Kosov@ and the politics of representation

On 24 March 1999, NATO started a bombing campaign against targets on the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in order to stop, or so it was claimed, alleged human rights' violations by armed forces in what, in Serbian, is called ‘Kosovo’. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), with a coalition of parties in government, which had previously been opposed to any use of force beyond its borders, especially in the absence of a UN mandate, deployed forces to participate in this operation. Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder insisted that there was no alternative. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer asserted that only the last resort of violence was open. NATO’s actions were, in other words, made inescapable by reality. This reality was, in NATO’s portrayal of the situation, one of a ‘deepening humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Kosovo as Yugoslav military and security forces continue and intensify their attacks on their own people’. The Milosevic regime, however, claimed this to be untrue and spoke of NATO aggression against Yugoslavia. Milosevic insisted that the French and British people ‘should be ashamed of themselves because of the threats of NATO-thugs against a small people’. The debate over what exactly had happened ‘on the ground’ in Kosovo before and during NATO’s intervention carried on even after the bombing raids were over and international troops had been sent to the area. The scale of human rights’ violations (hence the number of victims), for instance, was considered crucial in terms of justifying NATO’s actions as imperative on humanitarian grounds. In relation to this, a debate ensued over whether the estimated figure of about 10,000 Albanians killed by Serb forces could be corroborated on the basis of the number of bodies found. This is a contest over the accuracy of representations. Hence, the point of the debate is to prove or disprove one or other version of reality through the use of evidence. Fact-finding missions in Kosovo after the bombing campaign and their use in this kind of debate are part of this conception of the world. In this view, linguistic representations may communicate material realities but the representations are in some way separate from these realities. More
crudely put, they are names for objects. While this notion of the relationship between what we call *reality* and *language* may, as any look at the reporting of Kosovo shows, be in tune with what passes for common sense, the idea that language simply names objects has long been challenged.

This chapter considers a different conceptualisation of reality and representation in relation to the Kosovo conflict. The first section looks at Ferdinand de Saussure’s arguments in order to offer some thoughts on the role of naming in relation to the Kosovo conflict. Naming concerns the relationship of language and reality. Using Jacques Derrida’s thought, the second section argues that the idea of the existence of a reality, which constrains our actions, is itself a representation, which has political implications. The third section explores how NATO’s Kosovo operation and the FRG’s participation were represented as demanded by reality and, building on Derrida’s arguments, highlights the problematic nature of these statements. The conclusion stresses how the representation of the situation in Kosovo as an inescapable reality places it beyond our responsibility and thereby, at the very moment of its representation, it undermines the claim that the military operation was necessary in the name of a common humanity. Grasping the conflict as an ethico-political matter requires, or so I argue, a rethinking of the limits which we hold to be those of reality.

**Naming: reality and representation**

When we refer to a political situation, we invariably name who and what is involved. We name, for instance, ‘Kosovo’ as the territory or political entity where specific events are unfolding; ‘the Serbs’ and ‘the Kosovo Albanians’ as those involved; and, say, ‘human rights violations’ as what is going on. This may seem innocent enough, a process of identifying something which is already there. We simply match a list of terms to things. The idea that the words we use in language stand for ‘objects’ and thus reflect an independent reality has, however, been challenged by some thinkers who have contributed to a ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy. Ferdinand de Saussure who is engaged in linguistics and whose work has been crucial for poststructuralist thought has also fundamentally questioned it.

Saussure rejects the idea that language consists of a list of terms, which corresponds to a list of things. He particularly objects to the assumptions that ideas exist prior to and independently of words and that the link between a thing and a name is unproblematic. Rather Saussure asserts that a linguistic sign is a link not between a thing and a name but between a concept and a sound pattern. Crucially, the sign functions on the basis of differences in relation to other terms of language, and it is arbitrary, or rather unmotivated, because the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. The sign is, however, pre-given to the individual.
already exists and the speaker must operate within it. It is important that words do not represent independently existing concepts but are part of a system of language. Saussure draws attention to the arbitrariness of signs by pointing out that the same objects are called different names in different languages. Hence, names are not natural or necessary in linguistic terms. However, their relation to the linguistic context, and hence arguably to the political context, is not arbitrary at all.

