

*The Ghosts of Derrida*  
*or*  
*The Impossibility of Deconstructive Politics:*  
*A Critical View on, and Review of, Derrida's "Specters of Marx"*

**Pre-Preface:** As will become apparent, this paper of mine oscillates between a "journalary" critical "review" of a book - namely "Specters of Marx" - and a philosophical "parody" - precisely in the old and original sense of "respectful imitation" - of the so-called "deconstructive" writing style that is associated with Derrida, most often by those who do not read Derrida very carefully.

**Preface:** This text, critical but sympathetic, should be taken as a "supplement" to my oral lecture. It does not aim to reproduce Derrida's arguments, nor the lecture I gave a few weeks ago, but rather, *this text - here and now* - through imitative practice (for example, by using *this* "preface" as a philosophical tool of de-centering), serves as the perfect platform to playfully ape and mimic Derrida as a writer and a philosopher. It is a playful "exe/orcise" in deconstructive methodological rigour - but *only* an exercise with specific limitations, not a mastery of a philosophy, and certainly not a "missing link" between Derrida and his better, true, "ghostly" self. Even these self-effacing opening words are meant to be taken as imitative poetics of Derridan *praxis*, which I both revere and criticize in the form of this serious, playful, exe/orcise. To offer a critique of Derridean politics, what is needed is a way of writing that is decisively Derridean at the expense of Derrida himself, "more Derrida than Derrida."

**Face:** With this in mind, let us begin *the play*... with seriousness.

**effaced:** Truth be told, the secret remains... to come.

[\*ghost\*]

## 1. A Critique of a Critique of a Critique of a Critique

We are here concerned with the possibility of offering a (brief, provisional, strategic) critique of Derrida's critique of Fukuyama's critique of Marx's critique of capitalism.

In other words, we are concerned with the *traces*, *iterability* and *différance* of Marx within what Derrida, enigmatically, calls the "impure 'impure impure history of ghosts'." (p.95)

Derrida's 1994 book, "Specters of Marx", falls in the period of Derrida's working career when he started to consciously move slightly towards more political, social and moral topics and engagements. It comes as no surprise, then, that the book is hailed as the "renowned philosopher Jacques Derrida's first major work on Marx and his definitive entry into social and political philosophy" (according to the book's blurb).

The reader - or, as Derrida might say, the strategically situated, textually engaged "I" of the provisionally present "Reader-Subject" - might unfortunately be slightly disappointed, or at any rate disillusioned, by the contents of this eclectic volume of speech transcriptions and re-edited lecture notes. The book is based on two lectures given by Derrida at the University of California Riverside, on April 22 and 23 of 1993, in an international colloquium called "Whither Marxism?"

The title of the colloquium is, in itself, ambiguous. Such ambiguity reflects not only the inquisitive and dialectical nature of critical Marxism (both self-critical and critical, of course, of the capitalist society), but moreover the state of apathy, disillusionment and uncertainty about the relevance and impetus of Marxism/Communism in the era immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. The "proper name" (as Derrida would say) of the conference, "Whither Marxism?", contains, at the very least, the following designations:

1. *Where* will Marxism go (to)?
2. Will Marxism *wither* away?
3. *Whether* Marxism has any role to play in the post-communist world.

The book's structure, as the form of Derrida's dialectic, oscillates between these different determinations, with copious unexpected divergences into the "margins of philosophy" (into heterodox readings of Marx, Hegel, Fukuyama, Stirner, Kojève, et al) and into literary detours (e.g. Shakespeare and Victor Hugo). The guiding light is the metaphor of the *ghost*: "Everything is then concentrated in the German expression, *es spukt* [...]. One would have to say: it haunts, it ghosts, it specters, there is some phantom there, it has the feel of the living dead - manor house, spiritualism, occult science, gothic novel, obscurantism, atmosphere of anonymous threat. The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide

between hallucination and perception; there are only displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see" (p.135-6). Perceptive readers of Derrida will notice that although the vocabulary is new (and context-specific), the themes of *différance* and *displacement* are there.

