

mind/*geist* of Europe by its cultural others and inferiors. Derrida's fascination is with Hamlet-as-*geist* haunted by the corporeal form of the ghost, as a trope for the irreducible spectral implication of spirit and spook. However, this Valéryian reading of Hamlet forecloses his distinctive relation to the premodern, conscripting his melancholic Renaissance proto-modernity into a latter-day battle with the developed forms of modernity in the moment of European high modernism.

The question of modernity is as insistent in the text of Marx as in the texts of Freud and in *Hamlet*, though differently. Marx's use of Gothic tropes, however, does not usually reference the uncanny's punctual rupture of modernity's breach with tradition. Derrida's misreading of the *Manifesto*'s famous citation of the Spectre of Communism implausibly aligns Marx as fearful exorcist with the reactionary powers of old Europe. However, Marx is staging not an uncanny encounter of *geist* with ghost, but a clash of two forms of narrative, of the traditional nursery tale of the spectre with the party manifesto that calls for the realization of a future possibility. The Classical anachronism of the French revolutionaries in *The 18th Brumaire*, the mystificatory, vampiric and spectralized effects of *Capital*, are seen as the production of the internally riven and self-contradictory character of the economic and political forms of capitalist modernity. What this then poses is the question of the uncanny *Nachträglichkeit*, the deferred action or afterwardsness, of the premodern within

modernity (conceptualized within Marxism as the overdetermination of different temporalities, or uneven and combined development) and its relation to modernity's self-haunting or auto-spectrality. Derrida's spectral *a priori* or ghost-in-general, in its conflation of these effects, precludes such a questioning.

## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (1972), trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981.
2. In a footnote in *Dissemination*, where the theme of undecidability is related to the uncanny, Derrida remarks that 'we find ourselves constantly being drawn back to that text' (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 220). In a still partial invocation in the closing moment of *Specters*, he remarks that, 'One should read also for itself ... all the rest of the text (we will try to do so elsewhere), while crossing this reading with that of numerous other texts in Heidegger' (p. 174).
3. Mark Wigley, *Derrida's Haunt: the Architecture of Deconstruction*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.
4. David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, Macmillan, London, 1969.
5. Interview with Jacques Derrida, 'The Ghost Dance', *Public*, no. 2, 1989.
6. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. J. Strachey, Vol. 17, The Hogarth Press, London, 1955, pp. 245–52.
7. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Custom: An Essay on Social Codes*, trans. A. F. Borenstein, Gateway Books, Chicago, 1961.
8. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, edited by Chris Baldick, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. xii.

**John Fletcher**

# Messianic ruminations

## Derrida, Stirner and Marx

Much of the response to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* has concentrated on the significance it might have for his thought. No doubt this is an interesting and important subject, but it is not my principal concern here. I am interested in *Specters of Marx* as a Marxist, and therefore not for what it reveals of Derrida and of the alleged 'ethical turn' of deconstruction, but for what it says about Marx and Marxism, and about 'What is to be Done?', here and now in the 'New World Order'.<sup>1</sup>

There have been other Marxist responses to *Specters*, notably those by Aijaz Ahmad and Fredric Jameson.<sup>2</sup> Both are highly characteristic of the writers' respective intellectual styles. Thus Jameson's main thrust seems to be recuperative, as he seeks to weave Derrida's themes into the dialectical totality forming, he believes, the horizon of all human thought and activity. Ahmad's comments on *Specters* are, by contrast, sharper, more

polemical, more concerned to identify the lines of opposition still dividing Derrida from Marxism. These differences in approach are, of course, symptomatic of their more general stances towards poststructuralism.

My own sympathies are more with Ahmad's approach than with Jameson's. Thus Ahmad highlights the apparent contradiction between Derrida's current rallying to Marx and his past stance towards the Marxist tradition, which is summed up by Derrida's remark that he 'opposed, to be sure, *de facto*, "Marxism" or "communism" (the Soviet Union, the International of Communist Parties, and everything that resulted from them...)' (p. 14). Ahmad comments: 'That word, *everything*, is so definitive, ... that one does not know why the collapse of those socialisms [that is, the no longer existing socialisms of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union] should have sent him into mourning.'<sup>3</sup>

