

# The Deconstruction of Actuality

## An Interview with Jacques Derrida

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**Passages:** From Bogota to Santiago, from Prague to Sofia, not to mention Berlin or Paris, your work gives people an impression of being in touch with the moment, with actuality. Do you share that feeling? Are you a philosopher of the present? Or at least one of those who think their time?

**Derrida:** Who knows? How could anyone be sure? And anyway, being 'in touch with actuality' and 'thinking one's time' are not the same thing. Both of them imply *doing* something, over and above establishing facts or offering descriptions: taking part, participating, taking sides. That is when you 'make contact', and perhaps change things, if only slightly. But one 'intervenes', as they say, in a time which is not present to one, or given in advance. There are no pre-established norms which can guarantee that one is 'making contact with actuality', or 'thinking one's time' as you put it. And you often get one without the other. But I don't think I am capable of improvising an answer to this kind of question. We must stick to the time of our conversation – and of course time is limited. Now more than ever, thinking one's time – especially if there is a danger, or a hope, of speaking about it in public – means recognising and exploiting the fact that the time of this speaking is produced artificially. It is an *artifact*. In its actualisation, the time of such a public act is calculated and constrained, 'formatted' and 'initialised' by (to put it briefly) the organisations of the media – and these alone would deserve an almost infinite analysis. These days, anyone who wants to think their time, especially if they want to talk about it too, is bound to pay heed to a public space, and therefore to a political present which is constantly changing in form and content as a result of the tele-technology of what is confusedly called news, information or communication.

But your question referred not only to the present, but to actuality. Very schematically, let me quickly mention just two of the most actual features of the moment. They are too

abstract to capture the most characteristic features of my own experience of 'actuality', or any other *philosophical* experience of it, but they do point to something of what constitutes actuality in general. I will try to designate them by two portmanteau terms: *artifactuality* and *actuvirtuality*. The first means that actuality is indeed *made*: it is important to know what it is made of, but it is even more necessary to recognise that it is made. It is not given, but actively produced; it is sorted, invested and performatively interpreted by a range of hierarchising and selective procedures – *factitious* or *artificial* procedures which are always subservient to various powers and interests of which their 'subjects' and agents (producers and consumers of actuality, always interpreters, and in some cases 'philosophers' too), are never sufficiently aware. The 'reality' of 'actuality' – however individual, irreducible, stubborn, painful or tragic it may be – only reaches us through fictional devices. The only way to analyse it is through a work of resistance, of vigilant counter-interpretation, etc. Hegel was right to tell the philosophers of his time to read the newspapers. Today, the same duty requires us to find out how news is *made*, and by whom: the daily papers, the weeklies, and the TV news as well. We need to insist on looking at them from the other end: that of the press agencies as well as that of the teleprompter. And we should never forget what this entails: whenever a journalist or a politician appears to be speaking to us directly, in our homes, and looking us straight in the eye, he or she is actually reading, from a screen, at the dictation of a 'prompter', and reading a text which was produced elsewhere, on a different occasion, possibly by other people, or by a whole network of nameless writers and editors.

**Passages:** Presumably there is a duty to develop a systematic critique of what you call *artifactuality*. You say we 'ought' ...

**Derrida:** Yes, a critical culture, a kind of education. But I would not speak about this duty of ours as citizens and philosophers – I would never say 'ought' – without adding two or three crucial qualifications.

The first of these is about the question of *nationality*. (To respond briefly to one of the connotations of your first

question, it sounded as if, coming back from abroad, you had fished it out of your diary for some reason: 'here's what they say about you abroad: so what do you make of that?' I would have liked to comment on this; but let it pass.) Amongst the filters which 'inform' the moment – and despite the accelerating pace and increasing ambiguity of internationalisation – nations, regions and provinces, or indeed the 'West', still have a dominance which overdetermines every other hierarchy (sport in the first place, then the 'politician' – though not the political – and finally the 'cultural', in decreasing order of supposed popularity, spectacularity, and comprehensibility). This leads to the discounting of a whole mass of events: all those, in fact, which are taken to be irrelevant to the (supposedly public) national interest, or the national language, or the national code or style. On the news, 'actuality' is automatically ethnocentric. Even when it has to do with 'human rights', it will exclude foreigners, sometimes within the same country, though not on the basis of nationalist passions, or doctrines, or policies. Some journalists make honourable attempts to escape from this pressure, but by definition they can never do enough, and in the end it does not depend on the professional journalists anyway. It is especially important to remember this now, when old nationalisms are taking new forms, and making use of the most 'advanced' media techniques (the official radio and TV of former Yugoslavia are only one example, though a particularly striking one). And it is worth noticing that some of them have felt it necessary to cast doubt on the critique of ethnocentrism, or (to simplify greatly) on the deconstruction of Eurocentrism. This is still considered acceptable, even now: it is as if they were completely blind to the deadly threats currently being issued, in the name of ethnicities, right at the centre of Europe, within a Europe whose only reality today – whose only 'actuality' – is economic and national, and whose only law, in alliances as in conflicts, is still that of the market.

But the tragedy, as always, lies in a contradiction, a double demand: the apparent internationalisation of sources of news and information is often based on the appropriation and monopolisation of channels of information, publication and distribution. Just think of what happened in the Gulf War. It may have represented an exemplary moment of heightened awareness, or even rebellion, but this should not be allowed to conceal the normality and constancy of this kind of violence in conflicts everywhere, not just the Middle East. Sometimes, then, this apparently international process of homogenisation may provoke 'national' resistance. That is the first complication.

A second qualification: this international artifactuality – the monopolisation of the 'actuality effect', and the centralisation of the artifactual power to 'create events' – may be accompanied by advances in 'live' communication, taking place in so-called 'real' time, in the present. The theatrical genre of the 'interview' is a propitiation, at least a fictive one, of this idolatry of 'immediate' presence and 'live' communication. The newspapers will always prefer to publish an interview, accompanied by photographs of the

author, rather than an article which will face up to its responsibilities in reading, criticism and education. But how can we carry on criticising the mystifications of 'live' communication (videocameras, etc.) if we want to continue making use of it? In the first place, by continuing to point out, and *argue*, that 'live' communication and 'real time' are never pure: they do not furnish us with intuitions or transparencies, or with perceptions unmarked by technical interpretation or intervention. And any such argument inevitably makes reference to philosophy.

And finally – as I just mentioned – the necessary deconstruction of artifactuality should never be allowed to turn into an alibi or an excuse. It must not create an inflation of the image, or be used to neutralise every danger by means of what might be called the trap of the trap, the delusion of delusion: a denial of events, by which everything – even violence and suffering, war and death – is said to be constructed and fictive, and constituted by and for the media, so that nothing really ever happens, only images, simulacra, and delusions. The deconstruction of artifactuality should be carried as far as possible, but we must also take every precaution against this kind of critical neo-idealism. We must bear in mind not only that any coherent deconstruction is about singularity, about events, and about what is ultimately irreducible in them, but also that 'news' or 'information' is a contradictory and heterogeneous process. Information can transform and strengthen knowledge, truth and the cause of future democracy, with all the problems associated with them, and it must do so, just as it often has done in the past. However artificial and manipulative it may be, we have to hope that artifactuality will bend itself or lend itself to the coming of what is on its way, to the outcome which carries it along and towards which it is moving. And to which it is going to have to bear witness, whether it wants to or not.

**Passages: A moment ago you mentioned another term, referring not to technology and artificiality, but to virtuality.**

**Derrida:** If we had enough time I would want to stress another aspect of 'actuality' – of what is happening now, and what is happening *to actuality*. I would emphasise not only these *artificial* syntheses (synthetic images, synthetic voices, all the prosthetic supplements which can be substituted for real actuality) but also, and especially, a concept of *virtuality* (virtual images, virtual spaces, and therefore virtual outcomes or events). Clearly it is no longer possible to contrast virtuality with actual reality, along the lines of the serene old philosophical distinction between power and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*, the potentiality of matter and the determining form of a *telos*, and hence of *progress*, etc. Virtuality now reaches right into the structure of the eventual event and imprints itself there; it affects both the time and the space of images, discourses, and 'news' or 'information' – in fact everything which connects us to actuality, to the unappeasable reality of its supposed present. In order to 'think their time', philosophers today need to

attend to the implications and effects of this virtual time – both to the new technical uses to which it can be put, and to how they echo and recall some far more ancient possibilities.

