

Derrida on Marx: (Re)turn or De(con)struction?

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Ever since he stunned an international Marx conference in Riverside, California last year with his call for a return to Marx, something which also marked a major "turn" in his thought, Jacques Derrida's book *The Specters of Marx* has been eagerly awaited by a broad spectrum of the intellectual Left. The book is in fact a much-expanded version of that April 1993 lecture.

The Vicissitudes of Deconstruction

Derrida and the philosophico-literary school of "deconstruction" which he represents have long been associated with an intense theoretical radicalism rooted in abstruse linguistic/textual analysis. He and his numerous followers along with the whole cultural movement termed postmodernism have tended to disparage not only liberal thought, but also Marx's thought, as essentially Eurocentric, phallogentric, and full of humanist illusions and delusions.

Instead of Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger are often invoked as the truly radical philosophers, something which drew Derrida into an embarrassing (for him) dispute with the American leftist philosopher Thomas Sheehan in the *New York Review of Books* in 1993 over Derrida's attempt to suppress the English translation of his own statements which seemed to excuse Heidegger's anti-Semitism.

At a directly philosophical level, his most prominent colleague in the United States, Gayatri Spivak, has, while using some of Marx's theory of exploitation, pointed proudly to "deconstruction's share in the undoing of the dialectic" as well as to deconstruction's opposition to all forms of "transcendence" of the given. [1] Derrida himself, in one of his first essays in English, originally published in 1968, attacked humanist readings of Marx as forms of "onto-theo-teleology," calling instead for "an absolute break and difference" from/with the Western humanist tradition, Marx included, via a return to Heidegger and Nietzsche. [2]

Derrida's own work has usually been more complicated and interesting than that of his followers. For example, while some of his American followers support crude forms of Third Worldism, and others hesitate from openly defending women's liberation against Islamic fundamentalism, Derrida himself strongly supports human rights movements. He is a prominent member, for example, of the French committee to support the persecuted anti-fundamentalist Bangladeshi feminist writer, Taslima Nasreen.

On the Urgency of Marx for Today

The opening pages of Derrida's new book are full of praise for Marx. In the first chapter, he writes: "Upon rereading the *Manifesto* and several other great works of Marx, I said to myself that I knew of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson appears more urgent today." [3] Derrida mourns the fact that today "the name of Marx has disappeared" (p. 5) from philosophical and political debate, but he says that the specter of Marx still haunts our post-1989 world. There are many provocative literary allusions with regard to the notion of the specter, not only to the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* about the specter of communism haunting Europe, but also to Hamlet being haunted by his murdered father's ghost.

Derrida's point is not to introduce or reintroduce Marx into what he calls the "great canon of Western political philosophy" (p. 32) but rather to make Marx actual, to challenge the new "dominant discourse" which has become an "incantation" to the effect that "Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, with its hopes, its discourse, its theories and its practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here's to the survival of economic and political liberalism" (p. 52). Further, he argues that "it is necessary to assume the heritage of Marxism" in such a way that this "heritage is never a given, it is always a task" to be worked out for the future (p. 54).

These gestures toward Marx for today do not mean, however, a return to the humanism and dialectic of Hegel and Marx. There are enough hints even on these early pages praising Marx of where he will go later. For one still finds silence about the *1844 Essays*, and an effort to separate the "spirit" of Marxism from "Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, [or] as 'dialectical materialism'" (p. 68).

Then, a bit later, a little over halfway through the book, Derrida announces that "what is certain is that I am not a Marxist" (p. 88). As he goes on, it becomes clearer that the "spirit" of Marx which he wants to evoke is that of a radical critique of capitalism, but not the "dialectical method," the concept of "totality" or other philosophical aspects of Marxism, which he explicitly opposes (p. 88).

It is beginning to sound more familiar, as if he wants to use some of Marx's socio-economic analysis without embracing the core of Marxism, the dialectic, that he wishes instead to substitute his own deconstructionism for the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic. Deconstruction, he tells us, is "an attempted radicalization of Marxism" (p. 92). It is necessary to use deconstruction to overcome some of Marxism's worst flaws which include its "anthropo-theology" rooted in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (p. 144), its "untenable humanism" (p. 145), and its concept of the "whole" (p. 146).

Diverging from Marx

In the closing pages of the book Derrida takes up the famous section on commodity fetishism from chapter one of *Capital*. In an intricate and original reading of this key text, he seems to agree with Marx that under capitalism the products of human labor take on a life of their own, assuming a fetishized, mystical form while, at the same time, the human being is dehumanized, and relations between people, Marx writes, take on "the fantastic form of a relation between things." [4] All those who are oppressed by this racist, sexist, homophobic, classist system know well this feeling of being reduced to an object, a thing, (some)thing less than human.

But it is at this crucial juncture that Derrida diverges in an important way from Marx. He seems to make a serious misreading of Marx when he writes that "as soon as there is production, there is fetishism" (p. 166). Derrida probably knows full well that for Marx, pre-capitalist societies with their more open forms of social hierarchy did not need commodity fetishism, and were socially transparent. Also, he no doubt is aware (but does not mention) that Marx saw the growing self-organization of the workers and other revolutionary groups as pointing toward a future society of freely associated labor where human rationality would take hold of and uproot commodity fetishism.

