

THE QUESTION OF MARX AND JUSTICE REVISTED: DERRIDA'S MARX AND MESSIANIC TIME

By Catherine Kellogg

There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation which preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialism is aware of that.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Marxists have never found substantive principles of justice -- which include equality, fairness, and impartiality *inter alia* -- a very satisfactory basis for critique.¹ Marx himself said that to argue that capitalist exploitation is unjust is to condemn it on the basis of an abstract notion of right which is itself endemic to the functioning of capitalism. The only principles of justice appropriate to judging capitalism, he insisted, are those that in fact 'correspond' to it, and that are thus functional to sustaining and legitimating it. However, as many Marxist philosophers have noted, Marx's critique of capitalism does have a normative and even ethical dimension. Indeed, it is incoherent to understand that Marx thinks capitalism is anything other than unfair.

This apparent conundrum has fuelled a long and sometimes bitter debate within Western Marxism. For example, Norman Geras tells us that between 1970 and 1982 at least three dozen new items appeared on the topic.² Even more importantly, as Ernesto Laclau remarks, the question of 'Marx and justice' has not only been the theme of recurrent debates -- between economic determinism on the one hand, and so-called ethical Marxism on the other -- but those debates have made the history of Marxism itself possible.³ And while the controversy has

largely centred around conflicting exegetical evidence, Jacques Derrida has recently entered the fray on a rather new and startling note. The question Derrida asks in his text *Spectres of Marx* is not so much 'did Marx have a theory of justice?' but rather, 'if Marxism is to have a future, what kind of justice does it require?' In this way Derrida has left the terms of the debate behind and has reframed it, not uncharacteristically, in a profoundly philosophical register.

Derrida's position, while rather mystifying, is nonetheless emphatic. If the question 'whither Marxism' is still possible he says, then justice must carry "beyond the living present."⁴ The notion of justice which we require even to be able to ask the question of the future direction of Marxism, he claims, belongs to the "spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time."⁵ In this way, he relates the problem of Marx and justice to the question of time; a problematic that for the most part, has seemed distant to the pressing questions of Marxism's future. On the face of it, then, Derrida's approach seems strange and abstract: the kind of hyper-theoretical retreat from politics that post-modernists are vilified for. But I will argue that not only is the link between Marxism, justice and time not a lunatic postmodern retreat from politics, but that it suggests an interesting direction for Marxism; one that offers something new and potentially important to the tradition. I will talk about why I am at least somewhat convinced that following a line of questioning initiated by Derrida with respect to 'time,' allows for a way to think about justice, and in particular Marx's own notion of justice, beyond the present and beyond certainty. This way of framing the problem of justice allows for a thinking of politics beyond faith and a politics appropriate to 'our time'.

Marx and Justice

It is precisely in the complex articulation between time and justice that Derrida enters into a dialogue with Marx. Specifically, Derrida finds in Marx's critique of justice, a gesture that Marxism enables but is then unable

to control. For the bourgeois justice claims which Marx dismisses are in fact the unthematized possibility for the very critique of ideology which undercuts them. While Marx claims that the notion of justice that governs capitalist exchange is a part of the legitimating apparatus of capitalism, that claim itself -- a part of Marx's important critique of ideology -- is motivated by a notion of the good that cannot be accounted for without recourse to the very bourgeois ideological structure it simultaneously dismantles. This logical structure will be recognizable to all who are familiar with the traditional practice of immanent critique: a procedure which pushes the bounds of the object's self-understanding by holding it rigorously to its own self-definition.⁶ However, what Derrida's analysis allows us to notice is that Marx's engagement with the problem of justice involves more than critique. Derrida's insight is that the normative thrust of Marxism secretly relies on an alternate and undeveloped notion of justice; one permitted by what Derrida calls a messianic notion of time. So while Marx's critique of bourgeois justice claims (and the social relations that animate them) is well rehearsed, it seems appropriate to offer a synopsis.

Under capitalism, Marx tells us, workers receive a wage for their labour; an exchange which appears to be fair. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that workers, whose labour power is itself the source of the value of the commodities they produce, will have to work longer than the time which is necessary to reproduce the value of their own labour power; longer than is necessary to replace the value of the wage they have received. They will perform, that is to say, surplus-labour, and the surplus-labour they perform will be appropriated by the capitalist as a profit. This appropriation is what Marx argues is the objective feature of capitalist exploitation, and it is on this basis that Marx argues that exploitation is integral to capitalism.

This analysis poses the bourgeois notion of justice against the bourgeois social relations it sustains in order to demonstrate the poverty of both. As such, it is an example of the critique I alluded to above. For, while the

exchange appears to be fair -- the capitalist has paid for the value of the worker's labour power -- in fact, the capitalist, by virtue of owning the means of production, gains more from this exchange than the worker. It is for this reason that Marx also regularly employs the language of theft when describing capitalist extraction of surplus product from working people and condemns capitalism on the basis of such other values as its non-freedom, or oppression. For example, Marx says of the process of capitalist development,

Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows.⁷

Justice, rendered as fairness, is not being done here; capitalism unfairly advantages the capitalist.