## PLAYING FOR TIME

**Passages:** Might we ask you to come back to something rather more concrete?

**Derrida:** You think I have been wandering from the point? Avoiding your question? I admit I am not answering it directly. And people may think: he's just wasting time, ours as well as his. Or he's playing for time, putting off his answer. And that would not be entirely false. The one thing that is unacceptable these days – on TV, on the radio, or in the papers – is intellectuals taking their time, or wasting other people's time. Perhaps that's what needs to be changed about actuality: its rhythm. Time is what media professionals must not waste – theirs or ours. And often they can count on success. They know the price of time, if not its value. Before denouncing the silence of the intellectuals yet again, don't we need to investigate this new situation in the media? Don't we need to consider the effects of this difference of rhythm? Some intellectuals are reduced to silence by it – those who need a bit more time, and are not prepared to adapt the complexity of their analyses to the conditions under which they would be permitted to speak. It can shut them up, or drown their voices in the noise of others – at least in places which are dominated by certain rhythms and forms of speech. This different time, the time of the media, gives rise to a different distribution – different spaces, rhythms, intervals, forms of speech-making and public intervention. But what is invisible, incomprehensible or inaudible on the most public of screens can still be actively effective, either immediately or eventually. It is wasted only for those who confuse actuality with what can be seen, or done, on display in the mediatic superstore. In any case, this transformation of public space calls for work: and I believe that the necessary work is already being done, and is more or less accepted, in the obvious places one would expect. The silence of those who read the papers, or watch or hear the news, and analyse it too, is nothing like as silent as it sounds at the place where news is produced – which is deaf to everything that does not speak in conformity to its own law. So it becomes necessary to reverse the approach: there is a kind of mediatic noise about pseudo-actuality which falls like silence, which imposes silence on everything that speaks and acts. But it can be heard elsewhere, provided one knows how to train one's ears on it. This is the law of time. It is terrifying for the present, but it still leaves room for hope, that is to say for reckoning with the untimely. Here it would be necessary to consider the effective limits of the right of reply (which are the limits of democracy too). Quite apart from any question of deliberate censorship, they point to the appropriation of public time and space, and their technical distribution by those with power in the media.

If I still indulge myself in a pause – or a pose, a manner or mannerism just like any other, since these really are

manners of thinking one's time – it is because I really am trying to respond in every possible manner: responding to your questions, while taking responsibility for an interview. In order to take on such responsibilities it is necessary at least to know who and what the interview is for, especially when it is with someone who also writes books, teaches, or publishes in other ways, in a different rhythm, in different situations, and weighing words in different ways. An interview is supposed to be like a snapshot, a film-still, the capturing of an image: Just look how he flailed around like a frightened animal, on that day, in that place, with those interviewers. I'll give you an example: they talk to this guy about actuality, about what happens in the world every day of the week, and ask him to summarise his opinions very briefly: and off he goes, back into his lair like a hunted animal: laying false trails, drawing you into a maze of qualifications, of fits and starts. He rings the changes on 'but no, it's more complicated than that', (thus earning mockery and dissatisfaction from the fools who think that things are always simpler than one supposes); or 'it is true that complication can be a strategy of avoidance, but so is simplification, and in fact it is a far more reliable one.' So you get your virtual photograph: confronted with a question like the one you just asked, that is my most likely response. It is not exactly impulsive, but it is not entirely deliberate either. It consists not in refusing to answer a person or a question, but on the contrary trying to attend to their indirect presuppositions or invisible twists and turns.

For instance, you made a distinction between 'philosophers of the present' and 'philosophers who think their time.' According to you, I belong with the latter rather than the former. But this could mean several different things. Some philosophers may concern themselves with the present, with what presents itself at the present moment, without bothering themselves with bottomless questions as to the value of presence and what it may signify, presuppose, or conceal. Are they philosophers of the present? Yes – and no. Others may do exactly the opposite: they could immerse themselves in meditations about presence or the presentation of the present, without paying the slightest attention to what is at present going on around them or in the world. Are they philosophers of the present? No – and yes. But I am sure that no philosopher-worthy-of-the-name would accept the way this choice is framed. Like anyone else who tries to be a philosopher, I do not want to give up either on the present or on thinking the presence of the present. Neither do I want to give up on the experience of what both conceals and exposes them – through what I was just calling *artifactuality*, for example. How are we to broach this theme of presence and the present? What are the presuppositions of an inquiry into this subject? What commitments do these questions involve? And this stake, this commitment – is this not the law which ought to govern everything, directly or indirectly? I try to adhere to it myself, but by definition it is always inaccessible, it lies beyond everything.

You may say that this is just another evasion, another manner that I have put on in order not to speak about what you yourself call actuality or the present. The first question,

the one I should have returned to you, like an echo, is therefore: what does it mean to speak about the present? Of course I could easily try to show that in reality I have only ever been concerned with problems of actuality, of institutional politics, or simply of politics. We could pile up examples – references, names, dates, locations – (don't ask me to do it though). But I don't want to go along with that mediagological form. Nor do I want to use this platform for the sake of self-justification. I don't feel I have any right to do so, and whatever I may do to avoid running away from political responsibilities, it will never be enough, and I will always reproach myself for this.

But at the same time I try not to forget that it is often the untimely intrusions of so-called actuality which are most 'preoccupied' with the present. Being preoccupied with the present – as a philosopher for example – perhaps means avoiding the constant confusion of presence with actuality. An anachronistic manner of encountering actuality need not necessarily miss out on what is most present today. Difficulties – risks and opportunities, and perhaps incalculabilities – may take the form of an untimeliness which arrives exactly on time: precisely this one and no other, and which comes *just-in-time*. *Just*, because it is anachronistic and ill-adjusted (like justice itself, which always lacks measure, and has nothing to do with justness in the sense of nice exactitude, or with adaptive norms, and which is different in kind from the legal systems over which it is supposed to preside). It will be more present than the presence of actuality, more in tune with the individual enormity which marks the irruption of the other into the course of history. These irruptions always take an untimely form, prophetic or messianic, but they have no need for clamour or spectacle. They can stay almost concealed. For the reasons mentioned a moment ago, it is not the daily papers which tell us most about the plu-present of the day (not that we get it every day in the weeklies and monthlies either).

So any answer which is responsible to the needs of actuality has to involve itself in qualifications of this kind. It requires the dissension, dissonance, and discord of this untimeliness, just the right disadjustment of the anachronism. It is necessary to defer, to take one's distance, to tarry; but also to rush in precipitately. And we need to get it right in order to get as close as possible to what is happening throughout actuality. Every time and all at once, and it's a different time each time, the first as well as the last. At least, actions which unite hyper-actuality with anachronism give

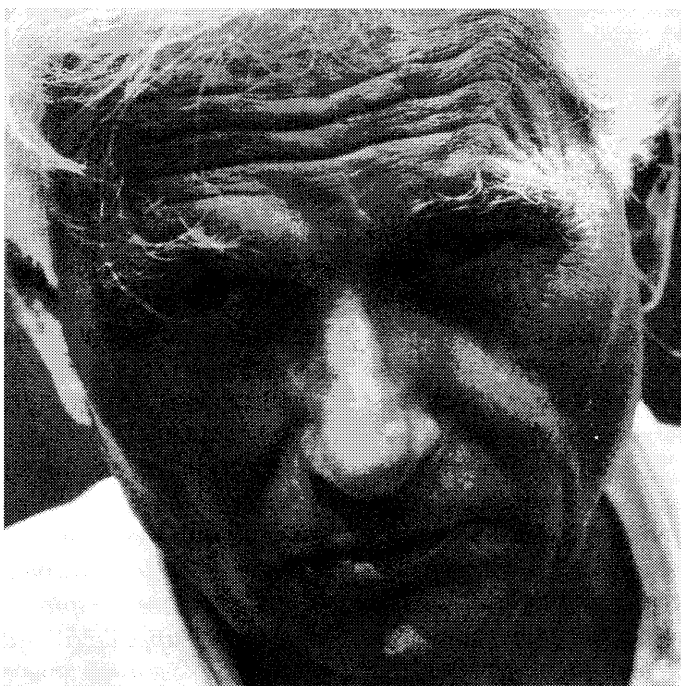
me pleasure (rare as they are, even impossible, and anyway non-programmable). But my preference for the allying or alloying of these two styles is of course not just a matter of taste. It is the law of answering, of answerability, the law of the other.