This is a good question, and one that is made even sharper by the fact that (unknown to Ahmad when he wrote the piece) *Specters* is dedicated to Chris Hani, the immensely popular leader of the South African Communist Party who was murdered in April 1993, shortly before Derrida delivered the lecture on which the book is based. Hani was one of the great heroes of the South African liberation struggle, a lover, as Derrida notes, of Shakespeare, and also of Jane Austen. He was also an honourable but thoroughly orthodox representative of precisely the kind of 'de facto Marxism' dominant within the Communist Parties to which Derrida proclaims himself so strongly opposed.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida could respond to Ahmad's query by pointing to his repeated observation that there is more than one Marx – and, one might add, more than one Marxism (see, for example, pp. 3, 13). The Marxist 'tradition' is in fact a plurality of traditions at least partially in conflict with one another. This is an important point of reference for anyone – such as myself – who argues that the existence of anti-Stalinist Marxisms – in particular, those stemming from Trotsky and the Left Opposition – is a prerequisite of any attempt to carry on Marxism after the collapse of 'existing socialism' in 1989. The 'New International' proclaimed by Derrida has quite specific connotations for those with a Trotskyist background. *New International* was for many years the name of the most intellectually distinguished journal of American Trotskyism.<sup>5</sup>

The plurality of Marxisms is not, however, addressed by Derrida. Beyond a couple of references to Althusser and Benjamin, he concentrates on Marx himself. I wish to consider here two of the main themes of the discussion which serve to highlight the differences that still separate Derrida from Marx.

### **Stirner and spectrality**

The first of these concerns Stirner and spectrality. Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1844) is the object of an enormously lengthy, indeed obsessive critique by Marx and Engels in Book II of *The German Ideology*, which takes up by far the largest part of that work. Stirner reduces everything – God, man, states, societies – to so many 'spooks', phantoms invented to conceal the sole reality, the punctual singularity of the individual subject. For Marx and Engels, Stirner's 'egology' represented an extreme case of the idealism and elitism into which the Young Hegelians had degenerated. They counterposed to it the practical realities of human beings participating in concrete forms of social production: the critique of Stirner thus prompted the formulation, in Book I of *The German Ideology*, of the first systematic version of historical materialism.

But for Derrida, Stirner is Marx's 'double, ... brother, ... diabolical image ... He has recognized someone who, like him, appears obsessed by ghosts and by the figure of the ghost and by its names with their troubling consonance and reference (*Geist, Gespenst*)' (p. 139). The point of the concepts of ghost and spectrality for Derrida seems to be that they represent yet another way of disrupting the metaphysics of presence. Thus: 'this, the spectral, *is not* ... this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor presence, *is never present as such*' (p. xviii).

Jameson's discussion of spectrality is helpful here. He calls spectrality 'what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage'.<sup>6</sup> Hence Derrida's counterposition of 'hauntology' and 'ontology' – terms whose French originals, like '*différance*' and '*différence*', are homophonic, allowing him to play yet again with the ineffaceable gap between speech and writing.

From the perspective of spectrality the differences between Marx and Stirner are less important than what they have in common:

Marx and Saint Max [i.e. Stirner] seem to put in question, others might say a little quickly 'deconstruct', an onto-theological and Christian phenomenology; but it is to the extent that it is occupied, they both say, and thus inhabited, haunted only by ghosts. Their 'deconstruction' is limited to the point at which they *both* oppose this spectral onto-theology – each in his own way but regardless of the differences between them – to the hyper-phenomenological principle of the flesh-and-blood presence of the living person, of the being itself, of its effective and non-phantomic presence in flesh and blood. (pp. 191–2, n. 14)

Marx thus relies, according to Derrida, on 'an ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity' relative to which spectres and other forms of representation of the absent can be 'conjured away' by being reduced to their material conditions, the world of labour, production, and exchange' (p. 170).

There is something to be said for this argument. Stirner undoubtedly posed a difficulty for Marx. When *The Ego and Its Own* appeared in 1844 Marx had begun to radicalize Feuerbach's critique of Hegel by applying it to political and social conditions rather than just to concepts and systems of belief. But in one crucial respect at least, Marx still remained within the framework created by Feuerbach. Feuerbach's method was one of inversion – thus the Hegelian Absolute is revealed to be

a rarefied version of God, which is itself exposed as a projection of the human essence. In this way an inversion of subject and predicate – of essential reality and its secondary attributes – is put right. The real subject, Man, is set in its proper place.

Stirner's trick was to apply this method to Feuerbach himself, exposing Man as a hypostasis of the individual ego. Thus:

The supreme being is indeed [as Feuerbach says] the essence of man, but, just because it is his *essence* and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as 'God', or find it in him and call it 'essence of man' or man. *I* am neither God, nor *man*, neither supreme essence nor my essence...

