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Journal of the  
Edinburgh  
Conference of  
Socialist  
Economists

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# Common Sense

**Drew Milne**

Marxist literary theory after Derrida

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**Ferruccio Gambino**

A Critique of the Fordism of the  
Regulation School

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**Toni Negri**

The Crisis of Political Space

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**John Holloway**

The Concept of Power and the  
Zapatistas

*plus* **Book Reviews**

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*Number 19*

Published in Edinburgh by **Common Sense**, PO Box 311,  
Southern District Office, Edinburgh, EH9 1SF, Scotland.

Printed by Clydeside Press, Glasgow.

Typeset in 9pt New Century Schoolbook.

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**ISSN: 0957 - 240X**

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# Marxist literary theory after Derrida

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Drew Milne

*'When I hear the word deconstruction  
I reach for my pillow.'* David Antin

## Introduction

A literary theory of Marxism, even if it is not Marxist, requires a version of the theory of text, history and political transformation which Marxism has traditionally claimed as its special science of critique and praxis. The difference, then, between a literary theory of Marxism and a Marxist theory of literature may be immaterial, not least because the most important examples of attempts to develop a political hermeneutics of the forces and relations of literary production are those provided by Marxism itself, often by Marxists whose interests in literature and literary theory were fundamental to the attempt to re-read and reinvent the discourse of Marxism. Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Lukàcs and Althusser all make special claims for the ways in which their readings of Marx reinvent the possibilities of Marxism as a mode of literary production, of what Benjamin in a different context termed the author as producer. The history of Marxism has a range of secret affinities with the question of writing and its reception, affinities which have also placed Marxism at the centre of the historical emergence of what is now known as literary theory. Moreover, most of the major movements of literary theory have been defined against Marxism, in dialogue with Marxism, or as part of attempts to exorcise, negate or overcome Marxism as some apparently foundational but reductive moment in the thinking of literature.

Even if the historical evidence is eloquent, the horizon of interpretation nevertheless appears to have shifted such that the work of Marx as the author of the discourse of Marxism is now dead, as though there were no longer a need to wrestle with Marx as the guardian angel of socialism, as though for literary theory, and discourse as such, Marxism was now merely historical, a defeated ghost of the cold war. As Derrida puts it in *Specters of Marx*, there is a dominant discourse: 'To the rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is

dead, very dead, and along with it its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices.<sup>1</sup> Derrida construes Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* as the emblem of this bogus triumphalism, but, in the rapidly shifting hegemonic disinheritance of the latest thought-bite in the mediatic spectacle, Fukuyama already seems to have gone past his sell-by date.<sup>2</sup> Derrida poses the question of the death of the author, a familiar problem in literary criticism, as a rather different question for Marx and Marxism. Is Marx any longer the author of Marxism? Is Marxism any longer the author of socialism? Or has Marx, like the intentional object of literary criticism, gone the way of the dodo and the dead parrot?

This paper asks what difference Derrida's *Specters of Marx* has made for Marxist literary theory, elaborating some of the problems sketched in my introduction to *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*.<sup>3</sup> I am concerned to work out what it means to read Marx and Marxism. The turn I propose is that such reading – both critical and historical re-reading – involves recognising that literary theory is integral to Marxism, since Marxism is inherently a literary theory of the reading of Marx, a hermeneutics of Marx, of capitalism and of capitalism's ideological sirens. The relation of Marxism to Marx provides, like the relation of psychoanalysis to Freud, an important problem for any literary theory of discourse, irrespective of whether such a theory is Marxist or merely attempting to theorise Marxism. This suggests that it is immaterial whether a particular theory earns the proper name 'Marxist', whether a pristine genealogy can be established which would link a thought's family tree back to Marx. What is decisive is the ability to develop a theory of the discourse of Marxism which can explain the relation between the writings of Marx and the historical vicissitudes of Marxism, and in so doing develop the explanatory and emancipatory praxis which Marxism attempts to theorise. In this sense, I am concerned to show how it is possible to re-read Marx so as to understand the development of Marxism and literary theory. This development, I want to suggest, has undergone a dialectical unfolding which reveals the historical envelope of Marxism as a shape of spirit, a shape in which the relation between Marx and Marxism becomes increasingly mediated and indeterminate, to the point where even Derrida can claim the spirit of Marxism.

