by Kierkegaard the “knight of faith,” gallantly going beyond the universal laws of ethics in order to follow the higher calling of faith, with its nonuniversal, particular, and indescribable relationship to the absolute (God), which he says, cannot be vocalized and must be suffered in silence. Kierkegaard argues that it is ethics itself that is a “temptation” away from God. Faith and ethics, as such, are at odds in the story of Abraham and Isaac. If Abraham follows his ethical duty, his conscience, he will only defy God. He ascends the mountain alone, without the help of the community and with fear and trembling, Kierkegaard tells us. Being the knight of resignation, as Kierkegaard calls the ethical person, is arduous enough. Kierkegaard, or rather Johannes de Silentio, marks out the path of the person of faith without the guidance of a church or even sure knowledge of what is to be. Abraham’s only guide is his faith. The act of sacrificing his son is truly an act of madness, as Kierkegaard suggests, and Derrida argues that
there are no a priori ethical rules in the face of the Other (God) that can
countenance Abraham's act.

For Derrida, the situation of Abraham on Mount Moriah is the ethical
situation par excellence. However Abraham responds—for his god or for his
son—requires a freedom, a passive decision in the face of the absolute other,
and no ethical system, as Kierkegaard is keen to point out, can fix the answer
for the knight of faith beforehand. Derrida's reading of this foundational
sovereign fiction of the three monotheisms—those whose knights of faith
still fight it out in and around Mount Moriah—is well known. But here, I
would make a different inflection. It is true that the ethical relation, the
relation to the "absolute singularity of the other" propels us into thinking
the "paradox, scandal, and aporia" of an ethics beyond ethical rules. The
moral of this sovereign lesson, Derrida writes, "would be morality itself,
at the point where morality brings into play the gift of death that is so
given." Abraham is bound to God by an "unconditional obligation" in
the face of which his reply, all the way up the mountain is nothing other
than a simple, "Here I am."

Derrida is right that Abraham's sacrifice is done in secret, and marks
the secretive and unsharable (non-partage) essence of the decision made
in the face of an aporetic encounter with the other: "There is no language,
no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility
which leads me to absolute sacrifice, an absolute sacrifice that is not the
sacrifice of irresponsibility on the altar of responsibility. . . . 'Here I am' is
the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: I am
ready to respond."

But I pause, I pause in fear and trembling, when Derrida argues that
the sacrifice of Isaac is the "most common everyday experience of responsi-
bility." "Tout autre est tout autre," Derrida will argue, in an untranslatable
passage: every other is wholly other; every other is every bit other. "Tout
autre est tout autre": a phrase that binds the universal (tout autre) and the
singular (tout autre). And this responsibility to the other and its "infinite
alterity," is the basis for the aporias of politics and ethics. For Derrida, the
aporia—the lack of clear passage in these passages—of the relation to the
other calls into question all ethics that would leave us with good con-
sience: "I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the
other, by sacrificing that one to the other. I am responsible to any one (that
is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others,
to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice."

The other is taking the measure of us, and we must measure up,
impossibly, to the tout autre, the come-what-may of the future. With the
patrimonial gesture of the story of Abraham and Isaac, a difference in read-
ing would be "subtle but fundamental." Secreted away in this story are not
just the words of Abraham, but the one given no chance for justice, the thirty-year-old Isaac. Derrida notes that the story of Abraham and Isaac is one of God’s “sovereign decision[s].” The story of Abraham and Isaac is the first in a long line of lessons on sovereignty and political theology, the right over life and death given to man by God, the ultimate patria potestas passing that very right over life and death to the monarch of his people, Abraham. 

But whether as Abraham or Ibrahim, viewed as a Jew, a proto-Christian (as in Kierkegaard’s account), or a Muslim submitting himself to God, we must view this story with fear and trembling and not just because of what it reveals about our relations to the other.

