

DECONSTRUCTION AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE:
DERRIDA ON MARX AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

SPECTERS OF MARX: THE STATE OF THE DEBT, THE WORK OF MOURNING, AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL. By Jacques Derrida. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994. Pp. xx, 198.

Jacques Derrida's important theoretical and political intervention, *Specters of Marx*, attempts to formulate a social critique adequate to the post-1989 world.¹ Written in dark times when, as Derrida puts it, no ethics or politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable (xix), *Specters of Marx* delineates the contours of a critique of the contemporary world which calls for a fundamental break with the present. In the face of the new world order following the collapse of the Soviet Union and European Communism, and the widespread claims that Marx and Marxism are finally dead, Derrida takes a strong stand against the triumphalism of economic and political neo-liberalism. He scathingly criticizes capitalism, defiantly presents deconstruction as the heir of a certain spirit of Marx, and calls for a new International as a response to the new Holy Alliance of the outgoing twentieth century.

Derrida's theoretical strategy is complex: He argues that an adequate critique of the world today must positively appropriate Marx and yet fundamentally criticize him. Derrida seeks to contribute to such a social critique by separating out a certain "spirit of Marx" from what he regards as the ontologizing and dogmatic aspects of Marxism.

This strategy of appropriating and criticizing Marx in order to grasp the new world order implicitly suggests that an adequate social critique today must seriously engage the problematic of global capitalism, and that the tendency to bracket political-economic considerations which characterized a variety of critical approaches in the past two decades no longer is tenable. Derrida's strategy, then, implicitly requires developing and explicating the social-theoretical implications of deconstruction. And, as I will indicate, although his approach fruitfully raises and helps clarify a number of important issues, its limits emerge most clearly precisely when it is considered as a social critique that can grasp the contemporary world. This raises more general questions about the differences between a critical social theory and a critical philosophical position, and illuminates the limitations of the latter.

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I

Specters of Marx is divided into five chapters organized around the central conception of spectrality—that which is not identical with the present. This notion, which calls into question the givenness and necessity of the present order of things, is at the heart of Derrida's attempt to outline a critical theory of contemporary society that appropriates the emancipatory spirit of Marx's approach while providing a fundamental critique of contemporary capitalist society as well as of traditional Marxist theory and practice.

Derrida begins the work with a discussion of specters—those of Marx, who has been declared dead, and of Hamlet's father (3-4). As one who would claim the inheritance of Marx, Derrida thematizes implicitly the relation of the would-be heir to the ghost of the father. He does so in existential terms, with reference to the question of learning to live, which, he claims, requires coming to terms with death. This, in turn, entails coming to terms with the spectral, with ghosts. The ghost both is and is not. Hence, learning to live, Derrida implies, requires getting beyond Hamlet's "existential" opposition of being and not-being, life and death (xvii-xviii).

This indeterminacy has both personal/ethical and political/historical implications. As that which is and is not, the specter represents temporalities that cannot be grasped adequately in terms of present time. They include a past that has not passed (the ghosts of Marx and Hamlet's father) as well as a future that breaks with the present (Marx's image in *The Communist Manifesto* of the specter of communism haunting Europe) (3-4). These temporal dimensions, past and future, are related for Derrida; he states that there will be no future without the memory and inheritance of Marx, or at least one of his several spirits (13).

The notion of the past and future as temporalities not fully subsumed by present time is central to Derrida's conception of spectrality as the non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present. Spectrality entails temporal disjuncture; it expresses that which does not exist solely in the "chain of presents" (xix, 4, 25-27).

This conception of non-identical temporalities serves as the means by which Derrida in this work extends his earlier critique of phenomenology and of the metaphysics of presence. He relates the latter, along with the philosophical categories of substance, essence, and existence, to the domination of a present of homogeneous modular time, to time as the linking of modalized presents, and to any teleological order of history. His critique of the present as presence is undertaken from the standpoint of a politics based on the non-identical, non-presentist temporality of spectrality. Derrida characterizes this politics as one of responsibility to the past, to the dead—victims of war, violence, and oppression—and to the future, to those not yet born (xviii-xix, xxix, 25-27, 70-75).

Such a politics of memory, inheritance, and generations is related to Derrida's conception of justice. He notes that Hamlet, proclaiming time to be out of joint, curses his mission to do justice, in the sense of righting history. Derrida com-

ments that right or law stem from vengeance; as such, they are expressions of a system of equivalences that can only reproduce the present. This raises the question (implicitly informed by the notion of spectrality) of the possibility of a justice beyond right, a justice finally removed from the fatality of vengeance (21).

Heidegger also attempted to formulate an alternative notion of justice, a notion of justice beyond right (*Dikē*). However, according to Derrida, Heidegger associated such justice with jointure; hence, his notion of justice remained bound to the metaphysics of presence. Derrida's conception of justice beyond right distinguishes itself from Heidegger's inasmuch as it entails a relation to the other as other—and this, according to Derrida, requires disjointure or anachrony. Derrida's notion of justice, then, is related to spectrality (25-27).

In general, according to Derrida, deconstruction as a critical procedure is rooted in disjointure and anachrony. It abjures the closed totalizing horizon of juridical-moral rules, norms, or representations that foreclose the chance of the future. The future to which Derrida refers is related to his notion of spectrality; it is a future that, breaking basically with present time, no longer would belong to history (21).