In this sense, Marx does not so much condemn capitalism on the basis of justice, but rather condemns justice on the basis of capitalist social relations. Indeed, Marx claims that justice is an inherently *distributive* value. It is, in other words, always on the basis of a formal, generalized and essentially numerical distribution that something is considered just in the first place. Justice, on this account, is understood on precisely the same kind of formal basis as that which considers workers to be equal in their interchangeability. As Marx says,

Right by its nature can exist only as the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals . . . are measurable by an equal standard only insofar as they are made subject to an equal criterion, are taken from a certain side only, for instance, in the present case, are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else is ignored. Besides, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another etc. etc.⁸

Thus, to argue that capitalist exploitation is unjust, is to

condemn it on the basis of an abstract notion of right which is itself endemic to the functioning of capitalism. What is deemed to be just, in other words, can only be understood from within the hermeneutic horizon of bourgeois ideology -- an ideology whose purpose is to shore up these very relations of exploitation. "To avoid all these defects," he says, "right would have to be unequal rather than equal."⁹ It is in this sense that Marx argues that communist society, one in which each will give according to his/her ability and receive according to his/her need, will be *beyond justice*.

Thus, while Marx clearly does not condemn capitalism on the basis of justice -- indeed, whether he condemns capitalism at all is the source of another controversy I cannot enter into here -- he is equally clearly not a disinterested commentator; a purely scientific observer of the events of history. There is clearly an unthematized evaluative, even moral dimension to Marx's thought which seems to remain un-deconstructed by his own critique of ideology. His critique of capitalist exploitation is precisely that it is unjust, but its injustice is not visible from the perspective of dominant ideology; an ideology which renders justice unjustly, if you will. For justice to be rendered justly, Marx suggests that it would have to be rendered on a case by case basis; from *each* according to her ability, to *each* according to her need. It could never, in other words, become generalized, for that would involve the abstraction and thus the violence of bourgeois social relations.

Marx's use of the notion 'justice' then, swings between right understood as generality, abstraction and universality, and right understood as *inequality*, concreteness and pure singularity, and he is very clear about which version he endorses. Following Derrida, I want to suggest that the crucial difference between these two notions of justice -- the hinge between them -- is time thought in two different ways. In one, the present is privileged as presence, and in the other, the present -- or at least the future present -- is strictly speaking, non-present. It is, in his language, *spectral*. The first version

understands time in the common, everyday way as a series of 'nows', and this notion, as I will show, gives rise to an teleological theory of history whose end redeems and thus avenges the past. The second more enigmatic version of time, one which Derrida himself argues makes deconstruction possible, is *messianic*. This version of time -- wherein history does not come to an inevitable and predictable end, but rather breaks apocalyptically away from time to begin a whole new history -- gives rise to a completely different way of thinking about justice; one modelled on the impossibility of what Derrida calls the 'gift'. The first teleological and vengeful notion of history has held sway within Marxism -- notwithstanding long and bitter debates -- while the normative thrust of Marxism secretly relies on the second impossible and messianic one. Our responsibility as Marx's heirs, Derrida argues, is to resist the dogmatism inherent in the former logic, and to heed the normative call of the latter.

Hegel's Version of Time: From 'Now' 'til Eternity

My point of departure then, is Derrida's suggestion that the ordinary understanding of time as the succession of a series of 'nows' gives rise both to an teleological notion of history, and to a notion of justice as revenge. This is a startling and rather mystifying claim. For while justice as vengeance -- justice as charged with historical memory if you will -- is not new to political philosophy (witness Benjamin's insistence that socialists are "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren," or Adorno's bitter remark that "the attempt to change the world miscarried" and thus "philosophy lives on"), Derrida insists that justice thought as revenge is a direct consequence of time thought in terms of the existence of 'the now'.¹⁰ The first general question it seems to me then, is how does this highly political notion -- justice -- arise from the profoundly philosophical problem of time?

The answer to this question takes me on a detour into Hegel. For it was surely Hegel who brought time squarely into the realm of modern political thought.

Specifically, Hegel changes natural time into spiritual history, by way of *Geist*. That is, Spirit, which alone has a history, "falls into time" [*fall die Entwicklung der Geschichte in die Zeit*]¹¹ to produce world history, or *Weltgeschichte*. In this way, Hegel transforms time into world history, which since Hegel, has been both the vehicle for and the object of politics.¹²

For Hegel, then, the becoming-history of time -- a path which is treacherous, if not near *impossible* -- is not incidental to his politico-philosophical system, but its very heart. In a nutshell, Hegel's problem is that time is both temporally impossible, and philosophically *indispensable*. It is indispensable insofar as "in its Notion, time itself is eternal"¹³ and thus the inaugural category for both truth and philosophy. However, Hegel argues, unless concepts are made actual they are philosophically empty. So time must be made real; it must stop being a concept and actualize itself. This is impossible insofar as 'when time happens' each moment or 'now' effectively destroys the one which preceded it.