Indeed, Stirner declares:

*Man* is the last evil *spirit* or spook, the most deceptive or most intimate, the craftiest liar with honest mien, the father of lies.<sup>7</sup>

Stirner could thus be said to have exploded Feuerbachian humanism: its characteristic form of critique had been turned against itself. He thus posed a challenge to Marx, whose *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* employs Feuerbach's method of inversion: the modern state is exposed as an alienated expression of the conflicts of civil society. Though the *Paris Manuscripts* are openly critical of Feuerbach, *The Holy Family*, the first text Marx co-authored with Engels, which was directed against Stirner's Berlin cronies the Bauer brothers, is strongly Feuerbachian in tone. The texts, however, which Marx produced after the appearance of *The Ego and Its Own* – the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology* – proceed in one respect at least along parallel lines to Stirner's. Marx also denies to Feuerbach's hypostatized Man its claimed status as the subject of history. In its place, however, he sets, not the singular ego, but 'the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life'.<sup>8</sup>

This countermove permits Marx to develop his first sketch of historical materialism, and thus to present a form of political critique which goes beyond the 'critical criticism' of Stirner and the Bauers by locating itself within the emerging struggles of the working class. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of *The German Ideology*, as Derrida observes, does tend to make great play of the material actuality of the 'real individuals' who, in concrete contexts of social production, make history. The text is, furthermore, almost positivist in its rejection of philosophy, which Marx famously compares at one point to masturbation.<sup>9</sup>

A certain ambivalence towards Stirner is revealed by

Engels's letter to Marx of 19 November 1844, recording his first response to *The Ego and Its Own*. Engels offers a qualified welcome to Stirner's book for the critique it makes of Feuerbach. At the same time he expresses his growing impatience with 'all this theoretical twaddle', and puts his differences with Stirner in terms very much consonant with Derrida's interpretation:

Stirner is right in rejecting 'man', or at least the 'man' of [Feuerbach's] *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Feuerbach deduces his 'man' from God, it is from God that he arrives at 'man'; and hence 'man' is crowned with a theological halo of abstraction. The true way to arrive at 'man' is the other way about. We must take our departure from the Ego, the empirical, flesh-and-blood individual, if we are not, like Stirner, to remain stuck at this point but rather to raise ourselves to 'man'. 'Man' will always remain a wraith so long as his basis is not empirical man.<sup>10</sup>

Marx's response to Stirner was much less positive. His reply to the letter just quoted is lost, but Engels's next letter suggests that Marx brought him up short with a dressing down for making any concessions to Stirner.<sup>11</sup> But the ferocity of Marx's critique of Stirner does not alter – indeed, by its obsessive length and detail, it tends to confirm – the impression that the two were both seeking to make their escape from Feuerbachian humanism, albeit in different directions.<sup>12</sup>

But this is not the end of the story. Marx's thought continues to develop after *The German Ideology*. It is only in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, first published in 1847, that he formulates clearly the concept of the relations of production, the master-concept of *Capital*. Derrida's discussion of the latter work concentrates, predictably enough, on what Marx himself called the 'metaphysical subtleties' of the commodity-form. Marx does return to the Feuerbachian theme of inversion in *Capital*: it figures as a metaphor, for example, when he criticizes the 'trinity formula', according to which 'factors of production' earn specific forms of revenue. He calls this 'the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre'.<sup>13</sup>

This is exactly the kind of language of exorcism – of ridding the real of the spectral – on which Derrida seizes. But he doesn't notice that it is no 'present' or 'living' reality that Marx invokes in order to set the 'upside-down world' of commodities and capital back on its feet. Rather, it is capitalist relations of production that form, according to Marx, the inner structure of this world. But the distinctive feature of capitalist relations, as Althusser and his collaborators sought to show in *Reading Capital*,

is precisely that they are *not* present. The capitalist mode of production is a structure which can be discerned only in its effects, and whose nature and operations must therefore be reconstructed through a process of theoretical labour. The real of *Capital* is a structure of relations that is the object of analysis, not a palpable living substance in the face of whose actuality the ghost dance of commodities falls apart.<sup>14</sup>

This leads to a more general philosophical point. Derrida is too quick, both in *Specters* and in the lengthy interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta at the height of the post-'68 Paris craze for Chairman Mao that represents one of his few earlier direct encounters with Marxism, to equate any conception of a real existing independently of thought and discourse with a present directly accessible to consciousness.<sup>15</sup> But Marx's mature materialism (or realism) is precisely one where the real is not the same as presence. The distinctions Roy Bhaskar draws between the empirical, the actual and the real, where the latter is conceived as a stratified structure of powers manifested in sequences of events (the actual) which may or may not be experienced by human subjects (the empirical), are helpful in further articulating this point.<sup>16</sup> Deconstruction's victories, if won merely over a naive realism that fails to draw these distinctions, are unlikely to amount to much.

