

Benoît Peeters' Derrida biography, just out in English and German translations, is a must-read for everyone interested in late 20th century philosophy. Over the years I must have read 4-5 books of Jacques Derrida—not much in comparison to his phenomenal output. As the cover already announces, Peeters has written a broad, human-interest biography in an Anglo-Saxon style. That may sound unusual for Paris—and maybe it is. A sign of times? Intellectual versions of Derridology already exist and no doubt more will appear in this genre. The inevitable coming biography by Avital Ronell will no doubt be a unique mix between the two genres. I myself knew little or nothing about the Werdegang of the good man, so it is not up to me to complain about personal details. I do not feel like pointing at the bias of the biographer or complain about the lack of larger psycho-cultural and socio-political frameworks (which is no doubt true). The fact is, in a few decades, despite all the Derrida archives, a book like this can no longer be written because the contemporaries that Peeters interviewed (100 or so) will no longer be alive.

What tires you out as a reader are the sheer endless fights between Parisian (and European) writers and thinkers from the 1960s to the recent present. This personality got into trouble with that genius etc. etc. A concept was no good. A discussion got out of hand. With the distance in time growing this is a mystery that will need a proper explanation: Why all this fractionalism? What the hell was at stake here? Money? Media coverage? Research money? None of that seems to apply in the Parisian context. Power? Truth? Reputation? Honor? Maybe. Amongst orthodox Marxists and inside social movements there are and always have been strategic debates, but in this case? Why this enormous anxiety and polarization? Was it only about power position inside institutions? Or perhaps in general the position of the intellectual in society? (a joke from today's perspective) A play of characters comparable to the dramas on the ape rock? (celebrities gossiping about each other). Or indirect political and ideological struggles? (preferred reading but most likely an overdetermination).

Peeters' Derrida biography can be read as one of possibly many parallel stories that can be told about French Theory going Global. The historical contribution of the most widely travelled proponent of this diverse movement seems to be one of deconstruction. I prefer the German term *Abbau* (Heidegger writes about *Destruktion*). Working in the long shadow of Second World War, Cold War, economic restructuring, decolonization and new social movements (in particular feminism), Derrida has led the project

to take apart the old European metaphysical concepts—albeit in a playful, positive manner. He comes over as a careful and modest person, neither a radical nor a fan of negative dialectics. Deconstruction as a cultural practices comes over a gentle project to take apart the Western supremacy, in a time when Europe was divided and defeated. Engaged and political in his own way, his main audience remained inside academia. His aim was to blow up the traditional discipline of philosophy (while remaining inside its walls). For today's generation this would be a difficult task (Derrida's failed attempts to get a respectable position inside French academia reads as a real tragedy). Anyone writing in the style of Derrida today wouldn't even get a PhD and his or her contributions to journals would be straight out rejected because of incomprehensible language, lack of quotes and absent argument. We are not supposed to fool around with literature, theory and philosophy. What was, and still is so radical about Derrida is his poetic experimental style. That's the real scandal. Just read the comments below [Terry Eagleton's review of the book in The Guardian](#).

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Benoît Peeters, *Derrida, A Biography*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013
(translated by Andrew Brown, org. published by Flammarion in 2010).