It discloses not just a lesson about ethics, but about the theology that has long been the mystical foundation of sovereigns (operating in silence, beyond the laws in order to protect the laws), those men who would save the community by breaking its commandments against murder, there, from on high, on Mount Moriah. This is the story of Abraham; this is the story of all the knights of faith beyond the aporias of ethics, reducing their relation to the other to a sovereign mastery in a continuous story of the right of the father passed onto the son by the duty of sacrifice, supposed theological covenants, and divine rights. The moral of this lesson, this sovereign fiction, then, is thus not just morality itself, but also the right of the force of the strongest over the weakest; it is a story of the reasoning of the strongest, that coercive power that must remain in silence given the autoimmunity of sovereignty. In short, it is a story of man who stands with the strongest of the strong, God, against les hommes faibles, against his son, against his wife, in giving death to the other. If we are to question a politics of patriarchy and fraternity, we must first and foremost, in the name of the other, question the silence of Abraham in the face of the weak, in the face also of the feminine, all those that have already been sacrificed to the sacred order before this narrative has begun, and, which is also part of this mythos, the narrative force it would have for the future knights of faith and their pastoral power: the silencing of women in the name of patriarchal and sovereign right in the monotheisms of the future. Here we have the genesis of sovereign right in the Hebraic-Christian-Islamic traditions. In the name of the other, these traditions must also be called to account, that is to say, taken on. Thus, we can hear a certain inflection when Derrida argues:

I would say that according to situations, I am an antisovereignist or a sovereignist—and I vindicate the right to be antisovereignist at certain times and a sovereignist at others. No one can make me respond as though it were a matter of pressing a button on some old-fashioned machine. There are cases in which I would support a logic of the state, but I ask to examine each situation
before making a statement. It is also necessary to recognize that by
requiring someone to be not just unconditionally sovereigntist but
rather sovereigntist only under certain conditions, one is already
calling into question the principle of sovereignty. Deconstruction
begins there. It demands a different dissociation, almost impossible
but indispensable, between unconditionality (justice without power)
and sovereignty (right, power, or potency). Deconstruction is on the
side of unconditionality, even when it seems impossible, and not
sovereignty, even when it seems possible.39

There will be cases when one defends a certain sovereignty, for exam‑
pie, the sovereignty of developing nations, against the evil of the sovereignty
in want of more: the neocolonial powers and the rogue states of today.
Derrida writes, “Nation-state sovereignty can even itself, in certain condi‑
tions, become an indispensable bulwark against certain international powers,
certain ideological, religious, or capitalist, indeed linguistic hegemonies that
would still represent . . . a rationalization in the service of particular inter‑
ests.”40 But this sovereigntism would be in the name of the unconditional,
not in the name of the law of force and the reason of force of international
hegemony. The unconditional would be a “force without force,” a “weak
force” beyond the onto-theology of Abraham and his patriarchal heirs. A
democracy-to-come? That might be another name for the call, here and
now, of something other than still-sovereignly-led prayers and tears, that
is to say, a thinking that leads to the fear and trembling of the political.

FREEDOM. EQUALITY. BUT NOT FRATERNITY

In taking the measure of the lessons of sovereign fictions, it would be neces‑
sary to rethink freedom and its aporias, as we’ve begun to approach them
above. In the section that follows, we will pass through Derrida’s elucidation
of another freedom, one without autonomy, one without power and force,
one that troubles and trembles the thinking of democracy but nevertheless
ultimately confronts a long line of the fear and trembling of the politics
of sovereignty.

Freedom, of course, has for an entire heritage of thinking the political
been aligned with democracy and also a certain conception of sovereignty,
the moment when a decision within a democracy is to be made. “This will
be true throughout the entire history of this concept, from Plato’s Greece
onwards.”41 For Derrida, the autoimmunity of the democratic, the indetermi‑
nacy and self-criticism at the heart of any democracy worthy of the name,
is nothing other than the “freedom of play, an opening of indetermination
and indecicability in the very concept of democracy, in the interpretation of
Derrida argues that there are two reasons for the turn in his later writing toward the concept of freedom: First, the vacancy or disengagement, the semantic indecision at the center of *demokratia*. “Democracy would not gather itself around the presence of an axial and univocal meaning that does not destroy itself and get carried away with itself.” Secondly, he also notes that the we should be oriented to all the places in thought where the interpretation and reinterpretation of freedom risks the disrupting of the sending off, the allegation or claim of democracy. “Wherever freedom is no longer determined as power, mastery, or force, or even as a faculty, as a possibility of the ‘I can,’ the evocation and evaluation of democracy as the power of the *dēmos* begins to tremble. If one values freedom in general, before any interpretation, then one should no longer be afraid to speak without or against democracy.”

