

SYMPOSIUM

Spectres of Derrida

The limits of hauntology

Ghosts are not renowned for their sense of humour. As Charles Lamb (he of the undeconstructed tales from Shakespeare) put it; ‘Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?’ But the ghost of the theorist of farcical returns might well be something of an exception. At any rate, one can’t help thinking that, were the personal spirit of Marx to be in any position to take note of his conjurings in the pages of *Specters of Marx*, it might be a little tickled in its gaunt ribs, inclined even to give vent to some hollow-sounding cries of mirth. For there is surely an element of irony about this supposedly overdue encounter between Derrida and Marx: namely, that it may be the cause – and this conference is itself confirming of the suspicion – of a certain rehabilitation of Marx.

I say ‘certain’ because we must add ‘in the academy’, or ‘in philosophy’. The rehabilitation may prove some-what local and limited, but nonetheless its peculiarity should not pass entirely without comment. That the deconstructive turn in philosophy which looked to be exorcizing Marx, and which was certainly interpreted by many as wanting to do so, may be that which conjures him forth again and puts him back into philosophical vogue; that it may only be through the authorization of Derrida that Marx may return from the shadowy wings of the academy to centre stage and even be allowed a speaking part: this is an odd turnabout, maybe even a bit spooky, certainly a funny business. Derrida is right that there are several spirits of Marx, including some we may want finally to put to rest. But one which we should surely continue to summon is that which invites philosophy to be sensitive to its context and effects, and to see the humour in some of its own inversions. Regrettably, Derrida’s return to Marx is too little haunted by this spirit of self-appraisal.

But how far, in any case, is this coming back to Marx a genuinely new event, how far a revenant of Derrida’s earlier deferrings of the engagement with the ethical and the political – which have always taken the form, in fact, not so much of a postponement or a confident ‘don’t call me, I’ll call you’, but of what one might call a politely tentative gesturing towards a possible handshake with the nettle.

Three aspects of *Specters of Marx* seem noteworthy here. In the first place, it offers a definite statement of political affiliation. Derrida makes plain his distance from the celebrants of the demise of Marxism and from all those who would echo Fukuyama’s triumphalist prophecies about the ‘end of history’. He is very ready to acknowledge that if we measure the out-of-jointness of our times by the degree of human misery already occurred or in the offing, then our times are indeed askew. In his ten indictments of global capitalism, he also makes it very clear that he subscribes to a broadly Marxist view of the sources of the disorder.

In the wake of 1989, Derrida’s Spectres de Marx (1993) has created unusual interest on the Left and produced a wide range of differing reactions, both theoretical and political. The pieces we publish below were first presented as talks to the Radical Philosophy Conference, ‘Spectres of Derrida’, held at Birkbeck College, London, on 6 May 1995. They have been revised slightly for publication, but traces of their spoken form have been retained. Page references to Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International (trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, New York and London, 1994) appear in brackets within the texts which follow.

Second, Derrida engages at some length with Marx's writing and offers a number of pertinent readings in the process. He is right to point to the deficiencies of Marx's realist account of ideology in *The German Ideology*; right to suggest that Marx was too quick to suppose that we could dispense with the ghost, whether in the sense of arriving at a time unhaunted by the revenants of the past, or in the sense of there being an actuality unvisited by the spectres of its own making – an actuality that could be liveable or knowable independently of all religion, ideology or fetishism. And even as he applauds Marx's critical laughter at the idea of the general essence of Man, he is surely right to point to the risks – and the damage done in history – of supposing that we can altogether have done with this 'arch ghost' in history. This is not to say that much of this message has not been registered by other commentators on Marx, albeit in less rhetorically embroidered form: to the point, in fact, where we might well ask of some of it whether we needed the spectral logic of deconstruction to come from the grave to tell us that.

Finally, Derrida acknowledges that, if deconstruction is to be associated with an ethics and a politics, then it is itself reliant in its argument on an element which is irreducible and resistant to deconstruction. It must in some sense be value-grounded. Or, as Derrida himself puts it, a certain messianism, a certain idea of justice and democracy, is essential to an emancipatory politics. 'What remains irreducible to any deconstruction,' he writes, 'what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice...' (p. 59). We might question the 'perhaps' here (does Derrida really wish us to understand that he has yet to make his mind up on the point?); and, of course, Derrida is quick to assure us that this is no common-or-garden idea of justice, but a justice to be distinguished from any of its current concepts and determined predicates. Nonetheless, Derrida here explicitly recognizes the necessity of adopting a certain prescriptive stance – and this is an important concession to those who have for some time been pointing out that there is an inconsistency between the ethical indecisionism of deconstruction and its deployment in support of an emancipatory political agenda.

