»The Time is out of Joint«

Ernesto Laclau

> *»Comme cette fin singulière du politique correspondrait à la présentation d'une réalité absolument vivante il y a là une raison de plus pour penser que l'essence du politique aura toujours la figure inessentielle, l'anessence même d'un fantôme«*
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> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx.*

Halfway, in *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida links the concept of production to that of trauma and speaks of »la spiritualisation spectrale qui est à l'oeuvre dans toute '*tekhne*' (SM, p. 16). He connects immediately this assertion to Freud's remarks concerning the three traumas inflicted to the narcissism of the de-centered man: the psychological trauma derived from the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious, the biological trauma resulting from the Darwinian findings about human descent, and the cosmological trauma proceeding from the Copernican revolution. To this Derrida adds the decentering effects coming from Marxism which, according to him, accumulate and put together the other three: »le siècle du 'Marxisme' aura été celui du décentrement techno-scientifique et effectif de la Terra, du géopolitique, de l'*anthropos* dans son identité onto-theologique, de l'*ego cogito* – et du concept même de narcissisme dont les apories sont, disons pour aller trop vite et faire l'économie de tant de références, le thème explicite de la déconstruction« (SM, pp. 161-162).

So, deconstruction inscribes itself in a secular movement of de-centering, to which Marxism itself belongs. Even more, at various points of *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida insists that deconstruction would be either inconceivable or irrelevant unless it is related to the spirit or the tradition of a certain Marxism. And, however, deconstruction is not *just* Marxism: it is a certain operation practised in the body of Marxism, the location, in Marx's texts of an area of undecidability which, in Derrida's terms, is that circumscribed by the opposi-

tion between *spirit* and *spectre*, between *hauntology* and *ontology*. The performing of this deconstructive operation – to which the last two chapters of the book are devoted – is far from being a purely academic exercise: the very possibility of justice – but also of politics – is at stake. Without the constitutive dislocation that inhabits all hauntology – and that ontology tries to conceal – there would not be politics but just a programmed, predetermined reduction of the other to the same. (»On passe facilement du désajusté à l'injust. C'est notre problème: comment justifier ce passage du désajustement (valeur plutôt technico-ontologique affectant une présence) à une injustice qui ne serait plus ontologique? Et si le désajustement était au contraire la condition de la justice? Et si ce double registre condensait son énigme, justement, et potentialisait sa sur-puissance dans ce qui donne sa force inouïe à la parole de Hamlet: *The time is out of joint?*« (SM, p. 44).)

To find a double logic in Marx's work, to detect in the Marxian texts a double gesture that the theory makes possible but that it is unable to conceptually control in a credible synthesis: all this looks rather familiar. Since the end of the XIXth Century, this duality, deeply inscribed in Marx's work, has been the object of countless analyses. The duality between determinism and ethical orientation of socialism, between economism and the primacy of politics, even between the »scientific« and »ideological« components of the theory, have been not only recurrent themes in Marxist discussions but the very issue which has made possible a history of Marxism. However, none of these apparent reformulations of the terms of a widely perceived dualism has been similar to the others. We are not dealing with a purely nominalistic operation of re-naming: the displacement that these reformulations operate, the logics of the social that they imply and, above all, the political strategies that they make possible, are radically different. Derrida does not trace the genealogy of his intervention in the Marxian text. This is regrettable, among other things because its specificity, originality and potentialities do not come sufficiently to the light. In what follows, I will try to stress some of these specific features, as well as their originality vis-à-vis other comparable attempts. To this effect, I will refer to what I think are two central theoretical points in Derrida's book: the logic of the spectre (the hauntology) and the category of messianism.