### **The reception of Derrida's *Specters of Marx***

In *Specters of Marx* Derrida offers something like a literary theory of Marx in opposition to more conventional Marxist analysis. His reading of Marx has elicited a series of responses from a variety of Marxist and non-Marxist theorists. This means that Derrida has provided a stage on which to analyse the contemporary state of Marxism in relation to literary theory, allowing us to consider the extent to which a Marxist theory of writing, and of Marx's writing, is possible now. Perhaps, somewhat surprisingly, the exceptional estrangement of Derrida's reading of Marx from more conventional modes of Marxism is claimed by Derrida to be in the spirit of Marxism. Derrida, for example, provides



the following formulation of how deconstruction expresses its solidarity with Marxism, a solidarity whose neither-nor is offered as something different from critique, however much the terms seem antagonistic to Marxism: 'deconstruction has never been Marxist, no more than it has ever been non-Marxist, although it has remained faithful to a certain spirit of Marxism, to at least one of its spirits for, and this can never be repeated too often, there is *more than one* of them and they are heterogeneous.' (75) With friends who are neither Marxist nor non-Marxist who needs enemies? There are many unintentionally comic moments in *Specters of Marx* where the relation between Derrida's play on Heideggerian motifs comes into conflict with the more worldly spirits of Marxism, as in the moment Derrida reads *The Communist Manifesto* as: 'Parousia of the manifestation of the manifest. As party.' (103) Understandably wearied by such gestures, Aijaz Ahmad concludes his unsympathetic assessment of *Specters of Marx* by offering a parodically deconstructive solidarity with a certain spirit of Derrida, a solidarity which involves 'no acceptance of the principle categories of deconstruction on our part', just as '[Derrida's] own gesture of affiliation with Marx includes the acceptance neither of the principal categories of political Marxism nor of the slightest responsibility for any part of its history'.<sup>4</sup> But this gesture of mimicry highlights the difficulty of establishing anything like the grounds for disagreement with an opponent who denies that a significant opposition is involved.

Ahmad suggests that Derrida provides not an argument, but something more literary: 'We have, in other words, essentially a *performative* text in a distinctly literary mode. A text that offers not analysis but performance'.<sup>5</sup> This is a strange argument for a Marxist literary theorist to deploy, as if literary texts were less argumentative, as if Marx's texts were not literary, as if it were not the case that Derrida has shown how literary performativity is something like a condition of writing as such. The comparison with Marx is striking, since Marx is prepared throughout his writing to pursue and deploy the literary figure as a task of analysis through which critique, polemic and satire can be deployed. In such a comparison, Derrida's insistence on the materiality of rhetoric and on the question of what Derrida has called 'grammatology' in *Of Grammatology* (1967; trans. 1974) appears more faithful to the spirit of Marx – for example in *The German Ideology*, *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* or *Theories of Surplus Value* – than the reading of Derrida provided by Ahmad.

A similar contrast emerges in Fredric Jameson's more sympathetic essay. Suggesting that Derrida provides some remarkable new exegeses of Marx, Jameson doubts that Derrida provides determinate arguments, so much as a project within a broader Heideggerian framework which 'enables the practice of deconstruction to find a consecrated form: that of the commentary or philosophical *explication de texte*, within which it can pursue its own augustly parasitic activity'.<sup>6</sup> Something similar could be said about the augustly parasitic activity of certain consecrated forms of Marxist explication, from diamat classes on the *Dialectic of Nature* to Jameson's own ponderings on postmodernism. As with Ahmad, Jameson's patient