Having said that, however, one would also have to say that where the argument of *Specters of Marx* remains more predictable, less than novel, is in the still purely formal quality of this recognition. Ready though he may be to accept that a deconstructive critique only makes

sense against the background, or within the context, of a certain ethical commitment, Derrida still seems very loath to endow it with any content. For when it comes down to it, the prevailing message is still to the effect that we must never ontologize, must remain no more than haunted by the spirit of an emancipatory politics, must never seek to incarnate it in any set of goods, institutions or strategies, since to do so – it is implied – is inevitably to betray the spirit itself.

Clean hands

What Marx shared with the opponents of communism, so Derrida argues, was a fear of its spectre – a fear antithetical to theirs, since it was not an alarm that it might take on flesh and become an embodied presence, but rather an alarm that it might not – that it might remain merely spectral – yet a common fear of spectrality itself all the same. Whereas, according to Derrida, what we should be more afraid of, most wary of, is the exorcizing impulse itself – the urge to render the spirit in flesh, to concretize our messianic yearnings. We should love the ghost, embrace the spectre – think and act always within the space between the absolutely formal and contentless regulative ideal and its embodiment or representation in any 'full' presence. Spectral logic requires us, as it were, to accept that the only site of political virtue is virtuality itself.

We must conduct an ongoing immanent critique of the failure of actuality to live up to its own ideals of justice and democracy; but at the same time we should critique those ideals themselves in the light of a justice which is not that of law and right, a democracy which is not to be confounded with any of its present concepts – a justice and democracy which we should not expect any putative alternative reality ever to realize or represent as actualizable. Rather, we should proceed within the spirit of an indefinitely deferred justice: a justice of the gift, which neither expects nor requires any return from the other; in the spirit of an indefinitely deferred democracy whose 'yes to the stranger' ethic is that of an absolute hospitality which sets no conditions on welcome; an ethic which refrains from all representations of identity, and makes no demands on the other to conform to any existing system of rights or legality, to any pre-given code of honour or justice.

Several points can be made about this deconstructive reworking of the Marxist emancipatory promise. In the first place, we can surely ask in what sense, if any, it could be said to be Marxist, even in spirit. One takes Derrida's own point (it is hardly a controversial one for Marxists to accept since it has been made by most of them themselves) that a Marxism adequate to our times

is a reformed, even radically revised Marxism. But one may still argue that to think in the spirit of Marx is to do more than condemn the actual in the light of the impossible. Or, to come at the point from a slightly different angle, we might ask whether there really is such a thing as the spirit of Marx once all his letters – his letters about economic determination, about base and superstructure, about class antagonism and class struggle, about ideology, about materiality, about the ‘real men and their circumstances’, about, in short, the ontology of the capitalist mode of production and the means and direction of its transformation – have been obscured or spectralized, either denounced as no longer relevant to our times or denied their literal meaning?

Derrida refers himself, and wants to refer us, to Marx, but, given that this is a Marx whom he deems presentable (presentable to himself, to us, for our times) only if we suspend our credit in his literal meaning, a Marx who in a sense is not only ‘not a Marxist’ but not Marx either, we might ask why – why Marx? When, in short, does working merely in the *spirit* of Marx cease to be Marxist and become, say, left liberalism, or the ‘radical democracy’ of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who make no bones about describing themselves as ‘post-Marxist’, but with whose argument Derrida’s de-ontologized version of Marxism would seem to have more affinity than with the actual works of Marx himself? Or, to give a more directly political – if impolite – cast to the question, could we not ask (as my friend Steve Kupfer put it to me) whether this spectral Marx doesn’t stand to Marx himself rather as Tony Blair’s reworking of Clause IV stands to its original? And if there is anything in the analogy, what does that imply for the Derridean version: that it is to be defended as more attuned than the original to the political realities of our times, or rejected as an evasion or fudging of the profound sources of their ‘out of jointness’?