At the center of Derrida's considerations, then, is a fundamental critique of presentism, of an existing order that presents itself as immutable. His critique is in the name of another future and a conception of justice beyond presence, beyond right and calculation. Derrida refers to such a critique as a "desert-like" messianic position, one without content and without an identifiable messiah, which he contrasts to the concrete, embodied, ultimately presentist character of eschatological, teleological, and apocalyptic positions (28).

Derrida's notion of the abstract messianic is the first indication in this work that, like his critique of logocentrism from the standpoint of the primacy of writing, one strand of the critical position he is developing is a critique of basic aspects of Christian Western thought from the secularized standpoint of its most fundamental other—the Jews. His appropriation of an aspect of the Jewish tradition as a refusal to come to terms with the given is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as well as of Max Horkheimer, who, in 1938, in still darker times, wrote: "[T]here are periods in which the status quo . . . has become evil. The Jews were once proud of abstract monotheism, . . . their refusal to make something finite an absolute. Their distress today points them back. Disrespect for anything mortal that puffs itself up as a god is the religion of those who cannot resist devoting their life to something better, even in the Europe of the Iron Heel."²

Having introduced the notion of the messianic, Derrida characterizes Marx's legacy in those terms, as a political injunction whose force ruptures and disarticulates time (30-31). Like spectrality, the emancipatory spirit of Marx's thought calls into question the sharp dividing line between actual present reality and

2. Max Horkheimer, "The Jews and Europe," in *Critical Theory and Society*, ed. Stephen E. Bronner and Douglas M. Kellner (New York and London, 1989), 94.

everything that can be opposed to it—a line drawn by the powers that be in order to reassure themselves. Derrida asserts that, in the face of the new world order, the lessons of the great works of Marx have become particularly urgent today. At the same time, appropriating one of Marx's spirits has become easier, given the collapse of European Communism and the dissolution of the Marxist ideological apparatuses. Under these circumstances, neglecting Marx becomes a failing of theoretical, philosophical, and political responsibility (11, 13).

Derrida's conceptions of spectrality and the messianic, then, provide the framework for his attempt to positively appropriate Marx's legacy. These conceptions also provide the standpoint for his critique of neo-liberal triumphalism and teleological eschatology—both of which are combined in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. Derrida treats this book as exemplary of the new dominant ideological discourses which declare the victory of capitalism and dismiss Marx and the possibility of a basic transformation of society; they do so, he argues, in order to disavow the threatening and threatened character of the new world order (49-53, 57). Fukuyama's fundamental thesis, derived from Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, is that the recent worldwide collapse of dictatorships suggests the coherent and directional process of human History has reached its end—a universal and homogeneous state based on the free market and liberal democracy (56-61).

Characterizing Fukuyama's treatment of history as a form of Christian eschatology and, hence, ultimately as presentist, Derrida criticizes it on a number of different levels. He argues on a theoretical level that Fukuyama's treatment of history necessarily oscillates between two irreconcilable discourses. On the one hand, his position has to have recourse to the empirical, to what it claims actually happened—the death of Marxism and the realization of liberal democracy. On the other hand, it must disregard the various cataclysms of the twentieth century as *merely* empirical, as opposed to the ideal orientation of most of humanity toward liberal democracy (57, 62-64).

But Derrida's critique is not only textually immanent; it is also empirical. In the third chapter, he describes the current world situation in terms starkly opposed to those of triumphalist neo-liberalism. Despite the celebrations of the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and the capitalist market, all evidence indicates that neither the United States nor the European Community has come close to the ideal of liberal democracy. Moreover, the current world situation is characterized by an enormous inequality of techno-scientific, military, and economic development, with the result that “never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and . . . economic oppression affected as many human beings” (85). This situation undermines any teleological understanding of history (53-54, 63-64, 78).

Nevertheless, Derrida does not proceed to analyze these historical developments. Instead, he provides a “taxonomy” of the salient characteristics of the current world situation. He does so by listing “ten plagues” of the new world order: new forms of unemployment; growing exclusions of the homeless, the poor,

exiles, immigrants, and so on from politics; world-wide economic wars; contradictions in the concept and reality of the free market; the problem of foreign debt and its consequences (hunger and despair); the centrality of the arms industry to research, economy, and the socialization of labor; the spread of nuclear weapons; inter-ethnic wars; the growing importance of the Mafia and drug cartels; the present state of international law and its institutions (78-82).

Marx's analysis could illuminate the problems of the contemporary world as well as the character of this new dominant discourse, according to Derrida, providing one modifies that analysis (for example, avoids the base/superstructure model and does not identify social domination with class alone) (53-54, 63-64). Derrida approvingly points to the self-reflexive historicity of Marx's theory, its openness to its own transformation and reevaluation, its lucid analysis of the ways in which the political is becoming worldwide, as well as the continued importance of the Marxist "code" in analyzing the contemporary world (13, 54, 88).

Nevertheless, Derrida argues, Marx's emancipatory spirit has frequently been contravened by Marxism's own practices, which have been associated historically with fixed forms such as organizations, parties, and states—that is, with forms of presence (29). As a result, aspects of Marxism share some characteristics with neo-liberal triumphalism. Accepting Fukuyama's contention (adopted from Kojève) that, like Hegel, Marx posited an end of history, Derrida maintains that Marx's and Fukuyama's notions of history overlap in fundamental ways. And Derrida rejects what he regards as their shared conceptions—the idea of an end of history and a conception of historical temporality as the successive linking of presents identical to themselves. Both remain within a framework of homogeneous time that hinders the possibility of a qualitatively different future (70).

