

The Hypothesis, the Context, the Messianic, the Political, the Economic, the Technological*

On Derrida's Specters of Marx

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»I once said, perhaps rightly: The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes, but spirits will hover over the ashes.«

Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

To begin with, let us try to be quite clear about what Derrida is affirming in *Specters of Marx* (SdM¹). Although he claims from the beginning to the end of SdM that Marxism is *plus d'un* (both more than one and no longer one), and that deconstruction has neither been Marxist nor non-Marxist (SdM 126-7/75), and that, as Marx said before him, »What is certain is that I am not a Marxist« (SdM 145/88), Derrida's affirmation in this text is the following:

»Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is also to say in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism.« (SdM 151/92)

Although Derrida has understandable reservations about the felicity of the word 'radicalization', he elsewhere speaks, to use another word he has problematized, of the *position* (SdM 92/53) he is going to defend in terms of assuming the Marxist heritage, »one must (*il faut* – with all the force that the *il faut* commands in a whole series of Derrida's texts, s.c.) assume the heritage of Marxism...« (SdM 93/54).

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¹ References to SdM will be given to the pagination of the French Text (Galilée, Paris, 1993) followed by a reference to the extremely accurate English translation (trans. P. Kamuf, Routledge, London and New York, 1994).

Deconstruction is marxism, it would seem. A formula that we will have to put alongside Derrida's other hyperbolic formulations, that »deconstruction is justice«, or, more awkwardly, »America is deconstruction«². I don't know how shocking this identification of deconstruction with Marxism might appear. To Derrida-watchers it shouldn't exactly come as news, particularly regarding a number of elements in his career: his early interest in Tran Duc Thao's attempted reconciliation of phenomenology and dialectical materialism, his radicalisation of the thought of economy from his earliest work, particularly in his essay on Bataille, and his revealing comments on Marxism during the 'Political Seminar' of *Les fins de l'homme*³. However, if deconstruction is a certain reception, continuation and continued radicalization of the Marxist heritage, then we are still no closer understanding what this might mean. To do this I would like to begin by briefly discussing *the hypothesis* advanced in SdM and making a couple of remarks about *the context* for the book. I will then go on to discuss what I see as the central theme of SdM: *the messianic*. As a way of unpacking this theme, I will address a number of sub-themes in SdM: the injunction of *différance*, democracy to come (*la démocratie à venir*), justice, religion and the *es spukt* (it spooks). As a consequence of this discussion, I would like to turn to the theme of *the political* and address the sub-themes of hegemony, the decision and the New International. I conclude, more speculatively, with brief discussions of two more themes: *the economic*, specifically the relation of deconstruction to capitalism, and *the technological*, where I focus on some of Derrida's hints on the relation of spectrality to technicity and try to approach Derrida as a thinker of originary technicity.

² Derrida momentarily ventures this hypothesis in *Mémoires for Paul de Man* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p. 18) before quickly dismissing it. As Stanley Cavell points out, America is, »the anti-Marxist country« (*Must We Mean What We Say*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 345-46). But if America were deconstruction, then what spirit of Marxism would haunt it? I am referring to work in preparation on Cavell and in particular to his extraordinary discussion of the Marx Brothers in 'Nothing Goes Without Saying' (*London Review of Books*, 6 January, 1994, pp. 3-5), where, in the final paragraph, and in a clear allusion to Derrida, Cavell suggests that, better even than Emerson or Thoreau, access to »that tangle of American culture« might best be had by »a few days immersion in half a dozen Marx Brother's films«. What is the specter of Marx for America? Is it Karl-o or Groucho?

³ On the influence of Tran Duc Thao's *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (Editions Minh-Tan, Paris, 1951), see Derrida's remarks in an interview with *Le Monde* in 1982 (*Entretiens avec 'Le Monde'* [Editions la découverte, Paris, 1984], p. 79); and remarks in the 'Avertissement' to *Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1990), p. vii. On economy, see 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A Bass (Routledge, London and New York, 1978), pp. 251-77. On politics, see *Les fins de l'homme. A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Galilée, Paris, 1981), p. 526-27.

The Hypothesis

Derrida's hypothesis in SdM has a structure that will be extremely familiar to readers of his work. He spells it out schematically in the concluding pages of the text,

»On the one hand (D'une part), Marx insists on respecting the originality and the proper efficacy, the autonomization and automatization of ideality as finite-infinite processes of *différance* (phantomatic, fantastic, fetishistic, or ideological)...But, on the other hand (d'autre part)...Marx continues to want to ground his critique of his exorcism of the spectral simulacrum in an ontology. It is a – critical, but pre-deconstructive – ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity. This critical ontology means to deploy the possibility of dissipating the phantom, let us venture to say again of conjuring it away as the representative consciousness of the subject, and of bringing this representation back to the world of labor, production and exchange, so as to reduce it to its conditions. Pre-deconstructive here does not mean false, unnecessary, or illusory.« (SdM 269/170)

D'une part... d'autre part – this is the double gesture, the rhythm of double or what I call elsewhere *clôtural* reading that has haunted Derrida's work since the 1960's, of which the examples are legion, and which is the most distinctive motif of deconstruction as a way of reading⁴. As always, Derrida reads with two hands, following assiduously and indefatigably the unstable limit that divides what we might call the logic of a text, its fundamentally aporetic or undecidable basic concepts and distinctions, from the intentions that attempt to govern that text, the author-ity that tries dissolve or control those aporias. As is so often the case, Derrida focuses this double gesture in the ambivalent usage of a specific word by the author he is considering, in this case *Spectre*, *Gespenst*. Previous examples, of course, are *Geist* in Heidegger, *pharmakon* in Plato, *supplément* in Rousseau, and so on. So, at the formal level at least, SdM »c'est du bon Derrida, n'est-ce pas?« Always the same, yet always different in each particular instance of reading; a singular event and the eternal return of the same. But, after all, could we or should we expect Derrida not to be Derrida?

However, to operate strategically with a pre-deconstructive distinction, if the double gesture gives us the *form* of Derrida's reading of Marx, then what of the *content* to his hypothesis? To introduce detail that will only become clear later on, the basic claim that Derrida makes is that, on the one hand, Marx respects the spectrality of *différance* at the basis of any conceptual order, political regime or mode of economic organization. For Derrida, this is exem-

⁴ See *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992), pp. 20-31 & 88-97.

plified in a number of specific ways: in Marx's treatment of technology and the media, his thinking of the spectrality of communism («A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism»), and the spectrality of capital itself: the fetish character of the commodity form, the non-phenomenologizable mystery of exchange value, and the subtle evasiveness and tendency-to-invisibility of ideology. This leads Derrida to one side of his hypothesis, that the figure of the spectre or phantom is not just one figure amongst others in Marx's text, it is rather «la figure cachée de toutes les figures» (SdM 194/120). The basic task of Derrida's reading in SdM is to survey this *phantomachia perites ousias* that runs through Marx's texts, which is traced through a partial reading of the *Communist Manifesto*, the Second Chapter of Volume I of *Capital* and, most impressively, a reading of Marx's critique of Stirner in *The German Ideology*.

This leads Derrida to the claim that there is, to use his neologism, a *hantologie* in Marx's text, a certain irreducible spectrality and *différance* at work, a logic of haunting that, for Derrida, is the condition of possibility and impossibility of any conceptual order⁵. One of the crucial distinctions in SdM turns, characteristically for Derrida, on a homonym, namely the difference between *ontologie* and *hantologie*, a difference that can only be marked grammatically in writing, that by-passes phoneticization. I will specify ontology in a moment, but let it be noted that Derrida's claim early in the book is that this *hantologie* is not only more powerful and ample than any ontology or thinking of Being, i.e. Heidegger's, but contains within it, as a secondary effect, any eschatology or teleology linked to such ontology, whether that be an eschatology of Being, of class struggle, of divine revelation, or whatever (SdM 31/10). In a gesture that will be familiar to Derrida-watchers, *ontologie* is an apocalyptic discourse on or of the end, whereas *hantologie* is a discourse on the end of the end⁶.