## DIFFERENCE AND THE EVENT

**Passages:** What relation would you see between this anachronism or untimeliness, and what you call *différance*?

**Derrida:** This takes us back, I think, to a more philosophical level of response, and to what I was saying earlier about the theme of the present or of presence. This is also the theme of *différance*, which is often accused of encouraging procrastination, neutralisation, and resignation, and therefore of evading the pressing needs of the present, especially

ethical and political ones. But I have never seen any conflict between *différance* and the pressing urgency of present need. I am even tempted to say: *quite the opposite*. But that would also be a simplification. *Différance* points to a *relationship* (a 'férence') – a relation to what is other, to what differs in the sense of alterity, to the singularity of the other – but 'at the same time' it also relates to what is to come, to that which will occur in ways which are inappropriate, unforeseen, and therefore urgent, beyond anticipation: to precipitation in fact. The thought of *différance* is also, therefore, a thought of



pressing need, of something which, because it is different, I can neither avoid nor appropriate. The event, and the singularity of the event – this is what *différance* is all about. (This is why I said that it means something quite different from the neutralisation of events on the grounds that they are artifactualised by the media.) Even if it also and inevitably involves an opposite movement 'at the same time' (this 'same time' about which sameness disagrees all the time, a time which is 'out of joint', as Hamlet says: disturbed, distracted, dislocated, and disproportionate) – an attempt to reappropriate, divert, loosen, and deaden the cruelty of the event, or simply to deaden the death towards which it is bound. So *différance* is a thought which wishes to yield to the imminence of what is coming or about to come: to the event, and therefore to experience itself, in so far as it too has an inevitable tendency, 'at the same time' and in the light of 'the same time', to appropriate whatever is going to happen: the economy of the other and the aneconomy of the other,

saving and dispensing, both at once. There would be no *différance* without urgency, emergency, imminence, precipitation, the ineluctable, the unforeseen arrival of the other, the other to whom both reference and deference are made.

**Passages: In that connection, what does it mean, for you, to speak of 'the event'?**

**Derrida:** It is a name for the aspect of what happens that we will never manage either to eliminate or to deny (or simply never manage to deny). It is another name for experience, which is always experience of the other. The event is what does not allow itself to be subsumed under any other concept, not even that of being. A 'there is' or a 'let there be something rather than nothing' arises from the experience of an event, rather than from a thinking of being. The happening of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented: it is another name for the future itself. Not that it is good – good in itself – that everything or anything should happen; nor that we should give up trying to prevent certain things from coming to pass (in that case there would be no choice, no responsibility, no ethics or politics). But you do not try to oppose events unless you think they shut off the future, or carry a threat of death: events which would end the possibility of events, which would end any affirmative opening toward the arrival of the other. This is why thinking about the event always opens up a kind of messianic space, however abstract, formal, deserted and desolate it may be, and however little it may have to do with 'religion'. It is also why messianism is inseparable from justice, which again I distinguish from law (as I already attempted to do in *Force of Law and Spectres de Marx*,<sup>1</sup> where it is perhaps the basic claim). If the event is what arrives or comes to pass or supervenes, it is not sufficient to say that this *coming* 'is' not, that it cannot be reduced to any of the categories of existence. Nor do the noun (*la venue*) and the nominalised verb (*le venir*), exhaust the 'coming' that they come from. I have often tried to analyse this sort of performative summons, this appeal which refuses to bow to the being of anything that is. Such appeals are addressed to the other, and they do not simply express desires, or orders, requests, or demands, though they may make them possible subsequently. The event must be considered in terms of the 'come hither', not conversely. 'Come' is said to another, to others who are not yet defined as persons, as subjects, as equals (at least in the sense of any measurable equality). Without this 'come hither' there could be no experience of what is to come, of the event, of what will happen and therefore of what, since it comes from the other, lies beyond anticipation. There is not even any horizon of expectation in this messianics without messianism. If there were a horizon of expectation, of anticipation, or programming, there would be neither event, nor history (a possibility which, paradoxically and for the same reasons, can never be rationally ruled out: it is almost impossible to think the absence of a horizon of expectation). There would be no event, no history, unless a 'come hither' opened out and addressed itself to someone,

to someone else whom I cannot and must not define in advance – not as subject, self, consciousness, nor even as animal, God, person, man or woman, living or dead. (It must be possible to *summon* a spectre, to appeal to it for example, and I don't think this is an arbitrary example: there may be something of the revenant, of the return, at the origin or the conclusion of every 'come hither'.) The one to whom 'come hither' is addressed cannot be defined in advance. This absolute hospitality is offered to the outsider, the stranger, the new arrival. Absolute arrivals must not be required to begin by stating their identity; I must not insist that they say who they are, and whether they are going to integrate themselves or not; nor should I lay down any conditions for offering them hospitality, for whether or not I shall be able to 'assimilate' them into the family, the nation, or the state. With an absolute new arrival, I ought not to propose contracts or impose conditions. I ought not; and in any case, by definition, I cannot. That is why, although this may seem to be no more than the morals of hospitality, it actually goes far beyond morality, and even further beyond law and politics. The kind of absolute arrivals I am trying to describe are similar to births, the arrival of babies, but they are not really equivalent. The family anticipates and forenames its new arrivals, it prepares the way so that they are caught up in a symbolic space which muffles the novelty of the arrival. But despite all the anticipations and prenominations, the element of chance cannot be eliminated: the child that arrives is always unforeseen. It speaks of itself from the *origin* of a different world, or from a *different* origin of this one.

I have been struggling with this impossible concept of messianic arrival for a long time now. I have tried to define the basic principles in my forthcoming book on death (*Apories*),<sup>2</sup> as well as in the short book on Marx that I have just finished. But it is difficult to give a justification, even a provisional, pedagogical one, for the term 'messianic'. Messianic experience is *a priori*, but it is *a priori* exposed, in its own expectation, to what will be determined only *a posteriori*, by the event. A desert within a desert, one signalling to the other, the desert of a messianics without messianism and therefore without religious doctrine or dogma. This dry and desolate expectation, this expectation without horizon, has one thing in common with the great messianisms of the Book: the reference to an arrival who may turn up – and may not – but of whom, by definition, I can know nothing in advance. Except one thing: that justice, in the most enigmatic sense of the word, is somehow at stake. And therefore revolution too, through the connection between the event, justice, and this absolute fracture in the foreseeable concatenation of historical time. Eschatology breaks teleology apart: the two have to be kept distinct here, difficult though this always is. It is possible to give up on revolutionary imagery, to abandon all revolutionary rhetoric; it is possible to give up revolutionary politics of certain kinds, perhaps of all kinds; but it is impossible to give up on revolution without abandoning both justice and the event.

An event cannot be reduced to the fact of something happening. It may rain this evening or it may not, but that is

not an absolute event. I know what rain is; so it is not an absolutely different singularity. In such cases what happens is not an arrival.

An arrival must be absolutely different: the other that I expect to be unexpected, that I do not await. The expectation of an arrival is a non-expectation; it lacks what philosophy calls a horizon of expectation, through which knowledge anticipates the future and deadens it in advance. If I am sure that something will happen, then it will not be an event. It will be someone I have arranged to meet – Christ perhaps, or a friend – but if I know they are going to arrive, and am sure that they will, then to that extent it will not be an arrival. But of course the arrival of someone I am waiting for may also, in some other way, astonish me every time; it can be an amazing surprise, new every time, and so it can happen for me over and over again. And the arrival, like Elias, may never arrive at all. It is within the ever-open hollowness of this possibility, the possibility of non-arrival, of absolute inconvenience, that I relate to the event: it is what may always fail to come to pass.

**Passages:** So there can be no event without surprise?

**Derrida:** Exactly.

## NATIONALISM

**Passages:** To take a recent example, have you been surprised by the fact that there has suddenly turned out to be a mingling between the extreme right and certain strands of left-wing thought?

