

Justice is beyond the reach of reason: on some agreements in the writings of Said Nursi and Jacques Derrida

Klas Grinell, assistant professor, History of Ideas, Goteborg university, Sweden

”Man, whose life is so brief, cannot experience the true essence of justice in this transient world; it is for this reason that matters are postponed for a supreme tribunal. [...] this passing and transient world is far from manifesting such wisdom and justice for man”¹ Thus said the Islamic thinker Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in the little Turkish village of Barla in 1925. At the Cardozo Law School in metropolitan New York in the autumn of 1989 the French post modern philosopher Jacques Derrida said:

justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.²

Their remarks seem to be very much compatible, in content if not in their style of expression. That might be surprising, given that they are stated by two men from very different surroundings and circumstances. In this paper I will elaborate on how it can come that two thinkers from so different angles can seem to have so similar views on worldly justice. Of course it has also to be considered on what levels the similarities are situated. Maybe they are not as compatible as it might seem from a first glance.

I will also try to argue that the fact that the theories of justice of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Jacques Derrida have common traits means that we have to revise the conflict between Islam and philosophy as described in the *Risale-i Nur*.

Let me already now state that I am a student of philosophy. But within the field of philosophy there are new traditions and styles born after Said Nursi’s time that shares much of the critique of positivistic philosophy and modernist Western civilization that Said Nursi formulated. In my

¹ Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman, *The Words: On the nature and purposes of Man, Life and all things, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 1*, Istanbul, Sözlük Publications, 2004, 10th Word, 3rd Truth, p. 78.

² Derrida, Jacques, ”Force of Law: The ’mystical foundation of authority’”, in *Deconstruction and the possibility of Justice*, Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (ed.), NewYork/London, Routledge, 1992, p. 16.

opinion there is room for dialogue and some recognition of the others similar work from these two sides. That is the drive behind my participation in this forum.

Since this paper is presented in a setting where Said Nursi is a well known and thoroughly studied thinker, I will start by setting Derrida in a context of what can be called a post modern critique of Western modernity. Jacques Derrida may be called *the* philosopher of post modernity. He is maybe the most revered European philosopher of the late 20th century and father of the fields of so-called deconstruction and post structuralism.

Derrida as an Algerian Jew

Derrida, who died in 2004 at the age of 74, was of Algerian Jewish decent. His critique of Western modernity was not only intellectual or philosophical, it also stemmed from a sense of exclusion that made him more acutely aware of the cracks between modernist rhetoric and action. Robert Young have argued that rather than some philosophical vogue in Paris it was the French atrocities in Algeria that gave birth to post modernism.³ Derrida was educated in French culture at the same time as the French colonial rule in Algeria turned into war, a war eventually won by the Algerians. But I think his earlier confrontation with a harsh and wide spread anti-Semitism in French Algeria during the Second World War was more formative and important to his views on Western civilisation. He had suffered beatings in the streets, insults for being a dirty Jew, and in 1942 he was barred from school for almost a year solely because of his Jewishness.⁴

In Algeria, as in all colonial places, it became violently clear and visible that Western modernity did not only mean the declaration of Human rights and belief in democracy; it was also a deadly practice to restrict those rights to Westerners only. In the words of Anne McClintock: “imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere – a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity.”⁵

Post colonial studies: derridian offspring

McClintock can be called a post modern, post colonial thinker. A common ground for post colonial studies, very much inspired by Derrida, is a critique of the scientific belief in the possibility of a full and objective knowledge of man. The established scientific knowledge of Man

³ Young, Robert, J. C., *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001.

⁴ Powell, Jason, *Jaques Derrida: a biography*, London, Continuum, 2006, pp. 9.