At this point, an important aspect of Derrida's theoretical strategy has become evident. He characterizes both contemporary neo-liberal triumphalism and dogmatic Marxism as rejecting spectrality. The concept of spectrality, then, is intended to provide the basis for a fundamental social critique that is directed against both terms of the opposition constitutive of the Cold War.

Derrida seeks to get beyond this opposition by distinguishing the elements of Marx's inheritance that affirm spectrality from Marxism as ontology, as metaphysical system ("dialectical materialism"). His aim is to reestablish a social critique of the contemporary world by recovering what he calls the historicity of history against positions that cancel such historicity, namely, the "onto-theo-archeo-teleological" concept of history in Hegel and Marx, and the "epochal thinking" of Heidegger (68, 74-75). He seeks to do so with a conception of eventness outside of present time—similar to Benjamin's image of the tiger's leap of the revolution as the messianic blasting of a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history.³ With this notion, Derrida attempts to open up the possibility

3. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Critical Theory and Society*, ed. Bronner and Kellner, 260-263.

of thinking of the messianic affirmatively and, hence, of emancipation as promise rather than as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design (74-75).

Derrida relates the concept of democracy to such a promise. He speaks of a democracy to come as a promise that would not simply be a future modality of the living present. The promise of such a democracy involves respect for the singularity and infinite alterity of the other on the one hand, as well as respect for the calculable equality between anonymous singularities on the other (64-65). Democracy, then, as a break with the present, entails overcoming the opposition between the particular and the universal. This attempt to conjoin respect for alterity and equality sharply distinguishes Derrida's approach from neo-romantic critiques of modernity and from all who yearn for "community" in ways that roll back what Derrida here implicitly valorizes, in the spirit of Marx, as a positive aspect of capitalist modernity.

Derrida discerns the sort of politics that points toward the promise of such a democracy in the new International—a vast array of non-governmental, non-party movements and institutions—that has emerged as a political response to the new order. What characterizes this new International, according to Derrida, is that it is without fixed forms such as organization, party, state, national community, or common class membership. That is, it is a movement beyond presence. It effects the sort of differentiation of the Marxian legacy on a practical level that Derrida seeks to effect theoretically; it is inspired by one of the ("desert-like messianic") spirits of Marx while abjuring the institutional framework and dogmatics of classical Marxism (29, 85).

This differentiation is the basis of Derrida's appropriation of Marx and his representation of deconstruction as the heir to a certain spirit of Marxism, to a unique non-religious, non-mythological, non-national project which is fundamentally separable from the totalitarian "perversion" of Marxism and the techno-economic and ecological disasters to which it gave rise. These latter aspects of Marxism, according to Derrida, resulted from an ontologization of the spectral (89-91).

The specter haunting the modern world since 1848 has been the possibility of a fundamentally different future. Communism, like democracy (and like the messiah), is always still to come, according to Derrida; it is distinguished from every living present. Recent declarations by the new Holy Alliance that Marx is irrevocably dead should be understood as attempts to nullify the two untimely specters of democracy and communism (95). This fear of the spectral future has had extremely negative consequences, according to Derrida; it has been at the root of many of the most negative developments of the twentieth century. He provocatively suggests that *all* the various forms of totalitarianism—Nazi, fascist, and Communist—were ultimately rooted in reactions to the fear of the ghost that communism inspired; they all attempted to incorporate that ghost animistically. Not only, then, did the Holy Alliance, terrorized by the specter of commu-

nism, undertake a war against it that is still ongoing, but that war has been waged against a camp that itself has been organized by fear of the specter (105).

Having attributed the totalitarian dimension of Communism to the fear of the spectral, Derrida traces such fear to what he characterizes as an ontological dimension in Marx's thought. That is, Derrida explains the practices of orthodox Marxism in terms of Marx's purported ideas and, hence, within the framework of the history of ideas (which is not surprising for a thinker deeply influenced by Heidegger). He claims that, in spite of Marx's emancipatory critique, Marx—or "the Marxist in him"—also continued to believe in the boundary between present reality and the spectral as a real limit (29, 38-39). Consequently, even as Marx was conjuring up the specter of communism, he sought an embodied incorporated form for the spectral—as Manifesto, as party, pointing toward the destruction of the state and the end of the political (99). This purported shift from the messianic-spectral to the apocalyptic-embodied expressed Marx's own fear of spectrality, according to Derrida, who seeks to demonstrate this contention by considering several of Marx's writings: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The German Ideology*, and *Capital*.

Marx begins *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with a meditation on the meaning of past and future for revolutionary actors. Elaborating his famous statement that the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living, Marx argues that in bourgeois revolutions the actors characteristically have wrapped themselves in the mantle of the past while creating a new present; the new revolution, however, can only draw its poetry from the future, not the past. Interpreting these passages, Derrida maintains that Marx, vainly attempting to separate spirit and specter, is arguing that future revolutions must destroy all recourse to the past—they must cease to inherit. Such a conception of revolution, however, ultimately is presentist (113-119).

This presentism is not merely restricted to Marx's political writings, according to Derrida, but characterizes his philosophical texts such as *The German Ideology* and *Capital* as well. In discussing *The German Ideology*, Derrida focuses on Marx's lengthy critique of Max Stirner, the young Hegelian. According to Marx, Stirner, who criticized Hegel for spiritualizing and mystifying Spirit, does so from the standpoint of the living body. However, such a critique of the spectral dimension of Hegel's thought is itself spectral, Marx argues, for the egological body, which serves as Stirner's critical standpoint, is itself abstract, an artificial body; it is merely the space in which autonomized entities are gathered, a body of specters, a ghost (126-129).