Marx is therefore, according to Derrida, a *hantological* thinker. This is what his texts *say*. This is the logic that governs them, that makes them possible, *despite themselves*. However, following the other side of the double gesture – *d'autre part* – if Marx's texts respect a logic of spectrality that is, as Derrida implies in the above quote, deconstructive, then, as Derrida makes crystal clear in his reading of the critique of Stirner in *The German Ideology*, Marx also wanted to be rid of phantoms and spectres. Of course, Marx shares this tendency with the Young Hegelians (Bauer, Feuerbach, Stirner) – and, I would claim, with Hegel himself – insofar as they wanted to free philosophy and consciousness of the illusions to which it had subjected itself in history, in

⁵ On *hantologie*, see SdM 31, 89 & 255/10, 51, 161.

⁶ Cf. 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy', trans. J.P. Leavey, *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol.6, No.2 (1984), pp. 3-37.

particular the illusory spectrality of religion. However, as is well known, the young Marx's problem with the Young Hegelians was that they concerned themselves with 'German philosophy and not German reality', and restricted their critique of spectrality to the realm of consciousness and its objects. However, Marx's discourse was not only directed against the spectrality and *Vorstellungsdenken* of the Young Hegelians, but also against the spectre of ideology, that is, »the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical«⁷ forms through which the ideas of the hegemonic class become the ideas of the epoch, and also against the spectrality of bourgeois economy characterized by the fetish character of the commodity form and the phantom nature of exchange value.

Furthermore, Marx wanted to found his critique of spectrality on what Derrida refers to as an *ontology*, which is critical but pre-deconstructive. Why pre-deconstructive? Because, to echo Derrida's words, it is a critique of political economy that has as its horizon or foundation a conception of presence as effective reality or objectivity, what Derrida elsewhere refers to as the living present of life, praxis, production and labour. The unstable limit that Marx's text criss-crosses at various points is that between the deconstructive and the pre-deconstructive, between *hantologie* and *ontologie*. Thus, the general hypothesis here is that Marx's analysis and critique of the Young Hegelians, of the German Ideology, and of bourgeois political economy is deconstructive and *hantological*, but it becomes pre-deconstructive when that critique is referred to or founded upon an ontology of presence, effectivity, praxis and objectivity. Derrida's characteristically quasi-transcendental claim is that *hantologie* is the condition of possibility for *ontologie*, that is, although Marx makes a decision to refer the critique of capital to an ontology of presence, this decision cannot repress what we might call the *spectral drive* or *différance* which would ruin any such ontology *avant la lettre*. Thus, although Derrida is reading with two hands, his reading is not even-handed, he is not offering an even choice between *hantologie* and *ontologie*, rather he is showing how this ambivalence is structured or staged in Marx's text, but *hantologie* has theoretical priority, it is from this spectral drive that something like thought is born (SdM 260/165)

(I have a parenthetical worry here about what counts as Marx's ontology: Derrida refers to an ontology of presence in Marx but how are we to understand this? I take it that Marx's 'ontology' is located in what, at the beginning of *The German Ideology*, he refers to as the »presuppositions« of his approach, namely that »we begin with real individuals, together with their actions and

⁷ Cf. 'Preface to a *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*', *Marx/Engels Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1968), p. 182.

the material conditions of life, those in which they find themselves, as well as those which they have created through their own efforts«⁸. That is, we begin with an insight into the fundamentality of the social production of life – »As individuals express their life so they are« – in terms of a dialectic between individual forces of production and the arrangement of the relations of production into which those forces are born, and which constitutes the economic structure of society. I take it that Marx's ontology is located in his insight into the dialectic of forces and relations of production, which generates both the materialist conception of history and an agenda for political action, let's call it communism. Two thoughts on this: is this an ontology? To my knowledge, Marx doesn't use this word in this sense and I imagine that many scholars of Marx would be suspicious of this terminology. For example, J. O'Malley in his recent helpful edition of Marx's *Early Political Writings* calls this 'ontology' a »materialist guideline«⁹. Thus, the notion of ontology here would seem to presuppose the hermeneutic grid of a Heideggerian conception of metaphysics which is not, as Derrida has shown better than anyone, exempt from deconstruction. Secondly, and more importantly, if the elements of Marx's 'ontology' are somehow 'pre-deconstructive', then what does this mean? Derrida is careful to point out in the above quote that pre-deconstructive does not mean »false, unnecessary or illusory«, but presumably neither does it mean 'true, necessary or real'. If the elements of Marx's 'ontology' are pre-deconstructive, then what remains that we might call (pre-deconstructively) *substantive* or at the level of *content* in a deconstructive Marxism? What force does Marxism retain if we set to one side its materialist account of life, production, praxis and history? I completely agree with Derrida that there are certain ontologies that we can do without, for example the Marxist-Leninist economic determinism of dialectical materialism, and we must constantly resist the temptation to ossification and dogmatism into which Marx's discourse can fall, but does this qualification disqualify all ontologies? Can we do without ontology or, better, an ontological *moment* if we are Marxists, even deconstructive Marxists? And what remains of Marxism when we set to one side this ontological baggage? I will return to this question below in my discussion of the political.¹⁰

⁸ *The German Ideology* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970), p. 42.

⁹ (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), p. xv.

¹⁰ A permanent risk of SdM, I feel, is its tendency to attempt to reinvent the wheel with respect to Marxism by ignoring the attempts, within the Marxist philosophical tradition itself, to refine and revise Marx's work and to save it from its theoretical and practical distortions, whether we think here of Lukacs, Gramsci, or Adorno and Horkheimer. Might we not ascribe this tendency to what one might call an Althusserian 'tic' in SdM (Althusser is clearly a specter throughout this text, SdM 147/89), that is, that one can bracket out the previous history of Marxist philosophy insofar as that has somehow been contaminated by »la grande dérive soviétique« and return to Marx's text, and, literally, *lire le Capital*. The only real exception to this rule is Benjamin, who

The Context

However, if Derrida's hypothesis in SdM claims a theoretical argument for the primacy of spectrality, then is this Derrida's only reason for writing SdM? Is there not, to use another pre-deconstructive paleonym, a *normative* claim running through SdM which allows us to establish something like the *context* for this text. Why read Marx now?

In the paragraph that follows the statement of the hypothesis that we have been commenting on, Derrida makes the following remark,

»That the ontological and the critical are pre-deconstructive, has political consequences that are perhaps not negligible. And they are doubtless not negligible, to say it too quickly here, as concerns the concept of the political, as concerns the political itself.« (SdM 270/170-71)

To express a thought telegraphically and in a way that I will try to make good below, the normative drive of SdM, and what I find so impressive about the text – so urgent and so clear – is its attempt at a politicization or, better, re-politicization (SdM 144/87) of deconstruction, an attempted reinvention of the political in terms of a Marxist *hantologie*. But what is Derrida arguing against? That is, what are the political consequences of a pre-deconstructive ontology and critique? They are twofold, or rather there are at least two elements to the context for SdM, one within Marxism, one outside of Marxism, the latter being much more important for Derrida. What they have in common is a refusal of spectrality.

1. Within Marxism, a strong point of Derrida's reading is the link he draws between what he rather euphemistically calls »the totalitarian heritage of Marx's thought« (SdM 170/104) and the refusal of spectrality. Totalitarianism, or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'immanentism', in all its recent and less-recent guises, is a political form of society governed by a logic of identification, where 'everything is political' that is, where all areas of social life are claimed to represent incarnate power: the proletariat is identified with the people, the party with the proletariat, the politburo with the party, the leader with the politburo, and so on. Totalitarianism is the phantasy of a completed and transparent social order, a unified people among whom difference or social division is denied. In terms of SdM, totalitarianism is premised upon a

is a decisive specter in SdM. But why is Benjamin accorded this unique state of exception? For the most part, Derrida's scholarly sources on Marx (excluding references to external classical sources, like Freud and Heidegger) are exclusively French – Etienne Balibar is treated very well, Michel Henry less so, and Blanchot's piece 'Les trois paroles de Marx' is the intellectual framework for Chapter 1. Indeed, SdM could be seen as a contemporary rewriting of Blanchot's essay, particularly if we take seriously Derrida's extremely astute remarks on the analogies between the 1950's 'end of ideology' thesis and the 1989 'end of history' thesis.

refusal of spectrality, it is, as Derrida puts it, a »panic before the phantom in general«, that is, before something which escapes, transcends and returns to haunt the social order. Although totalitarianism is a grotesque distortion of Marx's thinking, particularly of what I would see as its fundamentally democratic ethos (which is, of course, powerfully and rightly critical of the formalism of bourgeois liberal democracy, of the latter's attempt to have political equality without economic equality), it is clear how totalitarianism inherits a certain conception of 'the end to politics within Marx's text, what he called the abolition of the state and which Engels referred to as its 'withering away'. Against the troubling tendency to subordinate the political to the socio-economic within Marx's 'ontology', which was transformed into the economism of the Second International, Derrida's argument for a logic of spectrality within Marxism can be linked to the claim for the irreducibility of the political understood as that moment where the sedimented meanings of the socio-economic are contested. Following Ernesto Laclau's radicalization of Gramsci, one might link the logic of spectrality to the logic of hegemony; that is, if one renounces – as one must – the communist eschatological 'a-theodicy' of the economic contradictions of capitalism inevitably culminating in revolution, then politics and politico-cultural-ideological hegemonization is indispensable to the possibility of radical change. I will come back to this below¹¹.

