

Michael Roland Hernandez

Marx is not a Marxist

*The Ghost of "To Come" and the Technological Transformation
Of Labor and the Life of Capital*

Introduction

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real improvement which abolishes the present state of things . . . ¹

What, Marx seems to say, the genius of a great poet – and the spirit of a great father – will have uttered in a poetic flash, (. . .) is the becoming-god of gold, which is at once ghost and idol, a god apprehended by the senses.²

Derrida on Marx

Derrida's deconstruction of Marx works upon the recognition that there can be different interpretations and appropriations of Marx and his agenda. One must open oneself to these spirits of Marx that haunt the self-complacency of the present and recognize the responsibility inherent in the desire for the achievement of an emancipated proletariat where all is united in universal justice and brotherhood. What has Karl Marx seen into the future that Jacques Derrida has also foreseen?

¹Karl Marx, "The Materialist Conception of History," in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 171.

²Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, Routledge, 1994), 42.

What prompted Marx, along with Nietzsche and Freud, to exorcise the ghosts of religion and pushed him into the project of emancipation from the totalitarianism of the "modern"³ and of "capital" towards that proletarian liberationist utopia necessarily associated with his communism? Within this spirit of Marx's search for a communist utopia, Derrida contextualizes his deconstruction as a participation in the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment,⁴ as a rethinking of its axioms and truths, so as to better translate them in the light of "what should be the Enlightenment of our time."⁵

Derrida's deconstruction of Marx works upon the insistence on the presence of the ghost of Marx that continues to haunt the present time of capitalism. When Marx unleashed "the specter of communism"⁶ that was to haunt Europe in 1848, a common holy alliance was forged to conjure away this specter, the ghost of communism. By summoning all the powers of the capital, the specter must be put to death and all its effects exorcised so as to preserve the hegemony of the holy capitalist alliance—the symbol of old Europe.⁷ It is the exorcism of this ghost of Marx and of communism that was to characterize the struggles within the last century (the 20th) as the century of Marxism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, the celebrated triumph of capitalism, as Francis Fukuyama claimed in his *The End of History and the*

³Jacques Derrida associates the "modern" with the "imperative for totalitarianism" in his *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 42.

⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 88.

⁵Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-94*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 428.

⁶See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1951).

⁷Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 99-100.,

Last Man,⁸ becomes inevitable as the “apogee of human history.”⁹ The many evils endlessly brought about by capitalism, however, will always already at the same time resurrect the ghost of justice. For Derrida, there is simply an obstinate refusal on the part of the ghost to simply go away because in itself, “a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come back.”¹⁰ The specter of communism, endlessly conjured away by Christianity, will always come back to haunt the self-proclaimed complacency of capitalist societies. For this reason, these societies still cannot heave their “sigh of relief” and settle in the belief that once and for all, the enemy of the capital has been defeated. For Derrida, such power of the specter in the face of the capital will always be inscribed within the figure of the *revenant* whose inevitable coming is a promise that we must anticipate in hope and terror. In the face of such hopeful monstrosity, the nature of communism becomes clear to us: “communism has always been and will remain spectral: it is always still to come and is distinguished, like democracy itself, from every living present understood as plenitude of a presence-to-itself, as totality of a presence effectively identical to itself.”¹¹ This means that the specter of communism that Marx was talking about in 1848 “was there without being there. It was not yet there. It will never be there.”¹²

A Different Kind of Marxism

Derrida thus understands Marx’s project to be *haunted* by the phantom of a utopia that seeks to disturb the self-complacency of the *present* state of affairs constituted by the power of the capital. On the surface, this utopia serves to

⁸Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁹Georges de Schrijvers, *The Political Ethics of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 322.

