

# Power without Power: Malabou on Derrida's Economy of Domination

(ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT)

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Catherine Malabou's critique of Jacques Derrida's economy of domination. The central concern that emerges from this discussion is the deconstruction of an isomorphism between power and domination that, according to Malabou's reading, is not fully, or at least not clearly, achieved in Derrida's work. The first part of this article describes the chain of possible substitutions through which the word power acquires meaning in Derrida's work, one that places nonpower at the heart of power and one that gives central importance to Freud's *Bem chtigungstrieb*. The second part of the article offers a reception of the philosophical discussion on the deconstruction of the relationship between power and domination. First, Malabou's critique of the quasitranscendental status of mastery in Derrida's reading of Freud is considered, from which it follows that in Derrida's deconstruction there is no power beyond domination. Secondly, alternative readings are presented that offer different insights into the possibility of other experiences of power in Derrida's work that are not reducible to domination, and more so, other experiences of power that subvert predetermined authoritarian and cruel sovereignties. In the concluding section, by contrasting these different readings of Derrida's texts on power, the possible relations between Malabou's insightful notion of the non-governable and Derrida's notion of nonpower in relation to experiences of power detached from domination are discussed.

**Keywords:** Catherine Malabou, Jacques Derrida, power, domination, nonpower, non-governable

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Catherine Malabou's *Au voleur ! Anarchisme et Philosophie* (2022a; Malabou 2023), raises an important but difficult question: why are philosophers so reticent about the political viability of the absence of government (she considers the works of Schürmann, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, and Rancière)? Despite the relevance of this discussion, it is not Malabou's analysis of the disavowal of political anarchism the main interest of this paper, nor the dissociation of anarchy (which the six philosophers have located 'at the heart of their work') from political anarchism. What interests me most is the way in which Malabou treats the complex relationship between domination and power: is it possible to think power, mastery, authority, or discipline beyond domination? How is this problem addressed in the work of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)?

This paper discusses Malabou's interpretation of the economy of domination in Derrida's work. According to Malabou, neither the absence nor the outside of power is to be sought, for power denotes 'something irreducible' (Derrida 1988, 149) and is not incompatible with positive connotations (Malabou 2023, 8). The problem of power is domination, that is, when power sustains the practices, structures, institutions, relations, or forces that inertly (and often willfully) promote the subjugation of others. The economy of domination refers to the problem of exercising power while preventing any form of domination. In Malabou's reading of Derrida, this raises another problem: 'the need to negotiate with mastery' (ibid., 96). The economy of domination implies a negotiation with domination: how can one emerge victorious from this negotiation? And how does one deal with this question when Malabou claims: 'doesn't Derrida demonstrate that the drive for power ultimately always gets what it wants?' (ibid., 105)

The sixth Chapter of *Stop Thief!* makes a strong claim regarding the deconstruction of any isomorphism between power and domination, which from its point of view is not fully, or at least not clearly achieved in Derrida's work. How does Malabou thematize the dilemma of power and domination in Derrida? What possibilities and alternatives does Malabou derive from her reading of Derrida on the problem of power? How should Malabou's analysis be viewed in relation to the broad (and current) philosophical discussion about Derrida's deconstruction of the relationship between power and mastery? Is it possible that Malabou's 'non-governable' is inscribed in what Derrida called *non-pouvoir*, *impouvoir* or *pouvoir sans*

*pouvoir*? I think that Malabou's book offers an important opportunity to look closely at the broad discussion about the deconstruction of any isomorphism between power and domination in relation to Derrida's thought.

I intend to develop this discussion in three sections. The first follows one of Malabou's assertions: the centrality of chaining in Derrida's discussion of power. Chain not only names the discursive paradigm according to which each word acquires its meaning only through its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions (Malabou 2022b, 22). A common gesture in Derrida's texts when it comes to the word power is the enumeration of its heterogeneous substitutions. According to Malabou, there is another peculiarity of the chaining paradigm that needs to be considered: 'is it so simple to avoid privileging an element in a chain? Is interpretation possible without this freezing of one word, one motif, one key?' (Malabou 2022c, 46). Is there a privileged concept within power's chain of meaning? A special attention will be given to the second session of the first volume of the seminar on hospitality. Derrida has focused on Freud's *Bemächtigungstrieb* as a key concept to understand the problem of power and its relation to mastery, which has been addressed by various authors.

The second part of this paper, which is divided into two sections, deals with the recent and diverse reception of Derrida's discussion of power. First, I will describe Malabou's analysis of the problem of power in Derrida. Through this exercise, it will be possible to recognize what Malabou understands as the limits of the deconstruction of power and to consider the alternatives offered by her text. The second section looks at a group of different approaches to Derrida's work that have presented other possible outcomes for the deconstruction of power in relation to resistance and the unconditional (Sato 2007), ipseity and radical alterity (Senatore 2019; Mercier 2019, 2022), the economy of binding (Vitale 2020) and the place of nonpower (Briggs 2022). The aim of bringing together these different readings of Derrida is not to determine the correct reception of Derrida (whose works invite unfaithful readings, which is not the same as uninformed), but to find insightful and creative solutions to the problem of the economy of domination derived from these philosophical perspectives.