2. Outside of Marxism, and here we come to the real context for SdM, if there is a refusal of spectrality within totalitarianism, then there is an equal refusal of it in that anti-Marxist consensus that celebrates the 'collapse of communism' in terms of the uncontested triumph of liberal democracy. The context for SdM is the hegemony of the teleological discourse on the death or end of Marxism, which, as I mentioned above, Derrida rightly sees with a sense of *déjà vu*, as a rehearsal of the 1950's end of ideology thesis. Derrida detects a three-fold thread to this hegemony in the recent behaviour of the political

¹¹ Laclau has responded to the reading of *Specters of Marx* attempted here in his review essay 'The Time is Out of Joint', to appear in *Diacritics*, which offers some important critical clarification of Derrida's arguments, particularly on the question of necessity for discourses of incarnation and the irreducible teleology of the classical discourse of emancipation that Derrida supposedly wants to endorse. However, Laclau is unconvinced of the necessity for the move from a notion of messianic promise to an ethico-political injunction in the way I develop it in the present essay and in my other work. For Laclau, no ethical injunction of a Levinasian kind flows from undecidability and democratic politics does not need to be anchored in such an injunction. He concludes by focussing what he sees as an ambiguity in Derrida's work, between undecidability as the terrain of radicalization of the decision and undecidability as the source of an ethical injunction. If this is indeed an ambiguity in Derrida (and I am not wholly convinced of this), then Laclau and I stand at opposing poles of this ambiguity. However, my ambition in the discussion of the political given below is to show how these two poles can enter into some form of productive tension.

class, the media and intellectuals (SdM 91-92/52-53). As an example of this anti-Marxist hegemony, Derrida chooses Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, which is the focus of the engaging second chapter to SdM. Derrida quite rightly and very persuasively places Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis in the tradition of American Straussianism continued by Fukuyama's teacher, Allan Bloom, and going back, via Leo Strauss, to Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. In a way that recalls Derrida's discussion of an apocalyptic tone in philosophy, he shows how Fukuyama's neo-liberal euphoria of the end of history is essentially a Hegelian-Kojévian theodicy where liberal democracy, allegedly rooted in a recognition of the dignity of human beings and economic effectivity, is the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. Thus, the end of history would be the final eradication of the spectre of communism and the universal *incarnation* of liberal democracy. Thus, Fukuyama opposes the spectre of Marxism with a certain Hegelian/Kojévian Christian logic of incarnation as the end of history.

Although seemingly diametrically opposed, both elements of the context for SdM (and these two elements by no means exhaust its context) follow a logic that is premised upon a refusal of spectrality; they are both discourses on and of the end: apocalyptic discourses. We could go further and claim that both discourses are *Christian* in Hegel's sense of the word, that is, discourses of *incarnation*¹² and *revelation*, ultimately the incarnation of community, absolute knowing as community, the system as socio-political comedy (of course, there are other, and perhaps more persuasive, readings of Hegel than the *comic* reading). This thought can be linked to an opposition that runs throughout SdM, and which is particularly important in the final chapter, between spectrality and *phenomenology*. The specter is precisely that which refuses phenomenologization, that retreats before the gaze that tries to see it, like the ghost of Hamlet's father. The specter is the apparition of the inapparent¹³. Phenomenology is here conceived in its Hegelian rather than Husserlian sense¹⁴, as that

¹² On incarnation, see Laclau 'The Time is Out of Joint', op. cit.

¹³ Which still leaves open the question of whether there can be a phenomenology of spectrality, a phenomenology of the inapparent, to take up Heidegger's phrase from the Zähringen seminar in 1973. As the title of the final chapter of SdM suggests, 'L'apparition de l'inapparent: l'«escomatage» phénoménologique', Derrida is here alluding to debates about the status of French phenomenology and its alleged theological turn. On this debate, see Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (L'éclat, Combas, 1991) and Jean-Luc Marion, *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989).

¹⁴ On Husserl, see the intriguing and slightly hurried note (SdM 215-16/189), where Derrida, pondering the question of the specter in Husserlian phenomenology, focuses on the notion of the *noema*, as that »intentional but *non-real* component of phenomenological lived experience«, which would be »the condition of any experience...«.

active experience (*Erfahrung*) where objects become objects for consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology is always a phenomenology of spirit (subject becoming spirit and spirit becoming subject), or a becoming-phenomenologizable of the specter, in a logic which is both Christian, insofar as Christ is the phenomenologization of the spectrality of the divine, and, as the Young Hegelians were perfectly aware, post-Christian insofar as Christianity is the self-alienation of consciousness or human essence. For Derrida, the irreducibility of the spectral is thematically linked to the irreducibility of the religious. But, in order to understand what this means we must turn to the central theme of *SdM*: *the messianic*.

The Messianic

First, a word on ghosts. In the characteristically elliptical opening to *SdM*, entitled 'Exordium' (possibly an allusion to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*), Derrida suggests that without speaking to and of ghosts we would not be able to be responsible either to the living or to the not-yet or no-longer living. Thus, the discourse on specters is the condition for what, with Benjamin, we would call an anamnestic solidarity with the dead of history and for those as yet unborn¹⁵. Thus, the discourse with and on specters proceeds in the name of justice, as this word is presented in the essay 'Force of Law', which is in many ways the Ur-text for *SdM*, although the former presents the barest bones of the latter¹⁶. Indeed, in *SdM* – as in 'Force of Law' – Derrida cites Levinas and employs the latter's conception of justice from *Totality and Infinity* to illustrate his own account (*SdM* 48-49/23)¹⁷. Justice here defines and is defined by the ethical relation to the other, »*la relation avec autrui – c'est à dire la justice*«. In Derridian terms, Justice is the undeconstructable condition of possibility for deconstruction, the 'for-the-sake-of-which' deconstruction takes place, »but«, Derrida notes, »we can call it by other names«. The messianic will be one of those other names.

Thus, *SdM* proceeds in the name of justice, whether ethical or political, and speaks of specters in order to try and do justice to the living, the dead and the unborn. Running through Derrida's opening remarks is a critique of any

¹⁵ A view perversely paralleled in the Mormon doctrines of baptism for the dead and spirits for the unborn as described by Harold Bloom in *The American Religion* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992), pp. 112-28.

¹⁶ 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', in D. Cornell et al. (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (Routledge, London and New York, 1992).

¹⁷ I discuss this in more detail in 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?', *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.2, No.1 (April 1994), pp. 1-21, see esp. pp. 14-16.

account of justice that would restrict responsibility only to the living, to the presently living, or to the living present. In a manner that is difficult to present cogently outside the dense allusiveness and performative compression of the opening pages of *SdM*, Derrida is weaving together his account of justice with his early deconstruction of the *lebendige Gegenwart* in Husserlian phenomenology, to suggest that justice is somehow constituted by *différance*.