⁵ McClintock, Anne, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, London, Routledge, 1995, s. 5.

and his role in the world have been formulated in the West, which often have used this knowledge to justify geopolitical injustices. A clear formulation of this view can be found in Edward Said's important book *Culture and Imperialism*. In that book Said is saying that even the high culture of Western modernity, like the novels of Jane Austen or operas of Verdi, is closely linked and dependent on colonial imperialism. The 'Progress' and 'Development' of the West can never be fully understood without a simultaneous consideration of the oppression of the rest of the World that took place at the same time and according to the same foundational ideas. The non-Western world has had to play the role of a total opposite and Other to the West. That means that what in positivistic modernity has been viewed as objective scientific knowledge of the inhabitants of other parts of the world is dubious, tainted by colonial power.⁶

Modern empiricism said that if people turned out to be different that had to be accepted. And since empirical observations always took the white middle aged male as a norm, non-Westerners and women appeared to be different and therefore inferior.⁷

Said Nursi and the critique of modernity/ coloniality

Colonialism is fundamental in modernity and therefore it affects not only former colonizers or colonized peoples. It has deep effects on all countries, not the least those, such as my own home country Sweden or Said Nursi's Turkey, who have enrolled to modernity. Mucahit Bilici has from a similar outlook described "Kemalist modernization in Turkey by the state [---] as cultural self-colonization."⁸ Said Nursi called its supporters "pseudo-patriotic irreligious deviants who hid under the veil of Turkism and in reality are the enemies of the Turks."⁹

The history of the West in the West have for to long been written only from an inside perspective. It is our revered ideas, the basis of our identity and its history that all too often has been glorified. As long as only those who benefited from the spread of modernity was invited to write its history, the idea of what modernity meant was very much one eyed and blind to all its dark sides.

⁶ Said, Edward W., *Culture and imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994. For an introduction to post colonial critique, see Gandhi, Leela *Postcolonial theory: a critical introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

⁷ Larrain, Jorge, *Ideology and cultural identity: modernity and the Third World presence*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1994, pp. 23.

⁸ Bilici, Mucahit, "Forgetting Gramsci and remembering Nursi: Parallel theories of Gramsci and Said Nursi in the space of Eurocentrism" in Ibahim Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the life and thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 168.

⁹ Said Nursi, *Letters*, p. 492.

In time, more or less colonized people from the peripheries of modernity made their way into the metropolitan centers and their experiences resulted in very different stories being told. This happened on a broader scale in the 1960-ties. That was also the time when the environmental down sides of modernity's technoscientific spread started to show. Pesticides and exploitation of natural resources had created catastrophic effects for Nature. To more and more people of the West it became obvious that the arrogant trust in Western mans abilities to rationally control the World was just that – arrogant, dangerous and lethal.

These critiques struck at the very heart of positivistic modernity. The critique could no longer be said to be just religious irrationalism or reactionary opposition to Development. But still most Western scientists would only listen to voices trained in their own tongue. In the last decade or so more and more people are starting to realize that a similar critique have been present all along in the parts of the world that suffered from the colonial spread of modernity. Of course Said Nursi is one of those earlier critics from the borderlands of modernity.

The global spread of industrialism and modernity took place with the colonial imperialism that Eric Hobsbawm in his influential *The age of Empire* dates to the period between 1875 and 1914.¹⁰ The link between colonialism and modernity is no mere coincidence. The modern capitalistic world system, built with resources from the exploitations made be European colonial imperialism, is a foundational part of modernity. Persons like Said Nursi were more likely to meet the colonial practices of the West than most Western historians and philosophers who only tasted its sweet fruits. I think there is something to what Mucahit Bilici have argued in *Islam at the Crossroads* about the similarities between Said Nursi and Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. As I have said there is a long tradition of critiques from within the margins of modernity. Gramsci is a political one from the imperial hey days; Derrida is a philosophical one from the post colonial era. As Bilici argues, we who come from within those margins of modernity must acknowledge and high light those outside critiques that carry similar messages. But we must not subsume those outside voices into just a different shade of our own. If we draw to hard on the similarities we might make the non-Western thinkers into mere imitators or not fully developed versions of Western post modern critique.¹¹

There are affinities in the different strands of critique against modernity that exists, and have existed, around the world. There are also certain elements that seem to be present almost

¹⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric J., *The age of empire: 1875-1914*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.