Just as I do not view these questions as purely rhetorical, so I am not prejudging the answers to them. But there are a number of implications of Derrida’s advice which I think are relevant to their consideration, and which I do want to dispute – for instance, why should we abide by a logic, all of whose emphasis might seem to fall on the compromised nature of any active, hands-on politics, rather than on the gains it can achieve; which might seem to imply that we can be properly politically sensitive only in thought, in philosophy, and never in our actual practice? Derrida does not give sufficient due to the ‘to be or not to be’ quality of a great deal of political activity on the Left: its active and concrete pursuit of a ‘third way’ through the ontologies of the Cold War, for example; its insistence on being for justice, equality,

democracy, but not for the justice, equality and democracy of either Soviet communism or liberal capitalism; its commitment to a variety of betwixt or between agendas: between Marxism and existentialism, between Promethean and irrationalist responses to ecological crisis, between class politics, on the one hand, and an ‘anything goes’ postmodernism, on the other. The point is not that the specific representations of these political positions are invulnerable to a deconstructive critique, but that this critique is too assimilative. By inviting us to view all praxis as damned in advance by its failure to instantiate a true or authentic democracy, it offers no gauge or criterion for adjudicating between the more or less progressive character of different acts, practices and institutional forms. Derrida takes too little notice of the ways in which left-wing practice might be said to have actualized ‘spectrality’, to have proceeded in the spirit of some of its disciples. That Derrida envelops his precautions against theological Marxism in a new rhetoric should not blind us to the fact that the general spirit in which they are moved is one that has frequently been registered within the Marxist and socialist camp, and has at times been instantiated in some relatively clean-handed forms of praxis.

But if the logic of the spectre invites us to collapse distinctions within the actualized politics of the Left, it is also, and conversely, mistaken in implying that there could be any such politics that did not involve some choice, some decision about how and when to act, and some representation of the other as the condition of that action. If that is dirtyhandedness, then, yes, there is no politics without it. We cannot change the world, however minimally, if we stay obedient to the injunction not to ontologize. Nor can there be any extension of empathy or solidarity with the victims of oppression that is not ‘guilty’ – if that is the word – of reading or representing their plight in the light of our own identity; in the light, that is, of a conception of how it would be for us were we to be in their condition, of what we would feel were we to suffer their fate. Messianic opening or hospitality to the other is all very well if it is simply thrown out as a caution against over-hasty political assimilations – or as a challenge, for example, to current governmental policies on immigration; but if Derrida means that we are culpable of some disrespect for the absolute otherness of others in any and every representation of the other as like the self, then this seems a recommendation not for justice or democracy but for political quietism. We would, strictly speaking, be doing an injury in the very presumption of the other’s agony or humiliation at the hands of the torturer or oppressor, and might therefore do better not to intervene. Amnesty take note.

It will be said that Derrida recognizes the impossibility of what he is advocating, which in a sense is true. Thus, of messianic opening, he wrote that 'It would be easy, too easy, to show that such a hospitality without reserve, which is nevertheless the condition of the event and thus of history ... is the impossible itself, and this condition of possibility of the event is also its condition of impossibility.' Yet the acknowledgement is made only in the context of an argument to the effect that, without this experience of the impossible, one might as well give up on any justice, and on any pretensions to a politics in 'good conscience'. 'One might as well', so Derrida claims, 'confess the economic calculation and declare all the checkpoints that ethics, hospitality, or the various messianisms would still install at the borders of the event in order to screen the *arrivant*...' (p. 66). A just politics is presented as both impossible and essential.

Yet one can also claim that the condition of any politics in 'good conscience' is the refusal of this very dichotomy. For as soon as we ask why it is that this so-called democracy of unlimited hospitality is 'impossible', then we confront the fact that the idea of the 'impossible' is here obscuring a failure of politico-ethical engagement. It is impossible because there can be no saying 'no' to the other's suffering if saying 'yes' to the stranger means refraining from any and every preconception of how they are to live. It is impossible because respecting the absolute difference of the other – imposing no conditions on hospitality – would logically deprive the other of any grounds for contesting even the

most inhospitable forms of reception, and would require any and every 'host' to accept all those strangers whose strangeness consisted in their radical incapacity to accept or understand the very principles of hospitality, democracy or justice. It is impossible because justice is not a matter of generosity or charity, but a relationship of reciprocity which by its nature can only exist in a context of mutual obligations and responsibilities.

