

## Surfaces



Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

Michael Peters

Volume 4, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064979ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064979ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Peters, M. (1994). Review of [Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)]. *Surfaces*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064979ar>

---

Copyright © Michael Peters, 1994



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

---

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## BOOK REVIEW

### JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD'S *POLITICAL WRITINGS*.

Michael Peters

**Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).**

Inasmuch as there was in Marxism a discourse which claimed to be able to express without residue all opposing positions, which forgot that differends are embodied in incommensurable figures between which there is no logical solution, it became necessary to stop speaking this idiom at all...

J.-F. Lyotard, "A Memorial for Marxism"[\[1\]](#)

It is, perhaps, unusual to begin a review with reference to works other than the one under discussion. My excuse is bound up with language and the production of texts in time; with a rejection of simple chronologies as they can be fabricated out of personal histories. The selection which constitutes Jean-François Lyotard's *Political Writings* -- and their ordering -- demonstrate something of this complexity. The second half of the book, except for the opening essay "The Name of Algeria", is made up of Lyotard's writings on Algeria whilst he was a member of *Socialism or Barbarism*. All the essays appeared in the journal of that name during the period of Lyotard's engagement with critical Marxism, 1954-1963. Within the structure of the book these essays constitute the fifth section -- "Algerians". Roughly half the collection in terms of pages, structurally a fifth, they concern Lyotard's writings on Algeria at an early stage of his political engagement. These essays provide an insight into Lyotard's early political engagement, his pre-occupation with the postcolonial question in Algeria, and his *différend* with revolutionary Marxism.

The first half is more complex structurally and chronologically: seven chapters under the title "Intellectuals" which originally appeared in *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (1984); a further seven chapters entitled "Students", based on material originally published as early as 1964, but mainly in the early 1970s, and two further essays -- one published in 1978, the other in 1989. The first essay appearing in the third section -- "Born in 1925" -- originally appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948; the other four chapters date from 1978 and include recent work published as late as 1992. The final section, "More 'jews'", spans the period from 1948 to 1990. (This complexity is further compounded by the timing and separation of writing and publishing, by reprinting, by translation.)

There is also the question of the place of *Political Writings* within the corpus of Lyotard's work, the complexity of which again defies a simple recounting of publication dates. For instance, Lyotard has remarked that *The Postmodern Condition*, in the eyes of his critics, has occluded his other works; that it was marked by sociology and epistemology rather than philosophy; and that the philosophical basis of *The Postmodern Condition* is to be found in *The Differend*.<sup>[2]</sup> This same "displacement" occurs with *Political Writings* for while one can name the specific genres that constitute Lyotard's writings -- the philosophical, the epistemological, those of criticism, linguistics, autobiography or aesthetics -- politics, as he says, is more complex than a genre, combining "discursive genres (but also phrase-regimes) which are totally heterogeneous" ("Interview" 299).

As another self-commentary which also applies to *Political Writings*, we might echo Lyotard's words that "the essential philosophical task will be to refuse [...] the complete aestheticization of the political," ("Interview" 299). which he maintains is characteristic of modern politics. By "aestheticization" Lyotard means the "fashioning" or shaping of community according to an idea of reason. The crisis which is addressed in *Political Writings* is the crisis of "the end of the political,"<sup>[3]</sup> "of all attempts to moralize politics which were incarnated in Marxism" ("Interview" 300).<sup>[4]</sup> *Political Writings*, as Bill Readings suggests in his Foreword, is characterized by a "resistance to modernist universalism", by an "argument against what may be called the politics of redemption"(xviii). What we are presented with, then, as an alternative, is a politics of resistance, a form of writing which offers resistance to established thought and acceptable opinion. The same form of writing also registers an on-going internal struggle or resistance, characterized by the *différend* between early and later modes of thinking and, crucially, by Lyotard's *différend* with Marxism.<sup>[5]</sup>