This freedom in the concept of democracy is intrinsic to its “plasticity,” which gives rise to a democratic thinking of the democratic. “Democracy is what it is only by spacing itself beyond being and even beyond ontological difference; it is (without being) equal and proper to itself only insofar as it is inadequate and improper, at the same time behind and ahead of itself,” he argues. Derrida’s thinking of freedom not only challenges a certain concept of the political, but also the politics of the concept. For Derrida, there is no democracy without deconstruction, as he argued in the *Politics of Friendship*; there is also no deconstruction without freedom. Derrida has long been attuned to indecidability in political structures, concepts, and institutions, articulating the view that “ethics, politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the *aporia*.”

I am exposed, destined to be free and to decide. . . . Between knowledge and decision, a leap is required, even if it is necessary to know as much and as well as possible before deciding. . . . “My” decision ought to be the *decision of the other* in me, a “passive” decision, a decision of the other that does not exonerate me from any of my responsibility.

Derrida thus argues that any politics worthy of the name must be marked through and through by structural indecidability and aporias, without clear passages and passes for what tomorrow. To dismiss the “ordeal of the indecidable” is, for Derrida, to replace politics in general and democracy in particular with a machine-like program that would make decisions and responsibility impossible. The aporias of freedom and democracy do not paralyze politics, as many have feared and argued, but actually make responsibility—and freedom—possible in the first place. This is what allows
Derrida in *Rogues* to claim, “the *aporia* in its general form has to do with freedom itself.”

What are we to make of this claim, though, that the *aporia*—that is, the indecidability that gives rise to decisions worthy of the name—has to do with freedom itself? Freedom, whether positive or negative, de facto or de jure, natural or immanent to state apparatuses, has always been considered exemplary of the subject who is, first and foremost, a master and sovereign over itself. “In political philosophy,” Derrida writes, “the dominant discourse about democracy presupposes this freedom as power, faculty, or the ability to act, the force or strength, in short, to do as one pleases, the energy of an intentional and deciding will.”

To be free is to be sovereign, to be free to do what one wants, even if this freedom threatens to become license, to interfere in the self-mastery of others. Derrida thus argues that freedom can be understood as a turn of phrase for power, for the ability to choose, to decide, to determine oneself, to be master, and first of all master of oneself. “There is no freedom without ipseity and vice-versa, no ipseity without freedom—and thus, without a certain sovereignty.”

But this freedom, Derrida argues, is always at war with itself, always threatening to do away with itself in its very freedom: freedom is always free to be otherwise than freedom, to free itself of itself. This is (its) autoimmunity. “The double bind is that we should deconstruct, both theoretically and practically, a certain political ontotheology of sovereignty without calling into question a certain thinking of liberty in the name of which we put this deconstruction to work, [w]hich supposes a quite different thinking of liberty.” As we have seen, Arendt’s thinking of *arché* deals with just this problem. Nancy, for his part in *The Experience of Freedom*, articulates what Derrida calls the autoimmunity of freedom in the following way:

The philosophical thought of freedom has been thoroughly subordinated to the determination of an ontology of subjectivity. . . . [But] freedom cannot be presented as the autonomy of a subjectivity in charge of itself and of its decisions, evolving freely and in perfect independence from every obstacle. What would such an independence mean, if not the impossibility in principle of entering into the slightest relation—and therefore of exercising the slightest freedom?

Derrida treats this autoimmunity of freedom in *Rogues* through two interconnected strands of analysis: first, a philosophical investigation of the free-play of concepts, including the concepts of freedom and democracy; secondly, a more obviously political—that is to say at once strategic and performative—rendering of the concepts of freedom and democracy in response to political exigencies. In order to bring out the import of Derrida's
conceptual and strategic interventions, I will treat these strands by turning to Derrida's reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom* in *The Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*.