Recasting Marx's argument in the language of phenomenology, Derrida comments that for Marx both the phenomenal form of the world as well as the phenomenological ego are spectral; the standpoint of his critique of the Christian-Hegelian dimension of phenomenology is the "practical structure" of the world: work, production, actualization, techniques (130, 135).

This standpoint, however, is itself bound to a metaphysics of presence, according to Derrida, who claims that Marx's critique is morphologically similar to

Stirner's (131). Derrida maintains that, whatever the differences between them, both Marx and Stirner wish to win out over the ghost; both oppose to a spectral onto-theology the "hyper-phenomenological principle of the flesh and blood presence of the living person" (132; 191, n. 14). Marx's critique differs from Stirner's only quantitatively, as it were: it seeks to drive the latter critique further.

Ultimately, Marx wishes to distinguish sharply the specter (as negative) from spirit (as positive), according to Derrida. But this distinction cannot be maintained. The specter is not only the carnal apparition of the spirit (that is, the fetish), it is also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for a redemption, for a spirit. The difference between specter and spirit, for Derrida, then, is a *différance* (136).

Derrida extends this interpretation to Marx's analysis of the commodity form in the first chapter of *Capital*, volume 1. He notes that Marx seeks to show, with his conception of commodity fetishism, that capitalism is characterized precisely by what it purportedly had left behind—animism, spiritism. Marx's approach here parallels his critique of Max Stirner, according to Derrida; it is a critique of a form of "secularization" that reconstitutes the animism it imagines it has overcome. The new form of animism thereby reconstituted does not appear as such but instead appears as the object of phenomenological good sense—the phenomenological ego, for example, or the commodity as object.

Derrida assumes that the category of use-value is the standpoint of Marx's critique in *Capital* and, hence, that his critique is one from an ontological standpoint of materiality, of presence. Accepting the time-honored traditional Marxist reading, Derrida relates the use-value dimension to technics and identifies the category of value with the market. On that basis, he maintains that Marx's position doesn't allow for a critique of technology; instead, it envisions a society that extends further the process of capitalist secularization (160-163).

Derrida proceeds to argue that use-value and, hence, production and technology, are not simply present; they are not really as free of specters as Marx purportedly assumes, but are socially informed. Hence, they cannot serve as the standpoint for an emancipatory theory. Rather such a theory can only be one that embraces spectrality.

Derrida concludes this book by returning to the theme of a stripped-down messianic hope, of waiting without the horizon of expectation. If one could *count* on what is coming, hope would be but the *calculation* of a program (168-169). That is, it would remain bound to presentism. Instead of chasing away the ghosts, as Marx did, one should grant them the right to return. This is a condition of *justice*, of a form of life fundamentally different from present existence.

II

Derrida's intervention against the ideology of the new world order and his attempt to present deconstruction as the heir of Marx—that is, as the basis for a position that refuses to accept the presently given as necessary—are important

and timely. They herald the end of a period, beginning in the late 1960s, when newer critical approaches, sharply distancing themselves from an orthodox Marxism that had manifested its complete bankruptcy in Paris and Prague, implicitly focused on forms of domination characteristic of the Keynesian-/Fordist/Statist epoch which was drawing to a close. These new forms of critical thought tended to valorize and emphasize the importance of contingency, resistance, culture, and the non-state-bureaucratic political sphere. Issues of the ongoing dynamics of capitalism and their social and political consequences were treated marginally at best.

Specters of Marx expresses an awareness that contemporary historical developments require a different and more adequate theoretical response, one that also addresses directly the problematic of global capitalism. It implies that the conditions of post-Fordist critical thought have changed dramatically since 1989, and that many of the issues of the 1960s that subsequently impelled such critical thought for several decades have become historically anachronistic.

Derrida intends his notion of spectrality to provide the basis for a response to these changed conditions. Ultimately, however, this notion is too socially and historically indeterminate to serve as the basis for an adequate critique of the present. The weaknesses in Derrida's critical approach emerge most clearly when he directly discusses the contemporary world. As we have seen, Derrida treats fundamental problems of the contemporary world descriptively: that is, he lists ten "plagues" of the new world order. His list, however, leaves unclear whether these problems are interrelated; Derrida does not explain what categories underlie his critical description, or whether they are categories intrinsic to his critical philosophy.

Specters of Marx itself raises such issues—precisely because Derrida's critique of neo-liberalism moves beyond a textually immanent critique and invokes notions of empirical adequacy. Derrida criticizes writers like Fukuyama and Allan Bloom for formulating a new ideology which entails a "manic disavowal" of the bleak conditions of the world today (78). He contravenes Fukuyama's optimistic picture by describing the contemporary world in terms of international pauperization, economic conflict, and a fundamental crisis of the modern political order brought about by economic changes and the development of new communication technologies (53-54, 63-64, 74, 79-81, 112). In so doing, Derrida clearly is representing the neo-liberal picture of the world as fundamentally distorted, and his own position as based on a better, more adequate analysis of the world today. Such a position implicitly takes a step beyond the bounds of a deconstructionist immanent critique, and necessarily raises the question of the adequacy of social critique to its object. Yet this question is one that Derrida does not address.