### **Eschatology and teleology**

The second main theme of Derrida's discussion of Marx that I wish to address concerns his counterposition of eschatology and teleology. In seeking to characterize what he wants to keep of Marxism, Derrida identifies, first, a style of '*radical critique*' that is 'heir to a spirit of the Enlightenment which must not be renounced', and 'a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation'. He goes on to criticize Althusser and his followers, 'who believed that they must try to dissociate Marxism from any teleology or from any eschatology (but my concern is precisely to distinguish the latter from the former)' (pp. 88-90).

Derrida in fact wishes to rescue messianic eschatology from teleology. Thus he asks:

Is there not a messianic extremity, an *eskhaton* whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, at *each moment*, the final term of a *phusis*, such as work, production, and the *telos* of any history? (p. 36, trans. modified)

This passage inevitably calls to mind Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. And Derrida does invoke Benjamin's concept of 'weak Messianic power' (pp. 55,

180–81 n. 2). In the *Theses* and other writings of the late 1930s Benjamin conceives revolution as a Messianic irruption into the 'homogenous, empty time' presupposed by conventional historiography, Stalinism and social democracy alike, 'a tiger's leap ... in the open air of history'.<sup>17</sup> There is here stated an important truth about revolution: namely, that it constitutes a break in the causal chain. Revolutions can never simply be read off from subtending structures and preceding events. There is an irreducible sense in which they take everyone by surprise.

This is true, to take the most recent example, of the East European revolutions of 1989. It has become a cliché – but is no less true for all that – that no one expected the wave of popular insurgency that swept away the Stalinist regimes in the autumn of 1989. The Soweto uprising of June 1976, the event which initiated the other great political transformation of recent times, the removal of apartheid in South Africa, had the same quality of unexpectedness. But the same can be said *generally* of revolutions. To take the case of what is still *the* revolution of the twentieth century, the Russian Revolution of October 1917, Lenin notoriously told an audience of Swiss socialists in January 1917: 'We of the older generation may not live to see the coming revolution.' The fall of tsarism in February 1917 came as an 'infinite' – though very welcome – surprise to Lenin. The situationists were therefore right to call this 'the century of the unexpected'.

Simply to leave matters there would, however, be to mystify historical transformations, indeed to efface their specificity in a metaphysics of the event. For what is usually (though not always) the surprising thing about revolutions is not *that* they happen, but *when* and (to some extent) *how* they happen. Analysis can expose the systemic contradictions, class conflicts and ideological disarray of a specific society; what it can't do is determine the precise timing and form of their unravelling. Nevertheless, without a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of historical transformation of the kind that Marxism (but not only Marxism) seeks to offer, the historical imagination will be trapped between blind empiricism and belletrist speculation.<sup>18</sup>

That is why the efforts disparaged by Derrida to disentangle historical materialism from the teleological forms of thinking that are part of Marx's Hegelian heritage are essential. A non-teleological historical materialism – that is, one that does not posit communism as the ineluctable end of history – is needed to provide 'messianic eschatology' with ballast and orientation. Benjamin famously imagined historical materialism

calling on 'the services of theology', by which he meant the 'weak Messianic power' invoked by Derrida.<sup>19</sup> But Benjamin's own career – his tortuous, ambiguous, but ultimately decisive movement towards revolutionary socialism and historical materialism – showed that the reverse is also true, that 'messianic extremity' requires a materialist anchorage.

Without the substance of Marxism as well as its spirit, Derrida's 'ethical turn' is likely to amount to little more than an avowal of left liberalism, and a rather weak one at that. His conceptualization of spectrality is intended in part to help articulate his thoughts on justice (pp. 23–9). But these thoughts – to the extent that they are not simply impenetrable – have a curiously provincial air about them. It is hard to know what to make of a discourse on justice whose main reference is Heidegger's 'Anaximander Fragment' – hardly the work of a thinker who can be treated as a reliable guide to the political – and which ignores the vast debates on justice which have taken place among English-speaking philosophers over the past quarter-century. Rawls, Nozick, Dworkin, Sen, MacIntyre, Walzer, Sandel, Rorty, Barry and Cohen might not have written for the notice they receive from Derrida. But it is hard to see how he can lay claim to the terrain of justice without addressing the prior claims of its present occupants.