¹⁰Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 100.

achieve the economic determination of the reality of use-value, to which Marx attributes an ontological status, as a "natural, uncorrupted, originary, self-identity"¹³ freed from the hegemonic spectral power of the capital. For Derrida, however, Marx's discourse was further "haunted" by another ghost operating on him from behind: the ghost of the religious which comes back to haunt him as the "messianic" and "eschatological" structure that underlies his utopia of a just [communist] society. The deceptive ghosts of religion that Marx tried to exorcise so as to achieve the ideal of social justice resurrect as the "haunting ghosts" that ultimately give Marxism and its utopia their emancipatory "spirit."¹⁴

For Derrida, Marx was able to foresee into the future of what deconstruction aspires at in its most radical form. This foreseeing consists in being inspired by what John Caputo calls as "an irreducible and powerful 'messianic' spirit, (. . .) an irreducible religious aspiration and respiration' towards a future justice to come 'that breaks the spell of the living present and haunts our present projects.'"¹⁵ It is on account of this future utopia, of the specter of justice to come, that Marxism becomes ironically haunted by the very ghost of religion that it wishes to exorcise. Marx did away with religion and its illusions in order to free and to prepare man for the inevitable coming of communist justice; only to be haunted back by the specter of a justice to come which can only come from the "religious," i.e., from a certain messianic and eschatological structure discernible only in religion.

Evidently, such deconstruction reveals itself oriented towards a different appreciation of Marx's project, away from the Orthodox forms that has characterized the Soviet, Chinese, and other communisms of the twentieth to the present centuries. Derrida himself cautions us that his project is not one that will be pleasing to the Marxists; rather, this

¹³Ibid., 159.

¹⁴Ibid., 166-7.

¹⁵John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 122.

deconstruction is a *hauntology* that seeks to follow the ghost of Marx that has been exorcised not only by the capitalist powers of the old Europe but also, by a strange fear, by the communist institutions themselves. It is as if the spirit of Marx himself was cast off not only in the triumph of capitalism that Fukuyama has so boldly proclaimed but also in the theoretical solidification it assumed in the various modern totalitarianisms (Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism, etc.) we have witnessed with horror in the last two centuries. In this vein, Derrida's hauntology is itself a work of mourning:¹⁶ it is an attempt to locate the dead, the lost ghost within the ontologization provided by the desire to subsume everything into the mastery of knowledge. For Derrida, the Marxists themselves are as guilty of driving away the ghost of communist justice as the old powers of capitalist Europe. That this is the case is confirmed by the fact that the existence of the Communist Party, in the *Manifesto* in 1848, becomes "the final incarnation, the real presence of the specter" which ultimately marks "the end of the spectral."¹⁷ The party, to which the force of a properly political structure is bestowed, will serve as "the motor of the revolution, the transformation, the appropriation, then finally the destruction of the State, and the end of the political as such."¹⁸ That the specter ceases to be, however, is not contrary to what Marx is saying. Instead, for Marx, the specter which haunts Europe must become, eventually, "in the future, a present reality, that is, a living reality."¹⁹

What we see from the above are two ambivalent attitudes by Derrida in his reading of Marx. While he wishes to follow the ghost of Marx which seeks to liberate the majority of the suffering humanity from the fetters of inhumane existence, he is also fearful of the other ghosts of Marx which have abrogated unto themselves all the powers

¹⁶See Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 9ff.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 101. See also Marx, "The Materialist Conception of History," 171.

of this world in order to revolutionize the earth towards the communist vision of justice. It is these latter ghosts, which Derrida claims incarnated in Orthodox Marxisms that stand in complicity with the old capitalist powers. Possessed by the powers of the capital in the State and the newest technological apparatuses, these incarnated ghosts of Marx stand to perpetuate the hegemony of capital and replicate, if not worsen, the experience of suffering and injustice by the majority of humanity.

Within the age of modern technology therefore, Derrida proposes a selective exorcism of the ghosts of Marx. He doubts whether the established Marxisms will be able to combat human “alienation” and signal a greater “humanization” of the proletariat.²⁰ The solidification of all proletarian authority in the party is suspect for it tends to forget the demand for justice as its internal control mechanism and unavoidably transforms itself into a most subtle repetition of the hegemony of the capitalist structure. The historical repetition of violence in liberal democracies, constitutional monarchies, Nazism, Fascism, or Stalinism reveals the great evil possible when the “axiomatics of the party”²¹ are absolutized. Eventually, this leads to the possibility of despotism where the “liberated” proletariat is thrown at the mercy of an entirely worse, totalitarian scheme.²²

For this reason, Derrida sees the structure of the party as “radically unadapted to the new – tele-techno-media – conditions of public space, of political life, of democracy, and of the *new* modes of representation (both parliamentary and non-parliamentary) that they call up.”²³ In his typical Heideggerian fashion, Derrida suggests that the solidification of power and authority in the “party” is an evil that the

²⁰Similar idea is given in Schrijvers, *The Political Ethics of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida*, 323.