¹¹ Bilici, Mucahit, "Forgetting Gramsci and remembering Nursi".

everywhere. One is the critique of the one dimensional understanding of Man and Nature in positivistic modernity. This would imply that there is something of importance in the argument that a positivistic and self sure modernism lacks respect for the limited reach of its beloved reason.¹²

The world is far more complex and sensitive than technoscientific progressivists have been able to see. Their self assurance has lead to very serious conditions for our globe. Technoscience must be held in check by something. That is a lesson many different people have learnt from the 20th Century. What this something ought to be seems to be much more difficult to reach agreement on. When it comes to the formulation of alternatives Said Nursi and Derrida aren't very close. And it is difficult to say that Derrida has any clear positive alternative.

That means it should be possible to see similarities in the different critiques of positivistic, modernistic belief in a just social order based on scientific methods. It should also be possible to see that different traditions and fields can find inspiration and support from critiques from a very different angle.

But we must not assume that the different critics all strive for the same goals. Derrida would not find it possible to be as sure about the divine justice as Said Nursi. Derrida's hope is a more Jewish one, more agnostic – we can only keep the possibility open and wait and see. One day we will know.

The metaphysics of presence

One of the starting points in Derrida's extensive writings is the critique of what he calls the metaphysics of presence.

There is no privileged or obvious presence in time or space from where Man and his Reason can see, understand and explain the world. Derrida argues that reality is always in motion, and that time therefore always is out of joint. It is impossible to find any place, any restricted present, where the observer can come to rest and from where he could see and understand the world. As soon as one tries to rest in a present *now*, a displacement takes place, time runs away from the spectator and a difference between a time just past and the present arises. We realize that it is

¹² Leaman, Oliver, "Nursi's place in the Ihya' tradition", *The Muslim World* (LXXXIX), 1999.

impossible to make a difference between a real presence in a present and a re-presentation of a present that has just passed.

We can therefore never understand who we are, at best only who we were a moment ago. Understanding always lags behind, since the circumstances we try to understand have always already changed. That means that positivism is ultimately impossible. Reason is always belated and the world is too rich to be fully understood by reason. This also means that any decision will always rest on the analysis of a situation that no longer is present.¹³

We can see that this argument is compatible with the view held by Said Nursi, and religious critics of philosophy in general, that man is not a self-sufficient animal but a creature that on its own is impotent, weak, poor, and in need.¹⁴ For Nursi and other religious thinkers this shows our deep need for humility and guidance. And as Said Nursi shows for example in the 10th Word there is lots of proof for the believer that there is divine justice in the Hereafter. “Since man is not called to account and judged in fitting fashion while in this world, it follows that he must proceed to a Supreme Tribunal and a final felicity.”¹⁵

Justice according to Derrida

For Derrida a certain humbleness is also crucial. We must realise that philosophy or science can never decide what is just. But according to Derrida this inescapable out-of-jointness of time that I talked about earlier makes justice a possible ideal and a possible way of behaving towards others. Every moment is in a fundamental way always open, and any experience can never be more certain than a maybe. This means that we always have a choice, and therefore we are responsible for that choice. We can not say that it was the only reasonable way to act. Reason isn't conclusive. Since it is impossible to know for sure laws can never be complete or decided to be just. Derrida speaks of justice as “a messianic hope” that is always unfulfilled in this world. True justice is a problem beyond the reach of philosophy and jurisprudence. That means that the Laws governing a state can never be proven to be Just, they can only be legitimate or not. Justice in this world can never be more than a promise and a hope.¹⁶ Derrida is agnostic about the possibility of the divine justice that lies at the heart of Nursi's argument.

¹³ The most thorough explanation of this is given in Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1967, chapter 6.

¹⁴ See for example Said Nursi, *The Words*, 30th Word, First aim, p. 564.

¹⁵ Said Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, 7th Truth, pp. 90.

¹⁶ Derrida, “Force of Law”, pp. 17.

Said Nursi meant that modern civilization was built on force, egoism, conflict, racialism and hedonism.¹⁷ We have already touched on some of those aspects, and seen that post colonial critique hold similar views. But one thing can be elaborated on further since it is a prominent feature in both Derrida's and Said Nursi's theories: Force.