The concluding section discusses how Malabou's interesting notion of the non-governable offers possibilities for rethinking the problem of the economy of domination from what Derrida refers as non-power.

### **The problematic unity of a word: hospitality at the heart of power**

On several occasions Derrida points out the uneasiness concerning the use of the word power. At the beginning of the second session of his first seminar on hospitality (1995-1996), Derrida declares: “‘power’, a word more troubling, more enigmatic, and more indeterminate than ever’ (Derrida 2023, 33; 2021, 56). In his text entitled *Afterword. Reiterating the Differences* (1988), Derrida claims: ‘[t]he words “force” and “power” which I have just joined you in using, also pose, as you can well imagine, enormous problems. I never resort to these words without a sense of uneasiness’ (Derrida 1988, 149). Despite the complications associated with its use, power was not a word excluded from Derrida's work (not even a word that had to wait for a political turn<sup>1</sup>) but it was embraced as ‘an old word that needs differentiation, an abstraction that needs analysis’ (Derrida 1979, 124). What is the difficulty of the word power?

The first and most important problem of power is related to unity. Derrida claims that recognizing the heterogeneous state of historical powers does not erase the problem of unity. Even if one accepts that there is no singular, unique, and centralizing power (Foucault 1976, 121-129), that is, ‘[s]’il n’y a plus le pouvoir’ (Derrida 2014, 8), it rests to be inquired: how to assume ‘*le droit d’appeler du même nom de pouvoir une multiplicité d’instances?*’ (Derrida 2014, 10) Derrida has presented this problem elsewhere: ‘[e]ven if, as Foucault seems to suggest, one no longer speaks of Power with a capital P, but of a scattered multiplicity of micropowers, the question remains of knowing what the unity of signification is that still permits us to call these decentralized and heterogeneous microphenomena “powers”’ (Derrida 1988, 149). How is this unity of power produced or given amid the dispersion and multiplicity of its historical forms? Derrida confronts us with a question about the unity of power: ‘[c]’et ensemble est-il dès lors déterminable ?’ (Derrida 2014, 11) Can we determine the unity of power (since power is already implied in the formulation of this question)?

However, multiplicity constitutes the word power on a different level. What Derrida says about the word deconstruction applies to the word power which ‘like any other, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions’ (Derrida 2008a, 5; 1987a, 393). It is a common gesture in Derrida’s texts to place the various substitutions of power in parenthesis.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in its chain of meaning, power not only allows for numerous synonyms, but also ambiguous and mutually contradictory terms. This explains why Derrida, for example, speaks of ‘[t]he power of powerlessness [*l’impuissance*], the possibility of the impossible’ (Derrida 2005, 131); or, in view of the animal question, power is related with nonpower: ‘And what of this inability [*impouvoir*]? ... What is this nonpower [*non-pouvoir*] at the heart of power?’ (Derrida 2008, 28; 2006, 49). The uneasiness with this word may refer to the problematic unity of power, which not only assembles pairs of opposing concepts (potency-impotence, ability-passivity, sovereignty-subjugation, possibility-limitation, etc.), but locates notions as *impouvoir* and *non-pouvoir* at the heart of power. What does this (rather unique) constitution of the chain of meaning of power mean for our understanding of the relationship between power and domination (and vice versa)? I will return to these questions later. For it is necessary to consider another problem: is there a privileged concept within Derrida’s chain of meanings of power?

To reflect on the last question, it is worth looking at the second session of *Hospitalité I. Séminaire* (1995-1996). There, Derrida devotes considerable attention to Benveniste’s analysis of the etymological genealogy of the word hospitality. Power (derived from the ‘etymological family’ of *potis*: *potere*, *possum*, *posse*) is a constitutive element of the word hospitality (*hosti-pet-s*), for which Derrida emphasizes that there is no hospitality without power. However, and this is where Derrida’s keen observation comes into play, there is no power without hospitality. A close examination of this relationship can shed light on the understanding of power in Derrida’s work.

How is it that power and hospitality are chained together? Hospitality is also an enigmatic word that ‘lets itself be parasitized by its opposite, “hostility”’ (Derrida 2023, 20; 2021, 21). But it is also a word that carries power within it: ‘[t]here is doubtless and always and irreducibly such a notion of power, such a “will to power”, if you prefer, in every hospitality, but that does not mean that we already know and recognize something familiar

and that we call power' (ibid., 39; 2021, 63). Power, which remains a difficult word, is deeply intertwined with or chained to hospitality. However, the relationship between the two concepts is not simple, not linear, but complex, as Derrida suggests at length in this second session of his seminar:

While every hospitality, every host as *hospes* presupposes some drive to power (*Bemächtigungstrieb*, that original drive about which Freud speaks with such discretion in *Beyond...*, and that no one or almost no one has noticed, although it is irreducible to any other drive: death drive or sexual drive), while every hospitality, then, every host as *hospes*, presupposes some drive to power, conversely, it is very possible that power in itself might not be thinkable without something like the exercise and possibility of hospitality. To be powerful, have power, be master or mistress of one's house, be at home, be oneself in one's ipseity, be or have one's own potential, is to be capable of hospitality. This begins even with hospitality: whoever is incapable of hospitality has to recognize their own lack of power (*im-pouvoir*). The two concepts, hospitality and power (power [*puissance*] or possibility, potentiality, capacity, skill, faculty) would thus co-entail one another (ibid., 39-40; 2021, 64).