elaboration of Derridian thematics deploys a hermeneutics which fails to achieve either the rhetorical materiality he praises in Derrida's work, or a Marxist critique of Derrida's reading of Marx. Jameson concedes an exegetical authority to Derrida's reading which would have surprised Marx, and this suggests that Jameson is somewhat indifferent to the detail of Marx's writings, an impression confirmed by a reading of Jameson's claims about the cultural logic of postmodernism. Similarly, Terry Eagleton asserts in *Radical Philosophy* that what Derrida wants 'is a Marxism without Marxism' in which 'Derrida's indifference to almost all of the *actual* historical or theoretical manifestations of Marxism is a kind of empty transcendence'.<sup>7</sup> And yet, it is difficult to resist the temptation to suggest that the shifting trajectory of Eagleton's own work – from an Althusserian science of the text in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) to a more Brechtian and Benjaminian mode of essayism, notably in *Against the Grain* (1986) – could also be described as Marxism without Marxism. The wit and intellectual agility of Eagleton's essayism owes as much to the socialist spirit of Oscar Wilde as to Karl Marx or Walter Benjamin, the guiding spirits of Derrida's reading.<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that it is self-evident what a Marxist reading of Marx and/or Derrida would look like if it were more faithful to the spirit of Marxism. Rather it is to suggest that the relation between Marxism and literary theory in the work of leading Marxist literary theorists appears attenuated.

Perhaps even more surprising is the extent to which responses to Derrida by those whose work might be thought more sympathetic to Derrida than to Marxism seem to find it easier to raise substantial objections of a proto-Marxist kind. Spivak, for example, who has written a number of less than pellucid accounts of the relation between Marxism and deconstruction, takes Derrida to task for a number of errors.<sup>9</sup> She notes the absent problem of Marxist-feminist thematics in Derrida's reading. She observes the dangers in the way in which Derrida attempts to coordinate his reading across the early and later Marx without recognizing the transformation of Marx's early conception of money into the later conception of capital and capitalism. She construes a central problem in Derrida's reading as his eagerness to discern the structural repetition of an ontological response to spectrality which blinds Derrida to the different discursive contexts and subtleties of Marx's thinking. She suggests that Derrida fails to see how the young Marx already offers a critique of Derrida. Spivak's suggestions require careful consideration, not least because they suggest how details might matter for a reading which can articulate both Marx and Derrida. For my purposes what is significant is the extremity of Spivak's affiliation to what might still be called Marxism, however open.

Similarly, Ernesto Laclau, who is himself cited by Derrida, provides objections to Derrida in which Laclau's explicitly post-Marxist position offers a sharper politics than any provided by avowed Marxists. For Laclau, Derrida fails to work through the political and ethical consequences of deconstruction, which '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'.<sup>10</sup> The extension of undecidability reactivates the agency of decision, but Laclau observes how Derrida's deconstruction of the teleology of emancipatory politics forces Derrida into a politically indeterminate aporia. Laclau spells out the disjointed consequences: '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.... In a way a case for totalitarianism can be presented starting from deconstructionist premises'.<sup>11</sup> In short, the politics of undecidability throws up dualisms which force either a generalised indifference to specific political contents or a further radicalization of the groundlessness of decision making. Groundlessness becomes a new ground. Although Laclau would resist such an interpretation, undecidability appears subject to a dialectical unfolding which either produces determinate negations or what Hegel understood as the restless and contentless conscience of the beautiful soul. Or as Derrida puts it at the beginning of *Specters of Marx*: 'Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience.' (xv) Such groundless aporia produce an ethics of conscience without duty, and of concern without commitment. As Laclau suggests, the weak messianic power which Derrida claims as a spirit of Marx owes rather more to Levinas than to Benjamin or Marx. Given that Derrida himself cites Laclau sympathetically it would be helpful if Derrida responded to such criticisms.

Simon Critchley also pursues the comparison of Laclau, Levinas and Derrida. Like Spivak, he questions the validity of the way Derrida reads Marx as an ontological thinker. And like Laclau, he indicates the necessity of coordinating Derrida's Benjaminian messianic promise with Laclau's conception of hegemony: 'hegemony is a theory of decisions taken in the undecidable terrain opened up by deconstruction'.<sup>12</sup> Critchley suggests an opening into which something like a Marxist understanding of the politics of Benjamin and Gramsci needs to be developed if deconstruction is to coordinate the agency of its aporia, and that such a development is implied but not substantiated by Derrida.