²¹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 102.

²²See Schrijvers, *The Political Ethics of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida*, 323.

²³Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 102.

Marxism of tomorrow must remove, or deconstruct, if we are to be labelled worthy of Marx's inheritance. This necessity for reflection must result to "a deconstruction of the traditional concepts of the State, and thus of party and labor union."²⁴ In the explosion of tele-technological, economic capitalist rationality,²⁵ there exists the necessity of thinking through the established notions of labor and capital and how they were transformed in the light of modern technology. For Derrida, the rethinking of these key concepts will help us determine which due course a relevant revolutionary struggle should take.

The Technological Transformation of Labor and Capital

We recall how in his *Capital*, Marx explains the nature of labor and capital. Situated within the context of the industrial revolution, Marx's definitions were oriented towards the realization that the surplus value of a particular commodity is ultimately traceable to human labor, which, in the last analysis bears the mark of human individuality. He understood labor as "a process (. . .) in which man of his accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature."²⁶ As expression of himself, it is the capacity which involves all "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description."²⁷ Now, within Marx's economic analysis, the fact that human labor can be sold at the whim of the human person himself becomes the source of the monstrous alienation resulting from the separation of the use-value from human labor. For Marx, what a person gives when he sells

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵See Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in *Acts of Religion*, trans. Samuel Weber (New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.

²⁶Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. F. Engels, trans. from the third German Edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1951), 85.

²⁷Ibid., 79.

his labor is his *capacity* to work and not the *product* of his labor.²⁸ The worker is not paid for the *value* of what he produces. Instead the capitalist, with money as capital,²⁹ merely pays for his labor so as to produce the commodity meant to be converted eventually into money again. With money as end, the capitalist becomes the source and center of the separation of the worker from the fruits of his labor. This process of separation—the essence of alienation and dehumanization—is the essence of capitalism: a system only able to sustain itself through the exploitation of labor.

Without going into the intricate computations of labor and capital within Marx's brilliant analysis, the logic of his economic discourse leads us to the inevitable conclusion about capitalism's self-mandated demise. The capitalists will eventually come to a point when the misery, oppression, degradation, servitude and exploitation, will become so great that it will arouse the indignation of the working class. The injustice brought about by capitalism will lead to "the seizure of the means of production by the workers themselves and the placing of production under social control" — revolution.³⁰

Given such brief summary, the validity of the Marxist analysis before, as it is now, is hard to deny. The emphasis on money-making and marketability over use-value of the product transforms the center of economic exchange from the human being to the "spectrality" of money.³¹ Caught within the web of money-exchange, the value of the human person

²⁸See Eugene Kamenka, "Introduction" in the *Portable Karl Marx* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Viking Penguin Inc., 1983), xxxvi.

²⁹Marx defines capital as the money that has transformed itself into a commodity which is then later exchanged again into more money (see Marx, *Capital*, 69). The capitalist is the seller whose aim is "to recover money" (70), the "restless never-ending process of profit-making alone" (72).

³⁰Kamenka, "Introduction," xxxviii.

³¹See Schrijvers, *The Political Ethics of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida*, 324.

becomes erased in the ghostly appearance of money that has effectively transferred work-value from the person himself to impersonal capital. Such emphasis on the spectrality of money creates a veil, a camouflage that prevents us from seeing the injustice that is necessarily inscribed within the capitalist financial system.