Beyond Benveniste's central observation on the etymology of hospitality, Derrida suggests that hospitality is connected in a deeper sense to the problem of power. It is worth noting Derrida's detailed description of the possible substitutions for power listed above, in the last parenthesis: *puissance*, possibility, potentiality, capacity, skill, faculty; words that Derrida associates with power in many other of his texts. But also, in the middle lines of the previous quotation, 'power in itself' is described as: being powerful, being master in one's own house, being oneself in one's ipseity, having-being one's own potential. Potency, sovereignty and ipseity are possible and central substitutions in the chain of meaning of power (Derrida 2023, 43; 2021, 69; see also Derrida 2009, 66). Without these elements no experience of hospitality would be possible, for a proper home must be granted, secured and available to welcome others. Of course, Derrida constantly reminds us that the protection of hospitality (one's own hospitality, one's own ipseity, etc.) can become hostility within an autoimmunitarian turn in which xenophobia is unleashed with deadly consequences.

In the use of the word power, a difficult word, all these possible substitutions, all these terms are invoked; for power is deferred, delayed, and differentiated by and in them. Nevertheless, Derrida reminds us that power is not fixed nor encapsulated in any of these terms (possibility, potentiality, capacity, sovereignty, faculty, ipseity), for there is also hospitality, and without hospitality, power 'in itself' would be lost. No power is possible

without being open to the unconditional reception of an unexpected other. What does this requirement of hospitality mean for power? Is hospitality another name for ‘nonpower [*non-pouvoir*] at the heart of power’? Is hospitality a possible substitute for the *impouvoir* that makes any experience of power possible? Malabou (2023, 107) recognizes hospitality as a form of beyond the principle, a key discussion about power that we need to revisit.

Before we turn to these questions, we need to address a very important element: the drive for power. At the beginning of the above quotation, Derrida mentions ‘some drive for power’ that is necessarily related to hospitality. Early in his written work, Derrida refers to Freud’s *Bemächtigungstrieb*, ‘*la pulsion de pouvoir*’, or ‘drive for mastery, drive for power, drive for domination’ (Derrida 1987b, 403). *La vie La mort. Séminaire (1975-1976)* refers to this: ‘a drive for mastery, a drive for power, or a drive to have power over [*pulsion d’emprise*], this last being perhaps best’ (Derrida 2020, 294; 2019, 359). A drive that cannot be reduced to any other, not even to the death drive. *Bemächtigungstrieb* has several possible French translations, as Derrida informs us in parentheses ‘(*emprise, pouvoir, possession*)’ (1980, 431); although he claims to have a preference: ‘drive for domination [*emprise*]. The latter denomination seems preferable: it marks more clearly the relation to the other, even in domination *over oneself* ... there is no drive not driven to bind itself and to assure itself of mastery over itself as drive’ (Derrida 1987b, 403). Domination and mastery play an important role in Derrida’s thinking about power. Even hospitality can be captured by this drive for domination when it takes the form of a prearranged invitation or a detailed examination that implies domination over others by selecting who is worthy of being welcomed.

According to Derrida, Freud’s *Bemächtigungstrieb* is central to the chain of power and key to understanding the problem of power in relation to domination. What is meant by this central status of Freud’s notion? Is the ‘drive for power’ the unity of ‘power itself’? Does this mean that power in Derrida’s work is reduced to mastery and domination? How is the role or place of hospitality (in the broader sense of the unconditional or the impossible) to be understood in relation to the ‘drive for domination’? To consider these questions in more detail, in the next section I will provide an overview of various and more recent approaches to Derrida’s reception of Freud’s *Bemächtigungstrieb*. I will pay particular attention to Malabou’s critique of Derrida’s economy of domination.

### **Power without chains: readings of Derrida’s drive for (non)power**

In this second section, I will deal with Derrida’s concept of power as it has been interpreted in various written works dealing with (the drive for) power and its relation to domination. In the first part, I will present Malabou’s reception of Derrida’s work on mastery. In her view, Derrida gives domination the status of the quasi-transcendental, which means that any power beyond the principle is nothing other than a source of domination. Malabou claims that there is a preference in Derrida’s work for the binding of free energy, which is ultimately expressed in his disavowal of political anarchism. In the second part of this section, I will present other readings of the problem of (drive for) power in Derrida’s texts that differ from Malabou’s perspective and offer an alternative understanding of the deconstruction of mastery, in which power would not be the reservoir of domination, although it can have violent effects, but is constituted or haunted by that which can undermine any historical form of domination. Creative and insightful solutions could be derived from this philosophical discussion of Derrida’s thoughts on the problem of the economy of domination.