What is the problem? Why can't I let Derrida go, to be himself, to do what he does? Why is there a necessity for a critique (*here*, but why not, always *everywhere*) of Derrida himself? Why is there always-already a need for a self-deconstructive reading of deconstruction?

The fact that disturbed me personally - the thing that "set me up" (I admit!) as a critic - was not so much the use of Hamlet as a metaphor, or allegory, of communism, nor even the all-too-brief and half-hearted nature of Derrida's critique of "really existing" communism (see next chapter), but precisely the essentially typically "Derridean" transcendental (or quasi-transcendental) nature of his politico-philosophical analysis which fails to yield the **political force** of the **political effects** that the **political** "Derrida-the-author-of-a-proper-name" might want to achieve, however provisionally, however reservedly, however self-effacingly. In other words, Derrida embraces the duality of acting *and not* acting, of choosing *and not* choosing, of committing *and not* committing. This way of doing political philosophy fails to yield political consequences. To put it simply, *Derrida fails to say anything (good or bad) about Marx precisely because he fails to say anything, at all.* This is his choice: the choice of not choosing, the choice of "remaining philosophical", of not committing, of not collapsing the undecidability of human actions into the reality of political decidability.

Derrida's deconstructive project of "pure philosophy" fails to turn into "*political philosophy*" precisely at the moment when such a move is expected, and when such an empirical determination is "promised," if not by Derrida, then at least by the book's zealous international publishers and marketers. (I quote the blurb in order to *parody* but also to *take seriously* Derrida's repeated exhortation to take the margins, signatures and contextual determinants of a text into consideration, under scrutiny, under critical differential erasure, however marginal and negligible. The question of "interpretation" becomes a question of "reading" *properly*, that is, in *full* context.)

In addition to the rather detached nature of his philosophical analysis (something a long-time reader of Derrida will come to expect, and might even find soothing), the disorganized formal outline of his lectures (follow as they do an "oral" logic, contextual to a spoken colloquium) becomes, I think, something of an unnecessary hindrance to grasping the possible socio-political consequences of Derrida's critical undertaking, if such consequences are to be drawn *at all*.

Well, what *are* the consequences of his analysis?

## 2. Critical Effects and Non-Critical Appropriations

The sketchy outline of his lectures - and consequently of the book - is as follows:

- 1) End(s) of History and Marxism (from Paul Valéry on), with recursions to Hamlet!
- 2) Against Fukuyama.
- 3) A critique of Marx's critique of "Saint Max" (i.e. Max Stirner): "Marx sees Ghosts".
- 4) The spectrality of Marxism today and in the future.

In the book, Derrida claims that communism *is* always spectrally not-present, i.e. ideally to-come, "revenant", of the form of the "specter". In other words, that communism is always-already self-deferring and self-differing. And that materialism is the bastard child of German idealism, which continues to "haunt" Marx, through Hegel and Stirner, to the bitter end. Furthermore, *everybody* has his own ghosts, and *everything* is haunted by something other than itself. This means that hauntology (*différance*) becomes the general condition of ontology (*identity*).

1. Hegel as the spectralized, exorcised but still always haunting "father" of Marx.
2. Marx as the spectralized, exorcised but still always haunting "father" of Marxism (Communism).
3. Stirner as the alter ego of Marx; according to Marx, he was the "bad son" of Hegel.
4. Fukuyama as another "bad son" of Hegel, the gleeful *ghostbuster* of the Specter of Communism.

So, the series of lectures constitute, roughly speaking, an analysis of Marxism from the point of view of deconstruction (metaphorized here as "spectrality"), from the point of view of Derrida's "world view" or, rather, from the "safe" perspective of his philosophical grand theories.

When I say "safe", I mean that Derrida is able to "politicize" his thinking without actually letting go of his grandiose philosophical project which - I would claim - is decisively apolitical. But this has a few disturbing consequences: Marxism is given almost *transcendental* justification. On the other hand, Marxism is given *no* justification whatsoever. Marxism simply *is, has been, and will be*. Derrida ends up underlining Marxism, as the destiny of the world, but as the *spectral* destiny - i.e. the always-already-absent transcendental "hauntological" condition of human history. This means that Marxism is not criticized, but also that Marxism is the very form and shape of this (non)critique. So, Marx is put under erasure, without actually erasing his name or effects.