Throughout the ‘Kosovo’ crisis, naming played a crucial role. Both the territory and a political entity were consistently identified by Western governments as ‘Kosovo’, a Serbian term, whereas Albanians refer to ‘Kosova’. Both mean ‘blackbird’. The problem is, whether the place in question rightfully belongs to Serbia as the birthplace of the Serb nation in the 1398 battle on the ‘Kosovo’ field, or whether autonomy or even independence should be granted to ‘Kosova’ on the grounds that its population today, which is largely Albanian, is seeking self-determination. In this context, the persistent usage of either of two equally arbitrary signs should be of concern, not merely to the sensitive scholar but to much wider audiences. In fact, this problem was one mentioned in the press.

The usage of Kosovo rather than Kosova implied that independence was not on the cards. What was at issue was a ‘troubled province’ of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia rather than a newly or future independent state. Hence, despite their explicit support of the Albanians as victims of Serb atrocities, in using the Serb name Western governments already construed the situation in a way that favoured the Serb, rather than the Albanian, view. Obviously, this is not to say that they really supported the Serbs rather than the Albanians, but that naming already implied taking a position. The inevitability of this positioning is reflected in the need felt by those writing on Kosovo to protest that their usage of the Serb term is merely a matter of practicality and not, as Tim Judah puts it, ‘a secret signal of support for one side’. However, the German Green Party attempted to avoid altogether a political decision inherent in the naming, and proposed to write Kosov@, which was supposed to capture both the a- and o-endings. Predictably, this move was considered somewhat ridiculous, especially as it is impossible to actually pronounce Kosov@. A recent visit to the website of the Green Party showed that it now also uses the term which dominated the discourse: Kosovo.

The use of Kosov@ and even the sensitivity to either ‘Kosovo’ or ‘Kosova’ are based on a prior process of naming. ‘The Albanians’ and their concerns are separated from ‘the Serbs’ through the use of language. Two clearly identifiable groups of people are constituted and created as subjects in this move. Bizarrely, the victims of Serb atrocities were often identified as ‘Kosovo Albanians,’ combining the Serb term for the territory with the notion that those being named are essentially Albanians. If ‘the Albanians’ have identifiable common ideas about their political future, they should be referred to as Kosova Albanians.
As the debate about Kosovo, and the explicit justifications of the usage of Kosovo, show, it was sometimes acknowledged that naming was a political act, as it implied taking a position. However, the issue seems to me to be more fundamental. Following Saussure, naming is not a simple act of linking a name to an existing object, which might be called one or other thing. Rather it is a productive practice.22 Judith Butler, referring to Louis Althusser, points out that being called a name is ‘one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language’.23 According to Althusser, hailing, or ‘interpellation’, is the process whereby individuals are recruited into subjects by an ideology as they realise that it is they who are being hailed.24 This draws attention to naming as a twofold political process of making subjects and positioning them at the same time. Firstly, our name is not merely a label attached to us as a priori existing individuals. It establishes us in our relationship to the social world, i.e. in our subjectivity, while at the same time serving as an act of objectification. Prosecution, for instance, must first identify the victim as an object through its name.

Secondly, although names are arbitrary in their sound pattern, they are not random in the linguistic and political context. If being called by a name turns us into subjects (and indeed objects) within an ideology, then naming is related to the assigning of power positions. For example, ‘Albanians’ in ‘Kosovo’ are unlikely to be as powerful as they are in ‘Kosova’ because the names already imply that the best they can hope for is autonomy, rather than independence. Tim Judah argues that there has been a transition from ‘Kosovo’ to ‘Kosova’, leading to a situation where the ‘Albanian Kosovars’ have taken over, thus excluding the Serbs and other minorities.25

The assertion that naming is part of subjectification draws attention to the issue of how we conceptualise reality and our relationship to it. Saussure’s critique of the idea that linguistic concepts are reflections of independently existing objects opens up the opportunity to question representations of reality. It does not, however, offer any views on the status of representation and of reality as such, or on that of the power relations involved. This view is open to the reply that the atrocities and bloodshed on the ground in Kosovo (or Kosova) are more real than their representation; and that it is that situation ‘on the ground’, rather than the secondary issue of how it should be properly called, which deserves our attention. This valuing of the supposedly real over representation, based on the possibility of differentiating between the two, is problematical. Engaging with Jacques Derrida’s thought enables us to explore why.