The difficulty critics have had providing an explicitly Marxist response to Derrida's book suggests that his claim to be faithful to a certain spirit of Marxism is less incredible than it first appears, indeed that Derrida can with some justice claim to have more in common with, for example, Benjaminian Marxism, than many of those whose affiliation with Marxism has no substantive relation to Marx. Contemporary literary theory often thought of as Marxist has barely a residue of determinate Marxist form or content. Marxism can seem little more than an ethical orientation to the professional terrains of 'cultural politics' or 'social science' dubiously construed and promoted by academic left-liberal moralists. The moral attitudes of certain kinds of ethical Marxism are barely distinguishable from the aporia of a Levinasian ethics of alterity and the supposedly non-hypostatized 'Other'. Such, then, are the terms of the possibility of a critical dialogue between Marxism and Derrida, a problem of more consequence than one

which would involve being simply for or against Derrida. It becomes necessary to re-read Marx and Marxism by *seeing through* Derrida in the double optic his figurative readings suggest.

My contention is that while Derrida's performative re-interpretation reveals important problems, it is nevertheless possible to read Marx with and against Derrida, reading Marx differently, without construing a mode of intentionality or a dogmatics of orthodox reception. The necessity of being able to read Marx against dogmatic Marxism also has a political history as part of the resistance to the many dogmatisms which have appropriated Marx's name. I recall the dogmatic surprise which greeted me when I asked academic philosophers in Romania who had been forced by the state to teach Marx why it had not been possible to read Marx against the state, given the complexity of coordinating any coherent reading of Marx's thought as a whole. State ideology requires academicians and theorists to convince themselves of their own ideological illusions, and a state for which *Capital* is a pseudo-bible must surely create the possibility of non-conformist readings. It remains difficult to see how Marx's writings could be made to conform to Soviet-style state ideology without some residue, some trace of difference.

Given the sclerosis of Marxism as the state doctrine of dialectical materialism one of the tasks for a reading of Marx and of Marxism is to understand how such practices could have been developed and legitimated as Marxist, and as a reading of Marxists such as Lenin, Stalin and Mao, whose opportunist readings of Marx are too easily dismissed as vulgar without due consideration of the political content of vulgarity. What, then, would be the trace of difference, the possibility of reading Marx against dogmatic Marxism? The peculiarity of Derrida's reading of Marx serves to indicate the difficulty and historical resonance of specific figures in Marx's writings, and how such traces might be read. It is, then, necessary to suggest how a different kind of reading would be true to the spirit and to the body of Marx and Marxism, and in this light to read the spectre of Marxism that haunts Derrida.

A literary theory of Marxism needs to understand the reception of Marx's writing as a hermeneutic relation to Marx. This involves reading the horizon of historicity in Marx's writings in relation to the problems of contemporary agency and political action. The truth of Marx's writings are not to be read to reveal transcendental or ontological conditions of the possibility of meaning, but rather they ask to be read and re-read as a critical process of prospective and retrospective transformation, a process which acknowledges the dialectical development of both intellectual and social contradictions. Marxism offers itself as a relation between interpretation and action in which textual criticism works both on the horizon of historical and potential meaning, and on the transformation of the conditions of meaning.

The depth of the hermeneutic problem is apparent if the conditionality of meaning as a horizon of revolutionary transformation is compared with the conditions for historical transformation suggested by the interpretation of the Bible or Shakespeare's plays. The possibility

for new interpretations and performances of the *Gospels* or of *Hamlet* pose some formal analogies, but the revolutionary project of Marx seeks a quite different future for its writings, one in which the conditions which produced these writings have been overcome. There are developed traditions of hermeneutics associated with theological and literary criticism, to say nothing of quite different attempts, associated with Dilthey and Gadamer, to conceive philosophy hermeneutically. The claim that Marxism seeks not merely to interpret the world but to change it marks out a quite different conception of understanding and action.