Before unpacking this claim, we should note that there are two prime candidates for accounts of justice that would restrict responsibility to the living. Firstly in Marx himself, recall the famous words from *The German Ideology* cited above – »as individuals express their life, so they are« – where Marx's thinking would seem to be rooted in an ontology of life. Secondly, we can also note an oblique debate with Michel Henry's reading of Marx, for whom *life*, for Henry the subjective praxis of living individuals, is the foundation upon which economic and meta-economic reality can be constructed¹⁸. Against Marx's and Henry's primacy of *la vie*, an approach that the latter would call phenomenological, Derrida posits a notion of *la sur-vie* (living-on, sur-vival), which one could trace back to his readings of Blanchot¹⁹. This notion, which only occurs, to my knowledge, on three occasions in the text (*SdM* 17, 179 & 235-6/xx, 187, 147), plays a quiet but organizing function. The nearest one gets to an explanation of *sur-vie* is when the debate with Henry surfaces in a long footnote (*SdM* 177-79/186-88). For Henry, Marx's metaphysical determination of reality in terms of praxis, production and, ultimately, life, gives rise to an entirely novel conception of subjectivity as »une puissance immergée en soi et qui s'éprouve soi-même sans distance«²⁰; that is to say, as radically immanent subjectivity constituted through affectivity. Although Derrida might be said, in principle, to grant the *ontological* plausibility of Henry's reading of Marx, as »the hyper-phenomenological principle of the flesh-and-blood presence of the living person...« (*SdM* 230/191), Derrida opposes this reading with his own *hauntological* approach. After posing some persuasive critical questions to Henry, Derrida writes revealingly,

»We are attempting something else. To try to accede to the possibility of this very alternative (life and/or death), we are directing our attention to the effects or the petition of a living-on or survival [une sur-vie] or of a return of the dead (neither life nor death) on the sole basis of which one is able to speak of 'living subjectivity' (in opposition to its death).« (*SdM* 179/187)

¹⁸ Cf. *Marx*, 2 Vols.: 1. *Une philosophie de la réalité*. 2. *Une philosophie de l'économie*, (Gallimard, Paris, 1976). For an abridged introduction to Henry's reading of Marx, see his essay 'Marx', to appear in *Blackwell's Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. S. Critchley (Blackwell, Oxford, forthcoming).

¹⁹ See, in particular, 'Sur-vivre' in *Parages* (Galilée, Paris, 1986), pp. 117-218.

²⁰ In Henry, 'Marx', op. cit.

By following the path of the specter and the logic of spectrality in Marx's text, Derrida is obviously seeking to deconstruct the limit between the living and the non-living and show that the seeming priority of life in fact presupposes a *sur-vie* that undermines this priority. We speak of ghosts in the name of justice.

However – and this is an extremely difficult thought to get to grips with, but it is a *capital* idea – to claim that justice is constituted by *différance* is not to imply that justice is deferred, delayed or indefinitely postponed: »demain on rase gratis«, »it's jam tomorrow«. *Différance* is falsely accused of procrastination or of evading the pressing needs of the present with the so-called *luxury* of undecidability. On the contrary, Derrida's whole effort in *SdM* is in thinking the *injunction*, be it the injunction of Marx (the title of the first chapter) or the injunction of *différance*. As Derrida remarks in an interview given at the time of the publication of *SdM*, »There would be no *différance* without urgency, emergency, imminence, precipitation, the ineluctable, the unforeseen arrival of the other, to the other to whom reference and deference are made«²¹. With an urgency and precipitation that marks the whole tone of the book, making its prose restless and light²², Derrida writes, and I quote at length,

»In the incoercible *différance* the here-now [l'ici-maintenant] unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an

²¹ Derrida, 'The Deconstruction of Actuality', *Radical Philosophy*, No.68 (Autumn 1994), p. 32.

²² Mention of the restlessness and lightness of Derrida's prose in *SdM* can be related to a common complaint one often hears in circles otherwise highly sympathetic to Derrida's work. It is claimed that Derrida's early work, in particular *La voix et le phénomène*, is philosophically decisive in the deployment of deconstruction and that it possesses a rigour sadly lacking in his later work, which too often seems to have been written in undue haste. Perhaps there is some truth to such a claim. However, what such a complaint consistently overlooks is precisely the question of the *urgency*, or the *injunction* that drives Derrida's later work, and its relation to what one might call the *performativity* or *event-character* of deconstruction. *Specters of Marx* is clearly not *La voix et le phénomène*. It is a text that was written with enormous urgency to address a specific context at a specific historical moment, to make an intervention at once theoretical, cultural and political. As such, I think that *Specters of Marx* should be viewed as a certain *enactment* of the injunction that the book seeks to describe or prescribe. Might we not view *Specters of Marx* in terms of what it says about the event (*SdM* 125-26/74-75), namely the event of the injunction of *différance* happening here and now without presence? *Specters of Marx* is an event, a performance, a staging which, as Samuel Weber has shown (I refer to an unpublished paper, 'Piece-Work', given at the University of Essex in October 1994), is utterly pervaded by its own *theatricality*, most obviously in Derrida's deployment of *Hamlet* as a frame for his reading. A serious question arises for me at this point, however: if we take on board Derrida's remarks on the need for a non-negative, non-reactive thinking of tele-technology and the media, might one not have doubts about whether the book – however staged, however theatrical, however performatively conceived – is the most felicitous medium for the enactment of such a singular event? How about the use of other media: theatre, television, compact disc, internet?

absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely, and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in imminence and in urgency: even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the pledge [le gage] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth). The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.

No différance without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now.« (SdM 60/31)

A full commentary on this compressed and rich passage would constitute a separate lecture in itself. It would at the very least cause us to link the urgency and injunction of Marx to the theme of *le gage* which, as I have shown elsewhere, is the key to an understanding of Derrida's reading of Heidegger in *De l'esprit*²³. However, the central thought here is that the injunction of SdM – of *différance* and Marxism – is *l'ici maintenant sans présence*, that is, the absolute singularity of justice happening now without presence. We should hear in the 'here and now' both the classical and theological *hic et nunc* and the semantic richness of the *maintenant*, understood both as the now, but also as the 'maintaining', that is, the act of *maintenance* or maintaining/sustaining/bearing, where the present participle connotes an *act* of presencing irreducible to the present (*Gegenwart*). We might even hear the thought of the hand-holding (*manutenerre – manus, tenere*) of the now which appears in Derrida's reading of Heidegger²⁴.

For Derrida, the ethico-political imperative of Marxism happens *now*, it is maintained at this very moment and is not postponed to a utopian future.²⁵ It would seem to me that the entire plausibility of SdM rests upon this difficult thought of the *here and maintaining-now without presence as an impossible experience of justice*. If this thought proves absolutely unintelligible, then one can perhaps follow Derrida no further.

Derrida associates the injunction of *différance*, or the injunction of Marx, with his notion of *democracy to come* (*la démocratie à venir*), which has been an increasingly persistent theme in Derrida's recent work (SdM 110-111/64-65). Once again, Derrida is anxious to distinguish *la démocratie à venir* from any idea of a *future* democracy, where the future would be a modality of the *lebendige Gegenwart*, namely the not-yet-present. Derrida's discourse is full

²³ Cf. 'The Question of the Question: An Ethico-Political Response to a Note in *Of Spirit*', in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, op. cit. pp. 190-200.

²⁴ I owe the last two sentences to a conversation with Samuel Weber. On the hand in Heidegger, see 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand', in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. J.Sallis (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1987), pp. 161-96.

of negations at this point: democracy is *not* to be confused with the living present of liberal democracy, lauded as the end of history by Fukuyama, *neither* is it a regulative idea or an idea in the Kantian sense, *nor* even a utopia, insofar as all these conceptions understand the future as a modality of presence (SdM 110/65). It is a question here of linking *la démocratie à venir* to *différance* understood in the above-mentioned sense as *l'ici maintenant sans présence*, as an experience of the impossible without which justice would be meaningless. In this sense, *la démocratie à venir* does not mean that tomorrow (and tomorrow and tomorrow) democracy will be realized, but rather that the experience of justice as the maintaining-now of the relation to an absolute singularity is the *à venir* of democracy, the temporality of democracy is *advent*, it is arrival happening now. As I have hypothesized elsewhere, democracy is the future of deconstruction, but this future is happening now, it is happening as the now blasting through the continuum of the present.²⁶ In this sense, we might speak of *la démocratie à venir* not as a fixed political form of society, but rather as a process of *democratization*. Although, I cannot go into the requisite detail here, it would be a question of developing at least three further points:

1. To show how the time of justice, that is, the time of the injunction of *différance*, of Marxism and *la démocratie à venir*, can be understood as messianic time in the sense developed by Benjamin in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'²⁷; that is, as that *Jetztzeit*, which Derrida translates as »l'«à-présent« (»the at-present« SdM 96/181), that *now* which is not the empty and homogenous flow of objectivist history governed by the *Gegenwart*, and which Benjamin assimilates to a notion of historical materialism.