Derrida: reality as representation

If language is not merely a reflection of an independent reality, the relation between representation and reality is in question. Derrida’s critique of what he
calls logocentrism, ‘the determination of the being of the entity as presence’,26 revolves around the claim that Western thought is based on the value of presence. In logocentric thought representation and reality are not merely divorced, but valued differently. Representation is always inferior to that which is supposedly present and therefore seen as ‘real’.

Taking presence as a secure foundation for our thought assumes presence to be given, pure and absolute. However, according to Derrida, presence is an effect of differences, and the mutual exclusiveness of presence and absence is impossible. Referring to Saussure’s claim that ‘arbitrary’ and ‘differential’ are correlated characteristics,27 Derrida introduces the notion of différance. On the one hand, it refers to something being not identical, discernible. On the other hand, it refers to a ‘temporal or temporizing mediation or a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of “desire” or “will,” and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect’.28 Derrida suggests that différance is a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. Différance is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive . . . production of the intervals without which the ‘full’ terms would not signify, would not function.29

This claim implies that when we cannot show the thing itself, ‘we go through the detour of the sign’.30 Hence, the sign is deferred presence: ‘[S]ignified presence is always reconstituted by deferral, nachträglich, belatedly, supplementarily’.31 ‘The sign, as supplement, is always dangerous because it necessarily contains two contradictory dimensions. On the one hand, the supplement adds itself, enriches another plenitude and thus functions as a surplus.32 ’But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.’33 Thus, while the supplement enriches the presence, at the same time the sign endangers presence by replacing it. As the ‘sign is always the supplement of the thing itself’,34 it ‘takes its place’ in both meanings of the term: it stands for it in its absence but at the same time already replaces it.

If the sign is not a stand-in for pure presence, there is nothing beyond signification. In other words, there ‘is nothing outside of the text’.35 This claim has created much indignation in those who understand it to imply that the ‘real world’ does not exist. What Derrida is driving at is that ‘all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this “real” except in an interpretive experience’.36 Derrida explains his point using the logic of supplementarity in relation to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Confessions:

There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n’y a pas de hors-texte] . . . What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the
‘dangerous supplement,’ is that what one calls the real life of these existences ‘of flesh and bone,’ beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. 37

This is particularly important in view of what is at issue here. The claim that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’, as the imprecise translation puts it, 38 is likely to arouse emotions insofar as it can easily be construed as questioning the reality of the bloodshed and the suffering of ‘real people in real places’. Discussing the status of reality in relation to Rousseau’s Confessions, as Derrida does, is one thing; doing so in relation to massacre and rape in Kosovo is quite another. It could be seen to ignore, if not ridicule, the suffering of the victims. However, Derrida’s thought does not imply that the real world with its bloodshed does not exist. Rather, because we conceive what we think of as life on the model of a text, the seemingly clear distinction between inside and outside is blurred. ‘One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognise that there is a supplement at the source.’ 39 Hence, that which we call ‘real life’ turns out to be ‘constituted by the logic of supplementarity’. 40 As a consequence, the positive value attached to the real as opposed to the represented, the signified, the supplement, is not natural, but is indeed political. Derrida’s arguments lead us to radically reconsider the notion of representation. It is not merely that several, and as Saussure might point out, arbitrary, representations of reality are possible. What we call ‘reality’ is itself a representation, and what comes to be represented as ‘reality’ is political.

The reality of Kosovo

Serb atrocities against the ‘Kosovo Albanians’ were identified as the salient feature of the reality which for NATO made it imperative to act. It was estimated that about 1,500 Kosovo Albanians had been killed in the Serb offensive in the summer of 1998 and about 300,000 had fled their homes to hide in the surrounding area. Despite negotiations and a partial withdrawal of Serb security forces, the situation continued to deteriorate. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that on 23 March 1999, when it had to suspend its operation in Kosovo, about 360,000 people had become refugees, either within the region or beyond. 41 After the OSCE observers had left Kosovo, reports of the Kosovar refugees had now become the only source of information. 42 As they were considered to have a stake in exaggerating the Serb atrocities to which NATO’s actions were claimed to be a reaction, verification was both difficult and vital. One of the verification
mechanisms relied on corroboration of reports by several groups of refugees. The refugees’ reports detailed mass expulsion, rapes and killings.43