Even if a number of hermeneutic problems are shared, the difficulty is to develop a more acute sense of the relevant differences. The historical location of such differences might be sought in the legacy of Hegel for Marxism, especially with regard to the attempt to think both historically and philosophically. The historical materialist conception of history and the persistence of engagement with the writings and ideas of Marx indicate that a central difficulty for Marxism is the need to develop an understanding of the extent to which Marxism can constitute itself as a hermeneutics of Marx and thus as a critique of the often sectarian or dogmatic interpretations of the spirit of Marx. This is perhaps the central task for Marxist literary theory, not least because the material difficulties faced by literary criticism are superficially similar. The interpretation of inherited literary traditions and texts involves a combination of detailed textual analysis, depth of historical understanding and a sense of the values and politics of the contemporary processes in which texts are read and performed, re-read and re-performed. Clearly, however, literary criticism and theory are no substitute for Marxism. Nevertheless, this affinity perhaps explains why Marxism has such an important place in the history of literary criticism, and why it might be important for Marxism to understand and develop this affinity critically.

### Marxism after Derrida

*Specters of Marx* provides a complicated version of a more general process of appropriation and reinscription. Derrida's gesture of solidarity with Marxism is exemplary. It takes the reading of Marx and Marxism as that with which deconstruction has always already been working *with* rather than *against*, while emptying Marxism of its contents to the point where the difference between a friend and an enemy of Marxism becomes a spectral difference, a difference which claims not to be critical, but which makes all the difference in the world for a discourse which claims to be one of the spirits of Marxism and in the spirit of Marx.

Derrida himself suggests that *Specters of Marx* can be read as Derrida's belated reply to Jean-Marie Benoist's *Marx est mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), a book which suggests a Nietzschean deconstruction of the discourse of Marxism, attempting – in an explicitly Derridean fashion – to read the inflation of signs associated with May 1968 as the tired discourse of metaphysics and metaphor in Marx and Marxism. Most of the themes explored in Derrida's book are already broached by

Benoist, as though in the spirit of Derrida: the question of ontology in Marx's work; the play between presence and non-presence, the inside and the outside, the difference between teleology and revolutionary eschatology, and so forth. Benoist, moreover, makes the metaphors in *The German Ideology* and *Capital* central to his reading, in an investigation which reads Lenin, Marcuse, Mao and Althusser, figures whose presence is barely even spectral in Derrida's reading. Benoist, however, is hardly a household name. It has taken the intervening quarter of a century for Derrida's own deconstruction of Marx to make itself news. This confirms a significant equivocation offered by Derrida in *Positions* (1971) in which he observed that Marxist texts 'are not to be read according to a hermeneutical or exegetical method which would seek out a finished signified beneath a textual surface. Reading is transformational....'<sup>13</sup> The deconstructive reading of Marxism broached by Benoist requires, for Derrida, something different from an interpretation or a reading of Marx, something more like an agency of re-reading, a transformational protocol which activates textual differences. There is an important distinction here to be made between hermeneutic *methods* and the sense in which Marxist texts are not grounded in the givenness of methods of reading, but are part of a different and active process of social transformation. As Derrida suggests, a reading of Marxist texts as though there were a hidden theological truth to be revealed – or as though the gospel of Marx could be reanimated – would not be in the spirit of Marx, even if much Marxist debate has been mired in such theological speculations. Accordingly *Specters of Marx* repeats a claim Derrida has often made about deconstruction: 'Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also in the *tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*.' (92) This hinge between interpretation and transformation in Derrida's reading is also Marxism's difficulty.

As Benoist suggests, the death of Marx is, like that of God, the end of a hermeneutic horizon, marking a shift away from the discursive authority with which Marx can be read. As Foucault has suggested, the status of Marx and Freud as authors not just of particular texts but of an endless possibility of discourse is such that they are founders of discursivity, producers of meaning who, in Benjamin's sense of the author as producer, change the relations of production within and through their writing. The constraining figure of Marx within the discourse of Marxism is not simply available for transformational reading, but is the figure of a possibility of discourse, what Derrida construes as something like the figure of the spirit of Marx.