2. To show how the Benjaminian notion of messianic time can be thought in relation to Levinas's notion of ethical time or the temporality of what he calls, with great discretion in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, messianic

²⁵ In some improvised remarks on deconstruction and pragmatism, Derrida distinguishes the thought of the messianic, as the here and now of justice, from the conventional meaning of utopia (which does not exclude the possibility of other meanings for utopia). See *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. C. Mouffe (Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming). I quote: »The messianic experience of which I spoke takes place here and now; that is, the fact of promising and speaking is an event that takes place here and now and is not utopian. This happens in the singular event of engagement, and when I speak of *la démocratie à venir* this does not mean that tomorrow democracy will be realised, and it does not refer to a future democracy, rather it means that there is an engagement with regard to democracy which consists in recognizing the irreducibility of the promise when, in the messianic moment, it can come (*ça peut venir*). There is the future (*il y a de l'avenir*). There is something to come (*il y a à venir*). That can happen...that can happen, and I promise in opening the future or in leaving the future open. This is not utopian, it is what takes place here and now, in a here and now that I regularly try to dissociate from the present.«

²⁶ See *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, op. cit. p. 241.

²⁷ In *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (Fontana/Collins, London, 1973), pp. 255-66.

eschatology²⁸. Levinas opposes the time of justice to the ontological or economic notion of time and history that reduces and reifies individuals, determining them in terms of their works, relations of exchange and productivity. When Levinas claims that »When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history«²⁹, I think »history« here refers to the objective history of the victors, or »barbarism« in Benjamin's sense of the word. At least on my reading, Levinas's work attempts to rub history against the grain, to find the »ruptures in history«³⁰, to produce a history for those without works or texts, what I have elsewhere called *ethical history*.³¹ The historical materialist, in Benjamin's sense, blasts open the continuum of objectivist history in the name of another history, in the name of justice, which would not be – for Benjamin, Levinas or Derrida – an end to history, but the continual working over of history as a work of infinite mourning, a politics of memory, the insomniac experience of being haunted by the specters of the past. Levinas writes, »Of peace there can only be an eschatology. (...) That peace does not take place in the objective history disclosed by war, as the end of that war or as the end of history.«³²

3. To show how the time of justice in Derrida, as the maintaining-now without presence, can be productively linked to the temporality of the ethical relation in Levinas. Levinas's later work proceeds from a distinction between two orders of time: synchrony and diachrony. Synchronic time is a linear, infinite series of punctual moments spread along the axes of past, present and future – what one might call, with Bergson, the spatial representation of time or, with Heidegger, the vulgar Aristotelian concept of time. Diachrony, on the other hand, is – literally – the coming apart of time, it is time as the punctual present falling out of phase with itself (*le déphasage de l'instant*) or the time of the lapse (*le laps*). In Bergson's sense, diachrony is the real time of subjectivity: the unique, unrepeatable and mobile temporality of *la durée*; in Heidegger's sense, it is the temporalisation of time (*die Zeitigung der Zeit*), the authentic experience of time from which the inauthentic time of synchrony is derived. Levinas's basic and astonishing claim is that the concrete case in which time temporalizes itself as diachrony is in the everyday event of my responsibility for another³³. Time is accomplished in a relation to the other. This relation is

²⁸ *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969), pp. 22–24.

²⁹ *Totality and Infinity*, op. cit. p. 52.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 52.

³¹ *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, op. cit. p. 30.

³² *Totality and Infinity*, op. cit. p. 24. Incidentally, if this view of Levinas's conception of history is right, then it makes little sense to claim that Levinas is an anti-historical thinker, as Derrida appears to do in 'Violence and Metaphysics' (in *Writing and Difference*, op. cit. p. 94).

³³ *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1981), p. 10.

not an experience of presence for Levinas, but is rather a relation to the other that is underwritten by an experience of the trace, the trace of the infinite as that past which has never been present. For Levinas, the essence of time is *temporalisation*: postponement, patience, the undergoing of time as senescence, the passivity of ageing. Time establishes a relation to the future that is not achieved through laying hold of the future, as Heidegger attempts in his analyses of *Verstehen* and *Entwurf*, but in a »lack of any hold upon the future«³⁴. The enigma of time – the time of justice – for Levinas lies in an experience of time that differs from the present, both as an absolute past and an ungraspable future, precisely as trace and as *différance*. And yet, this experience of time happens *now*, blasting through the continuum of the present in a relation to the other, the experience of justice. Interestingly, this temporal and ethical structure is what Levinas would call (and would Derrida call it?) *témoignage*: testimony or witness³⁵.

However, we are still a little distant from the theme of the messianic, although it has been presupposed in everything that has been said in the last few pages. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, the time is out of joint. The lesson that Hamlet learns from the political assassination of his father, according to Derrida, is that the order of law, of the state, is based on violence, vengeance and injustice. Given this identification of law and violence – which, Derrida rightly claims, is Shakespeare's question before it is Nietzsche's, Heidegger's or Benjamin's (and whose is it before Shakespeare? Homer's?) – how is one to think of justice at this time of disjuncture? Derrida asks, and it is here that the messianic is introduced for the first time, qualified by a characteristically coy 'quasi',

»If right or law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain... can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi messianic (my emphasis, s.c.) day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance.« (SdM 47/21)

In these fascinating pages, Derrida is weaving together a dense fabric of allusion and argument, where he associates (i) the experience of *disjuncture* (a crucial word in these pages), of Hamlet's sense of the time being out of joint – the order of law as vengeance – with (ii) the disjuncture of the ethical relation in Levinas, which is precisely that which cannot be assembled into a totality and (iii) Heidegger's meditation on time and justice in *Der Spruch der Anaximander*, where *dike* is translated as jointure or *Fug*, and which is thought together with *a-dikia* as *Unfug* or dis-juncture. Although I cannot go into the

³⁴ *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987), p. 80.

³⁵ In this regard, see Levinas's 'Vérité du dévoilement et vérité du témoignage', *Archivio di Filosofia* (1972), pp. 101-10.

detail of Heidegger's text here³⁶, what interests Derrida is Heidegger's attempt, firstly, to suspend all traditional conceptions of law as calculative, metaphysical and deconstructable, and to seek to think justice in relation to the donation of time, namely the presencing of the present (*das Anwesende des Anwesen*), and to think something like Being non-metaphysically in relation to this presencing.

However, and in a way that will be familiar to Derrida-watchers, he poses the following critical question to Heidegger. Namely,

»Once one has recognized the force and the necessity of thinking justice on the basis of the gift, that, beyond right, calculation and commerce... is there not a risk of inscribing this whole movement of justice under the sign of presence, albeit the presence to meaning of the Anwesen, of the event as coming into presence, of Being as presence joined to itself, of the proper of the other as presence?« (SdM 55/27).

Thus, if Heidegger thinks justice in relation to the presencing of the present, that is, in terms of a jointure that gathers and harmonizes, Derrida's question is to whether justice, understood with Levinas as a disjunctive relation to the other, »supposes on the contrary the irreducible excess of a disjunction or an anachrony, some *Un-fuge*, some 'out of joint'...« (SdM 55/27) In the interrogative mode (but does a question, or a series of questions, constitute an argument? Is it enough? Is one persuaded? A vast question), Derrida engages in a reversal of Heidegger where he hypothesizes that justice as disjuncture – »the de-totalizing condition of justice« (SdM 56/28) – is the condition for the presencing of the present. It is in this way (and Derrida recognizes the hastiness and provisionality of his formulations at this point) that the relation of deconstruction to the possibility of justice can be thought, where justice – »that which must (without debt and without duty) render itself to the singularity of the other« (SdM 56/28) – is the undeconstructable condition of possibility for deconstruction.