In order to address such a question, Derrida would also have had to thematize explicitly the issue of the historical dynamic of the contemporary world. Derrida's intervention, as we have seen, is a response to the dramatically changed historical situation since 1989. The recent collapse of the Soviet Union and of

European Communism, however, should not be viewed as self-enclosed, as representing local democratic victories of societies over states. Rather, they should be understood with reference to a more general historical development in the past twenty-five years entailing the decline of the Fordist regime of strong metropolitan states, national corporations, and industrial trade unions, and characterized by increasing globalization as well as the growing differentiation of wealth and power.

This general development, which has given rise to the new world order Derrida excoriates, is one of several large-scale historical patterns that can be descriptively discerned from the perspective of the end of the twentieth century. If the first two-thirds of this century was marked by the growing intervention in, and control of, socioeconomic processes by national states, the period since the early 1970s has seen the weakening, undermining, and—in the former Communist countries of Europe—collapse of such statist regimes. These patterns have been general and overarching; they have not depended fundamentally on the political parties or individuals in power. Hence, they cannot be understood adequately with reference to local factors and contingencies. The latter can explain variations in these common patterns; they cannot, however, explain the patterns themselves.

In this light, the assumption commonly made during the 1960s in the West (and earlier in the East) that the political sphere had achieved primacy over the socioeconomic dynamics of capitalism—an assumption implicitly adopted by much post-Marxism—has been shown to have been historically inadequate. Subsequent decades have indicated that the attempt to master the historical dynamic characteristic of capitalism by means of the state, as embodied in the apparatus of the Keynesian state in the West, and the Stalinist party-state in the East, apparently has failed. These general historical developments call for an account that could adequately grasp the historical dynamic that apparently has resisted such attempts at political control.

Derrida's critique of neo-liberalism in *Specters of Marx* is closely tied to his understanding of recent general historical developments. Yet he does not provide a framework for analyzing such developments. Derrida's notion of spectrality is most useful as a critique of presentist conceptions of the given and as a reminder that much of Marxism undermined its own intention by grounding itself in presence and, hence, by promulgating a vision of the future that did not fundamentally break with the present. As such, Derrida's conception of the non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present provides a standpoint from which neo-liberalism and traditional Marxism, as well as metaphysics and phenomenology, can be criticized.

Derrida's analysis, however, does not provide the means for specifying spectrality as a critical category by linking it to a social and historical analysis of the empirical phenomena to which his criticism refers. For these purposes, it is simply not enough for Derrida to assert that he is speaking in the Marxist code or that the problematics coming from the Marxist tradition will be indispensable for

analyzing social tensions and antagonisms for a long time (54-55, 63-64). Rather, having invoked the issue of empirical and historical adequacy in a work claiming to appropriate Marx, Derrida's critique of the new world order and of its hegemonic ideology raises the question of the relation of that critique to Marx's categorial analysis of capitalism as well as to Marx's emancipatory spirit. That is, the nature of Derrida's critique of the contemporary world implicitly requires that he take a step he avoids—namely, that he problematize the relation of the categories of his critical philosophy to those of Marx's critical social theory, and that he do so in a manner consistent with his critique of Marxist presentism as well as of global capitalism today.

Marx's categories, however interpreted, cannot be used simply to paint a picture of "background conditions" that are then inserted into a very different theoretical framework. They are historically determinate social and epistemological categories with far-reaching theoretical implications that are at odds with any attempt to understand the world in a historically indeterminate fashion. Moreover, these categories are purportedly reflexive. A self-reflexive critique attempts to ground its own possibility—the possibility of a fundamental critique of its social universe—by means of the same categories with which it seeks to grasp that universe. This sort of self-reflexive critical theory, then, is immanent to its object. Hence, it must show that the possibility of a fundamental transformation of the present is a determinate possibility immanent to that present. The possibility of a fundamental immanent critique of the present order and the possibility of a fundamental transformation of that order are intrinsically related.

Derrida's critical description of the new world order lacks this self-reflexive moment. Relatedly, although he positively characterizes the spirit of Marx in terms of its critical and questioning stance, as well as its emancipatory and messianic affirmation (89), Derrida's own critical description of the new world order is not intrinsically related to his (messianic) affirmation of an emancipatory possibility. His approach delineates a powerful stance, but does not provide categories that can adequately support its own social and historical critique. It neither grounds the categories with which it grasps the contemporary world, nor does it reflexively ground its own critique and, hence, the possibility of a fundamentally different future.

The notion of a fundamentally different future as a determinate *possibility* immanent to the present should not be confused with the question of the *likelihood* of a fundamental transformation. The notion of determinate possibility serves to highlight the problematic character of any conception of the future as a break with the present that is not rooted in the present, and it insists that any future order, even one fundamentally different from our present, can only be grounded in the tensions, possibilities, and struggles of the present. In that sense, any future necessarily will be historically immanent, regardless of the degree to which the historical actors may think they are undertaking a radical leap outside of history.