The question then becomes: can such a project of critical reading - offered as the first "truly open" reading of Marx and Marxism - result in anything other than yet another self-uncritical hegemonic forgetfulness of the necessity of *différance*? I think not; I claim that Derrida's "political philosophy" - if such a thing were produced - would be *the end of deconstruction*, the end of philosophy, the end of *différance* because, by necessity, Derridean deconstruction operates on the

level of the conditions of possibility (of the *return* of effects, of the production of *unintended* effects and of the *re-surfacing* of old effects) and not on the level of actualized ("political") choices.

In other words, could Derrida ever make a move to "presence" (to the felt effects of political force) without jeopardizing his whole philosophical strategy of self-detached philosophizing? I claim that he *cannot*, and moreover he *has not* made, nor should make, any such move. In other words, the blurb - the marginal side note, the marketing device of the publishers - constitutes a crime against Derrida, but moreover a case of a cultural and personal misreading of a philosopher's intentions. This means that "Specters of Marx" - as pure philosophy - is not Derrida's "definitive entry into social and political philosophy" (blurb, again). And bless him for it!

Derrida is slightly deluded, however, by the occasional flattering comments by his international associates: "Certain Soviet philosophers told me in Moscow a few years ago: the best translation of *perestroika* was still 'deconstruction.'" (p.89) Is that so? Perhaps such analogies are best seen as incidental, or metaphorical, rather than indicative of any real political effects. But it is, I think, typical of Derrida's style that he would simply *accept* such a statement, just because *it sounds nice*. Likewise, he later "signs" Habermas's proposals for a common European foreign policy - *signs them, co-signs them, accepts them...* provisionally, strategically, yet *in his own name*, without reserve, without input. Derrida likes to sign things that he likes.

The same thing here, in this book of ghosts and goblins: he accepts, signs and co-signs the Communist Manifesto and Gorbachev's Perestroika as projects that are... *well, nice*. These projects, these ghosts, are projects that *do* haunt him and will *continue* to haunt him, as **these nice and homely ghosts that he likes**, his "familiar spirits," these Hamletian father-figures, these ghosts that continue to call his name... Derrida is Marx's last and best son, the true and ultimate communist. The "real" (not-so-dead) father of deconstruction is... Marx! Not Derrida - Derrida is yet to come...

Derrida likes to sign Marx's name, to have *Marx as his nice but nasty father; he likes to kill him!* Derrida sees ghosts, and later "busts" them, but busts them back into existence - always!

### 3. Towards an Appreciation of Derrida as a "Pure" Thinker

Lastly, let us recapitulate and salvage the "truth" and true power of Derrida's quasi-politics.

So, what *is* Derrida's book about, if it's not political philosophy? Well, I claim that "Specters of Marx" is basically an imitative parody of German idealism (just like my paper, the one you are reading, is basically an imitative parody of French post-structuralism).

Despite its Hamletian overtones, the book's rhetoric has a solid basis in a kind of hallucinatory deep analysis of the rhetorics of German idealism as the true source (and here, I think,

Derrida is absolutely spot on) of Marx and Engels's "post-philosophical" materialism. The "Specter" in the title, of course, comes from the opening words of the Communist Manifesto: "a specter is haunting Europe - the specter of Communism" (quoted on page 4). He wonderfully deconstructs the multifaceted meanings of "*Gespenst*", "*Geist*", "*Spuk*" etc... So, Derrida's analysis is a very intriguing web of tracing the influences, rhetorical continuities, ideological debts and political effects of the different philosophers he is analyzing. The way he makes fun of Marx's bitter attack on Max Stirner is a wonderful piece of work, for example.