The Logic of the Spectre

»(L)e spectre est une incorporation paradoxale, le devenir corps, une certain forme phénoménale et charnelle de l'esprit. Il devient plutôt quelque 'chose' qu'il rests difficile à nommer: ni âme ni corps, et l'une et l'autre. Car la chaire et la phénomenalité, voilà ce qui donne à l'esprit son apparition spectrale, mais disparaît aussitôt dans l'apparition, dans la venue même du revenant ou le

retour du spectre. Il y a du disparu dans l'apparition même comme réapparition du disparu« (SM, p. 25). Anachronism is essential to spectrality: the spectre, interrupting all specularity, desynchronizes time. The very essence of spectrality is to be found in this undecidability between flesh and spirit: it is not purely body – for in that case there would be no spectrality at all; but it is no pure spirit either – for the passage through the flesh is crucial if we are going to have a spectre. »Car il n'y a pas de fantôme, il n'y a jamais de devenir-spectre de l'esprit sans au moins une apparence de chaire, dans un espace de visibilité invisible, comme dis-paraître d'une apparition. Pour qu'il y a du phantôme, il faut un retour au corps, mais à un corps plus abstraît que jamais. Le processus spectrogène répond donc à une *incorporation* paradoxale. Une fois l'idée ou la pensée (*Gedanke*) détachées de leur substrat, on engendre du phantôme en leur *donnant du corps*« (SM, p. 202).

From this point onwards, Derrida makes a classic deconstructive move: the spectre being undecidable between the two extremes of body and spirit, these extremes themselves become contaminated by that undecidability. Thus, having showed how, in Marx's analysis of commodity, exchange value depends for its constitution on a spectral logic, Derrida concludes that this logic is not absent from use value either: »Ladite valeur d'usage de ladite chose sensible ordinaire, la *hylè* simple, le bois de la table de bois dont Marx suppose qu'elle n'a pas encore commencé à 'danser', il a bien fallu que sa forme même, la forme qui informe sa *hylè*, la promette au moins à l'iterabilité, à la substitution à l'exchange, à la valeur, et qu'elle amorce, si peu que ce soit, une idéalisation qui permette de l'identifier comme la même à travers des répétitions possibles, etc. Pas plus qu'il n'y a d'usage pur, il n'y a aucune *valeur d'usage* que la possibilité de l'échange et du commerce ... n'inscrive d'avance dans un *hors-d'usage* – signification débordante qui ne se réduit pas à l'inutile« (SM, p. 254). In the same way, if the spirit is something whose invisibility has to produce its own visibility of the invisible, nothing is more difficult than to keep a strict separation between spirit and spectre. Once this point has been reached, the conclusion follow quickly. We find in Marx an hauntology, an argument about spectrality being at the very heart of the constitution of the social link. Time being »out of joint«, dislocation corrupting the identity with itself of any present, we have a constitutive anachronism which is at the root of any identity. Any »life« emerges out of a more basic life/death dichotomy – it is not »life« as uncontaminated presence but »survie« which is the condition of any presence. Marx, however, attempted the critique of the hauntological from the perspective of an ontology. If the spectre inhabits the root of the social link in bourgeois society, the transcendence of the latter, the arrival to a time which is no longer »out of joint«, the realization of a society fully reconciled with itself, will open the way to the »end of ideology« – i.e. to a purely »ontologi-

cal« society which, after the consummation of the proletarian millennium, will look to hauntology as its past. Hauntology is inherent to politics – so, the transcendence of the split between being and appearance will mean the end of politics. (We could, actually, put the argument in Saint-Simonian terms: the transition from the government of men to the administration of things.) If, however, the deconstructive reading shows that »ontology« – full reconciliation – is unachievable, that time is constitutively »out of joint«, that the ghost is the condition of possibility of any present, politics becomes also constitutive of the social link. We could say of the spectre what Groucho Marx said about sex: it is going to stay with us for a while.

This contamination of presence by the spectre can be considered from the two perspectives involved in a double genetive. There are, in the first place, spectres of Marx, as far as Marx himself – an abbreviation for communism – is haunting us today as a horizon preventing the possibility of being finally exorcised by the apparently triumphant capitalist »democracies« (here the main reference is Fukuyama). But there are also spectres of Marx, as far as they were those that visited Marx himself and prevent him from establishing a non-haunting ontology. Thus, the ground that we reach – that of a present never identical with itself – is the very terrain of this phantasmatic, non-essential practice that we call politics.