#### ***On Derrida’s quasi transcendental status of mastery***

Malabou reminds us that in Derrida’s work, the problem of power is not solved by ignoring it or leaving its troubling state untouched: ‘[t]o reject power is still to play the power game, whether colonialist, pro-slavery, or censorship’ (Malabou 2023, 83). Even if we think of a *pure power*, a power beyond principle, a free or unleashed energy, the problem of its relation to mastery and domination is not solved: either this pure power is ‘the reserve of all forms of domination’ (the absolute license to subjugation and cruelty) or else, ‘the beyond the principle may reveal the existence of a power unbound from domination’ (ibid., 84). What is Derrida’s position on this matter according to Malabou’s reading?

Malabou states that the concept of power in Derrida ‘is nothing but the *différance* of power’ (ibid., 101). This means that power ‘is distributed among its many different instances, its numerous synonyms ... without stopping at any of them’ (ibid., 101). This is precisely the chain of power as described before: power circulates or flows in its multiple possible substitutions without being trapped or fixed in any of them, which ‘prevents power from existing as the proper’ (ibid., 101). Nevertheless, Malabou reminds us that ‘[p]ower is differed, but never lost’, that is, the dispersion of power is not the same as its suppression.

This leads us back to Derrida's question: what is the unity that allows us to recognize power amid dispersion? What is this capacity of power that it can always send a postcard back to itself, no matter how far it has dispersed?

In Malabou's reading, the unity of power confronts us with the problem of mastery. Could it be that mastery is the cornerstone that holds together the various elements of the bridge of power? Are the possible substitutions of power nothing but delayed forms of domination? Indeed, mastery is a difficult concept in Derrida's work: '[t]he concept of mastery is an impossible concept, to manipulate, as we know: the more there is, the less there is, and vice versa' (Derrida 1998, 103). Deconstruction aims to challenge any system of thought that grants mastery a transcendental status. The problem regarding *Bemächtigungstrieb*, to which Derrida gives 'special attention, even excessive privilege' (Malabou 2023, 88), is precisely the role of mastery in Freud's work: 'the line of interpretation developed by Derrida is that Freud in fact constitutes mastery (power-control) in a "role of transcendental predicate." It is this constitution that Derrida seeks to trouble' (ibid., 96). And if mastery is constituted as a transcendental predicate: 'the completely other of mastery is also its identity' (ibid., 101), there would be not beyond of mastery. Then it is this status that must be deconstructed.

Malabou reminds us that, according to Derrida, 'it is not enough to banish the transcendental to be done with it' (ibid., 94); therefore, the problem of mastery requires a 'negotiation with the transcendental ... the need to negotiate with mastery' (ibid., 96). Malabou wants to assess whether Derrida emerges victorious from this negotiation with mastery. In her reading, Derrida only succeeds in 'reducing its hold to a mere "quasi transcendental" status'. The 'transcendental function' of mastery can only be liquefied, but not completely banished: the negotiation consists in delaying or deferring mastery for as long as possible. According to Malabou, this is Derrida's comfort zone, his 'yes and no' to the possibility of a power detached from domination:

Derrida's reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* adopts the middle ground ... In the unresolved tension between the radicalizing of power and the dissolution of power, Derrida defers the answer, plays for time, saves the question of whether beyond the principle is beyond domination or nothing but the root of domination (ibid., 87).

If mastery is irreducible, then all that is possible and responsible (Malabou called this Chapter ‘responsible anarchism’ in reference to Derrida’s answer in an interview) seems to be partial and temporary stabilizations for something unstable and chaotic. What needs to be questioned from Malabou’s point of view is Derrida’s reading of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that she characterizes as oriented towards an ‘almost Kantian interpretation’. It is an interpretation determined by a singular Derridean predilection for chaining: ‘It is striking that, in his reading of Freud’s text, Derrida spends more time on chaining than on unleashing, focusing more on binding (Bindung) than unbinding’ (Ibid., 99). Malabou believes that Derrida is averse to the possibility of an unleashed energy (another name for anarchy-chaos) and is therefore unable to consider ‘the possibility of surviving the absence of a master without being “irresponsible”’ (ibid., 103).

Alternatively, Malabou claims that Freud may be read beyond Derrida’s interpretation, since nothing in Freud ‘prohibits the possibility of envisaging the death drive as independent from power’. At this point, she proposes unbinding as the key to Freud’s death drive:

By working to undo the assemblies that Eros constructs, the death drive interrupts its compounding work, the fusional waving together, sheeplike, of the social bond. Moreover, this dissolution, this unbinding, is not necessarily the effect of a destructive fury. Paradoxically, it can give rise to other types of connection that are different from social cohesion of government and different from the obedient community. Bonds born of a breaking of bonds ... What if – contrary to what Derrida claims – the death drive were a prefiguring of political anarchy as a community *unbound from its bonds to mastery?* (ibid., 103).

Malabou, taking up Nathalie Zaltzman’s insightful idea about the anarchistic drive, claims that this interpretation of the death drive opens the possibility of the non-governable, that ‘which is not to be confused with the ungovernable of Derrida’s *différance*’. In her reading, Derrida is caught in the middle: ‘somewhere between “anarchic chaos” and “structured disorder”, Derrida seems to have forgotten a third way – the possibility of an anarchist order. The very possibility of the non-governable’ (ibid., 110) (see Fong 2016 regarding the French reception of the death drive).