One can understand Derrida's reluctance to recognize these conditions on the possibility of democracy and justice in the light of the inequalities and disparities of distribution perpetrated in the name of their existing concepts and determinate forms; but the very critique of these disparities within the global economy only makes sense if it is rooted in an idea of justice as sharing – as involving a commitment to a fair distribution of goods and resources. I do not see how it would be just to transcend such a conception of justice, and I certainly think that the rhetoric of 'justice of the gift' is unfortunate if it were to imply that certain forms of unconditional 'givings' through which such justice might be better realized – cancellation of Third World debt, for example – were 'givings' or 'gifts' rather than restitutions for previous takings, thefts and dispossessions. Derrida's refusal to ontologize – his resistance to speculating upon the political forms and institutions which might realize his transcendent concept of democracy and justice – leaves him open to the charge that he is not really engaging with the ethics of justice and democracy at all – even open to cynical claims that a 'justice of the gift' is



what we have had far too much of already, most of it in favour of the more affluent and privileged communities of the globe. There is a limit to the degree to which we can accept that Derrida's recommendations for sustaining a politics 'in good conscience' are in good conscience in the absence of any blueprinting of their conditions of possibility, or any engagement with the ethical conflicts to which unreserved hospitality offers indefinite welcome.

But there is a further aspect of Derrida's 'yes to the stranger' ethic, of which I think we should be wary. This is its invitation to erode or collapse conceptual distinctions between the 'human' and the 'animal'; or, to put it more accurately, his invitation to us to treat all our intuitive demarcations between human and nonhuman 'others' as a form of unwarranted conceptual policing. In the interview translated in *RP* 68, for example, he recommends that the 'someone' addressed in messianic opening is a someone whom we cannot and must not define in advance – 'not as subject, self-consciousness, not even as animal, God, person, man or woman, living or dead' (*RP* 68, p. 32). There are a number of claims made to similar effect in *Specters of Marx*. But would we even determine what was or wasn't a 'someone' if we were to be obedient to this injunction: what would it be to be a someone in the absence of any definition or determination? Is this a coherent injunction? Even if it were, could it be ethical, could such indiscriminacy be the basis of a just polity?

I find it puzzling that Derrida should be advocating an ethical perspective that appears at face value to be so ready to abstract from those differences – of language use, or our insertion within a symbolic order – which distinguish us from other creatures, and which have been such a focus of structuralist and post-structuralist attention. Is he not arguing here in ways that might align a deconstructive ethic with some of the more simplistic and reductivist forms of naturalism: with those, for example, who have argued for the extension of the moral community to include nonhuman primates, or with the biocentric opponents of 'anthropocentricity' who have rejected any privileging of humanity over other life forms?

Clearly there is a debate to be had around these issues, and a spectrum of positions which one may adopt in regard to them. My complaint is that Derrida gestures at these conceptual erosions of the human–animal distinction without any consideration of their counterfactual difficulties, and in complete abstraction from the important and intense discussions that have been taking place around these issues in environmental ethics.

Ontological voids

It is one thing to claim, as Derrida does, that 'there is no future without Marx', and another to suppose that we shall ever see a popular mandate for socialism in the future; one thing to advise that the foreign debt must be treated in the spirit of Marxist critique (whatever that means exactly), another to suppose that it will ever be dealt with through a dismantling of global capitalism. If the question whether Marx will come again is interpreted as a question about the return of any commanding support for a socialist programme, there may well be a future without Marx, at least for a good while to come. Never, in fact, has the spectre of communism looked less like haunting Europe than at the present time. But if anything remotely resembling this ghost is to be kept in the offing as a potential vote-winner in the future, then I suspect it will require all those who are committed to its spirit to rebel against the Derridean veto: to put some flesh on this alternative to the actual, to think through the institutional forms that might realize that will-o'-the-wisp called democratic socialism.

It seems to me that the capitalist order is sustained less by any widespread faith in its capacity to secure the good life or to ward off the major crises of our times, than by a deep, and in many ways justifiable, scepticism about the practical viability of any alternative to it. In this sense, one may argue that the problem for the Left has not been too much blueprinting, but too little of it – too much readiness to invoke an 'authentic socialism' as a way of dissociating from what has been done in the name of Marxism; too little attention paid to the concrete forms in which such an ideal might be implemented. If we do indeed wish to pre-empt the events of ever more terrible forms of misery, of genocide, of ecological barbarism, of terminal warfare (as Derrida implies we do), then all the more practical engagements of Left theory – the work on market socialism and alternative economic policies, on new concepts of citizenship and forms of democratic empowerment, on the liberation from work, on the institutions of a new cosmopolitanism – seem much more helpful than the continuous warnings against pre-empting the forms in which the future will eventuate.