What to comment about this Derridean sequence? A first remark – first both temporally and logically – is that I have nothing to object to. The deconstructive operation is impeccable, the horizons that it opens are far reaching and the intertextuality within which it takes place is highly illuminating. However, as any deconstruction worth of the name, there is a plurality of directions one can move out of it, and it is to consider this plurality that I would like to pause for a moment. My own work has largely concentrated on the deconstruction of Marxist texts and I could, *prima facie*, relate what I have called hegemonic logic[1] – which silently deconstructs Marxist categories – to the logic of the spectre as described by Derrida. Not only me – there have been several recent attempts to link »deconstruction« and »hegemony«. Simon Critchley, for instance, in a recent piece, has asserted: »Against the troubling tendency to subordinate the political to the socio-economic within Marx's »ontology« ... Derrida's argument for a logic of spectrality within Marxism can be linked to the claim for the irreducability of the political understood as the moment where the sedimented meanings of the socio-economic are contested.

[1] The basic formulation concerning the concept of »hegemony« can be found in E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist strategy*, Verso, London 1985, chapters 3 and 4. I have reformulated the basic dimensions of this concept, linking it more closely to the category of »dislocation« in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso, London 1990.

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«.[2]

I hesitate, however, before entirely endorsing such an apparently obvious assimilation. The reason for this is that, although there is no incompatibility between hegemony and spectral logic as far as the latter goes, a hegemonic logic presupposes some further steps beyond spectrality which I am not sure that Derrida is prepared to take: These steps are essentially two:

1. Spectrality presupposes, as we have seen, an undecidable relation between spirit and flesh which contaminate, in turn, these two poles. It presupposes, in that sense, a weakened form of incarnation. Weakened because a full incarnation – an incarnation in the Christian sense – transforms the flesh into a purely transparent medium through which we can see an *entirely* spiritual reality without any connection with its incarnating body. God's mediation is what establishes the link between spirit and flesh as far as He is at an infinite distance from both. So, the lack of natural connection between both poles is what transforms the flesh into the medium through which the spirit shows itself, but, at the same time, it is this lack of connection which prevents the contamination of one by the other. No doubt that Christian polarity can be deconstructed in turn, but the important point is that this deconstruction will not pass through the collapse of the frontier between spirit and spectre. For in the spectre the relation between spirit and flesh is much more intimate: there is no divine mediation which both sanctions and supersedes the essential heterogeneity of the two poles. Now, a hegemonic relation is one in which a certain body presents itself as the incarnation of a certain spirit. The hegemonic relation is certainly spectral: a certain body tries to present *its* particular features as the expression of something transcending its own particularity. The body is in an undecidable point in which universality and particularity get confused, but the very fact that other bodies compete to be the incarnating ones, that they are alternative forms of materialization of the same »spirit«, suggest a kind of autonomization of the latter which cannot only be explained by the pure logic of spectrality.

2. Of what does this autonomization consist? This is our second step. Let us remember that any step which is taken out of the logic of spectrality cannot

[2] S. Critchley, »On Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*«, paper delivered in October 1994 to the meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Seattle.

be in contradiction to the latter but has, on the contrary, to presuppose it. If the autonomization of the »spirit« is to take place within spectrality, »autonomy« cannot mean identity with oneself, self-representation, because that would, precisely, restore a rigid frontier between »spirit« and »spectre«. But autonomy does not require full identity as its precondition: it can also emerge out of a constitutive impossibility, an absolute limit whose forms of representation will be necessarily inadequate. Let us suppose a situation of generalized social disorder: in such a situation »order« becomes the name of an absent fullness, and if that fullness is constitutively unachievable it cannot have any content of its own, any form of self-representation. »Order« becomes thus autonomous vis-à-vis any particular order as far as is the name of an absent fullness that no concrete social order can achieve (and the same can be said of similar terms such as »revolution«, »unity of the people«, etc.). That fullness is present, however, as that which is absent and needs as a result to be represented in some way. Now, its means of representation will be constitutively inadequate, for they can only be particular contents which assume, in certain circumstances a function of representation of the impossible universality of the community. This relation, by which a certain particular content overflows its own particularity and becomes the incarnation of the absent fullness of society is, exactly, what I call a hegemonic relation. As we can see, it presupposes the logic of the spectre: the fullness of the »spirit«, as it has no content of its own, can only exist through its parasitic attachment to some particular body; but that body is subverted and deformed in its own particularity as it becomes the embodiment of fullness. This means, *inter alia*, that the anachronistic language of revolutions, which Marx refers to and Derrida analyses is inevitable: the old revolution is present in the new one, not in its particularity but in its universal function of being *a* revolution, as the incarnation of the revolutionary principle as such. And the Marxian aspiration of a revolutionary language which only expresses the present, in which the »content« overcomes »phraseology« is a pure impossibility. If the fullness of the revolution – as all fullness – is unachievable, we cannot have but a dissociation between the revolutionary content and the fullness of a pure revolutionary foundation, and this dissociation will reproduce *sine die* the logic of spectrality and the split between »phraseology« and »content«.