These *différends* constitute reason enough to suggest that *Political Writings* is an invaluable contribution to understanding Lyotard's work and both his status and significance as a thinker on the non-Marxist left. For serious students and scholars in the English-speaking world interested in Lyotard's

writings, the publication of *Political Writings* is something of an "event"; it provides a political "supplement" to his other works and an account of his sustained political engagement over more than thirty years. By the very nature of his militant involvement with *Pouvoir Ouvrier*; his support for Algerian liberation and contributions to *Socialism or Barbarism* (of which he was a member of the Editorial Board for a decade); and his active involvement with student issues and the events leading to May 1968 -- this record of political activity and writings serve as a kind of memorial to the "organic" intellectual, and together comprise the experiential and conceptual basis for the development of Lyotard's notion of the "specific" intellectual. It also serves, as Readings maintains, to "provide a useful empirical corrective to charges that poststructuralism is an evasion of politics, or that Lyotard's account of the postmodern condition is a product of blissful ignorance of the postcolonial question" ("Forward" xiii). Specifically, *Political Writings* provides not only an intellectual grounding for understanding the emergence of the postmodern political moment, indispensable for those who wish to appreciate the poststructuralist problematic dominating the French left after 1968 -- both critics and followers alike -- but also, implicitly, fragments and glimpses of a personal history of turmoil and struggle with the problems of modern political theory that results from a long-standing commitment to overcoming oppressions of all kinds.

The notion of "memorial" lurks beneath the surface in Lyotard's *différend* with Marxism and with his notion of the intellectual. The title (and collection) *Tombeau de L'intellectuel*, from which the first seven essays are drawn, Lyotard notes, "did not mean following Maurice Blanchot's idea that the intellectual is dead and must be buried" ("Interview" 301). Rather, the term "tombeau", as Lyotard indicates, in French, carries the designation of a literary or musical genre -- "a sort of memorial movement". So:

the "tombeau" of the intellectual is also the memorial of the intellectual. So we are *in memoriam*. This is not to say that there are no longer any intellectuals, but that today's intellectuals, philosophers in so far as they are concerned by politics and by questions of community, are no longer able to take up obvious and pellucid positions; they cannot speak in the name of an "unquestionable" universality as, for example, Zola or Sartre were able to. ("Interview" 301)

In "Wittgenstein 'After'" (Chapter 5) Lyotard acknowledges the way in which his thinking takes place "after", and links up with Wittgenstein, clarifying the diversity and incommensurability of language games as Wittgenstein's response to the general sense of nihilism and delegitimation characterizing European culture following the Second World War. The transition from "language games" to "phrase regimes" and their linkages, therefore, is Lyotard's major innovation and response to the ethico-political demands

following the loss of innocence in a time "diseased by language" and dominated by "industrial technoscience". As Lyotard writes:

Mourning for the unity of language [and of the subject] -- a certain "joy" in the description of its strengths and its weaknesses, the refusal to have recourse to metaphysical entities like finality, the will to power, or even *thought* -- ought to make Wittgenstein familiar to us. (*Political Writings* 21)

This analysis provides "linkages" with the question of intellectuals, "Intellectual Fashions", the form of the modern state, "cultural policy", the informational transformation of language by the "new technologies", and, of course, "the problem of capitalism", which, as Lyotard's states in "A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question", "overshadows all others, including that of the contemporary state..." (*Political Writings* 25)

Lyotard was at the University of Nanterre during the events of May 1968 and there are, correspondingly, three essays which deal with that time and its aftermath: "Preamble to a Charter", "Nanterre, Here, Now", and "March 23". The focus of the struggle was against the modernizing tendency -- new selection methods and the changed conditions to the baccalauréat examination -- of the Fouchet's reforms, which compromised the demand for democratization and, in doing so, severely underestimated the students' desire for genuine participation.<sup>[6]</sup> Themes that were to surface later in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* find their source here: in critique of a class monopolization of knowledge and the mercantilization of knowledge; in an attack on the "hierarchical magisterial relation" of pedagogy; in the refusal of a kind of education under capitalism which merely socially reproduces students to fulfill the technical demands of the system, and in the expression of a moral ideal embodied in non-dialectical forms of dialogue as the ethical condition for pedagogy.<sup>[7]</sup> There are, in addition, three later essays which address the "reorganization" of the psychoanalysis department at Vincennes (written with Gilles Deleuze), and the teaching and status of philosophy.