Force and legitimacy: Derrida and Nursi

"Modern civilizations [...] point of support is force", says Said Nursi. "The force of law" is the title of Derrida's major work on justice. A law needs to be enforced, and Derrida elaborates on the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin, who also held the view that there can be no worldly justice without force.¹⁸ But where is the line between this unavoidable use of force to uphold the Law and unjust violence? That is one of the major questions in Derrida's text. Is there a non violent force?

To say "I am just!", or "This is just" is to betray Justice, Derrida says.¹⁹ We cannot know what is Just, and to enforce what is not Just is an act of violence. As long as modern civilization is positivistic and have a firm belief in the conclusiveness of Reason it will rest on a violent force. I think we can say that Derrida and Said Nursi can be read as supporting each other on that point. But Derrida goes on to say that a Justice without force is not possible either. Justice that has no power to be enforced is no justice. I guess Nursi would simply say that God is the All-Powerful and All-Just, and it is only with Him that the problem is solved. But when he stood in the courts of the Turkish Republic defending the *Risale-i Nur*, his friends and himself he was facing this very problem and addressed it. In Afyon Court he defended himself and at one point said in respect of all the harassments he had had to suffer: "Is it not unprecedented tyranny in the name of justice? Is it not an unprecedented miscarriage of justice on account of the law?"²⁰

Derrida would say that the Law never can be just, or at least we can never decide if it is in accord with Justice. In a context where revelation is not a valid argument we have no way to decide. So we can't expect or demand that the Law shall be just. We can only demand that it should be legitimate.²¹ And that is an argument followed by Nursi as well. Maybe because he knew that an argument from revelation or the Qu'ran would not be considered valid and would probably have been seen as a proof of his guilt. In addressing the Afyon Court he reviewed his case from the

¹⁷ Said Nursi, *Seeds of reality*, seed 61, in *The Letters* s. 548 or *Words*, 30th Word, 561-69.

¹⁸ Derrida, "Force of Law", pp. 29.

¹⁹ Derrida, "Force of Law", p. 10.

²⁰ Said Nursi, *The Rays*, 14th Ray, s. 373.

²¹ Derrida, "Force of Law", pp. 16.

principles of the Republic. The Republic embraces a principle of freedom of conscience that must be applied also to the students of the *Risale-i Nur*, he argues. A conviction in the case could not be legitimate, it would show that the laws of the Republic are not in accordance with the principles it itself says it embraces. Whether those principles are just or not might be another question. Even if we find them not to be, we can demand that the Laws shall be legitimate.

I want my rights within the bounds of the law. I accuse of being criminals those who act against the law in the name of the law. The laws of the Government of the Republic certainly reject the arbitrary acts of such criminals. I am hopeful that my rights will be restored to me.²²

Against positivism, in different ways

I like to come back to Mucahit Bilici's insistence on the recognition of non-Western intellectuals' contribution to the critique of modernity.

I would definitely argue that reading Said Nursi helps anyone to get a fuller and more elaborated understanding on Western modernity. I would also argue that a reader of Said Nursi can get a fuller and more elaborated understanding of modernity by reading Jacques Derrida.

There are interesting similarities in the critique of positivistic philosophy in the two writers. Both are anti-dualistic and deeply suspicious of the dichotomy of tradition vs. modernity. Derrida will often try to show that the shady place in between the clear sides of a dichotomy is more fundamental and original. Nursi does not, as is all too common, set up a choice between Islam or modernity. The way ahead is in a blend of the two sides that are truer and more original, more Islamic. Said Nursi's differentiation between two different Europe is a well known example. He is no rough critic of Europe who says everything European is sinful or bad. Rather there is a true civilization in Europe that needs to be recovered in the name of justice and right.²³ In a similar way Derrida is searching for a truer use of the European philosophical legacy. Derrida translator and post colonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has said that deconstruction is a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.²⁴ I think the phrase is suitable also for Said Nursi's relation to scientific enterprises.

²² 14th Ray, s. 455.

²³ Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, p. 160. On this issue see Brodeur, Patrice C., "The Ethics of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's dialogue with the West in the light of his concept of 'Europe'", in Ian Markham and Ibrahim Ozdemir (ed.) *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2005.

²⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Outside in the teaching machine*, London, Routledge, 1993, "introduction".

Said Nursi or Derrida are no new age mystics who feel contempt for reason or science. They are criticizing those who use reason as an argument for oppression, and they both do it in the name of a higher reasonability. But at that point it also becomes clear how big differences there are between one who only has a vague messianic hope that such a pure Reason does exist, and one who stands firm in the belief in Revelation and a supreme tribunal. Derrida's religion is a very opaque monotheism bereft of any revelation. There is nothing higher than reason, but there are all too many that think too highly of what we can know for sure. So, Derrida and deconstruction teaches us humbleness in knowing that we never can rest assured that we are correct and righteous. That is its moral imperative. It is a constant reminder that we cannot know. Its centre is therefore emptiness. There is no room, or use, for prayer or supplications in its religiosity. The *Risale-i Nur* on the contrary is born from a firm contact with God, the All-Wise and All-Knowing. Where Derrida sees a faint and unreachable dream Said Nursi sees an All-Powerful Maker and Sustainer. On that ontological level they are incompatible.

Deconstruction is about moral and justice. It is a moral in line with the phrases *Allahu Akbar* and *Deus semper Major* – God is always Greater. But deconstruction rather says that reason is always smaller, not describing, not knowing that to which it is smaller. I find it somewhat affiliated with ismaili thought, or a negative theology taken to its very extreme. From that follows that there are fields of morality connected to classical virtues that it has little to say about. For example the central virtue of patience (arab. *sabr*, lat. *patientia*).²⁵ Said Nursi wrote:

[H]uman advances and the attainments of civilization, which are to be observed, have been made subject to him [man] not through his attracting them or conquering them or through combat, but due to his weakness. He has been assisted because of his impotence. They have been bestowed on him due to his indigence. He has been inspired with them due to his ignorance. They have been given him due to his need. And the reason for his domination is not strength and the power of knowledge, but the compassion and clemency of the Sustainer and Divine mercy and wisdom: they have subjugated things to him.²⁶

²⁵ In a hadith recorded in Sahih Bukhari (8:477) the prophet Muhammad said “he who remains patient, Allah will bestow patience upon him, and he who is satisfied with what he has, Allah will make him self-sufficient. And there is no gift better and vast (you may be given) than patience.” (trans: Muhsin Khan). On this concept in relation to Nursi, see Asfaruddin, Asma, “Patience is beautiful: Qur’anic ethics in Said Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur*” in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam*. Patience is a virtue for all abrahamic religion, but maybe more important in mainstream Islam than in mainstream Christianity, even if it is hard to speak about such broad categories. For the classical Catholic Christian version of patience, see *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1920, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Part II of Part II, Q. 136, “Patientia”.

²⁶ Said Nursi, *The Words*, 33rd Word, 2nd Chapter, 4th Remark, p. 337.

The All-Compassionate is one of the central divine names in the *Risale-i Nur*. It is he who sits at the supreme tribunal.²⁷ But the workings of the All-Compassionate are beyond even the dreams of Derrida.

Conclusion

There are some similarities in the experiences of Derrida and Said Nursi from the margins of modernity, and there are similarities in their critique of one dimensional positivism and the arrogant assurance that reason alone can govern the world. I have tried to show this on the subject of worldly justice. On the critique of colonial and positivistic modernity their respective students can exchange arguments and support. From a post structuralist perspective religion encompasses a reasonable humbleness in front of the incalculability of existence. From a nurculuk perspective it should be possible to find support for the need of religious morality to control the scientific advances of modernity in Derrida's writings. They can both argue that worldly justice is beyond the reach of reason. But their respective strategies and aims should not be subsumed under each other. There are also unbridgeable differences especially regarding the role of a Creator, and of Revelation. But without difference there would be no need for dialogue. I have wanted to stress that the differences between Derrida and Nursi are not bigger than the differences between Derrida and the students of philosophy under attack by Nursi. New alliances might be formed in the constant struggle to build of a better world.

²⁷ Said Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, 2nd Truth, p. 76.