It would, however, be churlish to end on this note of criticism, and not to welcome a book which so firmly denounces the cruelties and injustices inflicted by actually existing capitalism and the apologists such as Fukuyama who seek to explain these away; a book which, against the grain of contemporary fashion, affirms 'no future without Marx', and calls for 'a new Enlightenment for the century to come' (pp. 13, 90). Whether all this represents a significant modulation of Derrida's thought, I leave to others to judge. I am content here merely to welcome another interlocutor to the great, and still unavoidable, debate about the relationship between Marx's thought and the world in which we are condemned to live a struggle.

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## Notes

1. This paper is a slightly revised and expanded version of the one given at the *Radical Philosophy* conference. I am grateful to all those participating and particularly to Gregory Elliott and Kate Soper.
2. A. Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida', *New Left Review* 208, November–December 1994; and F. Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', *New Left Review* 209, January–February 1995.
3. Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida', p. 93.
4. Ahmad's article was 'a quick response strictly to the text of Derrida's "A Lecture on Marx"', the extract from *Specters* published in *New Left Review* 205, May–June 1994, which omits the book's dedication. See Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida', p. 89, n. 2.
5. See A. Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1990; and *The Revenge of History*, Polity, Cambridge, 1991; and J. Molyneux, *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?*, Bookmarks, London, 1985.
6. Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', p. 85.
7. *The Ego and Its Own*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 34, 165. Stirner's argument at times takes on a distinctly proto-Nietzschean tone, for example in his book's concluding polemic against truth: "'The truth' outlasts the downfall of the world of gods, for it is the immortal soul of this transitory world of gods, it is Deity itself" (ibid., p. 311). One can therefore see his attraction for a disciple of Nietzsche and Heidegger such as Derrida. During the *nouveaux philosophes*' noisy break with Marxism in the late 1970s, Dominique Lecourt pointed out the parallels between their arguments and Stirner's (see *Dissidence ou revolution*, Maspero, Paris, 1978, p. 55). One might say that the poststructuralist discovery of Stirner was bound to happen, sooner or later.
8. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, Vol. V, 1975–, p. 31.
9. Ibid., p. 236.
10. Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 12–13.
11. A chastened Engels wrote to Marx in January 1845: 'As regards Stirner, I entirely agree with you. When I wrote to you, I was still under the immediate impression made upon me by the book' (ibid., p. 16).
12. Did *The Ego and Its Own* prompt Marx to make the final break with Feuerbach, or had he already taken this step when he was confronted with Stirner's work? Auguste Cornu's great study supports the second interpretation, though he does note that Marx's 'radical opposition' to Feuerbach becomes evident only in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, written in the spring of 1945, i.e. after the appearance of *The Ego and Its Own* (see *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, IV, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1970, p. 133 and passim). Marx's possible ambivalence towards Stirner was first brought home to me by Tony Dodd in discussions during the mid-1970s.
13. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 969.
14. Derrida's failure to address *Reading Capital* is a puzzle, especially given his friendship with Althusser and participation in some of the seminars at the École Normale Supérieure from which the book emerged (see J. Derrida, 'Politics and Friendship', in E. A. Kaplan and M. Sprinker, eds, *The Althusserian Legacy*, Verso, London, 1993, pp. 186ff). My invocation of Althusser here is not intended to represent a simple endorsement of the idea of an epistemological break separating the young and old Marxes (see my discussion of these matters in *Marxism and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, ch. 2). It should also be noted that Marx's abandonment of Feuerbachian humanism left in its wake unresolved issues (see N. Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, Verso, London, 1983).
15. See J. Derrida, *Positions*, Minuit, Paris, 1972, pp. 51–133.
16. See R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Harvester, Hassocks, 1978, pp. 56ff.
17. W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1970, p. 263. I discuss Benjamin's conception of revolution in *Making History*, Polity, Cambridge, 1987, ch. 5.
18. I discuss Marxist and other theories of history in my *Theories and Narratives*, Polity, Cambridge, 1995, ch. 3.
19. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 255, 256.