Under the oddly styled sub-title of "Big Brothers" are subsumed a range of essays. "Born in 1925" locates Lyotard's philosophical concerns at the point of the "catastrophic breakup of both liberalism and positivism," and the "crisis of language" at the point where the "civilization of progress has just completed its own negation". This essay forecasts Lyotard's interests in the politics of aesthetics, as much as the aesthetization of politics -- a long time preoccupation with the literary and artistic avant-garde, especially surrealism. At least one critic has noted the way in which a number of early texts by Lyotard are reminiscent of Breton's manifestos, especially where the tracks of Marx and Freud converge in an economy of libidinal energies.<sup>[8]</sup> "A Podium without a Podium" uses the medium of television against itself through the technique of "voice over" and an unsynchronized sound track to

question the authority of the intellectual and the form of TV. "Oikos" records Lyotard's views on ecology considered within the politics of general development and modernization - -- "ecology as discourse of the secluded". "The General Line", written for Gilles Deleuze in 1990 and based upon Nina Berberova's *Le Roseau Révolté*, speaks of a second existence, of a "no man's land", which escapes totalitarian and administrative control. Lyotard's fable "The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun" muses on the state of criticism in general where emancipation has become a goal of the system and the role of the critic subsumed under the task of offering appropriate means to improve the efficiency of the reform process in a kind of defensive praxis. For Lyotard "neither the liberal nor the Marxist reading can account for the historical situation marked by both the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf crisis" (p. 119). There is only the dream of the infinitely extendable open system based upon the fable of the Sun.

These essays bear a certain "family resemblance" to themes addressed elsewhere: the status of philosophy, the position of the intellectual in the postmodern condition, the failure of grand narratives, the space for critique.

Under the title "More 'Jews'" there are four essays, beginning with the early essay "German Guilt" published in *L'Age Nouveau* in 1948, which demonstrates Lyotard's concern for the ethical through an interrogation of Jasper's *The Question of German Guilt*. The essay following provides autobiographical and theoretical links with this early concern to address a conference in Vienna on the subject of *Heidegger and "the Jews"*, and, in particular, Heidegger's silence on the subject of the *Shoah*, which Lyotard structures around the "double problem" of the undeniable greatness of Heidegger's thought *and* the objectionable nature of his politics. For anyone acquainted with the French Heidegger "affair", with the ensuing public debate following the publication of Victor Farías' book *Heidegger and Nazism* - -- its reverberations within a Nietzschean-Heideggerian French poststructuralism -- these essays must be considered crucial to the thought of a possible post-Auschwitz philosophical politics. Lyotard's championing of the "micrological", the little narratives, rests upon his appropriation of Adorno's forceful symbolization of "Auschwitz", as a kind of "para-experience" where dialectics is impossible. In *Le Différend*, "Auschwitz" functions as a model which designates an "experience" of language that brings speculative discourse to an end because, as Lyotard maintains, it invalidates the presupposition of that philosophical genre (viz., that all that is real is rational, and that all that is rational is real). For Lyotard "Auschwitz" serves as the symbolic end or "liquidation" of the project of modernity. It symbolizes the "tragic 'incompletion' of modernity" by pointing to the moral that universal history does not move inevitably towards the better, that history does not have a universal finality.<sup>[9]</sup> For Lyotard

the expression "the jews" refers to all those who, wherever they are, seek to remember and to bear witness to something that is constitutively forgotten,

not only in each individual mind, but in the very thought of the West. And it refers to all those who assume this anamnesis and this witnessing as an obligation, a responsibility, or a debt, not only toward thought, but toward justice (p. 141).

In two further pieces, "The Grip (Mainmise)" and "Europe, the Jews and the Book", written in 1990, Lyotard pursues the differend that sets apart the Jews from the rest of Europe, and the Christian testament from the Torah.