The question, then, is whether a social critique of the present is possible that would point toward a future fundamentally different from the present and yet root the possibility of that future in the present. Such a critique would have to grasp the present without simply reproducing and affirming that present. In other words, the critical examination of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* undertaken in this essay raises the question of whether a critical *theory* is possible that would be consonant with a certain spirit of deconstruction and its critique of presentism, while providing a firmer foundation for a critical analysis of the contemporary world. I have suggested that such a critique would require a more fundamental social and historical turn than Derrida has undertaken. Derrida apparently is wary of any such turn because he fears that it must necessarily entail a turn to presentism. This assumption is questionable and weakens his attempt to formulate an adequate critique of the present and its historical dynamic.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida acknowledges the importance of a critique of capitalism today as well as the power of Marx's analysis. However, as Derrida is only too aware of the various pitfalls associated with traditional Marxism, he seems to have thought he had little choice but to juxtapose elements of a Marxist analysis to his own "spectral" approach. In order to present an alternative theoretical approach, I shall briefly present elements of a reading of Marx very different from the traditional interpretation underlying Derrida's approach.⁴ The purpose of such a reading is not somehow to "defend" Marx from Derrida's critique, but to provide the basis for a critical theory that can grasp more adequately the new world situation socially and historically and still be congruent with the critical intention of Derrida's conception of spectrality and his critique of traditional Marxism.

Within the framework of this reading, Marx's categories in his mature works refer to historically specific social relations and should not be understood in transhistorical, "material" terms. These social relations, grasped by categories such as "commodity" and "capital," are not primarily class relations—as is assumed by traditional Marxist understandings—but peculiar quasi-objective forms of social mediation, constituted by determinate forms of social practices, that exert a historically new, abstract, "structural" form of compulsion on the actors who constitute them. The defining features of capitalism, according to this interpretation, are not the market and private property. Hence, the standpoint of the critique of capitalism is not (industrial) production and the proletariat; indeed, the latter are regarded as integral to and molded by the basic social relations of capitalism.

A possible post-capitalist future, within this framework, would not entail the realization of the industrial proletariat and the labor it performs—that is, the realization in rational form of the industrial, modern world—but the overcoming of a historically specific structure of abstract rational compulsions, as well as the

4. For an elaboration of this reading, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Eng. and New York, 1993).

concrete forms of production, labor, and, more generally, social life, historically molded by those compulsions. Marx's critical theory of capitalism, then, is not understood as a critical analysis of a class-based variant of modern society, but of modern society itself.

The categories of Marx's analysis, on this account, are historically specific in the sense that they are categories of modern, capitalist societies alone, and analytically distinguish that form of social life. Yet these categories also are general categories of capitalism. On a very high level of logical abstraction, they purportedly grasp the core features of capitalist society and its dynamic—those features that characterize capitalism regardless of its more specific historical configurations, such as nineteenth-century “liberal” capitalism, twentieth-century “statist” or “Fordist” capitalism, or late twentieth-century “post-Fordist” or “postmodern” capitalism. Although such categories would not suffice to analyze any of these more specific configurations, they provide the necessary point of departure for any such analysis, as well as for an analysis of the dynamic processes that transform one such general configuration into another.

In historicizing the fundamental categories of his critical theory in his mature works, Marx, according to this reading, also historicizes the notion of a historical dynamic. He implicitly abandons the transhistorical notion that human history in general has a dynamic in favor of an analysis of a historically specific historical dynamic as a unique and specifying characteristic of capitalism. The categories of Marx's mature critique of political economy—frequently understood as categories of the market and class-based exploitation (private property) alone—provide the basis for an analysis of the fundamental features and driving force of that historically specific dynamic at a very high level of logical abstraction.

Transhistorical conceptions of history—whether Hegelian or traditional Marxist—ultimately entail an affirmation of a dynamic (and, relatedly, of totality) against which thinkers like Derrida have reacted. The historically-specific understanding of historical dynamics outlined above removes the problematic from the realm of metaphysical assertions about the nature of social reality (whether the latter is totalizing or heterogeneous, for example) and instead seeks to grasp socially a historically unique dynamic process. Within the framework of such an understanding, the existence of a historical dynamic is not viewed as the positive locomotive of human existence, but is grasped critically, as a form of heteronomy, of abstract temporal domination.

This understanding in turn casts light upon a very important dimension of democracy—namely, self-determination. Within this framework, capitalism is in tension with democracy not simply because of the structural inequalities in wealth and power it produces and reproduces, but because the existence of a historical dynamic necessarily implies important limitations on the structural possibilities of self-determination. Far from equating the abolition of capitalism with an (apocalyptic) end of politics (a position criticized by Derrida), this analysis points to an expanded realm of politics as a possible consequence of the abolition of capitalism's structural constraints.

This conceptual turn entails a return to a conception of totality—but not as an affirmative category, as in orthodox Marxism, where the problem of capitalism is considered to be its irrational and fragmented character. Rather, totality here is the object of the critique. This approach, like Derrida's, is critical of homogeneity and totalization. However, rather than denying their real existence, this critique grounds processes of homogenization and totalization in historically specific forms of social relations and seeks to show how structural tensions internal to those relations open up the possibility of the historical abolition of those processes.

The problem with many recent critical approaches that affirm heterogeneity, including Derrida's, is that they seek to inscribe it quasi-metaphysically, by denying the existence of what could only be historically abolished. In this way, positions intended to empower people end up being profoundly disempowering, inasmuch as they bracket and render invisible central dimensions of domination in the modern world.

The difference between a transhistorical, affirmative conception of a historical dynamic and a historically-specific and critical one is an important difference between Hegel and Marx. This difference has been conflated by Fukuyama, Kojève, and much orthodox Marxism. Derrida, too, assimilates Marx to Hegel and assumes that any notion of a directional historical dynamic must be linear, teleological, and affirmative—hence, ultimately presentist. Consequently, Derrida opposes history as the linear stringing together of units of abstract homogeneous time to eventness—an opposition that reproduces the classic antinomy of necessity and freedom. Within this dichotomous scheme, fundamental change can occur only as the result of a completely unexpected rupture; it is not a possibility immanent in the present.