Derrida begins his reading by noting that the relation between self-mastery and freedom is not just a modern conception, as Nancy suggests, but in fact extends back to the depiction of democracy in Aristotle and Plato, where it is said to be intimately related to both liberty (*eleutheria*) and free will or license as an “I can” (*exousia*). Because of this relation between freedom (*eleutheria* or *exousia*) and democracy, Derrida maintains that democracy is the only system in which one always already has the right, the license, to criticize openly everything, including the concept and history of the idea of democracy; this is both its threat and its chance. This self-deconstruction or autoimmunity gives rise to the aporia of democracy: the *dēmos* of democracy is always free to rid itself of democracy, or, to fend off this possibility, to limit democracy and curtail freedoms in order to save democracy from its supposed enemies. We have seen both alternatives play themselves out in recent years, for example, in Algeria in 1994, in Thailand in 2006, or anywhere in which the police apparatuses and security agencies expand and master the political in the name of protecting the democratic order.

For Derrida, Nancy is an ally for criticizing traditional notions of freedom anchored in the self-mastery of the subject. Nancy's texts are exemplary for their attempt to think a nonsubjective freedom, one based not in the mastery of the self, in ipseity, but in the thrownness, the spacing, of existence, what might be called the *ex-ousia* of *exousia* or free will. Nancy argues that the metaphysical conception of freedom as mastery, as sovereignty, has been but another way of mastering freedom, a mastering of freedom in the name of mastery. Nancy writes:

> Keeping a space free for freedom might amount to keeping oneself from wanting to understand freedom, in order to keep oneself from destroying it in the unavoidable determination of an understanding. Thus the thought of freedom's incomprehensibility, or its unpresentability, might seem to heed not only the constraint of a limitation of power of thought, but also, positively, a respect for and a preservation of the free domain of freedom. . . . [T]he metaphysics of freedom . . . often finds itself exposed to the danger of having surreptitiously “comprehended” freedom . . . by having assigned freedom a residence in knowledge and, above all, in the self-knowledge of a subjectively determined freedom.55

The difficulty, Derrida argues, citing Nancy, “arrives when one must determine politically, indeed democratically . . . the spacing of a pre-subjective...
or pre-cratic freedom, one that is all the more unconditional, immense, immeasurable, incalculable, unappropriable insofar as it ‘can in no way take the form of a property.’ Undeniably, Derrida argues, this takes a form of the impossible, an impossible that is at once reasonable, that is counting and accountable: to share the incommensurable of freedom in a “just, equitable, and measured fashion.” This is the traditional and well-known aporia of freedom and equality, the free-play between the unconditional and the conditional that must be negotiated in any politics, indeed, in any democratic thinking of political and philosophical concepts. Nancy’s claim in The Experience of Freedom is that “fraternity” names this very relation between the conditioning (equality) and the unconditional (freedom). “Fraternity is equality in the sharing of the incommensurable,” Nancy writes. This has been a constant, though often unavowed theme throughout Nancy’s corpus, from The Experience of Freedom to The Creation of the World, or Globalization, in which, as we have seen, Nancy writes, “Freedom and fraternity, together, could represent the absence of the given height” of sovereignty.

But if what is shared out is already incommensurable, unmeasured, what use is the word fraternity, which seems to put a certain measure, and a nonfortuitous exclusion of the feminine, into the very sharing of the incommensurable? This is what motivates Derrida’s reading of The Experience of Freedom in Rogues. For Derrida, the “evocation and evaluation of democracy as the power [kratos] of the démos begins to tremble” when “freedom is no longer determined as power” or mastery, as is the case in Nancy. But Derrida is also interested—and this interest provoked much of Derrida’s later work—in this “trembling” of the démos of democracy. Traditionally conceived, the démos is inaugurated at the moment it imagines itself to be made up of equals, that is, those who are born free and equal. The démos is the measuring out, the equalizing, of that which is by definition unconditional, namely, freedom. Ultimately, Derrida is worried that Nancy’s “fraternalism might follow at least the temptation of a genealogical descent back to autochthony,” that is, to a thinking of the démos that repeats a tradition that limits rights and freedoms to men of native birth, to the exclusion of women and immigrants from the rights of a familial circle.