He traces - admirably I'll say - the intellectual inheritance of communism through the metaphor that "Marx sees ghosts," like Hamlet who saw *his* father's ghost. Marx, says Derrida, was always appropriating things from, and struggling against, his intellectual mentor and "father figure", G.W.F. Hegel, and Hegel's "sons" (Marx's "brothers"), the Young Hegelians, from Ludwig Feuerbach to Max Stirner. I think that Derrida's analysis is very interesting here. He thinks that Marx, despite his statements to the contrary, was still a German idealist. Marx had ghosts of the old generation in his "head." This constitutes the haunting specter of **idealism in materialism** (the never-to-be-exorcized ghostliness of *différance*). So, Derrida is saying that you cannot do politics that is somehow devoid of all contextual determinations and of all past experiences, mistakes and examples. Even the *language* and *rhetoric* of "materialistic" revolution is idealistic (utopian): "The Specter that Marx was talking about then, communism, was there without being there. It was not yet there. It will never be there. There is no Dasein of the Specter, but there is no Dasein without the uncanniness, without the strange familiarity (*Unheimlichkeit*) of some specter." (p.100)

But this sort of transcendental, idealistic, phenomenological, literary critical, rhetorical, "pleasurable" deconstruction of Marxist rhetoric should not be confused with any "political philosophical" intervention into the history of philosophy. Derrida is simply being Derrida!

Derrida was, and remains, a thinker *par excellence* of pure forms, signs, categories, shapes, lineages and other "traces" and "iterations" that appear, disappear and reappear in the history of philosophy as presences, differences and absences. Even when he takes Marx as his analytical "Other", he doesn't concern himself with history as *empiricism*, or politics as *action*. No: for Derrida, history is constituted by *the traces of ideas* and politics by the politics of *ghosts*. In short, Derrida's politics (at least in this book) are only *hinted at*, not sketched out. Derrida is **not** a political thinker, but a thinker *in the vicinity* of politics: an absent-minded thinker that goes through the maze and labyrinth of politics with his eyes fixated into the skies and his mind elsewhere.

To put it bluntly, Derrida takes the long history of politics into his mouth, swallows it whole, and spits it out as demons, angels and ghosts.

#### 4. Conclusion and Communism (will never come but are always-already there)

I have only offered a modest criticism of Derrida, in the form of a deconstructive analysis that has attempted to show that 1) Derrida is not a political philosopher, 2) Derrida *should* not be read as a political philosopher, and that 3) Derrida, like Marx and Stirner, has ghosts in his head and is a bit "crazy" that way. Well, at least there is method to his madness, a spectral method of haunting.

The biggest fault that I can find in Derrida's text is the **uncritical appropriation** of a certain Marxist *Weltanschauung* that Derrida is unable or unwilling to take up to task and deconstruct in his analysis. Clearly, Derrida cannot decide whether or not to embrace Marx:

*"Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism. There is, then **this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction...**" (p. 92; italics in the original, bolds are mine)*

*"What is certain is that **I am not a Marxist**" (p. 88, my emphasis).*

*"At least provisionally, we are placing our trust, in fact, in this form of critical analysis **we have inherited from Marxism**" (p. 55, my emphasis).*

So, deconstruction is an "attempted radicalization of Marxism" but Derrida is "not a Marxist"?

Maybe I'm just a bit naïve or stupid, but it seems like Derrida is being uncritical - both of himself, and of Marx. At the very least, we can say that the style of Derrida's philosophy is ill-suited to produce measurable political effects, and perhaps we should be thankful that this is so.

*(PS. I will confess that in the course of reading the book, lecturing about the book, and writing this article, I have been personally haunted by the ghost of Derrida... I have done my best to do away with him, to get rid of him, to exorcise him, to de-spiritualize and de-spectralize the legacy of deconstruction in my own thinking. I have done so in order to justify my continual fascination with Derrida, and to salvage him from the returning specter of politics, from that cold determination of history that promises "an end of history" - to salvage his ghost from the attack of the ghost busters.)*

Bibliography: Derrida, Jacques: "Specters of Marx", 1994. Routledge: New York & London.