These assumptions undermine Derrida's ability to grasp critically the dynamic of capitalism and, hence, a central dimension of domination in the modern world in a way that could also ground the immanent possibility of fundamental qualitative change. Because he understands that dynamic through the lens of affirmative forms of orthodox Marxism—which he rejects as presentist—Derrida jettisons too much of Marx's analysis in his attempt to appropriate the “spirit of Marx”; he reads a historically-specific critical analysis as transhistorical and, ultimately, affirmative.

This reading emerges very clearly in Derrida's various critiques of Marx's texts. In discussing Marx's analysis of money in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, his critical investigation of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology*, as well as his analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, Derrida claims that Marx's critique of ghosts, specters, and mystification is from the standpoint of living presence. Reading Marx through the lens of Henry Blanchot's interpretation and, more generally, the sort of phenomenological readings that were widespread in France for several decades after the Second World War, Derrida assimilates Marx to the sort of phenomenological positions criticized in Derrida's earlier works.

Yet, in every one of the texts Derrida cites, what he takes to be “living presence” is, in Marx’s analysis, a peculiar, historically specific, abstract form of social relations that exists (necessarily) in reified form. Derrida assumes, for example, that Marx’s critique of money opposes it to living reality (46-47). This argument, however, conflates Marx with Proudhon, who considered money to be the locus of the abstract, homogenizing tendencies of modern, capitalist society and, opposing money to living labor, promulgated the abolition of money. Criticizing Proudhon, Marx argued that money as a universal homogenizing equivalent is the expression of a peculiar, historically specific, form of social relations which molds both terms of Proudhon’s opposition, that it is impossible to abolish the phenomenal form of abstract social mediation without abolishing the peculiar social relations it expresses.

Similarly, as we have seen, Derrida criticizes Marx for formulating a critique of Stirner that is morphologically similar to Stirner’s critique of Hegel. Yet, far from criticizing Stirner from the standpoint of the “hyper-phenomenological principle of the flesh-and-blood presence of the living person” (191, n. 14), as Derrida would have it, Marx, I would argue, is claiming that the modern individual is socially and historically constituted by a form of social relations that it, in turn, constitutes. On that basis, Marx criticizes Stirner for presupposing the individual as given, as an ontologically irreducible point of departure, rather than as a historical result.

Derrida, in other words, consistently takes as the “material,” ontological standpoint of Marx’s critique that which Marx analyzes as the reified expression of a historically specific form of social relations. Consequently, Derrida’s “materialist” reading of Marx undermines his ability to grasp the dynamic of capital as a “real” reification in a manner that would overcome the classic opposition of necessity and contingency. This emerges most clearly in Derrida’s discussion of *Capital*.

As we have seen, Derrida assumes that, in *Capital*, use-value provides the ontological standpoint for Marx’s critique of the commodity form and its mystifications. Relating use-value to technics, Derrida identifies Marx’s critique of capitalism with the orthodox Marxist valorization of industrial production. He claims, on this basis, that Marx’s critique remains bound to the immediacy of presence; its vision of the future cannot really point the way beyond the domination of the present. Derrida then tries to deconstruct Marx’s critique by pointing out (in a transhistorical manner) that use-value (and hence production) is not simply there, but also has a spectral dimension. By evacuating this dimension, Marx tied himself to the present, only to remain haunted by the specter he attempted to exorcise.

Derrida’s understanding of Marx’s critique of capitalism and conception of history is fundamentally orthodox. He regards Althusserianism as the most sophisticated form of Marxism and, in a book that wrestles with the commodity form, ignores the works of Lukács and Adorno. Because he presupposes that Marx had a teleological conception of history which grasped historical tempo-

rality as the successive linking of presents identical to themselves, Derrida does not continue his reading of *Capital* beyond the first chapter.

But there are serious problems with stopping in the first chapter, which could, at first glance, be understood in terms of a simple static opposition between the abstract/social and the physical/natural. Marx's investigation of the commodity form is only the point of departure for his analysis of capital. And that analysis, as noted above, seeks to delineate and ground the historically specific dynamic of modern society. The dynamic it outlines, however, differs considerably from the traditional Marxist scenario and actually is consonant with Derrida's stance in important ways.

I have argued that Marx's analysis of the commodity form and of capital is not a critique from the standpoint of labor, objects, and material production, transhistorically understood. Rather, it is a theory of a historically specific abstract form of social mediation—a form of social relations that is unique inasmuch as it is mediated by labor. What characterizes the modern capitalist world, according to Marx, is that labor not only mediates the subject/object relations of humans and nature, but also mediates the relations among people. This imparts a peculiarly abstract quality to modern social relations and the forms of domination that ultimately constrain and mold modern social life.

The commodity as the basic social form of capitalist modernity is not, therefore, a unified, homogeneous whole. Rather, as a peculiar social mediation constituted by labor, it embodies both a material and a social dimension. This historically specific, socially constituted dualism is not simply a static opposition. Rather, in Marx's analysis, use-value and value interact. This interaction, rooted in the dual character of the commodity form, generates a complex immanent dynamic, haunted by what Derrida would call the specter of value acting as an automatic subject, appearing now in the form of various commodities, now in the form of money. Contrary to Derrida's reading of Marx, use-value is not outside this dynamic, but is very much integral to it; relatedly, technology is molded by value (and is not, as in traditional Marxism, outside of the social relations of capitalism).