Derrida’s critique of Nancy is at once strategic and conceptual. Nancy has argued, as he does in an appendix of fragments to The Experience of Freedom, that his use of fraternity is deconstructive, since it evacuates the term of its traditional meaning in order to reinvest it with another thinking of the political. This has been an approach familiar to those who have followed Derrida’s readings of hospitality, the gift, and, of course, democracy. But Derrida notes, pointedly, “any time the literality” of the familial and phallocentric “implications ha[ve] been denied, for example, by claiming that one was speaking not of the natural or biological family (as if the
family were ever purely natural and biological) or that the figure of the
brother was merely a symbolic and spiritual nature, it was never explained”
why one should hold onto this figure over any other, including those various
figures of the feminine: women, mother, sister, and so on.64 “One thus has
to ask oneself,” Derrida writes, “one has to ask Nancy, why he is so keen
on keeping the word fraternity in order to the say equality in the sharing
of the incommensurable” or freedom.65

For his part, Derrida argues that it is not enough to say that one is
taking on the tradition in the combative sense, since the very use of certain
terms cannot help but take on the tradition affirmatively, whatever one’s
intentions. This is the place of Derrida’s conceptual politics: to point out
not just the free-play of concepts, but also the way that they have sedi‑mented into particular hierarchies throughout the tradition. The continued
use and affirmation of certain terms, for example, fraternity, Derrida argues,
risks foreclosing this free-play of freedom and the democratic, which is an
“experience of the impossible,” the trembling of différence between fraternity
and its other. Derrida argues that Nancy’s acceptance of fraternity as the
free sharing of the dead father is but a repetition, in another register, of
a Christian and/or Freudian notion of community, or communion, as the
sharing-out of the body of the dead father.66 This part of the tradition is
unacceptable, especially, though Derrida doesn’t mention it, since Nancy
calls for a fighting for fraternity. Nancy writes:

Fighting “for” freedom, equality, fraternity, and justice does not consist
merely of making other conditions of existence occur, since it is
not simply on the order of a project, but also consists of affirming
hic et nunc, free, equal, fraternal, and just existence.67

But what is left of of democracy once the traditional foundations of
the démos (birth) and kratos (the sovereign individual) have been called
into question? Can we think of a democracy that would register an “expe‑
rience of the alterity of the other, of heterogeneity, of the singular, of the
not-same, the different, the dissymmetric, the heteronomous”?68 In the end,
these questions lead us to Derrida’s articulation of the “democracy to come”
and its relation to the question of freedom.

With the non-concept of the democracy-to-come, Derrida takes up
and affirms a term that has resonances with ancillary tropes, including fra‑
ternity, that Derrida would want to critique. Derrida himself has worried
about his use of the word democracy, which he says in Paper Machine, “can
only be use[d] anxiously.”69 But Derrida writes, for strategic reasons, that one
must take on democracy in the name of democracy, especially since “any
democracy is always influenced by the recognition of not being adequate
to its model,” a formulation that could not said of fraternity. In fact, the
former is taken up in a bid to question, critique, and displace the latter.
Derrida asks in *The Politics of Friendship*:

Is it still in the name of democracy, of a democracy to come, that
one will attempt to deconstruct a concept, all the predicates asso‑
ciated with the massively dominant concept of democracy, that in
whose heritage one inevitably meets again the law of birth, the
natural or “national” law, the law of homophilia, civic equality
(isonomy) founded on equality of birth (isogony) as the condition
of calculation of approbriation and, therefore, the aristocracy of
virtue and wisdom, and so forth.70

And so the possibility is always raised of abandoning the name, of betraying
the heritage of the name of a concept, in this case democracy, in order to
live up to its name, Derrida argues. “[T]o keep this Greek name, democracy,
is an affair of context, of rhetoric or strategy, even of polemics, reaffirming
that this name will last as long as it has to but not much longer, saying
that things are speeding up remarkably in these fast times, is not necessar‑
ily giving in to the opportunism or cynicism of the antidemocrat who is
not showing his cards.”71 It is here that Derrida makes explicit his isonomy
between deconstruction and democracy: “no deconstruction without democ‑
racy, no democracy without deconstruction.”72 It is also here that Derrida’s
generalized politics of the concept meets up with a specifically political
intervention or invention.