**Derrida:** A brutal return to ‘actuality’! But you are quite right, and in the light of what I have been saying, the question ought not to be dodged. The ‘mingling’ you speak of is complicated, though perhaps less improbable than it might seem. We need to proceed with great care here, and this is difficult when improvising. There are so many facts and problems that have to be taken into account: which extreme right, which ‘left-wing thought’, etc., what kind of ‘mingling’, who, where, when, within what limits, etc.? And before turning to individual, untypical actions, which are as usual the most interesting and innovative, we ought to remind ourselves of certain chains of general intelligibility, programmes or logics which contain no surprises. This is not the first time that far-right positions have been able to ally themselves, on certain issues, with those on the far left. Though based on quite different motivations and analyses, opposition to Europe can encourage nationalistic strategies on both left and right. Doubts about the policies of the dominant states in Europe – legitimate doubts, very likely, about their economism, or simply their economic or monetary policies – may lead parts of the left straight into positions which are in objective alliance with the nationalism and anti-Europeanism of the far right. Le Pen is currently parading his opposition to ‘free trade’ and ‘economic liberalism’. This opportunistic rhetoric may turn him into an ‘objective ally’, as they used to say, of those on the left

who also criticise the capitalistic and monetarist orthodoxies in which Europe is getting itself bogged down, though with quite different motives. Vigilance and clarity in action and in thought are required if these amalgams are to be dissolved or analytically resolved. The risk is ever-present, more serious than ever, and sometimes ‘objectively’ unavoidable: in an election, for example. Even if you sharpen the divisions and distinctions, which you should always be trying to do, through inquiries, records, and electoral analyses, with all that they entail, and in all the sites of publication, demonstration, and action associated with a given electoral conjuncture (but given by whom, exactly, and how?), the anti-European votes of left and right will still be added together in the end. And the pro-European votes too, of course.

But as you know there have been left revisionisms (to be specific, as one should always try to be: the negationist revisionisms over the Shoah) which have slipped into anti-semitism (if indeed they weren’t inspired by it in the first place). Some of these grew, more or less confusedly, from a basic anti-Israelism or, more narrowly, from opposition to the politics of possession, of the *fait accompli*, as practised by the State of Israel over a long period, in fact throughout the whole history of Israel. But these confusions can surely be subjected to bold and honest analyses. It must be possible to criticise specific policies of particular governments of the State of Israel without fundamental hostility to the existence of this State (I would even say: quite the opposite!), and without either anti-semitism or anti-Zionism. I would also suggest that even for Jews who are committed to the Zionist cause, a willingness to wonder and worry about the historical foundation of the State, its conditions and what it has brought into existence, need not imply any betrayal of Judaism. The logic of opposition to the State of Israel or its politics of possession does not entail anti-semitism, or even anti-Zionism; nor does it have anything to do with revisionism, in the sense I defined earlier. There are some very great examples (such as Buber, in the past). But, to stick with general principles, surely you would agree that our duty today is to denounce confusion. And to protect ourselves from it in each of two ways. *On the one hand*, there are the nationalist confusions of those who veer from left to right and confound every possible European project with the actual current policies of the European Community, and the anti-Jewish confusions of those who cannot see any dividing line between criticising the Israeli State and anti-Israelism, anti-Zionism, anti-semitism, and revisionism, etc. There are at least five possibilities here, and they must be kept absolutely distinct. These metonymic slides are all the more serious – politically, intellectually and philosophically – because they pose threats on *both sides*, so to speak: both to those who yield to them in practice, and to those who, *on the other hand*, denounce them whilst adopting their logic in perfect symmetry: as if you could not do one without the other – for example, oppose the actual policies of Europe without being opposed to Europe in principle; or worry about the State of Israel, its past and present policies, the conditions of its foundation and of what it has been



possible to build upon them for the past half century, without thereby becoming anti-semitic, anti-Zionist, or indeed revisionist-negationist, etc.

This symmetry between enemies forges a link between obscurantist confusion and terrorism. And it takes tenacity and courage to resist such occult (or occultising, occultist) strategies of amalgamation. In order to stand up to this double intimidation, the only responsible response is never to give up the task of distinguishing and analysing. And I would also say: never to give up on the Enlightenment, which also means, on *public* demonstrations of such discriminations (and this is less easy than you might think). This resistance is all the more urgently necessary since we are in a phase where renewed critical work on the history of this century is getting into dangerous waters. It is going to be necessary to re-read and re-interpret, to open up archives and shift perspectives, etc. How can we make progress if every political critique, every historical re-interpretation, is going to be automatically associated with negationist-revisionism, if every question about the past, or more generally about the constitution of truth in history, is going to be accused of paving the way for revisionism? (In *Spectres de Marx* I quote a particularly shocking example of this idiocy, from a leading American newspaper.) What a victory for dogmatism it will be, if prosecutors are constantly getting to their feet to make accusations of complicity with the enemy against anyone who tries to raise new questions, to disturb stereotypes and good consciences, and to complicate or re-work, for a changed situation, the discourse of the left, or the analysis of racism or anti-semitism. Of course, in order to keep the risk of such accusations to a minimum, it is necessary to take extra care in our discussions, analyses, and public interventions. And of course absolute assurance can never be promised, let alone delivered. Several recent examples could be given to illustrate this.

But to come back to your question: Were you surprised, you asked me, by this mingling? I have offered only a very general and abstract answer: certain models or schemes of intelligibility may make the mingling less surprising than it would at first appear; but they also show why the issues ought to be kept separate. As regards the most interesting particular cases, we would need more time and a different situation in order to analyse them. This is where you meet with surprises and syncopations. In between the most general kinds of logic (with the greatest predictability) and the most unpredictable singularities, comes the intermediate schema of *rhythm*. Ever since the fifties for instance, people have known what was wrong with the totalitarianisms of the East, and how it was bound to lead to their eventual collapse: for my generation, it was our daily bread. (Together with that old theme, recently patched up in the style of 'Fukuyama', of the supposed 'end of history', 'end of man', etc.) What could not be anticipated was the rhythm, the speed, the date: for example that of the fall of the Berlin wall. In 1986-7, no one in the entire world could have had even the vaguest idea of it. Not that the rhythm is inexplicable. It can be analysed in retrospect, taking account of new causalities which earlier experts ignored (in the first place, the geo-political

effects of telecommunication in general: the whole sequence in which a signal like the fall of the Berlin wall gets inscribed would have been impossible and incomprehensible without a given density of telecommunication networks, etc.).

## IMMIGRATION

**Passages:** To develop your point in a different direction: immigration is no higher now than it was half a century ago. But now it takes people by surprise: it seems to have surprised the social body and the political class. The discourses of both right and left, in turning against illegal immigration, seem to have careered into xenophobia in a quite unanticipated way.

**Derrida:** In this respect, at least in the discourse of the two republican majorities, the differences are mainly a matter of emphasis. The overt political lines are more or less the same. The common axiom, or the consensus as they say, is always: stop illegal immigration, and put an end to excessive, unproductive or destabilising levels of immigration. The manipulation of this consensus is more vigorous now and the atmosphere has changed; and this is an important difference. But the principles remain the same: that the national community has to be protected from any excessive effect on the national body, that is to say on the consciousness it supposedly ought to have of the integrity of its own body (an axiom which, by the way, implies that all kinds of biological or cultural transplants ought to be banned, which would of course lead us a long way – unless it led nowhere, or to death itself). When François Mitterand spoke about the threshold of tolerance (and some of us protested publicly against those words, whereupon he at least had the courage, honour or agility to withdraw them), his careless lapse spoke the truth of a discourse which is common to the republican parties of the left and the right, indeed the far right: we must not allow any new arrivals, in the sense I was just speaking of; we must control their arrival, and we must filter the flow of immigration.

I realise, I promise you, that what I am saying about new arrivals is politically impracticable, at least as long as politics is based, as it always is, on the idea of the identity of a body known as the State-nation. There is no State-nation in the world today which would simply say: 'We throw open our doors to everyone, we put no limit on immigration'. As far as I know – and I would be interested if you could think of a counter-example – every State-nation is based on the control of its frontiers, on opposition to illegal immigration, and strict limits to legal immigration and right of asylum. The concept of the frontier, no less than the frontier itself, constitutes the concept of a State-nation.