This dynamic is a central characteristic of the abstract domination of capital. It is not simply a linear succession of presents but is a complex dialectic of two forms of constituted time. It involves the accumulation of the past in a form that entails the ongoing reconstitution of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present, marked by the domination of abstract, homogeneous, constant time, of time as present—even as it is hurtled forward by another form of time, which is concrete, heterogeneous, and directional. This latter movement of time is "historical time." Such time is not, however, a counter-principle to capitalist time (as Lukács would have it), but is another form of constituted time, also integral to capital, which, in its interplay with abstract time, constitutes the overarching nonlinear dynamic of capitalist society. Both historical time and abstract time are constituted as forms of domination.

Within the framework of this analysis of temporality and capitalism, then, the ongoing present is never simply present. Rather, as an ongoing “chain of presents,” it is itself constituted by a complex interaction between what Derrida calls spectrality and the present. On the one hand, this dynamic entails the accumulation of past time that dominates the living by constantly reconstituting present time. It is in this sense that Marx’s well-known statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* should be understood—that the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Marx is not simply rejecting the past. Rather, he analyzes what Derrida criticizes as the domination of the present, in terms of the domination of the living by the past in a form that reconstitutes the present as necessity. On the other hand, according to this reading, it is precisely the same accumulation of past time that undermines the necessity of the present and makes possible a different future. Here the future is made possible by the *appropriation* of the past.

This critique does not ground itself in the gap between ideals and reality, but in a growing temporal tension between what is and what could be, generated by the accumulation of objectified past time. Its standpoint is not the living body, presence, labor, production—as Derrida would have it—but the emergent possibility of a fundamentally different future. That future would not be based on the realization of the present—of history and of proletarian labor—but on their abolition as expressions of abstract domination.

This approach, then, historicizes history. It does so in a manner, moreover, that avoids the unfortunate dualism of history (necessity) and event (contingency) reintroduced by Derrida. This reading also suggests that Derrida’s conception of spectrality is not sufficiently differentiated: the reconstitution of the present as well as its undermining are both aspects of what Derrida terms “spectrality.” Moreover, this nonlinear dynamic pattern is obscured by yet another dimension of what could be termed the spectral—the various forms of fetishism, whereby the material dimension of the social mediation veils its historically specific social dimension. These important distinctions, however, cannot be grasped by the category of spectrality, by an approach like Derrida’s that simply opposes spectrality to living presence.

The weaknesses of the notion of spectrality are related to the Marxism against which Derrida is reacting. When he does refer to the spectral effects of the commodity, Derrida presupposes that, for Marx, concrete labor and use values are somehow independent and outside of the value and commodity forms, and can be grasped adequately by phenomenological good sense (149-156). This understanding, which effects a radical separation between the material dimension (understood in terms of production and labor) and the social dimension (understood in terms of the market and private property), is at the heart of traditional Marxism and was also not called into question by Althusser. It does not provide the basis for a critique of modern production, and tends to grasp the notion of a historical dynamic affirmatively rather than critically, as a form of abstract domination.

By playing off his approach against this sort of Marxism—which lends itself to the same sort of critique Derrida developed of phenomenology—Derrida develops a conception of spectrality that is not fully adequate to the problematic he addresses. He formulates a theory of “hauntology” to undermine what he takes to be an ontology of being and time. In terms of the reading I have outlined, Derrida’s attempt both is parallel to Marx’s and, ironically, much less historically powerful.

The approach I have outlined to the critique of political economy is consonant in many ways with Derrida’s stance. It differs inasmuch as it is socially and historically determinate and gets beyond the oppositions that underlie Derrida’s approach even as he seeks to deconstruct them. Inasmuch as it provides the basis for an analysis of the dynamic of capitalism, such an approach could serve as the point of departure for an analysis of the ongoing historical transformations of the contemporary world, of the rise in the past decades of a new configuration of capitalism. Yet it also allows for a conception of a very different future. That is, like Derrida’s approach, such a critical theory points to a future that breaks fundamentally with the domination of abstract homogeneous time. Unlike that approach, however, such a theory provides the basis for a rigorous social and historical analysis of the contemporary world, and does so in a way that allows for a conception of a fundamentally different future as a historically determinate possibility.

Considered from the vantage point of such a critical theory, the strengths of Derrida’s intervention are also its weaknesses. If, as Habermas asserts, Heidegger put philosophy back in the dominant position from which it had been driven by the (social and historical) critiques of the Young Hegelians,⁵ the limits of Derrida’s post-Heideggerian attempt to unseat philosophy are highlighted by his attempt to confront critically the new world order and claim the inheritance of Marx’s critical spirit—that is, by his attempt to address social and historical issues.

This attempt inadvertently reveals that the enterprise of immanently deconstructing philosophical narratives in order to undermine certain reified cultural self-understandings ultimately remains bound within the limits of philosophical discourse. Although Derrida’s concept of spectrality has an important critical edge, directed against any given order and any notion of an end-state of history, it is too socially and historically indeterminate to serve as the basis for a critical analysis of contemporary historical developments. The concept of spectrality, then, illuminates what should be an important dimension of a social critique today; but it is not fully adequate as a core concept of such a critique. It thereby reveals the need for a contemporary critical social theory.

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5. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, transl. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 131.