The different emphasis of Foucault with regard to how the disappearance or the death of the author might be understood emerges in the sharp exchange between Foucault and Derrida. Derrida's reading of Foucault seeks to interrogate certain philosophical and methodological presuppositions of Foucault's history of madness, to show how Foucault confirms a metaphysical gesture he seeks to eschew.<sup>14</sup> In question is the possibility of a historicity of discourse which would free itself from the history of philosophy. Something analogous is

involved in Derrida's attempt to locate a constellation of metaphysical presuppositions in Marx's work, presuppositions from which Marx attempts to flee but in a flight whose figures can be traced in the spectres which haunt Marx's texts. Foucault's trenchant riposte to Derrida highlights the differences in the consequences of the death of the author with regard to the practice of transformational reading and the hinge I have alluded to between interpretation and transformational praxis. Foucault accuses Derrida of:

... the reduction of discursive practices to textual traces; the elision of the events produced therein and the retention only of marks for a reading; the invention of voices behind texts to avoid having to analyse the modes of implication of the subject in discourses; the assigning of the originary as said and unsaid in the text to avoid replacing discursive practices in the field of transformations where they are carried out.

I will not say that it is a metaphysics, metaphysics itself or its closure which is hiding in this 'textualisation' of discursive practices. I'll go much further than that: I shall say that what can be seen here so visibly is a historically well-determined little pedagogy.<sup>15</sup>

Much could be said about the violence of misrecognition in this exchange. For my purposes what is significant is that Foucault's attack has been echoed by many of those frustrated by the limitless pedagogical mastery claimed by the apostles of Derrida. The account of discourse provided by Foucault, however, owes more to Nietzsche than to Marx. The problem is the move from text to practice, from theoretical reading to praxis, precisely the move that Marxism has invariably insisted on as that which is both difficult and necessary. Foucault's criticism of deconstruction as a pedagogy nevertheless has some force given the pedagogic domestication of deconstruction, despite Derrida's claims to the contrary. Foucault's remarks can also be taken as a criticism of the symptomatic reading of literary and textual production proposed by Althusser and Macherey.<sup>16</sup> How then can Derrida avoid the textualisation of Marxism as a pedagogic or academic discourse? How can Derrida avoid reading Marx as if the material practice of Marxism is merely a spectral product of Marx's ontological underpinnings.

The criticisms directed at Derrida by Foucault haunt Derrida via a passage by Marx from *The German Ideology* which Derrida worries over in *Glas* and *La Carte postale*. The passage from Marx gives the following definition of Marx's materialist conception of history:

... it [the materialist conception of history] does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into 'self-consciousness' or transformation into 'apparitions', 'spectres', 'fancies', etc. (in short *Geist*), but only practical overthrow of the

What risks happening is that one will try to play Marx off against Marxism so as to neutralize, or at any rate muffle the political imperative in the untroubled exegesis of a classified work.... People would be ready to accept the return of Marx or the return to Marx, on the condition that a silence is maintained about Marx's injunction not just to decipher but to act and to make the deciphering [the interpretation] into a transformation 'that changes the world'.... It is something altogether other that I wish to attempt here as I turn or return to Marx... to do everything we can so as to avoid the neutralizing anaesthesia of a new theoreticism, and to prevent a philosophico-philological return to Marx from prevailing.(31-2)

Derrida recognizes more clearly than most Marxists the terms on which a Marxist reading faithful to the spirit of Marx could be understood and attempted. Yet the very terms put forward by Derrida indicate the impossibility of his own reading of Marx performing such an interpretation. Derrida's reading of Marx risks exactly this neutralising anaesthesia of a new theoreticism. But Derrida highlights the extent to which all claims to be faithful to the spirit of Marx are subject to such a logic of appropriation. A reading which is both interpretation and a political act goes beyond a literal, materialist reading to something like a spirit of reading, and yet does so in the name of materialism. And to re-read Marx and Marxism in this light is to engage with a process of reading as exhaustive and as political as that engaged by Marx in the writing of *Capital*, so as to develop a critique both of the explicit claims of Marx and Marxism and of the material conditions for the possibility of these claims. But there are more to material conditions than the impossibility of escaping metaphysics, however much this impossibility is that which Marxism has continually forgotten in its many lapses into materialist dogmatism. A decisive breach needs to be opened, however, between a Marxist understanding of reading and the kind of performative interpretation suggested by Derrida. The conditions of possibility for the discourse of Marx and Marxism are not those of philosophical form, or of an ontology of spectrality, but those of the contradictory conditions of capitalism and class struggle.