As Chancellor Schröder explained, the ‘Alliance was forced into this step, in order to stop further grave and systematic violations of human rights in Kosovo and to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe there’.44 NATO Secretary General Javier Solana and the German Army Inspector Helmut Willmann also used the description ‘humanitarian catastrophe’.45 The German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping argued that no further time was to be lost in the face of the misery of the refugees.46 For US President Bill Clinton it was a case of the civilised world fighting against ethnic violence and brutal crimes.47 According to one commentator, NATO was forced to act in order not to become complicit in the death of thousands.48 Thus two salient features of reality were identified: firstly, the human rights’ violations and the resulting human suffering in Kosovo; and, secondly, the necessity of NATO military action as an immediate consequence of this suffering.

This representation of reality is hard to escape. To argue that what we call reality is itself a representation seems simply an act of disrespect towards the victims of physical violence, if only from a position which sees itself as able to separate the real and the represented. While one may be quite prepared to accept that, as Derrida claims, we cannot refer to the real except in an interpretive experience,49 the real is typically considered to provide some form of limitation to this insight. In this view, whether torture is good or bad is a matter of fact, not of opinion or interpretation.50

The emotive power of human suffering had been important in German debates about military involvement abroad prior to the Kosovo operation. It is interesting to explore these earlier discussions in order to contextualise the German reaction to the Kosovo war. The problem the FRG was experiencing with post-Cold War international military operations, starting with the 1991 Gulf War, is often portrayed as a tension between commitment both to anti-fascism and to pacifism.51 This debate concerned the Greens in particular, if by no means exclusively, because they had portrayed themselves as a pacifistic party. The ‘heirs of the peace movement’ had been overwhelmingly opposed to Bundeswehr participation in the Gulf War.52 Yet Bosnia, and subsequently Kosovo, posed a completely different problem. Because of the atrocities committed, and the Holocaust imagery related to them, Bosnia came to be seen as a fundamental challenge to a pacifistic position.

In the summer of 1995, Joschka Fischer, then a leading politician of Alliance 90/German Greens, and from October 1998 Foreign Minister, argued that accepting a policy of war and murder in Bosnia would have far-reaching consequences for Europe. The key question he posed to his own party was: ‘Can pacifists, can especially a position of non-violence accept the victory of brute, naked violence in Bosnia?’53 He likened the position of the West in the 1990s to the appeasement in the 1930s and expressed his
worry that the German Left would lose its moral soul if it ducked the issue of standing up to the new violent politics with ‘whatever argumentative escape it may be’.54 His rhetorical question was whether the Greens could ‘put principles higher than human lives’.55

Fischer backed the idea of a military intervention in Bosnia, even though he stopped short of explicitly saying so. He thereby questioned a fundamental tenet of Green politics, the principle of non-violence, and predictably generated outrage and debate among his party colleagues.56 What is of interest here are the reasons why Fischer apparently felt compelled to do so. He claimed it was the terrifying reality of the cruelty and barbarity that had led him to rethink the principle of non-violence. In the face of real violence the unavoidable interpretative experience comes to be seen as somehow unnecessary, an ‘argumentative escape’, a luxury enjoyed by those safe at home in their living rooms, merely watching the bloodshed on television.

Less than four years later, Fischer had become Germany’s foreign minister, and his government authorised, with parliamentary consent, the Bundeswehr’s participation in Operation Allied Force. An ashen-faced Fischer insisted that he had done everything humanly possible for a diplomatic solution. He admitted that he simply could not figure out what else to do.57

The German weekly Der Spiegel commented that the German leadership, all good pacifists or at least card-carrying ‘civilians’ in the past, looked honestly distressed at the prospect of going to war.58 When, for ‘the first time, the western defensive alliance started out of area into a war of aggression against a sovereign country, and that on a questionable basis in terms of international law without a UN mandate’,59 when ‘German fighter planes were flying bomb raids on another state for the first time since the end of the Second World War’,60 those in charge in the FRG were not exactly the usual suspects. They had grown up as participants in sit-ins at NATO’s missile bases, in human chains and at ‘peace workshops’,61 and looked distinctly uncomfortable in their current role of commanding the military in a real war. The irony of their position was not lost on them. At one point Fischer publicly admitted that he sometimes thought he had lost his way.62