What precedes is an attempt at showing the type of move that I would make out of the logic of spectrality. But, as I said, it is not the only move that one can make. The steps which lead from the logic of spectrality to a hegemonic logic are steps which the former logic makes certainly possible, but not necessary corollaries derived from it.

But what political consequences does Derrida himself draw from his

deconstruction of Marx's texts? Although these consequences are not entirely developed in his book, we can have a broad hint of the direction that Derrida is taking, if we move to our second theme: the question of the messianic.

The Question of the Messianic

Let us quote Derrida again. After having indicated that both Marxism and religion share the formal structure of a messianic eschatology, he asserts: »Si elle [the messianic eschatology] leur est commune [to Marxism and religion], à la différence près du contenu ... c'est aussi que sa structure formelle les déborde ou les précède. Eh bien, ce qui reste aussi irréductible à toute déconstruction, ce qui demeure aussi indéconstructible que la possibilité même de la déconstruction, c'est peut-être une certain expérience de la promesse émancipatoire; c'est peut-être même la formalité d'un messianisme structurel, un messianisme sans religion, un messianique, même, sans messianisme, une idée de la justice – que nous distinguons toujours du droit et même des droits de l'homme – et une idée de la démocratie – que nous distinguons de son concept actuel et de ses prédicats déterminées aujourd'hui« (SM, p. 102).

Here Derrida summarizes themes that he developed in full in *Force de loi*[3]. These themes and concepts require, however, that they are reinserted in the various discursive contexts within which they were originally formulated, firstly because these contexts considerably diverge between themselves and, secondly, because the high metaphoricity of some of the categories employed – such as the messianic – can lead to an undue association of those categories with the concrete phenomena to which they are usually applied. I cannot properly do this job in the limited space of a review, but let us, at least, make some precisions. By the »messianic« we should not understand anything *directly* related to actual messianic movements – of the present or the past – but, instead, something belonging to the general structure of experience. It is linked to the idea of »promise«. This does not mean this or that particular promise, but the promise implicit in an originary opening to the »other«, to the imprevisible, to the pure *event* which cannot be mastered by any aprioristic discourse. Such an event is an interruption in the normal course of things, a radical dislocation. This leads to the notion of »justice« as linked to an absolute singularity which cannot be absorbed by the generality of law. The chasm between law and justice is one which cannot be closed. The existence of this chasm is what makes deconstruction possible. Deconstruction and justice – or, rather, deconstruction *as* justice – is that which cannot be deconstructed. Deconstructing law – which is finally what politics is about – is possible

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[3] J. Derrida, »Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'«, in D. Cornell et al. (ed.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992.

because of this structure of experience in which the messianic, the promise and justice are categories in a relation of mutual implication.