On this basis the concept can be treated in various ways, but these different policies, however important they may be, are subordinate to the general principle of politics, that the political is national. This is then used to justify the filtering of population flows and stamping out of illegal immigration, even though it may also be recognised that this is actually

unachievable, and indeed (a supplementary hypocrisy) that in certain economic circumstances it is quite undesirable.

What I have been saying about the absolute arrival cannot generate a politics in the traditional sense of the word: a policy which could be implemented by a State-nation. But whilst I realise that what I have been saying about the event and the arrival is impracticable and unpolitical from the point of view of this concept of politics, I still want to claim that any politics which fails to sustain some relation to the principle of unconditional hospitality has completely lost its relation to justice. It may retain its rights (which once again need to be distinguished from justice), and its right to rights, but it will lose both justice and the right to speak of it with any credibility. This is not the place to go into it, but it is important to distinguish between immigration policy and respect for the right of asylum. In principle the right of asylum (in the form in which it is still recognised in France, at least for the time being and for political reasons) is, paradoxically, less political, because it is not based in principle on the interests of the body of the State-nation which guarantees it. But, apart from the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between the concepts of immigration and asylum, it is almost impossible to delimit the properly political grounds for exile – those which, under our constitution, are supposed to justify an application for asylum. After all, unemployment in a foreign country is a malfunction of democracy and a kind of political persecution. In addition, and this is the role of the market again, the rich countries always share in the responsibility (if only through foreign debt and everything it symbolises) for the political and economic situations which push people into exile or emigration. Here we run against the limits of the political and the juridical: it is always possible to show that the right of asylum may be either meaningless or infinite. Thus the concept always lacks rigour, though this may not bother anyone except in times of global turmoil. It would have to be completely reworked before we could understand or in any way alter the current debate (between constitutionalism on one side, for example, and, on the other, the neo-populism of those who, like Charles Pasqua [Minister of the Interior], want to change the Constitution so as to adapt the article on right of asylum to the supposed wishes of a new or ancient 'French people' which is apparently different from the one which voted for the constitution in the first place). But I ought to try to come back to the point of your question. You were saying that it seems that 'the social body and political class' of today have been taken by surprise. Do you mean by immigration, or by xenophobia?

### **Passages: Xenophobia.**

**Derrida:** What the political class has been adapting to – both the class which came to power in 1981, and the one which is now taking over from it – is not so much xenophobia itself as new ways of exploiting it, or abusing it by abusing the citizens. They are quarreling over an electorate, roughly speaking that of the security-conscious (the '*sécuritaires*' as they are called, rather like the 'health-conscious', the

*sanitaires*, since what is supposed to be at stake is the security and health of a social body which needs to be protected, as they say, by a *cordon sanitaire*). The National Front electorate, which is dominated by an image of the quasi-biological hygiene of a proper national body (*quasi-biological* because nationalist fantasy, like the rhetoric of the politicians, makes frequent use of such organicist analogies).

Parenthetically, take for example the rhetoric of a recent intervention by Le Pen (*Le Monde*, 24 August 1993) – remarkable, as always, for his somnambulistic lucidity. Le Pen now prefers the analogy (both apt and threadbare) of 'a living membrane which is permeable to what is benign, but impermeable to everything else'. If an organism could regulate this filtration in advance, then I suppose it might achieve immortality, but first it would have to die in advance, kill itself or let itself be killed, for fear of being *altered* from outside, by the other in fact. Hence the theatre of death which is common to so many kinds of racism, biologism, organicism, and eugenicism, and to certain philosophies of life as well. And – to continue the parenthesis – let me once again stress a point which is unlikely to please anyone. All of those on the left or right who say they favour immigration controls 'like everyone else' and call for a clamp-down on illegal immigration and tighter immigration controls, are – in fact and in principle, and whether they like it or not, and with varying degrees of elegance and gentility – subscribing to Le Pen's organicist axiom. They are accepting the axiom of a national front (the front is a skin, a discriminating 'membrane': it only lets in what is homogeneous or capable of being homogenised, what is assimilable, or at most what is heterogeneous but considered 'benign': the appropriable immigrant, the proper immigrant). We should not close our eyes to this ineluctable complicity: it is rooted in the political, to the extent that the political is and remains linked to the State-nation. And since we had better recognise, like everyone else, that we have no choice but to protect what we take to be our own body, then let us be spared all these pure souls who appeal to high principles and put on a high moral tone and start lecturing us on politics as soon as we propose to control immigration and asylum (a proposal which is anyway accepted unanimously by the left as much as the right). Just as Le Pen will always have the most terrible problems in justifying or regulating the filtration of his 'membrane', so there is a permeability between these supposedly opposite concepts and logics which is far more difficult to regulate than is usually recognised. Today we have a neo-protectionism of the left and a neo-protectionism of the right, both in economics and in matters of demographic flows; a commitment to free trade both on the left and on the right; we have both right neo-nationalism and left neo-nationalism. All these 'neo-' logics pass straight through the protective membrane of their concepts, without any chance of control, and they create shady alliances both in discourse and in political and electoral activities. Recognising this permeability, this combinatory, and these complicities does not mean adopting an apolitical stance, or believing in an end of the division between right and left or an 'end of



ideologies'. On the contrary: it means calling for a courageous thematisation and formalisation of this terrible combinatory, as an essential preliminary not only to a different politics, but to a different theory of politics, and a different delimitation of the *socius*, especially in relation to citizenship and State-nationhood in general, and more broadly to identity and subjectivity as well. How am I supposed to discuss all that in an interview, and in an aside? And yet, as you know, these questions are at present anything but abstract or speculative. So, to return to France, the majorities are in the range of 1 or 2 per cent in presidential elections, 10 to 15 per cent in others. So the problem, as I was saying, is how to attract, motivate, and seduce (both trouble and reassure) a fraction of the potential xenophobes who vote for the National Front.

This points to some other questions: why is the National Front able to exploit this fear or aggravate this impatience? Why is it that, instead of doing what is needed (in education and socio-economic policy) to defuse these feelings, people are trying either to take over the positions of the National Front, or to exploit the split which it is creating within the so-called republican right? Meanwhile the level of immigration has, as you said, remained very steady: apparently it has not changed for decades, or it may even have gone down a bit. Is this surprising or not? Analysis always tends to dissolve surprise. 'It was only to be expected', as we say in retrospect, when we can finally see the elements that our analysis had overlooked, or we have developed a different analysis (for example, higher levels of unemployment, increasing permeability of European borders, the revival of religions and of claims to identity – religious, linguistic, and cultural – amongst the immigrants themselves: all this means that the same rate of immigration gets to seem more threatening for the self-identification of the host social body).

But an event which remains an event is a happening, an arrival: it is a surprise, and it resists even retrospective analysis. With the birth of a child – the obvious image of an absolute arrival – you can analyse the causalities, the genealogical, genetic and symbolic conditions, and all the wedding preparations as well, if you like. But even if such an analysis could ever be complete, you would never be able to eliminate the element of chance which constitutes the place of this taking-place: there will still be someone who can speak, someone unique, an absolute beginning, a different origin of the world. Even if it ought to yield to analysis, or return to ashes, the clinker of the absolute arrival refuses to break up and dissolve. The history of the immigrations which have constituted the culture, religions and languages of France is in the first instance the history of these children – children of immigrants or others – who were such absolute arrivals. The task of a philosopher – and therefore of anyone, a citizen for example – is to take the analysis as far as possible and try to make the event intelligible, up to the point where a new arrival takes place. What is absolutely new is not this rather than that; it is the fact that it only happens once. It is marked by a date (a place, a moment), and it is always births or deaths that are marked by a date.

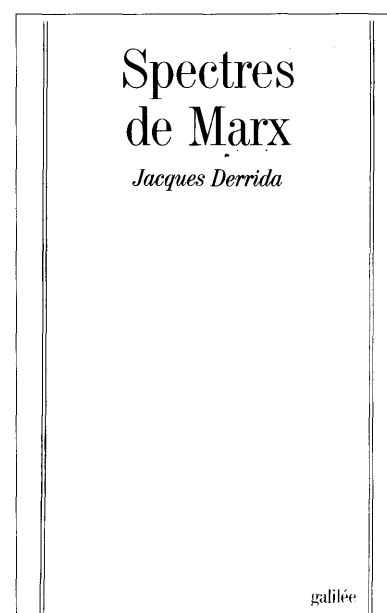
Even if it had been possible to predict the fall of the Berlin wall, it still happened on one particular day, there were a few more deaths (both before the collapse and during it) – and this is what makes it an irremovable event. What refuses to yield to analysis is birth and death: as ever, the origin and the end of a world.