While human chains may, to their way of thinking, have been a credible response to the threat of nuclear weapons, which is construed as potential rather than fully real, such non-violent protest rings hollow in the face of the atrocities in Kosovo.63 Defence Minister Scharping used a particular vocabulary to describe them; genocide, slaughterhouse, ethnic cleansing, selection, concentration camps.64 These terms suggested that what was at stake was not the crude materiality of what was going on, but its position in a wider interpretative context, within which the West, and the FRG in particular, were conceptualised. However, this point could be seen as unimportant because of the arguably indisputable reality of death. Derrida questions the underlying assumption of such talk about death which ‘takes the form of an “it is self-explanatory”’: everybody knows what one is talking
about when one names death’. While Derrida recognises death as a limit, it is not a self-evident, natural limit. Rather, as Drucilla Cornell explains, it is the ‘limit of any system of meaning [that] is, for Derrida, graphically represented to us in death’.66

The deaths of the Kosovars certainly were interpreted and related to systems of meaning. They mattered greatly in their symbolism with respect to the history of the Holocaust. They mattered quite clearly in relation to the lives of the Serb civilians. As Gordana Milanovic, a Serb woman living in FRG, put it: ‘Now Herr Fischer should explain to me how he wants to protect thousands in Kosovo by bombing millions’.67 Yet they mattered rather less in another context. The German commander for the Kosovo operation, General Helmut Harff, supported the deployment of ground troops, a move rejected by the government. He asked whether the argument against this course of action was supposed to mean that the ‘life of a raped, massacred woman is worth less than that of a soldier who is trained to defend himself’.68 Harff’s question about the refusal to commit ground troops suggests that death and its significance were a matter of interpretation. Thus, it seems that the ‘reality’ of a situation, even if it is one involving death, depends on how it is contextualised. One could therefore assert that there is nothing beyond the text of our representations of reality which could tell us how exactly bloodshed matters or whose life should be protected.

The different valuation of lives, which is apparent in the refusal to commit ground troops, also exposed a tension in the position of the German government. Harff’s contextualisation implied that the failure to commit ground troops to the operation contradicted the government’s stated objective of helping the Kosovars.69 It is interesting to note in this context that the massacres in Kosovo were seen to legitimise the FRG’s war operation but not asylum for the Kosovar refugees in the FRG.70

In fact, the German government seemed very eager to confirm its willingness to participate in NATO’s operation. As early as June 1998, then Defence Minister Volker Rühe had already stated that the Bundeswehr would participate in a NATO operation.71 In the period of transition to a new government in the autumn of the same year the continued willingness to do so was carefully established and articulated.72 Rühe’s successor, Scharping, confirmed on the eve of the first air raid that German soldiers would be part of the operation from the start.73 After the bombing had started, a SAT-1 television reporter rather proudly claimed that Bundeswehr Tornados were flying ‘in pole position’.74 When the Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov visited Bonn to mediate between the West and Belgrade, the FRG leadership was reportedly concerned, above all, to avoid a ‘second Rapallo’ which would undermine the West’s trust in Germany.75 It had to be clear that, as Fischer had declared like so many others before him, there would be ‘no German Sonderweg’, no German special path.76 According to Fischer,
Germany stood ‘on the right side for the first time this century’. Kosovo, despite all the agonising about the death of pacifism, provided a welcome opportunity to demonstrate the end of German abnormality.

The supplement: identity, credibility, cohesion

The end of German abnormality was articulated within a Western identity, which was thought to be enacted in Operation Allied Force. According to Chancellor Schröder, the Kosovo operation demonstrated that NATO is an alliance based on common values, especially human rights. The Kosovo operation had enabled the Alliance to show that it is a community of values above and beyond being a defensive alliance. The Operation thus provided an opportunity to endorse NATO’s proclaimed new post-Cold War identity. In tune with NATO’s human rights’ identity, the air raids were meant to limit the Serbs’ ability to inflict harm on the KLA and the civilian population in Kosovo.