On the basis of these promises Derrida elaborates his concept of »democracy to come« (»*démocratie à venir*«). This »*à venir*« does not involve any teleological assertion – not even the limited one of a regulative idea – but simply the continual commitment to keep open the relation to the other, an opening which is always *à venir* for the other to which one opens oneself is never already given in any aprioristic calculation. To summarize: the messianism we are speaking about is one without eschatology, without pre-given promised land, without determinate content. It is simply the structure of promise which is inherent in all experience and whose lack of content – resulting from the radical opening to the event, to the other, is the very possibility of justice and gives its only meaning to the democracy to come. Singularity as the terrain of justice involves the radical undecidability which makes the decision possible. »Il s'agissait alors de penser une autre historicité ... une autre ouverture de l'événementalité comme historicité qui permît de ne pas y renoncer mais au contraire d'ouvrir l'accès à une pensée affirmative de la promesse messianique et émancipatoire comme promesse: comme *promesse* et non comme programme ou dessein onto-théologique ou téléo-eschatologique ... Mais à un certain point la promesse et la décision, c'est-à-dire la responsabilité, doivent leur possibilité à l'épreuve de l'indécidabilité qui en restera toujours la condition« (SM, pp. 125-26).

What to say about the various theoretical operations that Derrida performs starting from this conceptual construction? I think that we can distinguish here three levels. The first refers to the deconstruction of the concept of messianism that we have inherited from the religious but also from the Marxist tradition. This deconstruction proceeds by showing the contingent character of the articulations which have coalesced around the actual historical messianism. We can do away with the teleological and eschatological dimensions, we can even do away with all the actual contents of the historical messianisms but what we cannot do away with is the »promise«, because the latter is inscribed in the structure of all experience. This, as we have seen, is not a promise of anything concrete, it is some sort of »existential«, as far as it is what prevents any presence from being closed around itself. If we link this to the relation law/justice, undecidability/decisions, we can see the general movement of Derrida's theoretico-political intervention, which is to lead back the historico-political forms to the primary terrain of their opening to the radically heterogeneous. This is the terrain of a constitutive undecidability, of an experience of the impossible which, paradoxically, makes possible responsibility, the decision, law and – finally – the messianic itself in its actual historical forms. I find myself in full agreement with this movement.

Derrida's argument, however, does not stop here. From this first movement (and, for reasons that will become clear presently, I keep this »from« deliberately vague, undecided between the derivative and the merely sequential) he passes to a sort of ethico-political injunction by which all the previously mentioned dimensions converge in the project of a democracy to come which links with the classical notion of »emancipation«. Derrida is very firm in his assertion that he is unprepared to put at all the latter into question. But we have to be very careful about the meaning of such a stand, because the classical notion of emancipation is no more than another name for the eschatological messianism that he is trying to deconstruct.

We have to differentiate here between various aspects. If by reasserting the classical notion of emancipation Derrida does not mean anything beyond his particular way of reasserting messianism – i.e. doing away with all the teleo-ontological paraphernalia of the latter and sticking to the moment of the »promise« – then I would certainly agree with him, but in that case the classic idea of emancipation, even if we retain from it an ultimately undeconstructible moment, is deeply transformed. I find it rather misleading to call this operation a defence of the classic notion of emancipation. But – second aspect – the classic notion of emancipation was something more than the formal structure of the promise. It was also the crystallization and synthesis of a series of contents such as the elimination of economic exploitation and all forms of discrimination, the assertion of human rights, the consolidation of civil and political freedom, etc. Derrida, understandably, does not want to renounce to this patrimony and it would be difficult not to join him in its defence. The difficulty, however, is that in the classic notion of emancipation the defence and grounding of all those contents were intimately connected to the teleological eschatology that Derrida is deconstructing. So, if he wants to maintain the results of his deconstruction and, at the same time to defend those contents, as the ground of the latter can no longer be an eschatological articulation, there are only two ways opened to him: either to show that those contents can be derived from the »promise« as a general structure of experience; or to sustain that those contents are grounded in something less than such a general structure – in which case the »promise« as such is indifferent to the actual nature of those contents.

There is, finally, a third aspect to be distinguished. The previous distinctions have to be put against the background of what is the real target of Derrida's discussion in *Spectres de Marx:* the exposure of a prevalent common sense (that he exemplifies through his brilliant critique of Fukuyama) according to which the collapse of the communist regimes would have meant the entering of humanity in a final stage in which all human needs will be satisfied and in which no messianic consummation of times is any longer to be expected.