Although the way in which Derrida links his argumentation to Heidegger and Shakespeare is novel, the above conclusion – deconstruction is justice – will hardly be surprising to readers of 'Force of Law'. However, what *is* novel are two subsidiary claims that Derrida tags on to the above argumentation: firstly, this account of justice is called a »desert-like messianism« by Derrida, »the messianic: the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*« (SdM 56/28). Secondly, this notion of the messianic is interpreted as »an *ineffaceable* mark... of the heritage of Marx« (SdM 56/

³⁶ 'The Anaximander Fragment', in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. D. Krell & F. Capuzzi (Harper and Row, New York, 1975), pp. 13-58.

28). Thus, combining the two claims, the heritage of Marx that Derrida wants to endorse is that of a messianic appeal for justice.

The theme of the messianic, allied to the name of Marx, recurs at crucial points in SdM. After stating that he endorses the kind of critical analysis (of ideology and capital) that we have inherited from Marxism, Derrida links this to the »*schwache* messianische Kraft« of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', what he calls, emphasizing the adjectival rather than substantive usage, a »messianique sans messianisme« (SdM 96/181, & cf. 103/59, 112/65).

(A further parenthetical worry begins to take shape here: namely, if this messianic appeal for justice is the way in which the heritage of Marxism is to be assumed, then, Derrida goes on,

»*Failing which* (Faute de quoi) *one would reduce the event-ness* (l'événementialité) *of the event, the singularity and the alterity of the other.*

Failing which (Faute de quoi) *justice risks being reduced once again to juridico-moral rules, norms of representations, within an inevitable totalizing moment...«* (SdM 56-57/28).

My question would be: is the passage from the messianic appeal for justice to laws, norms and rules always a fault (*une faute*), always in default? If so, why is it a fault and what sort of fault is it? Clearly for Derrida, to refer the messianic appeal for justice to moral and legal conditions is a transgression of the apparent priority, or indeed *apriori* antecedence of the messianic – what Derrida elsewhere calls »the universal dimension of experience«³⁷ – but is this transgression not also a necessity? Is it not the most necessary of necessities, namely the moral-legal-social *instantiation* of justice, the *aposteriori* and particular instance of the *apriori* status of the messianic? To employ the language of the above quote, is not totalization inevitable? Isn't the question not *whether* to totalize, but *how* to totalize, that is, *how* to link the *apriori* and the *aposteriori*, the universal and the particular, the transcendental and the empirical? As we will see below, the notion of the New International recognizes the necessity of instantiation, totalization, the *aposteriori*, the particular and the empirical, but I have two further telegraphic thoughts in this regard:

1. Is not this faulty move from justice to law precisely that which is thought by Levinas in terms of the move from the other (*autrui*) to the third party (*le tiers*), from ethics to politics? It might also be noted that, in 'Idéologie et idéalisme', Levinas also defines Marxism as an ethical »prophetic cry...the revolt of Marx and of Marxists beyond Marxist science«³⁸, but that, for

³⁷ See, 'The Deconstruction of Actuality', op. cit, p. 36. On the *apriori*, see *ibid*, p. 32.

³⁸ In *De dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Vrin, Paris, 1986), p. 19.

Levinas, politics would be the *measure* brought to the ethical relation to the other, without which the latter would risk being »angelic«, »the spirituality of angels« (if not specters) that is the source of his critique of Buber's I-Thou relation. How is one to combine (is one to combine?) the thought of justice with the thought of measure, which, of course, also entails the question of judgement?

2. In a recent debate with Axel Honneth, I have, with some significant and important reservations, attempted to support and amplify his attempt to show the possible compatibility or mutual supplementarity of Derrida's recent reflections on ethico-political issues with the Habermasian programme of discourse ethics, in order to show how the messianic appeal for justice conceived as a relation to the irreducible singularity of the other might be combined with a broadly Kantian and procedural theory of justice, capable of testing the validity of moral-political norms. The question here is: if it can be shown that the reciprocity and symmetry axiomatic to Habermasian discourse ethics stand in need of supplementation by a non-reciprocal, asymmetrical appeal to justice or the messianic, then is not the same true *vice versa*?³⁹

However, on the question of Marxism and messianism, are we not evading a rather basic and crude question? Marx had many swingeing and unkind things to say about the Young Hegelians, but what he endorsed in their approach was their critique of religion, writing famously that, »Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.«⁴⁰ As the *Theses on Feuerbach* make clear, the problem with the Young Hegelians is that their concept of alienation is restricted to the critique of religion, a critique which is »essentially complete«⁴¹. So, against Marx, Derrida would seem to want to maintain the irreducibility of the religious in its 'desert-like' form. Is this plausible? At least four features can be noted here:

1. The irreducibility of the spectral is linked to the irreducibility of the religious for Derrida, where Marx's critique of religiosity would be part and parcel of his ontological approach. *Hantologie* is premised upon the irreducibility of forms of non-identity and alterity, where the religious is a privileged form of such alterity.

2. More specifically, in Derrida, the irreducibility of the religious is the desire to maintain the *sublimity* of the religious, which is expressed in Benjamin's messianism and elsewhere (in Levinas, in negative theology). Derrida op-

³⁹ Cf. 'Habermas und Derrida werden verheiratet: Antwort auf Axel Honneth', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Vol.42, No.6 (1994), pp. 981-92.

⁴⁰ Cf. David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx* (Macmillan, London, 1971), p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 22.

poses, and this is a theme one can find dealt with at great length in *Glas*, any notion of religiosity rooted in what I called above a phenomenology of *incarnation* (which one might also call a phenomenology of the beautiful), the incarnation of the living presence of the divine in the form of the person of Christ and, ultimately, in the spiritual form of the community in Hegel and the material form of communism in Marx.

3. In opposing this logic of *incarnation* in religion, Derrida works to undermine (i) the historical teleology of religion in Hegel which leads irresistably to Christianity, the *revealed* religion; (ii) the *Aufhebung* of religion in philosophy found at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *one* condition (only one, the other being the becoming-spirit of the subject) for the possibility of Absolute Knowing; and (iii) the *Aufhebung* of the Young Hegelian critique of religion into the critique of political economy in Marx. All of these gestures would be ontological for Derrida.

4. Is one lead to conclude from the above that the irreducibility of religious sublimity in Derrida's notion of the messianic allows one to identify his position with that accorded by Hegel to Judaism, as an abstract and formalistic religion of duty, where justice is placed above love? Is *hantological* Marxism a continuation of what we might call 'philosophical Judaism' by other means? And is this justifiable?

Derrida goes some way to addressing this question in his most revealing discussion of the messianic which comes close to the end of SdM (SdM 266-67/167-69). Derrida asks: what is the relation between Marxist messianism, as »a universal structure« (SdM 266/167), and that other desert-like Abrahamic messianism of Judaism? Having set up the question nicely, Derrida doesn't really give a satisfying response, asking himself whether Abrahamic messianism would a prefiguration or (to use Levinas's word, which is how he refers to the divine as the trace of illeity⁴²) »prénom« of Marxist messianism. Why not, perhaps. Nonetheless, and always in the interrogative mood, Derrida asks, »Can one conceive an atheological heritage of the messianic?« (SdM 266/168) and suggests a few lines later that »One may always take the *quasi-atheist* (my emphasis, s.c.) dryness of the messianic to be the condition of the religions of the Book...« (267). Derrida goes on to qualify the messianic in terms which recall my discussion of *différance* and *la démocratie à venir* in terms of »imminence« and »urgency«, and calls it »a 'messianism' that despairs« (SdM 268/169). A religion of despair, then? Perhaps.