### ***Derrida’s strategies of resistance: event and power without power***

In this paper I cannot address Malabou’s main concern: the ‘philosophical bonds of subordination to the logic of government’, or her claim that ‘Derrida never imagined – even

to deny it – the possibility of an anarchism that would be neither a sadomasochistic republic nor a promised land’ (ibid., 108). However, I think that it is necessary to discuss her assertion that power in Derrida’s texts is profoundly tied to domination: although delayed or deferred, domination always finds its way home through the substitutions of power. Is it a common understanding among Derrida’s interpreters that mastery always prevails? Are both unbinding and chaos terms that Derrida rejected or pushed aside in favor of binding, order, and gathering? Is the idea of a power detached from or beyond domination possible in Derrida’s thinking? Is the ‘possibility of the non-governable’ completely alien to Derrida’s work, especially in relation to concepts such as *non-pouvoir* or *impouvoir*?

First, it is interesting to see how Malabou’s critique mirrors one of Derrida’s critiques to Heidegger regarding his preference on gathering: ‘Heidegger runs this risk, despite so many necessary precautions, when he gives priority, as he always does, to gathering and the same (Versammlung, Fuge, legein, and so forth) over the disjunction implied by my address to the other, over the interruption’ (Derrida 1994, 34); or, as he claims in a conference: ‘the privilege Heidegger grants to what he calls Versammlung, gathering, which is always more powerful than dissociation. I would say exactly the opposite’ (Derrida 1997, 14). Considering this, is it possible to claim that there is indeed a preference, a privilege, a priority for binding in Derrida’s work? Or more precisely, is there a preference for binding or gathering in Derrida’s reading of Freud which enforces domination?

It does not seem possible to give a positive answer to the last question. Derrida claims that Freud’s thinking is driven by *la pulsion du propre*: ‘the drive for the proper is stronger than life and stronger than death ... the most driven drive is the drive of the proper, in other words the one that tends to reappropriate itself’ (Derrida 1987b, 356; 1980, 379). The proper is the tendency to appropriate itself, such as Freud’s emphasis on the tendency of the organism to die on its own way. However, as Derrida shows in many discussions, there would be no re-appropriation in a space of pure continuity (the perpetual and perfect bind). A rupture is presupposed if re-appropriation is to be sought: ‘[h]eterology is involved, and this is why there is force, and this is why there is legacy and scene of writing, distancing of oneself and delegation, sending, *envoi*. The proper is not the proper, and if it appropriates itself it is that it disappropriates itself –properly, improperly’ (Derrida 1987b, 357; 1980, 379).

Heterology is always implied, and the need of expropriation allows to conclude that Derrida places unbinding at the heart of all ensembles (Jabre 2020).

Moreover, if the unleashed is the image of chaos, as Malabou's reading suggests, it is certainly not something Derrida is averse to:

[T]his chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize ... Chaos is at once risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other (Derrida 1996, 86).

It does not seem possible to claim that Derrida is committed to binding over unleashing, nor that he is averse to chaos. On the contrary, chaos entails something of enormous significance for Derrida's concept of power: the intersection of the possible and the impossible. Given these statements about chaos, instability, expropriation, heterology, and other ways to name the unleashed, one must ask: is Derrida's notion of power merely mastery rotating over itself?

Yoshiyuki Sato approaches Derrida's deconstruction of the drive for power from what he calls a *rupture derridienne*. When Sato reflects on the question: '*La pulsion de mort s'identifie-t-elle pour autant à la pulsion d'emprise comme pulsionnalité de la pulsion ?*' (Sato 2007, 140), his answer is negative – *Bien sûr que non*. Sato claims there is no isomorphism between the death drive and the drive for domination in Derrida's work, on the contrary, the death drive without cruelty is not only independent of domination, but it provides the basis for resistance (Sato 2007, 150; similarly, Trumbull (2016, 2022) has interpreted the death drive as the force that undermines domination by dissolving the boundaries or relationships which maintain it). What is the strategy of this resistance? It takes the form of *non-résistance* (Sato 2007, 151). This non-resistance goes beyond passivity, since it takes the form of exposure to the irruptions of the event: '*l'événement signifie l'altération de l'ordre souverain actuel, provoquée par l'irruption de l'altérité radicale*' 'the event signifies the change in the prevailing sovereign order brought about by the irruption of a radical alterity' (ibid., 154).

In this reading, Derrida's death drive anticipates the irruption of the impossible, which interrupts every established sovereignty as well as every symbolic economy. In Sato's

reading, hospitality is one of the many forms of the impossible/unconditioned that resist the sovereign order:

[L]’*hospitalité ne signifie pas la simple acceptation de l’immigration. Quand l’ordre souverain accueille les immigrants, la logique de sélection intervient nécessairement ... En revanche, la stratégie de Derrida est définie comme une hospitalité « pure et sans condition » dans laquelle n’intervient jamais pareille logique sélective* [Hospitality does not mean the mere acceptance of immigration. When the sovereign order welcomes immigrants, the logic of selection is necessarily implied ... On the contrary, Derrida’s strategy is defined as ‘pure and unconditional’ hospitality, which is never compromised by a logic of selection] (ibid., 148).

