

## The Anachronism of Hope: The ‘to-come’ in post-horizonal times

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Amidst the triumphalism of the West after the fall of the Soviet Union, Derrida contextualised his reading of Marx and Marxism with the statement: ‘[t]he world is going badly, the picture is bleak, one could say almost black... A black picture on a blackboard’ (1994: 97). He fleshed out this claim with a list of ten plagues aimed squarely at the self-congratulatory moment encapsulated by Fukuyama’s *End of History*. Deriding the latter as a ‘tiresome anachronism’, Derrida noted that its proponents, seemingly content to ‘puff out their chests with the good conscience of capitalism, [and] liberalism’, had ‘arrived late to the apocalypse’ (1994: 17). With an incredulity as pertinent today as it was in 1994, he asked: ‘[w]hat cynicism of good conscience, what manic disavowal could cause someone to write, if not believe, that “everything that stood in the way of the reciprocal recognition of human dignity, always and everywhere, has been refuted and buried by history”?’ (1994: 97-8, citing Allan Bloom). The central task of *Spectres of Marx* was thus to trace the Marxian inheritances by means of which this bleak era might be navigated, and its evangelical champions challenged. Twenty-five years later, as the world has deteriorated further and liberal triumphalism has given way to anxiety, unrest, and emergency - with even the likes of *The Economist* asking “was Marx right?” – we might fruitfully look to Derrida with the same intent.

Contemporary readers cannot fail to recognise Derrida’s prescience in rehabilitating Marx – or at least Marx’s ghosts. But it also appears that Derrida chose the *wrong* Marx: after the financial crisis, it is the critique of capital – Marx’s searing analysis of the capitalist mode of production’s tendency towards crisis and failing profitability – that has witnessed a resurgence. Derrida, by contrast, conjures the eschatological Marx of the *Communist Manifesto* and *The German Ideology*, who remains out of fashion even amongst Marxists. Yet a closer reading reveals so much that is of urgent and contemporary relevance, if we take the ‘spectre’ to be more than an illustrative motif. Derrida draws extensively on Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ to locate the power of Marx to haunt the present in a transgression; specifically, Marx’s use of idealism to (re)animate his historical materialism. As Benjamin explains, in Marx thought ‘[t]he puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight’ (1999: 245). We have discussed this theological inheritance, which Marx acquires through Hegel, elsewhere (Hirst 2013; Houseman 2013; see also Löwith 1949; and Taubes 2009). Through his ‘hauntology’, however, Derrida is able to recognise the grammar of this inheritance as less a question of Judeo-Christian eschatology than Marx’s awkward – or maybe even *playful* – relationship with the actual/ideal binary.

In *Spectres of Marx*, communism acquires its power in the bourgeois present as a persistent irritant that calls into question capitalism’s claims to justice and victory, through a contradictory and deeply theatrical *temporality*, in which communism haunts from the future (1994: 2-3, 10-21). This ‘hauntology’, as Benjamin Noys notes, ‘rests in the oddly meta-ontological position of that which pre-emptively ruins the security and primacy of ontology by forcing it to open to the event’ (2012:

27). The 'effectivity' of communism, and by extension the eschatological Marx, is for Derrida dependent on this spectral disorganisation of the temporal order (the 'chain of presents'): 'the logic of the ghost ... points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence)' (1994: 78). Communism incarnated - so-called 'actually existing communism' - therefore, necessarily forfeits this spectral power. Derrida's exegesis of Marx thus seeks to maintain the suspension of the actual/ideal binary – a suspension that the figure of the spectre produces. Doing so allows Derrida to make sense of the 'irreducible heterogeneity' (1994: 10) of Marx's work, and, following Blanchot, defend it against those who 'in the name of Science or Theory as Science, had attempted to unify or to purify the 'good' text of Marx' (1994: 10). Marx's enduring power, and our responsibility to our Marxist inheritance, for Derrida, flows from the former's disruptive and subversive transgression of the actual/ideal binary. This transgression can be seen for instance Marx's historiography, in which the free, ideal, self-conscious society is simultaneously a *mechanical consequence* of a teleological history composed of class antagonism, and at the same time the work of human revolutionary agency (to which he devoted himself to the point of infamy, financial ruin and ill health). This transgression runs through the other Marx, too: his critique of political economy is a materialist account of economic relations, but where commodity fetishism is a necessary explanatory ingredient. For Derrida, to close these spectral contradictions, to *decide* that Marx is an economist or a humanist, a scientist or a philosopher, is to surrender the power of his thought – a risk Marx himself invites, for instance in his critique of Hegel and Stirner (1994: 150-155).