However, taking as a cue Derrida's qualification of the messianic as 'quasi-atheist' (although what exactly does the coy 'quasi' mean here?), another

⁴² *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, op. cit. p. 185.

avenue can be briefly pursued. In his reading of *The German Ideology*, Derrida comes across Marx's citation of Stirner's words »Ja, es spukt in der ganzen Welt«, poorly rendered into French as, »Oui, le monde entier est peuplé de fantômes« (SdM 216/136). What holds Derrida's attention is the phrase *es spukt*, *het spookt*, *ça spectre*, *it spooks*. Derrida comes back to this phrase right at the end of SdM (SdM 272/172); what interests him is the way in which the logic of spectrality is expressed *verbally* (*es spukt* from *spuken*), that is, as a movement, what Derrida calls the »passive movement of an apprehension«. This passive movement is the very movement of haunting, of the ghost, of the ghosting of the ghost, *la revenance du revenant*. Derrida makes an interesting parallel between the spookiness of haunting and the experience of *Unheimlichkeit* in Freud and Heidegger (SdM 273-77/173-75). However, specifically in relation to the question of religion, I would like to associate the *es spukt* with the uncanniness of the *il y a* as this is figured in the work of Levinas and Blanchot. Although I cannot go into detail here⁴³, the *il y a* should not be confused with the Heideggerian *es gibt* (might one link the *es spukt* with the *es gibt*: *es spukt Sein*, *es spukt Zeit*?), for it is both Levinas's word for Being and his attempt to ruin the *Seinsfrage*. With the *il y a*, Levinas asks us to undertake a thought experiment, »Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness?«. But what would remain after this annihilation of all *Seienden*? Nothing? Levinas claims that this very nothingness of all existents would itself be experienced as a kind of presence, not the presence of the *lebendige Gegenwart*, but what he calls elsewhere »An atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence«⁴⁴. To compress to the point of incomprehensibility, the experience of the *il y a*, is what Blanchot would call *le neutre* which is opened in the experience of writing and literature. I have claimed that the *il y a* is the secret of Blanchot's work, its primal scene, which is an experience of dis-aster, of the night without stars⁴⁵. What interests me here is the way in which the experience of the *es spukt*, that is, the impossible experience of spectrality (i.e. the ghost is there, but does not exist; it is neither present nor absent) shares certain features with the *il y a*. The latter is an experience of the night, the night of insomnia for Levinas or what Blanchot calls the other or essential night towards which the desire of the writer tends. It is also, crucially, an experience of haunting, it is the night of ghosts, which Levinas illustrates with the example of Banquo's ghost which returns after death to haunt Macbeth⁴⁶. In the night of the *il y a*, which is also the space of

⁴³ For a much fuller discussion of the *il y a*, see 'A Dying Stronger than Death (Blanchot with Levinas)', *The Oxford Literary Review*, Vol.15 (1993), pp. 81-131.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1978), pp. 57-64.

⁴⁵ 'A Dying Stronger than Death', op. cit. pp. 119-20.

⁴⁶ *Existence and Existents*, op. cit. p. 62. It might be recalled that it is Levinas who writes in *Time*

many of Blanchot's *récits*, the frontier between the living and the dead is criss-crossed: the living are unable to either live or die and the dead refuse to lie down. The *il y a* is an experience of the impossibility of death – horror of horrors – which Derrida has himself explored in his recent *Aporias*⁴⁷. Death is the impossibility of my possibility which outstrips my powers, it is that of which I am ultimately unable (*je ne peux plus pouvoir*). With this in mind, we might explore some of the specters in Levinas's text, particularly his discussion of the return of *le revenant* of scepticism after its refutation, which, it has been claimed, is the specter of Derrida in Levinas's *Autrement qu'être*⁴⁸. However, the thought that I would like to pursue here is the following: might not the »quasi-atheist« messianism of SdM be linked with the *es spukt* and the *il y a*, not as a religious messianism, but precisely as an experience of atheistic transcendence? Does the impossible experience of the *es spukt*, the spectrality of the messianic, look upwards to a divinity, divine justice, or even the starry heaven that frames the Moral Law, or rather does it not look into the radically atheist transcendence of the *il y a*, the absence, dis-aster and pure energy of the night that is beyond law?

The Political

I suggested above that what is perhaps most impressive and most urgent about SdM is its call for a re-politicization of deconstruction in terms of a Marxist *hantologie*. I also indicated two of the political consequences of a pre-deconstructive Marxist *ontologie*, and suggested that the logic of spectrality in Derrida could be linked to the neo-Gramscian logic of hegemony in the work of Ernesto Laclau. It is time to try and make good on these suggestions.

In what we might justifiably refer to as his deconstruction of Marxism – that is, a reading that identifies a double gesture within Marx's texts – Laclau radicalizes Gramsci's critique of the economic stagism and historical determinism of traditional Marxism.⁴⁹ Roughly and readily, Laclau opposes the almost mechanistic vision of historical materialism advocated in the Second International and in certain Marxist texts (the example given is the Preface to the *Contribu-*

and the Other (op. cit. p. 72) that »it sometimes seems to me that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespere«.

⁴⁷ Trans. D. Dutoit (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1993).

⁴⁸ Robert Bernasconi, 'Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy', in *Re-reading Levinas* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991), pp. 149-61.

⁴⁹ My brief presentation of Laclau's work is based on the eponymous opening essay from *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (Verso, London, 1990, pp. 3-85), rather than Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Verso, London, 1985), which presents the same deconstruction of Marxism from within a genealogy of the concept of hegemony.

tion to the Critique of Political Economy), with an account of history based on the irreducibility of class struggle and antagonism, a tendency that one can also find within Marx's texts, for example at the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*. Thus, although Laclau would endorse the traditional Marxist account of capitalism in terms of its often pernicious dislocatory effects, he does not think that these dislocations can simply be referred to the alleged economic and historical objectivity of contradictions between the forces and relations of production, the effects of the infrastructure on the superstructure, but are rather the consequence of continual 'hegemonic articulation's (for me, the key concept in Laclau's work), of incursions of the political and the ideological into the socio-economic-historical realm, where infrastructure and superstructure form what Gramsci would call a 'historical bloc'. Such hegemonic articulations temporarily fix or stabilize the meaning of social relations in a transient equilibrium. Such a 'hegemonic equilibrium' of the social is not to be transcended in a communist society free from power, contingency, antagonism and politics itself – the millenarian vision of communist society that sometimes gets the better of Marx and which, with the privilege of hindsight, it is all too easy to confuse with the totalitarian myth of social transparency. In contradistinction to the traditional Marxist theodicy that would claim that the dislocations of capitalism lead inexorably to the simplification of the class structure, and the emergence of the proletariat as the revolutionary class and privileged agent of history, Laclau argues that the very dislocatory effects of late capitalism – what we might think of as the phenomenon of combined and uneven development – lead instead to a progressive fragmentation of the social and a proliferation of social actors (for example, the decline in the organizing power of the state and in the credibility of traditional political parties and the increasing prominence of ethnic, national, sexual or ecological protest movements). Perhaps Laclau's most challenging and controversial thesis is that these phenomena of dislocation and fragmentation lead not only to a proliferation of political possibilities, but are also the conditions under which something like freedom is possible; that freedom is a consequence of dislocation. The democratic transformation of society – what I still want to call socialism – is *one* of these political possibilities (and only one, there are others, particularly on the radical right, which have been significantly more successful at hegemonizing in recent decades), but there is no economic or historical inevitability to such an outcome. Socialism will only be the consequence or, better, the permanent activity of intense hegemonic articulation and political effort. It is, to say the least, unclear whether the traditional notion of the political party, confined within the nation state is adequate to such a task.

An expanded notion of hegemony becomes a way of arguing for the primacy

of politics over socio-economic relations, although the former can in no way proceed without continual reference to the latter and the former is done for the sake of the latter. As such, the concept of hegemony points in two different temporal directions at once: first, with regard to history, hegemony is a way of explaining how certain social relations became fixed, and shows that such fixing is not the consequence of the 'objective' contradiction of forces and relations of production, but rather is the product of contingency, antagonism and power, that is to say, it is the consequence of a *decision* (i.e. the transformation of history into genealogy). Second, the concept of hegemony leaves the future radically open and indeterminate, which means that nothing is guaranteed, but neither is anything lost, at least not yet. On this view, rather than standing at the end of history, it might be said that we stand at some sort of beginning, at the point when we can recognize the radical contingency and limitedness of our finitude. Such a situation need not lead to the pessimism of an Adorno or the passivity or the resignation of a later Heidegger, but can also be the condition for a »new militancy and new optimism«⁵⁰.

If deconstruction is the attempt to show the constitutive undecidability, radical incompleteness or untotalizability of textual, institutional, cultural, social and economic structures, then hegemony is a theory of decisions taken in the undecidable terrain opened up by deconstruction, and which, in my view, is precisely the way in which we might begin to think about the politics of deconstruction⁵¹. The burning question here is whether and how we can combine the logic of deconstruction with the logic of hegemony: does undecidability paralyze the possibility of the decision or does it, on the contrary, enable it?