## JUSTICE AND REPETITION

**Passages:** Can what resists analysis be equated with the undeconstructable? Is there such a thing as the undeconstructable, and if so, what is it?

**Derrida:** If anything is undeconstructable, it is justice. The law is deconstructable, fortunately: it is infinitely perfectible. I am tempted to regard justice as the best word, today, for what refuses to yield to deconstruction, that is to say for what sets deconstruction in motion, what justifies it. It is an affirmative experience of the coming of the other as other: better that this should happen than the opposite (an experience of the event which cannot be expressed simply as an ontology: that anything should exist, that there should be something rather than nothing). The openness of the future is worth more than this: that is the axiom of deconstruction – the basis on which it has always set itself in motion, and which links it, like the future itself, to otherness, to the priceless dignity of otherness, that is to say to justice. It is also democracy as the democracy of the future.

It is easy to imagine the objection. Someone might say: 'But surely it would sometimes be better if this or that did not happen. Justice requires us to prevent certain events (or "arrivals") from coming to pass. Events are not good in themselves, and the future is not unconditionally desirable.' Of course that is true. But it will always be possible to show that what we are opposing, what we would hypothetically prefer not to happen, is something which, rightly or wrongly, is thought of as obstructing the horizon, or simply forming a horizon (the word means *limit*) for the absolute coming of what is completely other, for the future itself. This involves a messianic structure (but not messianism – in the book on Marx, I make a distinction between the messianic, as a universal dimension of experience, and every particular messianism) which unites the promise of the new arrival with justice and the inscrutability of the future, and knits them indissolubly together. I cannot try to reconstruct the argument now, and



I realise that the word 'justice' may seem equivocal. Justice is not the same as law, and it is broader and more fundamental than human rights; nor is it to be equated with distributive justice; nor is it the same as respect for the other as a human subject, in the traditional sense of that word. It is the experience of the other as other, the fact that I permit the other to be other, which presupposes a gift without exchange, without reappropriation, without jurisdiction. Here I meet up with several different traditions, whilst also slightly displacing them, as I have tried to show elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> There is an inheritance from Levinas, when he defines the relation to the other simply as justice ('the relation with the Other – that is, justice').<sup>4</sup> There is also that paradoxical thought, Plotinian in its first formulation, but which also surfaces in Heidegger, and then in Lacan: giving not only what one has, but what one has not. Such excess overflows the present, propriety, restitution, and no doubt law, politics and morality as well, though it ought also to inspire and encourage them.

**Passages:** But doesn't philosophy also discuss the idea that anything, perhaps the worst, can always return?

**Derrida:** Yes, it precisely 'discusses' this return of the worst, and in more than one way. In the first place, everything that prepared the way for a philosophy of Enlightenment, or that has become its heir (not rationalism as such, which is not necessarily associated with it, but a progressive, teleological, humanistic and critical rationalism) does indeed struggle against such a 'return of the worst', which education and an awareness of the past are supposed to be able to prevent. Although this Enlightenment struggle can often take the form either of denial or of conjuration and incantation, one has to play one's part in it and reaffirm the philosophy of emancipation. I personally believe in its future, and I have never gone along with these proclamations about the end of the great emancipatory and revolutionary discourses. Nevertheless the very act of affirming them pays tribute to the possibility of what they oppose: the return of the worst, the incorrigible repetition-compulsion in the death drive and radical evil, history without progression, history without history, etc. And the Enlightenment thought of our time cannot be reduced to that of the eighteenth century.

Then there is another manner, still more radical, in which philosophy can 'discuss' the return of the worst. This consists in misrecognition (denial, exorcism, incantation, each form requiring analysis) of what might constitute a recurrence of evil: a law of spectres, which is resistant both to ontology (a ghost or a revenant is neither present nor absent, it neither is nor is not, and it cannot be dialecticised either) and to any philosophy of the subject, of the object, or of consciousness (of being-present) which, like ontology and philosophy itself, will also be committed to 'expelling' spectres. And hence also to not attending to the lessons of psychoanalysis either about ghosts, or about the repetition of the gravest threats to historical progress. (To which I would quickly add that on the one hand it is only a particular concept of progress which is under threat, and that there

would be no progress at all in the absence of that threat; and that on the other hand psychoanalytic discourse, starting with Freud, has always been dominated by something which entailed a certain misrecognition of the structure and logic of spectres – a powerful, subtle and unstable misrecognition, but one which it has in common with science and philosophy.) Yes indeed: a ghost can return, as the worst can return, but without such revenance, and without some acknowledgement of its ineradicable originality, we would be stripped of memory, inheritance, and justice, of everything that has value beyond life, and by which the dignity of life is measured. I have made suggestions about this elsewhere, and it is hard for me to schematise them right now. But I suppose that when you spoke of the 'return of the worst' you were thinking, more immediately, of what took place in Europe before the war?

**Passages:** Yes.

**Derrida:** And not only in Europe, let's not forget. In this context, each country has its own original history, and its own economy of memory, its own way of being economical with it. My immediate feeling is that what took place in France well before World War II, and during it, and still more, I think, during the Algerian war, has imposed, and therefore overdetermined, several layers of forgetting. The capitalisation of silence is especially dense, resistant and dangerous here. Through a slow, discontinuous and contradictory process, this compact of secrecy is being replaced by a movement towards the liberation of memory (especially of public memory, so to speak, and its official legitimisation, which never proceeds in the rhythm either of historical knowledge or of private memory, if such a thing can exist in its purity). But if this process of unsealing is contradictory, both in its consequences and in its motivations, this is due to the effect of ghosts. The moment at which the worst threatens to return is also the moment when the worst is being remembered (out of respect for memory, for truth, for victims, etc.). One ghost recalls another. Often it is because of signs of the resurgence or quasi-resurrection of the one, that an appeal is made to the other. The pressing need for official commemoration of the round-up of Jews at the Vélodrome d'Hiver [in Paris on 16 July 1942], or for recognition that the French State bears some responsibility for the 'worst' that happened under the occupation, is recalled because the signs of a return of nationalism, racism, xenophobia and anti-semitism are becoming visible, though in a very different context, sometimes with the same aspect, sometimes with different features entirely. The two memories relaunch each other; they provoke and invoke each other; and of necessity, again and again, they do battle with each other, always on the brink of every possible contamination. When the abominable ghosts return, we recall the ghosts of their victims, not only in order to preserve their memory but also, inseparably, for the sake of the current struggle: especially for the promise which commits it to a future without which it would have absolutely no sense – to a future, beyond every present life, beyond every living being

who can already say 'me, now.' The question of ghosts is also the question of the future as a question of justice. This double return encourages an irrepressible tendency to confusion. Analogy is confused with identity: 'Exactly the same thing is being repeated, exactly the same thing.' But no: a kind of iterability (difference within repetition) means that what returns is nevertheless a completely different event. The return of a ghost is always a different return, on another stage; it takes place under new conditions, which we must study with as closely as possible, unless we don't care at all what we are saying or doing.

Yesterday a German woman, a journalist, telephoned me. (It was about that 'appeal' from European intellectuals for 'vigilance', to which I felt I ought to lend my signature, on and about which there would be so much to say – but there is no time to do that seriously now.) Noticing that many German intellectuals were welcoming this action, and calling it opportune, for obvious reasons, especially in the current situation in Germany, she was wondering whether this was a revival of the tradition of 'J'accuse!' Where is Zola today? she wanted to know. I tried to explain to her why, despite my enormous respect for Zola, I was not sure that he was the best or only model for a new 'J'accuse!' Everything is so different now – the public space, the channels of information and authority, the relation between power and secrecy, the figure of the intellectual, the writer, the journalist, etc. It is not 'J'accuse!' which is out of date, but the form and space in which it was written. Of course the Dreyfus affair should not be forgotten, but we must also realise that it will never be exactly repeated. What happens may be worse, of course, but it certainly will not be the Dreyfus affair over again.