If Derrida locates Marx's power in the post-Cold War years as flowing from his transgression of the actual/ideal binary, it is because he identifies in that period a fixation with actuality and effectivity. The various discussions in *Spectres of Marx* of Fukuyama's *End of History* point to this: the claim that the *ideal* has finally become the *actual* is really the *actual's* claim to being *ideal*. In Derrida's words, in the triumphalist mode

[o]n the one hand, the gospel of politico-economic liberalism needs the event of the good news that consists in what has putatively *actually* happened... [H]owever since, *on the other hand*, actual history and so many other realities that have an empirical appearance contradict this advent of the perfect liberal democracy, one must at the same time pose this perfection as simply a regulating and trans-historical ideal. Depending on how it works to his advantage and serves his thesis, Fukuyama defines liberal democracy here as an actual reality and there as a simple ideal (1994: 78).

Fukuyama's opportunistic deployment of the actual/ideal binary to serve his own rhetorical purposes is, as Derrida notes, clear. However, his framing of the actual as ideal is *haunted* by its manifest untruth, as Derrida set out in his ten 'plagues' (1994: 100-104), and it is precisely this haunting that animates the mania, anxiety, and darkness that Derrida reads behind the veil of liberal triumphalism. In light of this, in an era in which positivist empiricism, hard-headed business rationality, neoliberal economics, and liberal-democratic institutions proclaimed their objective and proven superiority over other 'contenders', the power of Marx's spectral logic is, for Derrida, *activated* rather than obviated. Marx's critical materialism, ostensibly 'scientific' anti-idealism, and famous disdain for utopian thinking gives his work a purchase that those easily dismissed as dreamers and fantasists lack. But it is the spectral element in his thought – which smuggles into the realm of actuality something heterogeneous to it: the promise and *hope* of something different – which offers an antidote to the oppressive actuality of the neoliberal moment.

Returning to *Spectres of Marx* today, though, we must ask if this antidote – the spectral hope of communism, or perhaps simply the spectre of hope as such – is adequate to the current poisons. After the 2008 financial crisis, it is no longer counter-intuitive to affirm, as Derrida did in 1994, the potency of Marx, though it is not the spectral or even eschatological Marx that is enjoying a resurgence but rather the materialist prophet of capitalism's tendency towards crisis. Liberal triumphalism has given way to increasing polarisation as electorates around the world abandon business-as-usual centrism in favour of various stripes of nationalism and outright fascism, at the same time as a resurgence and rebranding of socialism is in evidence, even in the US. Far from being a preserve of philosophy, apocalyptic imaginaries have become a mainstay of Hollywood and small screen alike. This apocalyptic pessimism is presciently prefigured in *Spectres of Marx*. As Antonio Negri commented in 1999, '[t]here's something that's exhausted in these pages, like the shadow of that melancholic libertinism when, at the end of another counter-revolutionary age, men who were still free testified in refusal to the Counter-Reformation and awaited the martyrdom of the Inquisition' (cited in Noys 2012: 43). In Derrida's own words, 'never, never in history, has the horizon of the thing whose survival is at stake (namely, all the old models of the capitalist and liberal world) been as dark, threatening, and threatened' (1994: 65). Indeed, in this abject epoch, time itself is, according to Derrida, out of joint. He asks: 'what happens when time itself gets "out of joint," disjointed, disadjusted, disharmonic, discorded, or unjust? *Ana-chronique?*' (1994: 25).