With regard to SdM, the fate of the question of deconstruction and hegemony, to my mind, turns on how we interpret the following thought: in relation to the generalized dislocation of the contemporary world, Derrida claims, the messianic hesitates, it trembles; he writes,

»This messianic hesitation does not paralyze any decision, any affirmation, any responsibility. On the contrary, it grants them their elementary condition. It is their very experience.« (SdM 269/169).

Is messianic hesitation the experience of the decision? That is the question, as Hamlet might soliloquize. If our response is positive, then we might be able to solder the logics of deconstruction and hegemony at this point.

In SdM, Derrida indeed speaks of hegemony, using the word – which is, to my

⁵⁰ *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, op. cit. p. 82.

⁵¹ In this regard, see Laclau's short article 'Discourse', in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, eds. R. Goodin & P. Pettit (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994), pp. 431-37.

knowledge, relatively new to his vocabulary⁵² – on at least eight occasions (SdM 69[x2], 73[x2], 90, 91, 96-7, 149/37[x2], 40[x2], 51, 52, 55, 90), mostly during the discussion of Fukuyama and the so-called death of Marxism. The first time he uses the word, he even refers to Laclau's work, making the interesting and valid point that »Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony« (SdM 69/37). However, rather than viewing hegemony as a theory of the decision and the positive possibility of politicization, Derrida (mis)understands hegemony negatively in its traditional sense as domination. He writes, for example, that, »...a dogmatics is attempting to install its worldwide hegemony in paradoxical and suspect conditions. There is today in the world a *dominant* discourse...etc.« (SdM 90/51) This is unfortunate. However, if the concept of hegemony is (mis)understood traditionally in SdM, there is nonetheless, I believe, a *logic* of hegemony at work in the text. This logic turns around a phrase that forms part of the book's subtitle, and which, in Georges Sorel's terminology, we might describe as the mobilizing 'myth' of SdM: *The New International*⁵³. In many ways, this is the key to SdM, but my worry is whether the key fits the lock of the present political situation.

Derrida lists what he calls the ten afflictions of the 'New World Order' in a kind of *tableau noir* (SdM 134-39/81-84). After listing unemployment, homelessness and other woes, the final item on his list, which is privileged above the other terms (»*surtout, surtout*«, he writes, SdM 138/83) is the present state of international law, which he rightly sees as being dominated by the interests of certain 'hegemonic' nation states. In contradistinction to this, Derrida suggests that we require a New International that, »is being sought through these crises of international law, it already denounces the limits of a discourse on human rights that will remain inadequate, sometimes hypocritical, and in any case formalistic...« (SdM 141/85). This reference to the formalism of human rights, echoing the Hegelian-Marxist critique of their abstraction and one-sidedness, is illuminating and is followed by some qualifications of the New International. He writes of the bond around which something like solidarity might form, »It is a link of affinity, suffering and hope, a still discreet, almost secret link, like that around 1848, but more and more visible – we have more than a sign of it.« (SdM 141/85) Thus, the New International would be focussed around a common bond or link, that – at this point in history at least – is almost secret. Derrida goes on to claim that this bond would be, »...without party, without country, without national community (International before, across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizen-

⁵² Although Derrida speaks of »l'hégémonie centralisatrice« and »l'hégémonie nationale« in *L'autre cap* (Minuit, Paris, 1991), pp. 45 & 48.

⁵³ This notion is first introduced in Chapter 1 (SdM 58/29), but receives a fuller discussion as the centrepiece of Chapter 3.

ship, without common belonging to a class.« (SdM 142/85) A strange bond, then: without reference to the figures of community, class, party, nation or the other traditional means of collective identification or hegemonization. Yet, Derrida insists, this bond of the New International is inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marxism. Which one? Clearly not the ontological Marxism of *the* proletariat, *the* party and *the* revolution characterized above as ontological. Derrida continues in a luminous passage, which I quote at length,

»Now if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance (which Derrida qualifies on the previous page as the spirit of the Enlightenment, s.c.)...It is rather a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism. And a promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain 'spiritual' or 'abstract', but to produce events, new forms of action, of practice, of organization, etc. To break with the 'party form' or with such and such form of the State or the International does not mean to renounce every form of practical or effective organization. It is exactly the contrary that matters to us here.« (SdM 146-47/89)

I couldn't agree more. The New International must be in the spirit of the Marxist idea of critique (critique of ideology and of capital) and the quasi-atheist notion of messianic affirmation or promise that we discussed above and which proceeds in the name of justice and emancipation. Furthermore, such critical and messianic promises must be made with the intention of being kept, and thus the promise of the New International must in its turn give rise to new forms of organization, activism and political aggregation. In relation to what I said above about the *injunctions* of *différance* and *la démocratie à venir*, the urgency of the New International cannot be deferred or postponed indefinitely; it must be approached in messianic terms as *l'ici maintenant sans présence*. The New International is happening now, at this very moment; Derrida writes,

»And there are signs. It is like a new International, but without a party, or organization, or membership. It is searching and suffering, it believes that something is wrong, it does not accept the 'new world order'...«⁵⁴

To my mind, Derrida would here seem to be trying to sketch the preconditions for a new socialist hegemonic articulation, a political decision taken in the name of justice and in the face of the world's afflictions.

The only question I have here is the following: *how is the New International to be hegemonized?* What forms and means should it employ? Around what

⁵⁴ 'The Deconstruction of Actuality', op. cit. p. 39.

figures should it agitate? Should it agitate around figures? Who does it include? Who does it oppose? *Does* it oppose? *Does* it exclude?

I do not have convincing answers to these questions and I am not really in the habit of delivering prophecies to the masses, but, in closing, let me hazard three critical thoughts.

1. I find Derrida's suggestions on the subject of the New International a little vague, suggesting that, »...the new International belongs only to anonymity.« (SdM 148/90) He goes on, in the same paragraph, to suggest that within the academic and intellectual world, the New International includes those who have resisted the anti-Marxist dogma of recent years and remained hypercritical in the Enlightenment spirit, without renouncing the ideals of democracy and emancipation. Who does Derrida have in mind here? Jürgen Habermas?

2. Also, the limits of the New International begin to look a little vague when Derrida writes that, »Whether they wish it or know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism.« (SdM 149/91) Perhaps this is right. But so what? Couldn't the same be said – perhaps with even greater justification – about Adam Smith or John Locke? Are we not all heirs to their marketing strategies? Thus, there is the risk of a rather empty universalism on Derrida's part at this point.

3. Finally, on the question of organization, although Derrida is rightly dubious of the idea of a communist party as the privileged and sole means for revolutionary transformation, he tends to link this to a rather questionable historical positivism which claims that, »What tends perhaps to disappear in the political world that is announcing itself, and perhaps in a new epoch of democracy, is the domination of this form of organization called the party...« (SdM 167/102) Again, on the next page, he says of this hypothesis »...that this mutation has already begun; it is irreversible.« (SdM 168/103) Derrida tags two claims onto this hypothesis: (i) that the correlate of the party, i.e. the state, is also exhausted; and (ii) that the notion of the party cannot adapt to the exigencies of the contemporary public space with its domination by the media and tele-technology. In relation to this second point, I have two words to offer: *Forza Italia*. If Derrida is right, how does one explain the brief but stunning electoral success of this alliance which would seem (entirely cynically, to my mind) to combine a fairly classical party structure with the exigencies of the televisual media forms? An analysis of the 1994 elections in South Africa, although with a more progressive outcome, might also consider this question of the relation between the party form (in this case, the ANC), the media and the democratic process. However, to return to the first point, my question is the following: if the political party is not an adequate vehicle for promoting something like a New International, which might be justified although I have my (doubtless

nostalgic) doubts about this, then how does one hegemonize something like the New International outside of traditional party structures? What means of identification, figuration and hegemonization are available? Furthermore, how does one work outside traditional party structures without collapsing into a 'divide and rule' designer politics of individualism or confining oneself to the always modest socio-economic changes of single issue politics, or, worst of all worlds, devoting oneself to an intra-academic politics of vacuous radicalism and reaction?