In short, in order to think (but what does 'thinking' mean here?) what you were calling the 'return of the worst', it is necessary to go beyond ontology, beyond philosophies of life or death, beyond a logic of the conscious subject, and enter into the relations between politics, history and the revenant.

## MARX

**Passages:** Hadn't you already spoken about all this in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*?<sup>5</sup>

**Derrida:** From the very first sentence, in fact, that book was moving towards a disruptive logic of spirit as spectre. The matter is treated differently, but I hope consistently, in the book on Marx. This book is no more pro-spiritualist than the one on Heidegger was anti-spiritualist. But the need for a strategy of paradox did push me, at least in appearance, to distrust a certain kind of spirit in Heidegger and to *defend* spirit, a certain kind of spirit, a particular spirit or spectre, in Marx.

**Passages:** You spoke about Marx in a course at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the seventies, but only allusively.

**Derrida:** They were more than allusions, if I may say so,

and it was in more than one course. But apart from such references, my book is an attempt to explain that situation, that relative silence, and the difficult but, I believe, intimate connections between deconstruction and a certain 'spirit' of marxism.

**Passages:** What has led you to speak about Marx now?

**Derrida:** It is hard to answer that question in a few improvised words. But the book on Marx began as a lecture delivered in the United States in April, to open a conference entitled 'Whither Marxism?' – which also asked, through a play on words, whether Marxism was in the process of 'withering away'. I sketched out an approach to Marx's writings, to everything in them that can be subordinated to the problematic of the spectre (and so also of exchange value, fetishism, ideology, and much else besides). But I also tried, mainly as a political act, to mark, as I think it is now necessary to do, a point of resistance to a dogmatic consensus on the death of Marx, the end of the critique of capitalism, the final triumph of the market, and the eternal link between democracy and the logic of economic liberalism, etc. I tried to show where and how this consensus has become dominant and often obscene in its troubled but grinning euphoria, triumphal but manic (I make deliberate use of the language which Freud uses to describe one phase of the work of mourning: the essay on spectres is also an essay on mourning and politics). It is urgently necessary to rise up against the new anti-marxist dogma, don't you think? I consider it not only regressive and pre-critical in most of its manifestations, but also blind to its own contradictions, and deaf to the creakings of ruination, of the ruinous and ruined structure of its own 'rationality', a new 'colossus with feet of clay'. And I believe that it is all the more urgent to combat this dogmatism and this politics, as this urgency itself seems to me to be syncopated, to go against the rhythm. (Another theme of the essay is syncopation in politics, and anachronism, untimeliness, etc.) Clearly, this is connected with what I was saying earlier about the messianic and the event, about justice and revolution.

The responsibility for rising up comes back to everyone, but especially to those who, without ever being anti-marxists or anti-communists, resisted a certain kind of marxist orthodoxy as long as it remained hegemonic, at least in certain circles (and this was a long time for most of my generation). But apart from this position-taking, and also in order to sustain it, I started up an argument with Marx's writings. The argument is organised by the question of the spectre (networked with those of repetition, mourning, and inheritance, the event and the messianic, of everything that exceeds the ontological oppositions between absence and presence, visible and invisible, living and dead, and hence above all of the prosthesis as 'phantom limb', of technology, of the tele-technological simulacrum, the synthetic image, virtual space, etc.; and so back to the themes I have already discussed: *artifactuality* and *virtuactuality*). Remember the opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism.' Well I

investigate, I roam around a little with all the spectres which literally obsessed Marx. Marx really was persecuted by them: he chased them everywhere, he drove them away, but they followed him around as well. It happens in the *18th Brumaire*, in *Capital*, but above all in the *German Ideology* where, as you know, he set out an interminable critique (interminable because fascinated, captivated, shackled) of Stirner's hauntings, a hallucination which is already critical, and which Marx found extremely difficult to shake off.

So I have tried to decode the logic of the spectre in the work of Marx. I aimed to do this in relation, so to speak, to what is taking place in the world today, in a new public space which has been transformed by what is summarily called the 'return of the religious' as well as by tele-technology. What does the work of mourning mean when it comes to marxism? What does it attempt to invoke, to conjure up? The word and concept of *conjunction*, highly ambiguous as they are (at least in French, English and German) play an important role in this essay, no less important than that of heritage or inheritance. To inherit is not essentially to *receive* something, a *given* which one then *has*. It is an active affirmation, a response to an injunction, but it also presupposes initiative, the endorsement or counter-signing of a critical choice. To inherit is to select, to sift, to harness, to reclaim, to reactivate. I also believe, though I cannot argue the point here, that every assignment of inheritance harbours a contradiction and a secret. (This is the thread which runs through the book, and which ties the genius of Marx to that of Shakespeare – whom Marx loved so much and quoted so often, especially from *Timon of Athens* and *Much Ado about Nothing* – and to Hamlet's father, who is perhaps the main character in the essay.)

Hypothesis: there is always more than one spirit. To speak of spirit is immediately to evoke a plurality of spirits, or spectres, and an inheritor always has to choose one spirit or another. An inheritor has to make selections or filtrations, to sift through the ghosts or the injunctions of each spirit. Where assignments are not multiple and contradictory, where they are not sufficiently cryptic to challenge interpretation, where they do not involve the unbounded dangers of active interpretation, there is no inheritance. Inheriting implies decisions and responsibilities. Without a double-bind, there is no responsibility. An inheritance must always include an undecidable reserve.

If inheriting means reaffirming an injunction, if it is not a possession but an assignment which needs to be decoded, then we are nothing but what we inherit. Our being is inheritance, and the language we speak is inheritance too. Hölderlin said, more or less, that language has been given us so that we may witness the fact that we are our inheritance: not an inheritance that we have or receive, but one that we are, all the way down. What we are, we have inherited. And we inherit language, which witnesses the fact that we are what we inherit. There is a paradoxical circle here, a circle within which we have to struggle, and then strike out with choices which not only inherit their own norms, but invent them too, in the inevitable absence of programmes and fixed norms. Saying that an inheritance is not a commodity that

one acquires and that we are inheritors all the way down is therefore not traditionalist or antiquarian at all. And we are, amongst other things, inheritors of Marx and marxism. I try to explain why this involves an event which nothing and no one can eradicate, not even – in fact especially not – the monstrosity of totalitarianism (all the various totalitarianisms, and there were several of them, which were in part linked to marxism, and which cannot be seen as mere perversions or distortions of the inheritance). Even people who have never read Marx, or so much as heard of him, are Marx's heirs, and so are the anti-communists and anti-marxists. And then, you cannot inherit from Marx without also inheriting from Shakespeare, the Bible, and much else besides.

## COMMITMENT

**Passages:** To take this point a little further: would you be surprised if there were some kind of return of communism, though in a different form and with different applications – communism simply coming back, though perhaps with a different name? And if what brought it back was a need within society for the return of a little hope?

**Derrida:** But this is what I was calling justice. I do not believe in a return of communism in the form of the Party (the party-form is probably disappearing more generally from political life, though it may be hard for it to die), or in the return of everything that was so dispiriting about certain kinds of marxism and communism. At least I hope it won't come back: it is very unlikely to, but still it's necessary to be vigilant. But what is bound to return is an insurgence in the name of justice, which will give rise to critiques which are marxist in *inspiration*, in *spirit*. And there are signs. It's like a new International, but without a party, or organisation, or membership. It is searching and suffering, it believes that something is wrong, it does not accept the 'new world order' which is currently being imposed, and it finds something sinister in the discourses to which this new order is giving rise. And this insurgent dissatisfaction will be able to recover various forces from within the marxist inspiration, for which we do not even have any names. Although in some respects it will resemble the elements of a *critique*, I try to explain why it is or ought to be more than a critique, or method, or philosophy, or ontology. It needs to take a completely different form, and this may mean that Marx has to be read in a completely different way – though it's not a matter of a reading in an academic or philological sense, or of rehabilitating a marxist canon. There is a certain tendency, which I take issue with in this essay, which is gently trying to neutralise Marx in a different way: now that marxism is dead and its apparatuses disarmed, so they say, we can at last settle down to read Marx and *Capital* calmly, theoretically; he can be given the recognition he deserves as a great philosopher whose writings belong (in their 'internal intelligibility', as Michel Henry puts it) to the great ontological tradition. No: I try to explain why we should not

be satisfied with such a mollifying re-interpretation.