However, NATO’s credibility was an issue throughout. At times this issue seemed more central than the goal of protecting the Kosovars. When President Clinton outlined the three aims of the operation, he mentioned demonstrating the strength and resolve of the Western Alliance ahead of preventing Yugoslavia’s President Milosevic from further use of violence and restricting his military capabilities. NATO Secretary-General Solana stressed ‘NATO solidarity, unity and resolve’ with respect to the operation. And Chancellor Schröder simply said: ‘If only for the sake of its credibility as a community of values NATO was forced to act against mass expulsion and mass murder in Kosovo.’ Considering the argument that Operation Allied Force was all about protecting the lives of innocent Kosovar civilians, and the idea of human rights more broadly, this focus on NATO’s credibility seems inappropriate. Indeed, the very name of the operation seems to indicate NATO’s conception of self.

The point is not that NATO was more interested in its own unity than in the declared aims of Operation Allied Force, as if these were unrelated issues. One could argue that the maintenance of the NATO coalition was necessary to carry out the military operation that was to protect both the Kosovar civilians and the ideal of human rights. Hence, maintaining the consensus among the NATO states, as well as the credibility of the Alliance, might not have been the aim as such, but they were necessary to the overall goal. Strengthening NATO’s credibility and its post-Cold War cohesiveness are, then, welcome side-effects of the operation as well as its preconditions. This brings us back to Derrida’s argument, as one could say that NATO’s unity was only a supplement to the defence of human rights in Kosovo. The cohesiveness of the Alliance was not supposed to be the primary goal of the West, but was something added, a surplus. However, as Derrida warns,
the supplement supplements. It enriches only to replace. While NATO’s solidarity may have been intended to help and protect the Kosovars, such solidarity, following Derrida’s argument, at the same time endangered this objective by replacing it.

The debate over the sending of ground troops to Kosovo offers another illustration of this mechanism. Although the deployment option was seen to have been almost unavoidable in terms of military logic, it was rejected by all key powers except the United Kingdom. The fear of large-scale casualties, and the expected loss of domestic support in NATO countries as a result, were seen to be the reasons. In contrast, an air war with smart weapons was attractive because the threat to the lives of NATO soldiers and civilians was considered low. ‘Real’ war, involving ground troops and thus probably a higher level of casualties, was to be avoided in order to prevent a break-up of NATO’s unity. This option was thus evaluated not primarily in terms of what was supposed to be the main goal of the operation, the protection of the Kosovars, but in terms of the supplementary consideration of NATO’s solidarity.

The point, however, is not a simple overturning of the means–end relationship. Whether NATO ‘really’ wanted to protect the Kosovars, or to reinvent itself and sustain its new identity, is in many ways the wrong question to ask. Operation Allied Force can be construed both as protecting the Kosovars and as contributing to their expulsion and slaughter. More pertinently, it can be seen as a practice, one which produced the Kosovo Albanians as subjects in a particular political context. The NATO operation, however much intended to help and however much it did achieve what were presented as its aims, could not but reproduce the identity of ‘Kosovo Albanians’ as victims of the present state system in which they cannot practise self-determination. Therefore, it also produced them as a danger to the ‘text’ of which NATO is a part.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that what we hold to be reality is itself a representation. We produce reality and its subjects whenever we represent them, and representing them is an inherent part of our political practices. Portrayals of the Kosovo conflict have tended to suppress the productive effect of Western practices. The crisis was conceptualised as a ‘no-choice’ situation. Typically, when we have no choice, we are thought not to be responsible for our actions, for example when someone holds a gun to our head or when we cut off a fellow climber from the rope below us in order to save ourselves. While moral philosophers might have protracted debates about what exactly is happening in such situations, the idea that we are not responsible when the only alternative is death holds some persuasive power.
Germany’s Chancellor Schröder argued that there had been no choice for the West in relation to the Kosovo operation. As a result, the responsibility for the air raids rested exclusively with Milosevic. Western governments emphasised, time and again, that it was in Milosevic’s power to immediately end NATO’s operation by acceding to the Alliance’s demands. As Defence Minister Scharping explained: ‘Everyone in the government had scruples. In order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo, we had, however, no other choice. The responsibility for the air raids rests exclusively with President Slobodan Milosevic, who leads a war against his own people in Kosovo with incredible brutality.’ The West was forced to act in the way it did both by Milosevic and by the reality of which Milosevic was a part. Therefore, Milosevic and that reality were to blame for any adverse consequences of NATO action.