Hospitality, like ‘*le don, le pardon, l’imprévisibilité*’, as a figure of the unconditional, the impossible, or the uncanny (*Unheimliche*), breaks in as that which threatens and disturbs any sovereign or symbolic order. Thus, when Derrida claims that ‘power in itself might not be thinkable without something like the exercise and possibility of hospitality’ (Derrida 2023, 39; 2021, 64), it is possible to conclude from Sato’s perspective that power, if not constituted, is haunted by the impossible, by the unconditional, by the event, and therefore by resistance to any form of cruelty or indivisible sovereignty.

Mauro Senatore believes that the role of *Bemächtigungstrieb* must be studied in the intersection of politics and psychoanalysis in Derrida’s later works. Senatore is particularly interested in the ‘inescapable effects of the unconscious upon sovereignty’ (Senatore 2019). It is not power what is primarily compromised in Derrida’s reading of Freud, but the autotelicity inherent in both drive and sovereignty. According to Senatore (2019), autotelicity is deconstructed by forcing the drive to bind to itself at the price of its exposure to others (even itself as Other), for any appropriation of oneself presupposes *différance*. What is ultimately undermined or compromised by Derrida’s reception of *Bemächtigungstrieb* is sovereignty, understood as the self’s posting a text to itself. Senatore (2019) claims that the drive for power names the deconstruction of sovereignty, more specifically the undermining of its unicity, its ipseity.

Thomas Clément Mercier (2019) has claimed that the monster is an exception, the intrusion of an absolute alterity which transcends all norms, rules, jurisprudence, biopolitical norms, and new forms of domination derived from biopower. From this point of view, Derrida’s monstrosity, together with phantasmaticity (Mercier 2022), is one of the figures of

the impossible that threaten any given authoritarian order, because they are the expression of experiences of otherness, of the irruption of the event that suspends order (in a very interesting discussion, Mercier (2019) claims that monstrosity has no place in Malabou's plasticity). Mercier's approach to monstrosity, like Sato's idea of Derridean resistance, is a figure of the irruption of the impossible and unconditional which breaks through any given authoritarian order, even one organized by biopolitical norms.

Turning now to Derrida's preference on binding (Malabou 2023, 99), it is necessary to consider Francesco Vitale's interpretation of the economy of binding in Derrida. According to Vitale (2020), the binding or 'constraining force' is the structural condition of all being together, including that of the psychic apparatus. For this reason, no drive exists indifferently or in isolation from others, but only in relation to other drives, that is, all drives are compelled to connect with others or with themselves as others because of the 'differences (of/or forces) that constitute them' (Vitale 2020, 36). Therefore, no drive (not even the drive for power) can assume the role of a transcendental drive: its transformation 'into a transcendental drive would entail the interruption and closure of this transactional dynamic and therefore the very death of the system, which is why the dominance to which any drive tends over the others can never be definitive' (ibid., 42). Vitale refers here to what Derrida (2020, 241) says about force in Nietzsche's perspective: the existence of an infinite force would imply the abolition of all singular forces, since forces only exist in differential relations between other forces (and it can be added Derrida observation about '*Les puissances s'enchaînent*' (1974, 122) in relation to Hegel). Likewise, the existence of a transcendental drive would imply the dissolution of the psychic system since it would abolish all singular drives.

In view of this, the death drive or the sadistic drive cannot be the driving force of life. Vitale (2020) points out that 'the binding function can be bound to a sadistic drive, but the sadistic drive is not necessarily a consequence or a structural effect of that binding impulse ... it can't be considered as the mover of the drive for power as such, nor, consequently, as a manifestation of the death drive as the essential mover of life' (44). Only in a pathological sense, according to Vitale, can a drive for power be dominated by a sadistic drive, because this would entail the violent dissolution of the drive society and thus a pathological

autoimmunity of the psychic system itself. Since the drive for power is neither ontologically connected to the death drive nor to the sadistic drive, there is ‘room for relations of power that are different from those that imply the violent submission of the other’ (Vitale 2020, 44). In Vitale’s perspective, the binding economy allows for other experiences of power that are not reducible to domination: binding is not the reservoir of mastery, but also can provide ways to resist domination.

I would like to conclude this section with a reference to Robert Briggs’ brilliant text *The Animal-To-Come. Zoopolitics in Deconstruction*. Briggs is interested in exploring Derrida’s ‘nonpower at the heart of power’, something we touched on briefly in the previous section. Briggs’ approach is aware of the problem pointed out by Catherine Malabou, that is, ‘deployments of given concepts of power – however heterogeneous and differential such concepts conceive power to be – always run the risk of falling into the trap of power (of mastery, for example) by overlooking something other than power’ (Briggs 2021, 70). This does not mean that power always finds its unity in mastery, not even in the mastery of the mark as Derrida himself has explained: ‘There is not one power, the power of the mark. This singular would still lead to some mystification: fostering the belief that one can do otherwise than to oppose powers to powers and writings to other writings, or again that the unity of power (and of knowledge) is always itself, the same’ (Derrida 1979, 144). The unity of power is never itself: something that necessarily applies to mastery.