**Passages:** You have always claimed that the experience of deconstruction entailed an ethico-political responsibility. How does this differ from the old idea of the 'committed intellectual'?

**Derrida:** I don't feel I have either the right or the inclination to disparage what you call the 'old idea' of the committed intellectual of the past, particularly in France. I continue to find Voltaire, Hugo, Zola and Sartre admirable and exemplary. Such models can inspire us; but often they are inaccessible and we certainly ought not to try to imitate them now that the situation is, as I was saying, structurally altered. With that reservation, it seems to me, very roughly, that their courageous stands presupposed that there were two identifiable partners in a kind of confrontation: on one side a given socio-political field, and on the other the intellectuals with their language, their rhetoric, their literary output, their philosophy, etc., who came along and 'intervened' or *committed* themselves to a field in order to take sides or adopt positions. From that point on they had to refrain from trying to alter either the structure of their public space (press, media, modes of representation, etc.) or the nature of their language and the philosophical or theoretical axioms of their interventions. In other words, they committed their culture and authority *as writers* (and the very French examples I mentioned were popular mainly for their literary rather than philosophical work); they put them at the service of a political cause – sometimes a legal issue, but often one which went beyond legality: a matter of justice. I am not saying that Hugo or Sartre never questioned or transformed the forms of involvement available to them. I am only saying that it was not a constant theme for them, or a major preoccupation. They did not think it appropriate to begin, as Benjamin would have suggested, by analysing and transforming the apparatus, instead of simply entrusting their messages to it, however revolutionary they might be. The apparatus in question comprises technical and political authorities, and procedures of editorial and mediatic appropriation, and the structure of a public space (and hence of the audience that one is meant to be addressing); and it also involves a particular logic, rhetoric, and experience of language, and the entire sedimentation which that presupposes. Asking oneself questions, including ones about the questions that are imposed on us or taught to us as being the 'right' questions to ask, even questioning the *question-form* of critique, and not only questioning, but thinking through the commitment, the stake, through which a given question is engaged: perhaps this is a prior responsibility, and a precondition of commitment. On its own it is not enough of course; but it has never impeded or retarded commitment – quite the reverse.

**Passages:** We would like, if we may, to ask you a rather more personal question. There is one thing that is coming back in some parts of the world, especially in Algeria with its religious aspect. Politicians and even intellectuals

have a way of talking about Algeria, which consists in saying that it has never really had an identity, unlike Morocco or Tunisia, and that the death and destruction which are now taking place there are due to this absence of identity, this lack. Beyond all the emotional turmoil, how do you see what's happening there?

**Derrida:** You say it's a personal question, but I wouldn't dream of comparing my own distress and anguish with that of most other Algerians, whether in Algeria or France. I am not even sure that I could claim that Algeria is still my country. But I should perhaps say that I never left Algeria in the first nineteen years of my life, that I have been back regularly, and that something in me never left at all. It is true that the unity of Algeria seems to be under threat. What is happening there is not far from resembling a civil war. The news media in France are only slowly beginning to realise what has been going on in Algeria for some years now: preparations for taking power, assassinations, guerrilla groups; and in response, repression, torture, and concentration camps. As in all tragedies, the crimes are not all on one side, or indeed on two. The FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] and the state would not have been able to confront and pursue each other in the classic cycle (terrorism/repression; the social and popular diffusion of a movement which has been driven underground by a state with both too little power and too much; the impossibility of sustaining a process of democratisation, etc.), and this infernal duet, which has already claimed so many innocent victims, could never have taken place, without a simple and anonymous third factor: that is to say, without the country's economic and demographic situation, its unemployment and the development strategy it adopted long ago. These conditions tend to favour a kind of duel; but perhaps it is not so symmetrical as I have been suggesting. (Some of my Algerian friends disagree with this symmetrisation: they regard the state's violent reaction and the suspension of the electoral process as its only possible response to a well-prepared long-range plan to take over power, which was hostile to democracy itself; they have a point, but still it's going to be necessary to devise some means of consultation or exchange which will get people to lay down their arms and enable the processes that have been broken off to be resumed.) If we consider this nameless third partner, it is clear that responsibility goes back much further, and that it is not purely algero-algerian either. This is connected to what I was saying earlier about the emblematic foreign debt, which is a heavy burden on Algeria. I mention it not in order to level accusations, but in recognition of our responsibility. Without in any way diminishing what is primarily a matter for the citizens of Algeria themselves, every one of us is involved and responsible, especially – for obvious reasons – those of us who are French. We cannot be indifferent, particularly to the fate and the efforts of all those Algerians who are trying to stand up to fanaticism and all sorts of intimidation. (Many of the victims of recent assassinations have been intellectuals, journalists and writers, though we must not forget all the other unknown victims; it is in this

spirit that some of us have come together, on the initiative of Pierre Bourdieu, to form CISIA, the International Committee in Support of Algerian Intellectuals, some of whose founder members, it must be said, have already received death threats.)

You said that some people regard the identity of Algeria not merely as problematic or endangered, but as something that never really existed in an organic, natural or political fashion. There are several ways of responding to this. One would be to invoke the fractures and partitions of Arab-Berber Algeria, the divisions between languages, ethnic groups, religious and military authorities, and perhaps to draw the conclusion that it was basically colonisation which, in this as in many other cases, created the unity of a State-nation so that when formal independence was at last achieved, its struggles took place within structures partly inherited from colonisation. I cannot get into lengthy historical analyses here, but I think that this is both true and false. It is certainly true that Algeria as such did not exist before colonisation, with its present frontiers and in the form of a State-nation. But that in itself does not undermine such unity as has been forged through, within and against colonisation. All State-nations have this kind of laborious, contradictory and tortuous history of decolonisation and recolonisation. They all originated in violence, and since they constitute themselves by establishing their own law and legitimacy, they cannot base it on any prior legitimacy, notwithstanding all their protestations and inculcations to the contrary. You cannot object to a unity simply because it is the result of a process of unification. Unification and legitimacy never establish themselves successfully except by making people forget that there never was any natural unity or prior foundation. The unity of the Italian State is also very recent, and it is going through a good deal of turbulence at present. But does this mean that it has to be cast into doubt, on the grounds that it is a recent foundation and that, like every other state-nation, it is an artifact? Some people are certainly being tempted to suggest as much, and from motives which are more than just historiographical. But there are no natural unities, only more or less stable processes of unification, some of them solidly established over a long period of time. All these state stabilities, all these familiar steady states, are only stabilisations. Israel is another example of a state which was founded recently and, like every other state, founded on violence; and this violence is bound to seek retrospective justification for itself, provided that national and international stabilisation manage to wrap it up at least in provisional and conditional oblivion. But that is not the current situation. These are seismic times for all State-nations, and correspondingly favourable to this sort of reflection – which must also be a reflection on what may (or may not) link the idea of democracy both to citizenship and to nationality.

The unity of Algeria is of course in danger of being ruptured, but the forces which are tearing it apart are not, as is often supposed, those of the West as opposed to those of the East, or of democracy against Islam, as if these were two homogeneous units. Various different models of democracy,

representativeness, and citizenship are involved – and above all, various different interpretations of Islam. So part of our responsibility is to pay careful attention to this multiplicity; and to plead unceasingly against the confounding of the confusion.

**Interview conducted by Brigitte Sohm,  
Cristina de Peretti, Stéphane Douailler,  
Patrice Vermeren and Emile Malet.**

**(English translation by Jonathan Rée)**

#### Notes

1. *Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'* (bilingual text) in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Cardozo Law Review, New York, July-August 1990 – English text reprinted as a book with the same title, edited by Drucilla Cornell et. al., Routledge, New York & London, 1992; *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Galilée, 1993.
2. Paris, Galilée, 1994
3. See especially *Donner le temps 1: La fausse monnaie*, Paris, Galilée, 1992.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1961, p. 62; translated by Alfonso Lingis, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 89.
5. *De l'esprit, Heidegger et la question*, Paris, Galilée, 1987, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1989.

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