Despite this apocalyptic thread, however, read today *Spectres of Marx* seems imbued with an insistent, if ethereal, optimism. In spite of, or in response to, the irreducible bleakness of the post-Cold War world, Derrida asked: 'can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would be finally removed from the fatality of vengeance?' (1994: 25). This optimism took the form, as this suggests, of a messianic promise of something different to come. Purged of an arrivant, even of the expectation of an arrivant, Derrida's was a despairing messianism. He explains: 'without this latter despair and if one could *count* on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program... [T]his despairing messianism has a curious taste, a taste of death' (1994: 212). Here, as elsewhere, Derrida is clear that such a 'to come' refers not to any actually existing future present, but rather to the structure of faith in a justice always deferred in temporal terms. And yet, this messianism has the structure of a promise, of the horizon. This vision leans towards the future, 'deferring not what it affirms but deferring just *so as to* affirm, to affirm *justly*, so as to have the power (a power without power) to affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself' (1994: 19). In an always-deferred future to come, then, something is affirmed. As this suggests, and as Noys deftly argues, visible in *Spectres of Marx* is a 'weak affirmationism'. Derrida explains: it is 'a matter of linking an affirmation (in particular a political one), *if there is any*, to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the *perhaps*' (1994: 42). To this extent the messianic, Derrida claims, 'is always revolutionary. It has to be' (1994: 211). As horizontal hope, the future haunts the present, insisting on the question of 'what can be, the eventual disruption and opening of the living present to a future 'to come'. Hauntology inscribes the imminent necessity of events that will disrupt the "hell of the same"' (Noys 2012: 45, citing Baudrillard).

Indeed, and more concretely, Derrida noted in *Spectres of Marx* that signs of positive change were already in evidence, specifically in the form of a New International. This 'link of affinity, suffering, and hope', he claimed, would involve 'a profound transformation, projected over a long term, of international law, of its concepts, and its field of intervention.' We have, he continued, 'more than one sign of it' (1994: 105-6). As Noys echoes, in 1994 'Derrida insisted, with some justification given the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement, that the 'New International' 'is already a reality'. However, in the current time, that reality, he continues, has 'entered a state of

routinisation and seeming decline, which again raises the question of Derrida's tendency to futural invocations of agency' (Noys 2012: 42). This decline - manifest in current the rise of the far right, ecological emergency, and the global proliferation of affronts to human and civil rights – forces us to ask whether Derrida's promise of the future-to-come, understood not as a future reality yet to arrive but rather *as the structure and possibility of hope itself*, has been broken. In a world which feels increasingly *horizonless*, what place can the 'to come' have? In post-horizonal times, has hope itself become an anachronism?

The idea of the disappearance of a horizon is not new, from Adorno's 1956 claim that 'for the first time we live in a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011: 108) to the Sex Pistols' 1977 declaration of there being No Future. But within the framework of *Spectres of Marx*, we can trace the specific configuration in which the horizon Derrida articulated no longer quite makes sense. Hope, in the form of Marx's eschatological spectre, receives its potency from a moment of idealism smuggled into an otherwise deeply materialist project – the dwarf behind the automaton – which aimed to crack open capitalist political economy not from an external moral viewpoint but through a rigorous and *immanent* critique (Bonefeld 2001). Marx's potency as a challenge to an eternal bourgeois society consists in his agreement with its anti-metaphysical, anti-romantic, anti-utopian self-image. It participates, albeit critically, in positivism's obsession with the actual, the injunction to value-freedom which itself belongs to bourgeois rationality's fixation with the self-interested, calculating individual. *Das Kapital* is difficult to dismiss as the work of a dreamer. But, as Derrida uncovers, a purely rationalist Marx surrenders that power; Marx's materialism gives him the power to haunt the sterile actuality of the bourgeois present, but it is the moment of idealism – eschatological communism – that does the haunting. The *timeliness* of Marx's spectres, then, is indexed to the cult of actuality, of materialistic rationality, that characterised bourgeois society. This directs us to paying greater attention to what has changed since the early 1990s; specifically a shift away from actuality as opposed to the ideal, and towards a blurring of the two poles that destabilises and perhaps obviates the subversive power of Marx's transgression and therefore, maybe, even the possibility of spectral haunting that Derrida derives from it.