Derrida reacts against this new dominant consensus and its Hegelo-Kojèvian grounding by showing, at empirical level, the gap between historical reality and the satisfied image of itself of the capitalist West and, at the theoretical level, the inconsistencies of the notion of an end of History. It is against the background of this polemic that the whole discourse about the always returning spectres of Marx has to be understood. What Derrida is finally saying is that isolated demands, grievances, injustices, etc. are not empirical residues of an historical stage which has – in all essentials – been superseded, but that they are, on the contrary, the symptoms of a fundamental deadlock of contemporary societies that pushes isolated demands to some kind of phantasmatic articulation which will result in new forms of political reaggregation. The latter are not specified beyond Derrida's quick allusions to the historical limits of the »party« form and to a »New International« in the making. It is however clear that any advance in formulating a theory of political reaggregation crucially depends on how the transition between the general structure of experience – the promise – and the contents of the classical emancipatory project is conceived.

This is the third level at which the argument of *Spectres de Marx* can be considered: the type of link which it establishes between the promise as a (post-) transcendental or (post-) ontological (non-) ground and the ethical and political contents of an emancipatory project. This is the level at which I find the argument of *Spectres* less convincing. For here an illegitimate logical transition can easily be made. I am not necessarily asserting that Derrida is making that transition but, at any rate, it is one frequently made by many defenders of deconstruction and one to which the very ambiguity of the Derridian texts gives some credence. The illegitimate transition is to think that from the impossibility of a presence closed in itself, from an »ontological« condition in which the openness to the event, to the heterogeneous, to the radically other is constitutive, some kind of ethical injunction to be responsible and to keep oneself open to the heterogeneity of the other necessary follows. This transition is illegitimate for two reasons. Firstly, because if the promise is an »existential« constitutive of all experience, it is always already there, before any injunction. (It is like the voluntaristic argument criticised by Ortega y Gasset: on the one hand it asserts that life is constitutive insecurity; on the other, it launches the imperative *Vivere pericolosamente*, as if to do it or not to do it was a matter of choice). But, secondly and most importantly, from the fact that there is the impossibility of ultimate closure and presence, it does not follow that there is an ethical imperative to »cultivate« that openness or even less to be necessarily committed to a democratic society. I think that the later can certainly be defended from a deconstructionist perspective, but that defence cannot be logically derived from constitutive openness – something

more has to be added to the argument. Precisely because of the undecidability inherent in constitutive openness, ethico-political moves different or even opposite to a democracy »to come« can be made – e.g. that as there is ultimate undecidability and, as a result, no immanent tendency of the structure to closure and full presence, closure has to be *artificially* brought about from the outside. In that way a case for totalitarianism can be presented starting from deconstructionist premises. Of course, the totalitarian argument would be as much a *non sequitur* as the argument for democracy: the decision to move in one or the other direction are equally possible given the situation of structural undecidability.

We have so far presented our argument concerning the non-connection between structural undecidability and ethical injunction, starting from the »ontological« side. But if we move to the »normative« side, the conclusions are remarkably similar. Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that openness to the heterogeneity of the other is an *ethical* injunction. If one takes this propositions at face value, one is forced to conclude that we have to accept the other as different *because* she is different, whatever the content of that heterogeneity would be. This does not sound very much like an ethical injunction, but as ethical nihilism. And if the argument is reformulated by saying that openness to the other does not necessarily mean passive acceptance of her but rather active engagement which includes criticizing her, attacking her, even killing her, the whole argument starts looking rather vacuous: what else do people do all the time without any need for an ethical injunction?