Taking over the validity of the Marxist analysis, Derrida pursues the conclusions of Marx's *Capital* within the context of today's modern technology. Going further, he claims that the spectral power of money enchants modern man into the "theologizing fetishization" that signals the perversion resulting from the "becoming-god of gold."³² By linking the spectral ideology of money to the question of religion, Derrida acknowledges the similar mystifying effects that both money and religion has to the human person. Although, it might be accidental that they often go together, the enchantment caused by the mystical power of money eventually results to the loss of authentic human relations in favor of the exchange-relation between commodities themselves. Consequently, the predominance of money (or the money-form),³³ through ghostly commodities, eventually "transform human producers into ghosts."³⁴ Having become ghosts, human social relations vanish into phantomized social bonds.³⁵

In our present time which I will dare to characterize as the "reign of the virtual," Marx and Derrida's analyses take a more disturbing but also deeply liberating form. The rise of modern technological apparatuses and gadgets, the inclusion of man within inescapable social bonds and technological spaces demand that the new face of revolutionary class struggle take them into account. In the reign of the virtual, the experience of labor and capital take new forms and significance. Where products and the social

³²Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 42.

³³See Marx's discussion of the currency of money in *Capital*, 52-3.

³⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 156.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

bonds have become virtualized, they acquire a life of their own, relating in manifold ways within and outside the whole economic circulation of labor and capital. In this case, Derrida reminds us that the predominance of the technological

obliges us more than ever to think the virtualization of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever (more and otherwise than ever, for this is not absolutely and thoroughly new) from opposing presence to its representation, “real time” to “deferred time.” Effectivity to its simulacrum, the living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living dead of its ghosts.³⁶

The possibility of virtual labor and the virtualization of capital, which arrogates surreptitiously manifold forms of authority, power and money unto itself, demands that we rethink of alternative ways of addressing the problem of alienation, dehumanization and injustice. The crude view of labor as the sum total of all human capacities in order to produce use-value or commodities and of capital as (simply or complexly) equated to money-form can no longer address the monstrosity coming from modern technology. This sort of technological monstrosity demands that we look for better and more relevant ways to combat the alienation and dehumanization that comes from the power of the capital. This is a demand that we think, from the experience of modern technology, “another space for democracy,”³⁷ that is, for a democracy and justice to-come.

The Inheritance of the Revolution

To think of revolution therefore demands that a singular experience of justice and democracy be reconciled with the virtual reality of the simulacrum that techno-science

³⁶Ibid., 169.

³⁷Ibid.

or tele-media-technology is revealing to us. We have to make a revolution that addresses the demand of that “to-come” of justice in a manner that transforms the “virtual space of all tele-technosciences” into a space in which human beings can dwell, that is, where they can be free to realize their own humanity.³⁸ This virtual space for freedom must move away from any attempt to ontologize the notion of class struggle as an absolute, univocal notion; instead, it must be dynamically construed so as to open itself to the coming of a future justice and democracy to-come. For this reason, we must also revolutionize the very notion of the “party” insuring it from complicity with the hegemonic powers that be—particularly the notion of the state and the mystical power of the capital. We must render these virtual spaces “habitable, but without killing the future in the name of old frontiers.”³⁹ For Derrida thus, a revolution must move away from the theoretical and practical limitations of the nation-state so as to prevent the party from repeating the evils of capitalism. If the party is not able to insure itself from the seductive effects of power and capital, it will ultimately end up translating the inescapable language of oppression. Turning worse than the capitalists, the absolutized party may end up “[l]ike those of the blood, nationalisms of the native soil [that] not only sow hatred, not only commit crimes, [but that] they have no future, they promise nothing even if, like stupidity or the unconscious, they hold fast to life.”⁴⁰

By linking the idea of revolution to a future justice or democracy to-come, Derrida suggests to us the possibility of a revolution that “takes the original form of a return of the religious.” For Derrida, the question of the “religious” is that

³⁸Here, the Heideggerian ghost is unmistakable. For Martin Heidegger, “[t]o dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its own essence” (Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 319-340: 327.

³⁹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 169.