Derrida seems to argue instead for the permanence of fetishism, and mentions the "general question of fetishization" as something he will return to in a "work to come" (p. 167). He apparently considers Marx's critique of commodity fetishism under capitalism to be nothing more than an attempted exorcism of the fetish. Or putting it more accurately, he thinks that dialectical Reason -- in the sense of unmasking, critiquing, and going beyond the fetish -- itself has no rational basis.

He suggests that Marx may be grounded in a set of "messianic" beliefs, which includes, Derrida writes, an "exorcism at the beginning of *Capital*" which is linked to a great "revolutionary promise" for the future (p. 163). Derrida does not therefore dismiss Marx, because even such an "exorcism" would not "discredit" Marx, and he points to the possibility of a form of messianism without theology. However, he does write that Marx is a "critical but pre-deconstructive" thinker (p. 170). But this does not mean any easy assimilation of Marx into deconstruction for "Marx has not yet been received" and he remains even today "a clandestine immigrant" in Western thought (p. 174).

Diverging from Derrida

Let us look more closely for a moment at Marx's own text to get a better grasp of Derrida's critique. Derrida himself (p. 164) quotes the following passage on commodity fetishism: "The whole mystery of commodities, the whole magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production." [5]

He never, however, quotes any of Marx's historico/dialectical analysis which follows, wherein pre-capitalist social formations such as European feudalism had "no need for labor and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality" (p. 170), because the exploitation of the peasantry was open, brutal, and direct. In a different way, the liberatory society of the future to which Marx also points will dispense with commodity fetishism because in a society based upon "freely associated" labor, human relations would assume not only a "transparent" but also a "rational" form (p. 171). It is these very notions of transparency and of dialectical Reason which Derrida questions, however.

To be sure, in today's retrogressive climate, it is hard to see the actuality of dialectical Reason as negation of the negation, as the positive in the negative of this crisis-ridden world. Yet, without such a perspective, on what grounds can we really go beyond the capitalist order?

Still, Derrida's critique is more compelling than that of Althusser a generation ago. Althusser tried to banish Hegel, humanism, and dialectical Reason from Marx, which was impossible to do given Marx's own writings. Derrida, however, is seriously engaged with Hegel throughout his writings. Although he too is an anti-humanist, he acknowledges Marx's humanism, yet urges us to return to Marx.

Two decades ago, in her *Philosophy and Revolution*, the Marxist Humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya wrote that in the reified [thingified] and fetishized world of capitalism, "the reification of human relations is a fact so overpowering that it dominates the whole of society and *the thought of the period.*" [6] Is this not the trap Derrida has fallen into, in assuming fetishism to be permanent? Is this not in large part because deconstruction lacks an historical dimension?

Perhaps this problem is related to another one also found in deconstruction and in postmodern theory generally, the tendency to reject subjectivity. Dunayevskaya addresses this problem in a later discussion of fetishism. There, she stresses that post-Marx Marxists tended to discuss fetishism, if at all, only as an "objective" feature of capitalism, one which weighed down upon us, and not as something which also generated "subjective" yearnings for freedom on the part of the oppressed: "The objective may outweigh the subjective, but, unless we see the unity of the two and grapple with the truth of both, we will never be free. And freedom is what all the striving is about." [7]

The Importance of Derrida's Return to Marx

But none of this should obscure the uniqueness of what Derrida has done. In raising Marx as the thinker for today, Derrida may have opened up some important space for debate on Marx, Hegel, and the dialectic among youth, feminists, and radical intellectuals generally.

Furthermore, Derrida has put forth very forcefully the notion that Marx's own writings, by now over a century old, are still, as cited earlier, very "urgent" for "today." Perhaps some of this will inspire the generation of radical youth who have been influenced by Derrida to confront Marx directly and to connect Marx to their fight against sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, war, and imperialism. It is interesting that Derrida is the only one of today's internationally prominent philosophers to advocate a return to Marx.

He is taking the opposite tack to that of other "radical" philosophers such as Richard Rorty or Jürgen Habermas. Why has he done so? Why now?

Something is rotten in a European civilization which allows genocide to continue unchecked in Bosnia, which greets another genocide of up to a million people by the French-financed Rwandan regime with near silence, and which allows a "normal" fascism, as in the "neo" fascists who are part of the Italian government, to become simply an accepted part of political life. All the while this same civilization, of which America is the sole superpower, closes its borders ever tighter against people of color.

It is perhaps this rot [8], this decadence, this retrogression, which has drawn one radical French philosopher, one who as a teenager was forced to wear the yellow star under the Nazi Occupation, to return to the greatest of Europe's revolutionary philosophers, Karl Marx, as the one who is most "urgent" for us today.

NOTES:

1. See Spivak, "Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida," in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 119.
2. Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 134-35.
3. Derrida, *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 13. Further pagination directly in the text, translation occasionally modified.
4. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. by Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 165.
5. Marx, *Capital*, p. 169. Further pagination directly in the text.
6. Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, orig. 1973), p. 88, emphasis added.
7. Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, orig. 1982), p. 144.
8. In a recent review of the book in France, Alain Guillerme writes: "We can thank Derrida for having written such a book during a period of rotteness," *L'Homme et la Société*, No. 111-12 (Jan-June 1994).