Briggs indicates that it is possible to think the ‘nonpower at the heart of power’ through passivity, a passivity that could be understood as more than the mere vulnerability of the animal (human or non-human):

Instead – or in addition – ‘nonpower’ might, on the basis of the preceding hauntology, be read as Derrida’s name for the differential condition in which power is originality divided and delayed, referred and relayed, such that power is always owed to an absolute, irrecoverable ‘past’, and always haunted by something extraneous to the semantics and to the history of power (Briggs 2021, 70-71).

The word nonpower (*non-pouvoir, impouvoir, pouvoir sans pouvoir*)<sup>3</sup> denotes neither the absence of power nor the incapacity or impotence that results from oppression. It refers to the preceding ‘dispersion from which a force differential may produce something like a capacity, a competence or a possibility’ (ibid., 71). Nonpower in Derrida’s work means that

power (and mastery) is not produced by itself and from itself but is due to a preceding and irreducible set of differential forces. In this sense, ipseity (which was linked to power by a cultural tradition that Derrida sought to deconstruct in his later seminars) is internally compromised because no power is capable of sustaining itself: ‘ipseity remains owed to the fundamental passivity and differential relay of forces called “nonpower”, moreover, the extension of the concept of ipseity to nonhuman organism would constitute at the same time a questioning of the “self-sameness” of those forms of life’ (ibid., 73). Without a separation or disjunction that enables the reception of the other(s) (human and non-human), no ipseity is possible: hospitality is at the heart of power/ipseity.

According to Briggs’ reading, no mastery in Derrida can have the status of the (quasi) transcendental since nonpower must always be considered as ‘the condition for being able to do anything at all’ (ibid., 75). Even mastery is based on nonpower, that is, on a fundamental dependence on a radical chain of supplements that create the conditions for any ability or possibility to exist and express itself, including that of the master (sovereign). To return to the problem of hospitality: if every historical expression of power is based on hospitality (in some form), then there is no power (no mastery, no domination) without an openness to unexpected and radical otherness that no sovereign can fully control or predetermine.

If one follows these last readings of Derrida’s work, one cannot come to the conclusion that power is always subsumed in the turns of domination over itself. Nor can one conclude that deconstruction is reticent towards unleashed forces or chaos. On the contrary, it has been shown how Derrida thematizes resistance to domination through the unforeseen intrusion of the impossible and unconditional otherness (Sato, Mercier); the economy of binding as a constant undermining of the mastery of drives (including the drive for power) that enables experiences of power other than those ‘that imply the violent submission of the other’ (Vitale 2020); and the constitutive status of nonpower (*non-pouvoir, impouvoir, pouvoir sans pouvoir*) as the fundamental passivity of the conflictual and divergent conditions that make any possibility possible. What these readings of Derrida’s work have in common is the idea that domination can be deconstructed and that it is therefore possible to have experiences of power not only detached from domination, but in opposition to it.

For the concluding part of this article, I will consider this question: would it be possible that Malabou's non-governable comes close, perhaps even too close to Derrida's nonpower (Briggs 2021) or to the event of the irruption of the impossible that disturbs any prevailing sovereignty (Sato 2007)?

## Conclusion

Malabou does not argue for the abolition of power, but for its detachment from domination. The last chapter of her book *Pleasure Erased* is entitled: *Clitoris, Anarchy and the Feminine* (Malabou, 2022d, 120-123), which calls for a different order that is not bound by mastery. The clitoris (as anarchy) disrupts any logic of command and obedience, for it is indifferent to the metaphysical pairing of act and potency that exacerbates all forms of domination: the clitoris brings chaos to the economy of domination, it shows the failure that constitutes all mastery. This is not the same as claiming that the clitoris is powerless or inadequate to occupy the empty space of domination. Its existence is the testimony of a power that is detached from any economy of domination. Malabou presents the clitoris as a figure of the non-governable: it is not beyond power but enables the experience of *pouvoir sans pouvoir*.

Malabou states that the non-governable is not the ungovernable. Although Malabou speaks of a fragile demarcation, the ungovernable 'resists and opposes what it assumes, namely the priority of government' (2023, 23). The ungovernable is trapped in the logic of governing, while the non-governable marks its radical otherness. This difference mirrors the one commented on in this paper: '[t]he difference between ungovernable and non-governable goes back to the difference between power and domination' (ibid., 142). The non-governable is not that which resists government, but it is the mark of that which remains alien to commanding and obeying, impossible to domesticate, it corresponds 'to regions of being and psyche that governing can neither reach or manage' (ibid., 23). The non-governable stands for that which is neither leashed nor chained to a predetermined form of control, as a political plasticity that can dissolve all fixed knots. This marks the possibility of a 'liberational uncoupling', as it is called in reference to Zaltzman's *La pulsion anarchiste*.