And, however, I think that deconstruction *has* important consequences for both ethics and politics. These consequences, however, depend on deconstruction's ability to go down to the bottom of its own radicalism and avoid becoming entangled in all the problems of a Levinasian ethics (whose proclaimed aim: to present ethics as *first* philosophy, should look from the start suspicious to any deconstructionist). I see the matter this way. Undecidability should be literally taken as that condition from which no course of action necessarily follows. This means that we should not make it the necessary source of *any* concrete decision in the ethical or political sphere. That is, that in a first movement deconstruction extends undecidability – i.e. that which makes the decision necessary – to deeper and larger areas of social relations. The role of deconstruction is, from this perspective, to *reactivate* the moment of decision which underlie any *sedimented* set of social relations. The political and ethical significance of this first movement is that by enlarging the area of structural undecidability it enlarges also the area of responsibility – that is, of the decision. (In Derridean terms: the requirements of justice become more complex and multifacetic vis-à-vis law.)

But this first movement is immediately balanced by another one of the opposite sign, which is also essential to deconstruction. It would be wrong to think of undecidability as a bottomless abyss which underlies any self-sufficient »presence«. This approach still maintains too much of the imagery of the »ground«. The duality undecidability/decision is simply something which belongs to the logic of any structural arrangement. De-grounding is, in this sense, also part of an operation of grounding, except that grounding is no longer to refer something back to a foundation which would act as a principle of derivation but, instead, to reinscribe that something within the terrain of the undecidables (iteration, re-mark, differance, etc.) which make its emergence possible. So, to go back to our problem, it is no longer a question of finding a ground from which an ethical injunction should be *derived* (even less to make of undecidability itself such a ground). We live as *bricoleurs* in a plural world, having to take decisions within incomplete systems of rules (incompletion means here undecidability) and some of these rules are ethical ones. It is because of this constitutive incompletion that decisions have to be taken, but because we are faced with incompletion and not with total dispossession, the problem of a *total* ethical grounding – either through the opening to the otherness of the other, or through any similar metaphysical principle – never arises. »The time is out of joint«, but because of that there is never a beginning – nor an end – of time. Democracy does not need – and cannot be – radically grounded. To move to a more democratic society we can only do through a plurality of acts of democratization. The consummation of times – as Derrida knows well – never arrives. Not even as a regulative idea.

This leaves us, however, with a problem: how to conceive of emancipation within this framework? What kind of collective reaggregation is open to us once we have moved away from the eschatological dimension of the classical emancipatory model? This will be my last discussion and I will broach it by locating Derrida's intervention within the tradition of critique and reformulation of Marxism.

The Question of the Tradition

Derrida very cogently sustains that one only thinks from within a tradition and shows that this thinking is only possible if one conceives one's relation with that past as a critical reception. Now, the reception of Marxism since the turn of the century has turned, in my view, around the discussion of two capital and interrelated issues: 1) how to make compatible – if it can be done at all – the various contradictory aspects of Marx's thought – as, in Derrida's version the relation between the »ontological« and the »phantasmatic«; 2) how to think forms of reaggregation of political wills and social demands once the obvious-

ness of the identification of the working class with the emancipatory agency started to dissolve. It is my contention that the deconstructionist intervention represents a crucial turn in connection with both issues. To show it, let us recapitulate the broad lines of the main classical attempt at recasting Marxism.

1) A first tendency represents the accentuation of the ontological dimension (in the Derridean sense) of Marx's thought. The absolute reconciliation of society with itself will arrive as a result of the elimination of all forms of distorted representation. The latter will be the consequence of the proletarian revolution. This tendency can be found in a vulgar materialist version (e.g. Plekhanov) or in an apparently more »superstructuralist« one, centered in the notion of »false consciousness« (as in Lukàcs). There is here no reaggregation of collective wills (the revolutionary agent is the working class) and human emancipation is fixed in its contents by a fully fledged eschatology.

2) The various forms of »ethical« socialism, to be found in Bernstein and in some currents of Austro-Marxism. The common feature of all these tendencies is a return to a Kantian dualism. Here the ontological dimension becomes weaker: the »necessary laws of history« become more erratic, the agent of emancipation becomes more contingent and indeterminate and the *Endziel* loses most of its eschatological precision. However, the determinacy which has been lost at the level of an objective history is retrieved at the level of an ethical regulative idea. The moment of the political decision is as absent as in Marxist orthodoxy.