Spurred especially by the internet, consumer society has shifted in various ways away from the rational transactions of *homo oeconomicus*. Advertisers increasingly sell lifestyle aspirations in the form of 'content marketing' rather than specific products, while social media has invited the rise and commodification of user-generated content, culminating in the phenomenon of on-brand 'influencers' who make a living through the hybridisation of stealth marketing and social communication. As powerful voices become ever more brazen in their disdain for even the illusion of open and honest rational discourse, with demonstrable hypocrisy seeming no longer a barrier to success (electoral or otherwise), the traditional liberal mechanisms for holding such voices to account are subsumed – either drowned out or transformed by – the free flow of misinformation and unverified 'news'. As Derrida prophetically noted,

[e]lectorate representativity or parliamentary life is not only distorted, as was always the case, by a great number of socio-economic mechanisms, but it is exercised with more and more difficulty in a public space profoundly upset by tele-techno-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication, by the devices and the speed of forces represented by the latter, but also and consequently by the new modes of appropriation they put to work, by the new structure of the event and of its spectrality that they *produce* (both invent *and* bring up to date, inaugurate *and* reveal, cause to come about *and* bring up to light *at the same time, there where they were already there without being there*: it is the

relation of the concept of *production* to the ghost that is in question here). This transformation does not affect only facts but the concept of such 'facts' (1994: 98).

It is emphatically not our intent to lament the loss of a fictional golden age of truth and integrity, but rather to trace the disintegration of the constellation of interrelated binaries that surround and sustain the relationship between the actual and the ideal. It is not hard to perceive a widespread anxiety that everything is now fake, that the actual has become entirely obscured by the simulations and misdirections of a consumer culture growing exponentially more digital by the day. If the spectral power of Marx, of communism to-come, originates in historical materialism's smuggling of the *ideal* into a social universe otherwise beholden to relentless *actuality*, then it is plausible that this power has been cancelled and erased by a present in which the architecture of actuality – presence, objectivity, rationality, exchange of equivalents, scientific predictability – makes increasingly less sense. The fugitive and delicate messianic hope that Derrida excavates from Marx's spectres, which was a powerful antidote to the Fukuyaman moment, may well have lost its purchase.

As appealing as Derrida's vision of the 'to come' may be, it is fundamentally dependent upon the figure of the horizon, of an affective bond with the possibility of something beyond or other than that which is. Read in the current moment, one is struck by the difficulty of conjuring such a horizon. For many, the glimmer which feeds the sense of connection, promise, hope, seems dimmer now than it was when *Spectres of Marx* was published. Framed in terms of *differance*, one might say that while the *differing* element holds firm today, the temporal *deferring* is compromised because the horizon upon which it depends is so blurred by digital consumer culture's bizarre temporality, stuck in a moment of permanent crisis where the constant exhortation to 'follow your dreams' coexists with an apocalyptic sense of imminent and immanent decay. As Noys notes, 'Derrida's tendency to futural invocations of agency', his 'temporal wavering' (2012: 42-4), presupposes a link to the 'to come' which the current political enclosures appear to have blocked. The certain idea of justice in *Spectres of Marx*, differed and deferred, relies on an eschatological or messianic promise is at present hard to conjure. Without a capacity to hold fast to the promise of the 'to come', the future appears to be qualitatively cancelled, a quantitative lingering in broken time remaining in its stead. Under such conditions, Marx is dead and we have become the spectres. Twenty-five years after the publication of *Spectres of Marx*, then, the critical task must be to learn a politics of transformation, resistance, and activation no longer tied to deferrals and promises; a radicalism of and for ghosts.

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