The claim that something is demanded by reality is problematical because it conceptualises ‘reality’ as outside language. Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat claim that we ‘seek to convince ourselves of the existence of “reality” by trying to trace the outline of objects over and over again. As Wittgenstein points out, this is a trick of language.’ Derrida similarly argues that ‘the truth is precisely limited, finite, and confined within its borders’, but that we fail to recognise the limit for what it is. The problem is that if we understand the boundary, which we believe we experience, as the necessary interference of an independent materiality rather than a limit to our conceptualisations, we consider our choices limited by a mysterious outside power that we cannot ever directly experience. As a result, because we have no choice, and because this is the way things are, we limit our responsibility. This conceptualisation is deeply political. In other words, the assertion of the existence of an independent reality, which in itself cannot be proved and seems to demand no proof, works to support particular political positions and to exclude others from consideration.

Facing up to the reality of not being able to do anything other than use armed force in order to protect innocent civilians from physical violence was portrayed as the responsible thing to do in the Kosovo crisis. Clearly, the assertion that reality is a certain way, rather than another, limits the range of options that one might reasonably contemplate. In this context, the idea of refusing the choice between ‘Kosovo’ and ‘Kosova’ can be seen not as a silly move, as some political commentators regarded it, but as an effort to disturb an established field of signification by refusing to be committed to either side of the dichotomy. In this sense, writing about Kosov@ constitutes a political intervention, an act of resistance. For the point is not to face up to a tough reality but to engage the ‘limits declared to be insurmountable’, and to explore ways of thinking beyond the limits which are thought to be those of reality.

No one failed to be touched by the human suffering to which NATO’s air campaign was a response, nor by the misery that followed in its wake and
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which was, to some extent, a consequence of it. Equally, no one is likely to be satisfied with that response, nor would they have been had the operation not happened. Clearly, it was not only the response that was unsatisfactory, but the way in which the issue was approached, discussed and conceptualised. What is interesting is not so much that the West’s response fell short of what one might have hoped for. Rather it is that something seemed amiss in the ethical discourse surrounding ‘Kosovo’. The way we are accustomed to speak about such crises revolves around the issues of human rights, sovereignty and war; and that way of speaking (re)produces the exclusion it seeks to remedy.

NATO and Western governments claimed to be acting out of responsibility for fellow humans. However, their conceptualisation of the events in Kosovo and their practices produced those for whom they were claiming to take responsibility as ‘other’, as neatly identifiable ‘Kosovo Albanians’, as outside the accepted state system, and consequently as a danger to it. Having conceptually excluded this ‘other’ in the representation of reality, and having then recognised its humanness, the question was how to bring the ‘other’ back in. Military intervention, which at the same time reproduced the exclusion (for instance, by making even more Kosovars refugees), was the answer. This is a peculiar way of accepting one’s responsibility for the ‘other’, based as it is on thinking which starts from exclusion and therefore reproduces exclusion even as it aims to overcome it. Our inability to address the Kosovo crisis in a satisfactory manner points to our failure to investigate the role of language in producing subjects, and with them what we call reality. The question, then, is how to think differently, and that seems to require thinking beyond the limits we consider to be those of reality.

Notes

I would like to thank Stuart Elden and Michael Shapiro for commenting on earlier versions of this chapter, which was presented at the ISA convention in Los Angeles in March 2000.


11 Ibid., Part II, pp. 67f., 113 and esp. p. 120.
12 Ibid., pp. 67–9 and 71.
13 Ibid., pp. 66f.
14 See, however, Ismail Kadare, Three Elegies for Kosovo, translated from the Albanian by Peter Constantine (London, Harvill Press, 2000).
15 See, for example, ‘Wilder Klammeraffe’, Der Spiegel, 17 May 1999.
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20 On similar issues in relation to Bosnia, see David Campbell, National Deconstruction. Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
25 Judah, Kosovo, p. 297.
28 Derrida, Margins, p. 8.
30 Derrida, Margins, p. 9.
32 Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 144.
33 Ibid., p. 145.
34 Ibid., p. 145.
35 Ibid., p. 158.
37 Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp. 158f.
39 Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 304.
41 Adam Roberts, ‘NATO’s “Humanitarian War” Over Kosovo’, *Survival*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1999), pp. 112f.

42 ‘Serbische Offensive löst neue Fluchtwelle aus’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 March 1999. See also Partos, ‘Q & A: Counting Kosovo’s Dead’. I use ‘Kosovar’ as it can mean both ‘Kosovo Albanians’ and ‘people from Kosovo’. This reflects the ambiguity of the situation.