The terms by which the agency of reading is understood by Derrida are such that the political move enacted by his reading of Marx reduces the chain of figures linking Marx's writing to a kind of ontological fear which attempts to flee from the proliferation of spectrality:

Marx continues to want to ground his critique or exorcism of the spectral simulacrum in an ontology. It is a – critical but pre-deconstructive – ontology of presence as actual reality and objectivity. This critical ontology means to deploy the possibility of dissipating the phantom, let us venture to say again of conjuring it away as representative consciousness of a subject, and of bringing this representation back to the world of



labor, production, and exchange, so as to reduce it to its conditions. Pre-deconstructive here does not mean false, unnecessary, or illusory. Rather it characterizes a relatively stabilized knowledge that calls for questions more radical than the critique itself and than the ontology that grounds the critique. These questions are not destabilizing as the effect of some theoretico-speculative subversion. They are not even, in the final analysis, questions but seismic events. *Practical* events where thought *becomes act...* (170)

The quality of Derrida's performative interpretation here emerges in all its contradictory glory. To construe Marx's thought as being grounded in an ontology which reduces spectral representations to their conditions is to offer an explicit and general critique of Marx's thought. And yet Derrida stresses that Marx's critique, although 'pre-deconstructive', is not 'false, unnecessary or illusory', but rather that it is insufficiently radical. If Marx's work can be described as a 'critical ontology', then an important aspect of what makes it critical is its emphasis on *social* being rather than on Being as such. This emphasis is itself critical of traditional conceptions of ontology, such that philosophical questions are to be understood not in terms of consciousness, nor as grounds or ontological conditions, but as ideological reflections of social being and the history of class struggle. There is something like a philosophical anthropology in the early thinking of Marx, notably in suggestions regarding species-being. Nevertheless, Derrida's reduction of Marx's understanding of critique to an ontology inverts the central emphasis of Marx's thought and his attempt to distance his thinking from Hegelianism. And if Derrida thinks that this is not to offer a critique of Marx but a radicalization of the spirit of Marx's thought, then it would seem that this is because, for Derrida at least, critique is necessarily grounded in an ontology, a grounding Derrida wishes to deconstruct. But if Derrida wishes to free Marx's thinking from the necessity of its ontological chains, it would appear to do so at the cost of subverting the very possibility of critique. Hence, Derrida's claim that this is not merely a theoretical or speculative question, but a question which performs a movement from theory to practice, where thought becomes act, constitutes an audacious appropriation of the theory / practice conception traditionally associated with Marxism. The attempt to appropriate Marx's thought by conjuring it away from its conditions of labour is indeed to perform a spectral kind of politics, to ground the possibility of politics in an ontological condition whose ground is in the same moment construed as groundless. Derrida indicates the difficulty of Marxism as a theory of interpretation faced with the shifting hermeneutic horizon of the history in which Marx thought and acted, and as a theory of political action developed in the light of this theory of interpretation. Derrida is right to insist on the materiality of the figurative conditions of Marx's writings, and on the difficulty of understanding the materiality of Marx's texts. Marxism needs to develop such an understanding if it is to avoid the temptation to reduce social being to ontology, particularly when tempted by recourse to ontology as

the implicit ground of critique.

Marxist literary theory after Derrida has, then, to articulate the spirit of Marxism in all its heterogeneity as the spirits of Marx. This articulation involves developing a literary theory of the relation between interpretation and action which can illuminate the discourse founded by Marx, going beyond the fantasy of origin with which Marxism grounds itself in Marx, so as to develop a forgetful remembering of Marx. As such, a literary theory of Marxism will need to converge with Marx's critique of capitalism and with Marxist literary theory, a convergence which meets at the point where these differences makes difference matter.

## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 52. Page references to *Specters of Marx* hereafter are included in the main text.
2. Derrida's demolition of Fukuyama is amusingly pointed, but readers of *Common Sense* might find more substance in *Has History Ended? Fukuyama, Marx, Modernity* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), eds. Christopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty.
3. See *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). This paper is a draft version of a chapter from my forthcoming companion book *Reading Marxist Literary Theory*, to be published by Blackwell.
4. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida: "Specters of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics', *New Left Review*, 208 (1994), 87-106 (106).
5. Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida', 91.
6. Fredric Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', *New Left Review*, 209 (1995), 75-109 (82).
7. Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism without Marxism', *Radical Philosophy*, 73 (1995), 35-37 (37).
8. Subsequent critiques in *Radical Philosophy* come no closer to a substantiated refutation of Derrida: see 'Symposium: Spectres of Derrida', *Radical Philosophy*, 75 (1996), 26-41.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Ghostwriting', *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 65-84.
10. Ernesto Laclau, 'The Time Is Out Of Joint', *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 86-96 (93). On Laclau's post-Marxist understanding of political thinking informed by Derrida see Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985) and Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990). For a general account sympathetic to Levinasian ethics see S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). A critique of Levinas can be teased out, with some difficulty, from Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism* (1984) and *The Broken Middle* (1992).
11. Laclau, 'The Time Is Out Of Joint', 93.
12. Simon Critchley, 'On Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 21:3 (1995), 1-30 (21); cf. S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*

(Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

13. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone, 1987), p. 63.

14. See Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978).

15. Michel Foucault, 'My Body, This Paper, This Fire', trans. G. Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review*, 4, no. 1 (1979), 9-28 (27).

16. See Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1970) and Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoff Wall (London: Routledge, 1978). Recent works are more modest: see Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995); and Pierre Macherey, *The object of literature*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

17. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), pp. 58-9.

18. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 267-8.

## The Concept of Power and the Zapatistas

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John Holloway

[1] "A new lie is sold to us as history. The lie about the defeat of hope, the lie about the defeat of dignity, the lie about the defeat of humanity". (Subcomandante Marcos in the invitation to an Intercontinental Gathering against Neo-Liberalism, *La Jornada* 30/1/96).

The lie is a lie about power, and about necessity. After twenty years of neo-liberalism, it is no longer really a lie about desirability. The market optimism of the 80s has been largely replaced by a market realism: not 'everything is perfect under a market system', but 'this is the way things are and this is the way things must be, in reality there is no alternative'. 'A different society might be nice, but it is not possible'. The lie about the defeat of hope is a lie about the defeat of possibility, a lie about the power to change.

The zapatistas have a different idea of possibility, a different idea of power. This was expressed by Marcos in a comment on the dialogue between the zapatistas and the government. "This is not a fair dialogue, it is not a dialogue between equals. But in this dialogue the EZLN is not the weak party, it is the strong party. On the side of the government there are only military force and the lies spread by some of the media. And force and lies will never, never be stronger than reason. They can impose themselves for days, months or years, but history will finally put each one in its place" (Subcomandante Marcos, 5/5/95, *La Jornada*, 11/5/95).

Very pretty, but it's absurd! How can Marcos's declaration possibly be correct? His reference to history does not answer anything, since history is no more than the result of struggles about power. So how can we possibly maintain that the zapatistas are stronger than the Mexican government, or that reason is stronger than force and lies? To defend such an absurd statement, it would be necessary to defend an absurd theory of power.

That is surely the challenge of the zapatistas and their absurd rebellion. The zapatista rebellion is absurd. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, after the defeat of the sandinistas, after the defeat of the revolutions in El Salvador and Guatemala, when China is becoming more and more integrated into the capitalist world market, when the Cuban revolution is finding it increasingly difficult to survive in any form at all, when all the major revolutionary movements have disappeared from Latin America





























































































































