⁴⁰Ibid.

which “overdetermines all questions of nation, State, international law, human rights, Bill of Rights . . . ”⁴¹ It is therefore the question which underlines all questions of politics and hence, of ethics.⁴² Through the religious, the link between politics and ethics is revealed as a responsibility demanded by the “impossible” – taken as the “that which exceeds” presence, thought, and language. In this vein, to speak of revolution in terms of the religious is to recognize the possibility of a universal structure within our experience that is recognized through the operation of *différance*. This universal structure is what Derrida calls as the “messianic” as distinguished from “messianisms.” While messianisms would refer to particular institutional religions (such as Islam, Judaism, or Christianity), the messianic is a universal structure which has to do with the “absolute structure of the promise, of an absolutely indeterminate, (. . .) a structural future, a future always to-come, *à venir*.”⁴³ The messianic is a structure of experience which *prevents* our present experience from being self-contained in its present. The messianic is what allows us to *encounter the other*, as “something that we could not anticipate, expect, fore-have, or fore-see, something that knocks our socks off, that brings us up short and takes our breath away.”⁴⁴ By virtue of the messianic structure, it is possible for us address “god” and the “other” with the word: “Come” [*Viens*]. It is what enables us to always pray, plead, and desire the coming of the Messiah.

In this vein, a revolution underlined by the religious must therefore take into account the universality of this messianic structure. This clarifies to us why “religion (. . .) was never one ideology among others for Marx.”⁴⁵ In religion

⁴¹Ibid., 167.

⁴²See Jacques Derrida, “*Tout Autre est Tout Autre*” in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 83-4.

⁴³John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 162.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 42.

(messianism), we find the very structure of fetishization as governed by the same structure in “idealization, autonomization and automatization”—processes which define human alienation both in traditional religion and capitalism. Yet, with the discovery of the “religious” (messianic) within religions (messianisms), we are made to understand that the structure of the present is always to open itself up to its future, to the impossible. Through *différance*, it becomes possible for the revolution to become a critique, a subversion of the existing states of affairs, of paradigms, of governments so as to keep the dynamic search for justice alive. A revolution understood through the religious can never rest, can never be self-complacent with the present states of affairs; rather, it must always move onwards to meet the demands of its responsibility for the justice of an impossible future to come. A true revolution of the proletariat demands the justice of a never-ending subversion of things in the light of that which is to-come, never to be absolutized in the party, never to be solidified in the many “isms” or orthodoxies in which we have captured the ghosts or the specters of Marx.

Conclusion: Why Marx is not a Marxist

Derrida’s selective exorcism of the good ghost of Marx from the bad ghosts of totalitarian systems reminds us that the meaning of the Marxist utopia is a never-ending search for the achievement of a universal justice to-come that unites all men into the equality of the brotherhood of the proletariat. Such desire for the Marxist utopia is a reminder that to “revive the specter” is to go beyond the present order of things so as to welcome the incoming or the invention of the other as our responsibility to the justice of the future-to-come. This means that in our understanding of Marx, we cannot be beholden to any interpretation that dictates to us what Marxism is or what Marxism is not. Simply, to revive the specter means that we cannot limit the understanding of Marx to its solidification in traditional Marxisms. As a practical corollary, we must put as suspect any violent

appropriation of Marx's ideas by totalizing political ideologies and parties.

Eugene Kamenka, one of the noted scholars on Karl Marx, writes that "Marx himself once proclaimed that he was no 'Marxist'."⁴⁶ Taking this cue from Marx himself, perhaps this reminds us that the demand of any serious philosophical undertaking cannot be reduced to what have been stereotyped presentations of what Marx wrote and said. Practically, this demands a responsibility from us, his readers, if we are worthy inheritors of his enlightenment, that we take the project of emancipation into our own hands in a way that does justice to our person, our lives and our bodies. Faithful to a true Marxist ontology, we, who are enframed within the modern technological world, must learn to work for that justice which, while it is to-come, must also be reflected in the material conditions of life—just as it is reflected in the words of the prophet Amos, "justice over the land." It is only when justice has been given to the human person's life and to his body that we can only say: "Long live the Specter!"

⁴⁶Kamenka, "Introduction," xlv. Derrida remarks that Marx actually confessed it to Engels (*Specters of Marx*, 34) while the two were on a drinking session. Many scholars on Marx insist on the need to distinguish Marx from Marxism(s), especially in its traditional authoritative form, that it is necessary to separate his originary thought from Engel's influence (see for instance Tom Rockmore, *Marx after Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002], xiii).

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