43 See, for example, OSCE, ‘Kosovo/Kosova. As Seen, As Told’.


47 Flottau et al., ‘Alle Serben im Krieg’.


51 Alice H. Cooper, ‘When Just Causes Conflict With Acceptable Means: The German Peace Movement and Military Intervention in Bosnia’, *German Politics and Society*, no. 15 (1997), p. 103. The FRG also had a problem with this practice due to constitutional restrictions. That issue is not explored here. Arguably, the legal constraints were a problem precisely because of the tension between anti-fascism and pacifism.


54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.


59 Flottau et al., ‘Alle Serben im Krieg’.

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61 Didzoleit et al., ‘Ernstfall für Schröder’. See also Drozdiak, ‘Europe Comes Together’.


63 See, for example, Josef Joffe, ‘Verfehltes Reifezeugnis’, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10 March 1998.

64 ‘Ich darf nicht wackeln’.


68 Quoted in ‘“Möglichst gut rauskommen”’, Der Spiegel, 6 September 1999.

69 See Gerhard Schröder (chancellor), in Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 14/31, 26 March 1999, pp. 2571f.

70 Refugees from Kosovo were treated as victims of a civil war, which means a lesser status in terms of protection. Heribert Prantl, ‘Das deutsche Asylrecht – blind für den Kosovo’, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1–2 April 1999. Note also the under-preparedness of the UNHCR, which was blamed on NATO assertions that air strikes would solve rather than exacerbate the refugee problem. See Peter Capella, ‘UN Agency Failed to Meet Refugee Crisis, Says Report’, The Guardian, 12 February 2000.


74 Quoted in Flottau et al., ‘Alle Serben im Krieg’.

75 ‘Ich darf nicht wackeln’. Rapallo was where Germany and Soviet Russia concluded a treaty in 1922, arguably undermining Western trust in Germany.


77 Quoted in ‘Ich darf nicht wackeln’.

78 I have explored the issue of German (ab)normality in relation to the FRG’s (un)willingness to use force since the end of the Cold War in more detail in ‘Militarising Germany and the Politics of the Past’, paper presented at the 1999 BISA conference in Manchester.


82 See, for example, ‘Zweimal total verkalkuliert’, Der Spiegel, 12 April 1999.


84 Press conference called by Secretary-General Javier Solana and SACEUR General Wesley Clark, 25 March 1999.


86 The independent evaluation of the UNHCR’s response to the refugee crisis mentions that the interests of key donor states were related to ‘the NATO military campaign and not necessarily to universal standards of refugee protection’: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, The Kosovo Refugee Crisis. An Independent Evaluation of UNHCR’s Emergency Preparedness and Response, pre-publication edition (Geneva, February 2000), chapter 6, section 438.

87 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 145.


89 See, for example, Jürgen Hogrefe, Jürgen Leinemann, Paul Lersch, Rainer Pörtner, Alexander Szandar, ‘Aus freier Überzeugung’, Der Spiegel, 19 April 1999.

90 Olaf Ihlau, Siegsmund von Ilsemann, Uwe Klussmann, Dirk Koch and Roland Schleicher, ‘Ziellös und traumatisiert’, Der Spiegel, 19 April 1999.

91 An intervention in a field of signification which aims to go beyond the existing oppositions also requires a displacement. See Derrida, Positions, pp. 41–3.

92 The OSCE estimates that 1.4 million people from Kosovo had been displaced by 9 June 1999: OSCE, Kosovol/Kosova. As Seen, As Told. We have already seen that it is difficult to ascertain precisely how many people were killed. However, the OSCE report argues that violations of the right to life increased dramatically after the withdrawal of observers on 20 March 1999 and further escalated with the beginning of the NATO air campaign four days later. See OSCE, Kosovol/Kosova. As Seen, As Told, chapter 5. Moreover, some Kosovars were killed by NATO bombs: see Human Rights Watch, Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign (February 2000), available online: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/nato (accessed 18 December 2000).

93 This notion of responsibility is, however, diametrically opposed to what Derrida has to say about responsibility. See Jacques Derrida, The Other Heading.
95 Ibid.
99 Derrida, Aporias, p. 1 (italics in original); see also pp. 3f.