In *Rogues*, Derrida thinks this through the problem of the vulgar‑
ity of the roguish démos, those appositional to the sovereignty of the kra‑
tos of democracy.73 Though Derrida identifies himself as a rogue of sorts,
it is this roguish trope that helps Derrida to take up the problem of the
mob, those whose nationalisms Arendt reviewed at length in the *Origins
of Totalitarianism*:

The voyou [rogue] is always a part of mankind, always human, of our
kind, and almost always a man. . . . From a political point of view,
the representatives of order, the forces of bourgeois or moral order,
try to present as Voyous all rebels, agitators, and insurgents, indeed
all revolutionaries, whether they come from bad neighborhoods or
from the suburbs, whether they erect barricades, as in 1848, 1870,
or 1968, or commit acts of vandalism, crime, organized crime, or
terrorism. This is as true for the revolutions of the left as for those
of the right. Fascism, Nazism, populism, today’s movements of the
far right also often recruit from among a population that might eas‑
ily be described as a voyoucracy, Criteria are often lacking in this area, which is also a zone, that is a belt, for distinguishing between voyoucracy and the people as plebeians, between democratic election, referendum, and plebiscite.74

Derrida, of course, is thinking of the role of the banlieue, the zones in around French cities that, like the “ghettos” of the United States, have played as setpieces in demagogic rightist speeches in France, since it is in the banlieue where the other lives (even where the state has all but made life unlivable). In the United States, it is these places in which votes are least likely to count, or to be counted well. But it is also in these poorest of the poor regions of any state that populisms of a pernicious kind give rise to racism, there where the superfluous find mechanisms for a backlash against the forces containing them in these zones, often in ways not amenable to a thinking of justice, though we must never forget that these crimes are nothing on the scale of the “white-collar” and other forms of criminality in the capital and in capitalism that go unpunished as the jails fill with the so-called criminal element of the banlieue. In sites la-bas and en bas, le plus bas, from the capital, the promise and the dangers of a democracy-to-come, of a democracy that counts all the votes and voices (voix), there is, as in the capital, an “indecidable limit between the demagogic and the democratic,” between those in want of sovereignty, whatever “its shape and form” (as democracy or the voyoucracy of the criminal underworld), and those responding in the face of the other, and it’s never fully determinable which is which.75 This requires another thinking of rights and also another thinking of citizenship beyond or within the nation-state, in short, “engag[ing] in another experience of belonging and in another political logic.”76

When I speak of the democracy to come—this thing that can appear a little mad or impossible—I am thinking of a democracy that would no longer be bound in any essential way to citizenship. Here again, I come back to the same apparent contradiction: I am not against citizenship; it is necessary, and one must even fight for certain human beings who have been deprived of it, so that they might finally gain it. But the rights of man must also be extended beyond citizenship.77

In Specters of Marx, Derrida ties this thinking to what he calls the “new international,” a haunting from the future of an international movement that Derrida argues is the only hope, the only “hope now,” to borrow the felicitous and enigmatic phrase of Sartre’s last interviews. As Bill Martin puts it, Derrida’s writing is related to a double trauma: “a trauma not only
from the future [as the other that interrupts the presence and present of
the self], but indeed of no future." As Derrida wrote in Of Grammatology,
“The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It
is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be
proclaimed, presented, as a form of monstrosity.” It is in the face of this
possibility of “no future,” of no future worthy of the name, that Derrida
speaks of a responsible and non-naïve “hope now,” of a hope from the future
that impels us, now, to anticipate, to work, to think, that is, to be engaged
in another spacing of the political that is represented in a “weak force [of]
movements that are still heterogeneous, still somewhat unformed, full of
contradictions, but that gather together the weak of the earth, all those
who feel themselves crushed by the economic hegemonies, by the liberal
market, by sovereignty, and so on.” Let me quote at length from Derrida,
from Specters of Marx, because it is here that he ties together his thinking
of the democracy to come with the thinking of the promise of an event of
another thinking of the political beyond its mechanization.