3) The Sorelian-Gramscian tradition. It is here that the phantasmatic dimension finally takes the upper hand. The anchorage of social representations in the ontological bedrock of an objective history, starts dissolving. The unity of the class is, for Sorel, a mythical unity. For Gramsci, the unity of a collective will results from the constitutive role of an organic ideology. History becomes an open and contingent process which does not reflect any deeper underlying reality. Two aspects are important for us: a) the link between concrete material forces and the function that they fulfil in the classical Marxist scheme become loose and indeterminate. »Collective will«, »organic ideology«, »hegemonic group«, etc. become empty forms which can be filled by any imaginable political and social content. They are certainly anchored in a dialectics of emancipation, but as the latter is not necessary linked to any particular content, it becomes something like an »existential« of historical life and is no longer the announcement of a concrete event. Now, is this not something like a deconstruction of eschatological messianism, the autonomization of the messianic promise from the contents that it is attached to in »actually existing« messianisms? b) the distinction between the ethical and the political is blurred. The

moment of the ethico-political is presented as a unity. This can, of course, be given a Hegelian interpretation, but my argument is that this would be a wrong reading for what is really at stake in Gramsci's intervention is a politization of ethics as far as the acts of institution of the social link are contingent acts of decision which presuppose relations of power. This is what gives its »ontological« primacy to politics and to »hegemony« as the logic governing any political intervention.

I have said enough to make clear that for me it is only as an extension and radicalization of this last tendency that deconstruction can present itself both as a moment of its inscription in the Marxist tradition as well as a point of turning/deepening/supersession of the latter. My optimistic reading of *Spectres de Marx* is that it represents a step forward in the prosecution of this task. The main stumbling block that I still see for this to be accomplished – at least as far as Derrida is concerned – is that the ambiguity previously pointed out between undecidability as a terrain of radicalization of the decision and undecidability as the source of an ethical injunction is still hovering in Derrida's texts. As far as this ambiguity is, however, superseded deconstruction can become one of the most powerful tools at hand for thinking strategically.

This rethinking of politics in a deconstructive fashion can (if we start from the Marxist tradition) produce three types of effect. In the first place, if we are thinking in our third tendency within Marxism, we can recast and extend its system of categories far beyond the intellectual tools to which Sorel or Gramsci had access. This recasting in terms of the logic of *différance* can open the way to much more refined forms of strategic thinking.

Secondly, the logics of hegemonic reaggregation face, in the contemporary world, much more serious challenges than those that a Gramsci was confronted with. Our societies are far less homogeneous that those in which the Marxian models were formulated and the constitution of the collective wills take place in terrains crossed by far more complex relations of power – as a result, *inter alia*, of the development of the mass media. The dissolution of the metaphysics of presence is not a purely intellectual operation. It is profoundly inscribed in the whole experience of the last decades. Deconstruction, as a result, faces the challenge of reinscribing the Marxian model in this complex experience of present day society.

Finally, operating deconstructively within Marx's texts can help in a third vitally important task: reinscribing Marxism itself and each one of its discursive components as a partial moment in the wider history of emancipatory discourses. Derrida is quite right in combating the current amnesia of the Marxist tradition. But let us not make the opposite mistake and think that the history of Marxism overlaps with the history of emancipatory projects. Many

more ghosts that those of Marx are actually visiting and re-visiting us. Benjamin's angel should become a symbol constantly reminding us of our complex and multi-layered tradition. I remember that during my childhood, in Argentina, in the cinemas of continuous performance there was an announcement saying »The performance begins when you arrive«. Well, I think that »emancipation« is the opposite: it is a performance to which we always arrive late and which forces us to guess, painfully, about its mythical or impossible origins. We have, however, to engage ourselves in this impossible task which is, among other things, what gives its meaning to deconstruction.

A significant contribution to one of the most important strains of current political theory...

RECONSIDERING THE POLITICAL

Edited by David Howarth and Aletta J. Norval
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Reconsidering the Political centres on a rethinking of the political in late modernity from a poststructuralist perspective. It includes international contributions dealing with the form and character of political spaces and institutions in the present; contemporary theoretical debates concerning the relationship between state and civil society, and politics and ethics; as well as more concrete historical analyses.

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