In this connection, one can't help noting how paradoxical it is that Derrida should be recommending a spectral Marx, given how loath Marx himself was to do more than conjure the spirit of communism – given, that is, his resistance to specifying the political institutions which might realize those famous abstract desiderata: a society of abundance, a future unmeasured by any existing moral yardstick, distribution according to needs, a rich and all-round development of the individual.

Where Marx is closest to the spirit of deconstruction is, arguably, in these formulaic gestures towards a society that had so far transcended existing actuality that its conditions of realization could no longer be conceptualized. Marx is spectral Marx in his refusal to envision communism in his envisaging of it, in his anti-utopian utopianism.

Now, I am not deploring this vision. A world that no longer aspires to any such political sublime is an impoverished world. What I am saying, however, is that ontological voids can offer themselves as hostages to fortune; that Marx's refusal to think through the politics of communism created a number of such voids; and that in so far as these came to be filled by 'actual existing socialism' they have played a role in the demise of Marxism itself. Or, to put it otherwise: one doesn't

necessarily avoid the horrors of a messianic totalitarianism by refusing to ontologize. One might even be leaving more space for them. Certainly we should be very wary of all those who know how to change the world, and how it ought to look when they have done so. But, since the world will change anyway, there are also dangers in too narrowly confining oneself to the task of 'critical criticism': to a perpetual critique of the out-of-jointness of all times, of the eternal failure of the actual to measure up to a rationality that will never arrive. Derrida abhors the politics of the 'full presence', whether it takes the form of a celebration of the end of history or an absolute knowledge of how it should end. I agree. But it is not, I think, by leaving ontological vacuums that we best guard against these types of plenitude.

Kate Soper

Marx the uncanny?

Ghosts and their relation to the mode of production

I want to pose some of the problems that are raised by Derrida's postponed and long-awaited encounter with what in an interview of 1971 he calls 'the Marxist text'.¹ I will do this by setting up a different, but for Derrida equally postponed, encounter, that with Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919). This will lead me to consider the place of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Derrida's argument as a kind of un-text of the spectral and his privileging of it as a way in to Marx's texts with their ghosts and spectres.

Freud's paradox of the *heimlich/unheimlich* is invoked and alluded to in Derrida's writings over the years, often in passing and with a claim for its crucial importance, followed by a disclaimer of any intention to undertake the necessary and, we are given to understand, necessarily lengthy, deconstructive reading that its importance would call for.² Mark Wigley observes of Derrida's relation to the uncanny:

Like the figure of the house to which it is bound, it is a theme that can be traced throughout Derrida's work without it ever becoming a discrete subject, as if it is itself repressed, returning only occasionally to surface in very isolated and what seem, at first, to be very minor points. But precisely for this reason it can be argued that its effects actually pervade all the texts that are unable or unwilling to speak about it.³

The uncanny in Derrida's texts seems to play the role of a nagging but deferred element, one that is welcomed as

congenial but never integrated into the texts that cite it, something that remains beckoning but peripheral to the trajectory of the argument. The page or two it gets in *Specters of Marx* is the fullest attention Derrida has given it so far. Significantly, I will argue, of the two points from it that Derrida focuses on, he gets one wrong, which he gives a partial reading of the other, in which a key element of Freud's concept is lost.

The occasion of Derrida's citation of the uncanny is the repetition in Freud's essay of a German idiom that appears in Marx's interminable critique of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology*, and which also resonates for Derrida in his equally repetitive and seemingly interminable paraphrase and commentary on Marx's obsessive battling and entanglement with Stirner. The German idiom in question is *es spukt*: it spooks. The phrase is, Derrida notes, translated into English and French in such a way as to lose its force. In Freud's essay, *es spukt* appears when Freud comments on the lack in other languages of a word that has the same connotations as the German *unheimlich*. Freud says, in the English of Strachey's Standard Edition, 'Some languages in use today can only render the German expression "an *unheimlich* house" as "a haunted house".' The French translation of the equivalent is *une maison hantée*. What these translations lose is Freud's German idiom, when he says in Derrida's translation: 'Some languages in use today can only render the German expression *ein heimliches Haus* [an uncanny house] by a house in which