Even beyond the regulative idea in its classic form, the idea, if
that is still what it is, of democracy to come, its “idea” as event
of a pledged injunction that orders one to summon the very thing
that will never present itself in the form of a full presence, is the
opening of this gap between an infinite promise (always untenable
at least for the reason that it calls for the infinite respect of singu-
larlarity and infinite alterity of the other as much as for the respect
of the countable, calculated, subjectal equality between anonymous
singularities) and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily
inadequate forms of what has to measured against this promise. To
this extent, the effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise,
like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it,
and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope
at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come [l’à-venir]
of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be
anticipated. Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what
one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve,
welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise
of the arrivant from whom or from which one will not ask anything
in return and who or which will not be asked to commit to the
domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, State, nation,
territory, native soil or blood, language . . . ), just opening which
renounces any right to property, any right in general . . . opening
to what is coming . . . to the event that cannot be awaited as such,
or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner
Derrida and the Limits of Sovereignty’s Reason

itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always in memory of the hope.81

Derrida long noted, on the one hand, that the interminable analysis of the aporia of democracy as ultimately indefinable, deferred, and displaced, that is, democracy as différence, gives rise to indecision. But, for Derrida, “this indecidability is, like freedom itself, granted by democracy, and it constitutes . . . the only radical possibility of deciding”; it is the only hope now of the future.82 In other words, the decision is the event of the “to-come” of democracy, its future, which is never satisfied with democracy as it stands, here and now. At this indecidable limit, we can see the true force, the force without force, of what Derrida calls the “passive decision”:

If an event worthy of this name is to arrive or happen, it must, beyond all mastery, affect a passivity. It must touch an exposed vulnerability, one without absolute immunity . . . there where it is not yet or is already no longer possible to face or face up to the unforeseeability of the other. In this regard autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. . . . What must be thought is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude, in short, something like a passive decision.83

Are we free to think, to experience, such a freedom? If it is no longer a matter of mastery, no longer a power of the “I can,” then it is also no longer a matter of deciding for this freedom, of freeing the self for such a decision, of simply fighting for freedom or even a fraternity, of a decisionism or voluntarism that has no other relation than to the solus of the ipse. Deconstruction as an attunement to the autoimmunity of freedom and democracy is not a philosophy of the emancipatory promise, of a teleological messianism with its theological fear and trembling, but a thinking of the free space of the promise itself, the radical perhaps within any system, institution, or living being open to the radical future, the democracy to come, the coming of the other:

It is a question here, as with the coming of any event worthy of this name, of an unforeseeable coming of the other, of a heteronomy, of a law coming from the other, of a responsibility and decision of the other—of the other in me, an other greater and older than I am.84

Absolutely heterogeneous to any program—in fact, autoimmunity is that which calls for the “event of the irruptive decision”—the decision is indeed...
a weak force, always at risk and risking itself in the face of what or who
knows what. What could be more undemocratic, less open and intelligible
to the δῆμος of democracy, than this and what Derrida called in The Other
Heading a “‘freedom’ to be invented. Every day. At least. And democracy
along with it.”85 To the democrat, to those who believe in freedom and
think this freedom should be comprehended and experienced by all, this all
may sound, as Derrida admits, like a dangerous obscurantism. But Derrida’s
deconstruction of democracy and freedom—rethought as the sending of a
heritage still to come, of a democracy to come as this very sending—leads
not to a political quietism paralyzed in the face of what Derrida suggestively
calls the “khôra of the political.”
Rather, taking on democracy and freedom—questioning power (kratos)
and the measuring out of the people (δῆμος)—is the unconditional claim
made upon all those who take themselves to be the friends of freedom and
democracy. And this claim would form nothing other than what Derrida
called in “Faith and Knowledge” a “co-autoimmunity.” This is the “death
drive at work in every community,” one we’ve seen in Rousseau, the “prin-
ciple of self-protection” that also leads to the demise of a community
rethinking itself in its “self-contesting attestation.” “Keep[ing] the autoim-
mune community alive” means being “open to . . . the other, the future,
death, [and] freedom,” that is, a being without sovereignty and a hope now
apposing the reason of the strongest.86 This co-autoimmunity, then, would be
nothing other than the “community of the question” announced by Derrida
long ago in “Violence and Metaphysics,” that is, the questioning of sover-
eignty and a questioning of freedom that motivates us to work, each day,
for a future worthy of the name.