It seems possible to think of the interesting notion of the non-governable in relation to *impouvoir*, *non-pouvoir* or *pouvoir sans pouvoir*, as used by Derrida. These terms, at the heart of power, express firstly what Briggs (2022) has shown: nonpower as the radical

passivity of the polemical and agonistic conditions and forces that precede and enable all forms of capacities and possibilities (including that of ipseity); secondly, the *impouvoir* of the unforeseen intrusions of the impossible (uncanniness, monstrosity) that interrupt the indivisible continuum of violent sovereignties (Sato, Mercier); and thirdly, the irreducible chaos that offers the chance for change (power without power). It seems possible to think of the non-governable as a political expression for nonpower: a power detached from mastery capable of performing ‘liberational uncoupling’. For Derrida power is constituted by disjunction (nonpower) and can express itself in the dissolution of cruel bonds. These terms thus express or witness to the possibility of experiences of power (political, aesthetic, ethical, pedagogical, sexual, etc.) that are detached from domination and that create the conditions for the undermining of any cruel economy of domination.

1 It is relevant to indicate that the problem of power in Derrida’s work is not limited to a so-called political corpus. However, this indication allows me to distance my paper from perspectives that suggest an absence of power do to (a suppose) Derrida’s tendency to focus on language (Said 1978 673-714; Castro-Gómez 2015, 259-269), the absence of force (Protevi 2001, 80-82; for a different approach to the force-difference problem in Derrida-Deleuze: Cisney 2018, 111-125), or the absence of the political in Derrida’s texts (Fraser 1984, 127-154; Rorty 1996, 13-18; Rancière 2009, 74-96; the latter insisted that Derrida’s ethical insights should not be confused with political thought). I even distance my approach from texts that suggest a late inclusion of power/politics in Derrida’s work (Beardsworth 1996, xi; Salmon 2020, 209-234). As many authors have shown, these problems have been considered in Derrida’s work since early texts (Baring 2014, 287-303; Gasché 2015, 169-190). Recent approaches to Derrida’s work have discussed how the apolitical bias reproduced oppositional hierarchies (political- nonpolitical, language-materiality, abstract-concrete) rooted in the *arkhé* of the political that Derrida himself sought to deconstruct (Cheah&Guérlac 2009; Biset&Penchaszadeh 2016, 55-70; Bennington 2000, 18-33).

2 A common gesture in Derrida’s texts when dealing with the word power consists in opening a parenthesis to convey its possible substitutions, synonyms, or translations from/to other languages. It is a way to express the chain of substitutions of power, for instance: ‘*pouvoir* (*puissance ou possibilité, potentialité, capacité, habilité, faculté*)’ (Derrida 2021, 64); ‘power (possibility, faculty, sovereignty)’ (Derrida 2005, 136). Also, the parenthesis next to power conveys the possible translations from/to other languages. On several occasions Derrida refers to the Greek word *dynamis*: ‘it is a matter of the sovereign, precisely, of might, of power (*dynamis*)’ (Derrida 2005, 117); or the Greek *kratos*: ‘*l’hypothèse est celle d’une prise de pouvoir ou d’une remise du pouvoir (kratos)*’ (Derrida 2003, 57). In the lecture *Les pupilles de l’Université. Le principe de raison et l’idée de l’Université* (1983), the word power is followed by several terms in other languages: ‘*pouvoir (Logos, Ratio, Reason, Vernunft)*’ (Derrida 1990, 471). A similar problem arises with Heidegger’s *Gewalt*: ‘the order

of that Gewalt that is so difficult to translate (force, violence, potency, power, authority: often legitimate political power, force of order: *walten* is to reign, to dominate, to command, to exercise a power that often political: sovereignty, the exercise of sovereignty, is of the order of *walten* and Gewalt)’ (Derrida, 2009, 319-320). Derrida also uses the parentheses to communicate different modalities of power: ‘*pouvoir (politique, juridique, religieux, idéologique, économique)*’ (Derrida 2003, 199). This gesture is employed when naming the various institutions or entities that hold, represent, or exercise power: ‘power (family, State, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, even humanity)’ (Derrida 1994, 82).

3 It would require another work to determine the possible relations and differences (if any) between the terms *non-pouvoir*, *impouvoir* and *pouvoir sans pouvoir*. With regard to *impouvoir*, Derrida indicates that the term was taken from Artaud: ‘*L’«impouvoir»*, dont le thème apparaît dans les lettres à T. Rivière, n’es pas, on le sait, la simple impuissance, la stérilité du « rien à dire » ou le défaut d’inspiration. Au contraire, il est l’inspiration elle-même : force d’un vide, tourbillon du souffle d’un souffleur qui aspire vers lui et me dérobe cela même qu’il laisse venir à moi et que j’ai cru pouvoir dire *en mon non*. La générosité de l’inspiration, l’irruption positive d’une parole dont je ne sais pas d’où elle vient et qui la parle, cette fécondité de *l’autre* souffle est l’impouvoir’ (Derrida 267, 263). Then, *impouvoir* is not merely ‘inability’, nor the lack of power, but is closer to term *non-pouvoir* as presented by Briggs (2022). The last term *pouvoir sans pouvoir*, is taken from *Spectres of Marx*, when Derrida is talking about the promise: ‘What has been uttered “since Marx” can only promise or remind one to maintain together, in a speech that defers, deferring not what it affirms but deferring just so as to affirm, to affirm *justly*, so as to have the power (a power without power) to affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself’ (Derrida 1994, 19).

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