Chapters 24 to 34 of the section entitled "Algerians" were originally published together in *La Guerre des Algériens* in 1989. These essays, with the exception of the opening one are, as I have mentioned above, a selection from Lyotard's contributions to *Socialism or Barbarism*, from the time after he was assigned responsibility for the Algerian section in 1955. I shall not provide a detailed account of the contents of these chapters here -- they resist the paraphrase of the reviewer and cannot, at any rate, be properly rendered in another idiom. In "The Name of Algeria", the opening essay which prefaces this selection and *La Guerre des Agériens*, Lyotard acknowledges his debt to the group which inherited the revolutionary tradition while at the same time presiding over the demise of the revolutionary hope which sustained and informed it. In the articles of this period, as Lyotard himself comments, there is already a suspicion of "depoliticization", of a political crisis which threatened to mark the end of the grand narratives of emancipation and the loss of substance and intelligibility, in particular, of radical Marxism. Lyotard comments that he preserves only one belief from this political crisis:

that it is inaccurate and intellectually dishonest to impose the hope that, as Maxists, we should only invest in the revolutionary activity of the industrial proletariat, upon the freely spontaneous activity of such as young people, immigrants, women, homosexuals, prisoners, or people of the Third World. (169)

The "voice of the intractable" still remains; it has not been extinguished by the system. It is just that the political has ceased to be "the privileged site in which the intractable appeared." As Lyotard argues:

Certainly, something of the intractable persists in the present system, but it is not possible to locate and support its expressions or signs in the same areas of the community and with the same means as those of half a century ago. (169)

*Political Writings* is an invaluable collection of Lyotard's work, of his unerring sense of political commitment, of his own inner turmoil over questions that have proven to be among the most significant and challenging of the age, and of his political imagination which enables him to recast hegemonic stories, old narratives, and exhausted utopias in forms that present new political possibilities for resistance.

**Michael Michael Peters**  
**Senior Lecturer**  
**Dept. of Education University of Auckland**  
**New Zealand**  
**Email: [ma.peters@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ma.peters@auckland.ac.nz)**

[1] In *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 61.

[2] J.-F. Lyotard, "An Interview with Jean-François Lyotard", Willem van Reijen and Dick Veerman, *Theory, Culture and Society* 5 (1988): 278

[3] This is the title of Bill Reading's provocative Foreword to *Political Writings*.

[4] For an early statement of Lyotard's "deconstruction" of Marxism, see J.-F. Lyotard, *Dérives à Partir de Marx et Freud* (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973). The English translation of "Dérives" appears as "Adrift", in J.-F. Lyotard, *Driftworks*, ed. Roger McKeon (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984). For a more recent account of Lyotard's relationship to Marxism, particularly that epitomised by Pierre Souyri, see "A Memorial of Marxism: For Pierre Souyri", in *Peregrinations*, 45-65.

[5] As Lyotard makes clear in "A Memorial for Marxism", this *différend* was not only personal or conceptual, it was also concerned with the question of *logic* and of the means of expression of what was at stake in understanding and transforming the new direction taken in modern capitalism after the Second World War. He writes: "A differend is not simply divergence precisely to the extent that its object cannot enter into the debate without modifying the rules of that debate"(49).

[6] For an historical account of the French educational reforms of this period and the differences between Lyotard's and Foucault's responses to the changes, see James Marshall, "Pedagogy and Apedagogy: Lyotard and Foucault at Vincennes", in Michael Peters ed., *Education and the Postmodern Condition* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, in press).

[7] See Bill Readings, "From Emancipation to Obligation: Sketch for a Heteronomous Politics of Education", in Michael Peters ed., *Education and the Postmodern Condition*.



[8] See Christa Burger's "Modernity as Postmodernity: Jean-François Lyotard", in S. Lash and S. Friedman eds., *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992): 73-93. Burger, wrongly in my opinion, assimilates Lyotard's work and that of postmodernism in general to (Italian) Futurism and echoes Benjamin's reaction to Futurism, without examining Marinetti's split with Mussolini in 1920.

[9] See sections 152-160 of *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1988), and "Apostil on Narratives" and "Missive on Universal History" in J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992): 27-32 and 33-48.