This problematic comes to Hegel by way of Aristotle, and like Aristotle, Hegel analyzes it through a 'philosophy of nature'.¹⁴ In Hegel's thought, Nature is the Idea outside itself; it is pre-actualized Spirit. As such, nature admits no mediation and no difference. Nature, in other words, is pure, diffuse undifferentiatedness; it is "absolute space."¹⁵ Time's emergence from space then, even before it is transformed into history, (although, of course, the *before* here cannot be considered anything other than nonsensical as it designates a time which has not yet 'happened',) must *differentiate* space by negating its absolute 'spaceness'. For, as Hegel goes on to say, "time is the Concept itself, which is there in empirical existence" -- that is, in real space, with real humans in the World.¹⁶ So the concept of time -- which is eternal -- is there, in the stream of the temporal. This is Hegel's sleight of hand: he names the phenomenological experience of time -- what time becomes for us -- as an *intemporal* category. On Hegel's view, time dialectically *discovers* its phenomenological status as *eternity*. Eternity, as the in-

temporal, is the name for the impossible presence of the present *for us*. Eternity is our name for 'now'.

At the phenomenological level, eternity can be even more precisely identified as the name for the presence of a *future* in the present. For through its articulation with actual subjects, time has entered the realm of desire. As Alexander Kojève says, "desire is the presence of an absence: I am thirsty [I desire water] because there is an absence of water in me."¹⁷ Desire, in other words, is constituted by and conditioned on the basis of the future. 'Eternity' then, is properly speaking, not just the name of the impossible presence of the present, but the name for the *presence of an absence in the present which is conceived in terms of the future*.

The subject of this desire is thus a being who inhabits a time in which the future takes primacy -- a being, that is, who inhabits *historical* time. The transformation of time into history then, happens by way of concrete humans, whose experience of the 'present' brings anticipation and memory together. This weighting of the 'now' with a presence -- 'now' is an experience we are capable of having, as well as a philosophical concept which is the home of truth -- engenders history.¹⁸ Thus, time comes into existence through the back door. It comes into existence through weighting the basic unit of time, the 'now', with a presence, but the presence of the non-temporal category *eternity*.

Philosophical, Phenomenological and Political Results

There are three results of this complicated word play that I want to highlight in particular. First, this description of time erases an impossible piece of logic: the 'present' in which each 'now' has a self-identity, has been made possible through the interiorization of the alterity which constituted it. For the process by which History (i.e. *inside* time and the world of differentiation) swallows up Nature (i.e. *outside* time in absolute space), requires an *originary difference* which is impossible. While time's existence requires difference in the form of concrete

humans in a concrete differentiated world, that difference itself could not itself exist unless time had already pierced the undifferentiated arena of absolute space; of Nature. A missing 'original difference' has been covered over. I will return to this point shortly.

The phenomenological view reveals the second important consequence of Hegel's ontologization of time. On Hegel's telling, the condition of possibility for an 'experience' of the present -- which seems, by definition, to be indeterminable -- is swept up in a future which has, in some sense, already been written. In other words, while 'what happens next', from our vantage point, seems to be undetermined, on Hegel's telling of it, the *appearance* of indeterminability is an epistemological error. This is true insofar as 'history' -- the time of Spirit/humanity in the world -- is not aimless in its spiritual fulfillment, but has a proper direction, and an ultimate destination. The necessary and inevitable end of history is the identity of subject and substance in Absolute Knowledge. The purpose of the development of Spirit in time (History) is to bring a knowledge of itself to the world. This is the ultimate plan of God.

Third, as I suggested above, this way of conceiving of history means that justice must be thought in terms of revenge. To illustrate this, I would like to return to Hegel, as the story of the journeying subject in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a perfect case in point. For while the subject of the *Phenomenology* constantly has the epistemic and ontological stuffing knocked out of him insofar as his picture of the world -- whether it be sense certainty, the master and slave struggle for recognition etc. -- is continuously revealed as false, this disappointment turns out to be yet another necessary moment on the road towards truth. As Judith Butler points out,

There is little time for grief in the *Phenomenology* because renewal is always so close at hand. What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more like the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbour's chicken coop always seems to land on all four

wheels.¹⁹

Hegel's journeying subject can always retrospectively understand his own path, no matter how humiliating, as having gone the way it was meant to.

We can be forgiven if we question the believability of this indefatigable hero. For the rest of us, each humiliating defeat cannot be understood as spiritual or intellectual grist for the mill. We are much more likely to find those humiliations preparing us for thoughts of retribution. As Rebecca Comay points out, perhaps no one was more critical of Hegel's omniscient subject and teleological sense of history, or more prescient about how these give rise to justice thought as revenge than Nietzsche.²⁰ In particular, Zarathustra's triumphalist utterances on redemption seem to speak directly to Hegel's ontologization of time:

I walk among men as among fragments of the future: of that future which I scan. And it is all my art and aim to compose into one and bring together what is fragment and riddle and dreadful chance. And how could I endure to be a man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and the redeemer of chance! To redeem the past and to transform every "It was" into an "I wanted it thus!" -- that alone do I call redemption!²¹

As Comay points out, this statement outlines two important approaches to history which foster an attitude of revenge. First, when the "it was" -- the concrete events of the past -- cannot be reformulated into a "I wanted it thus," we are on our way to thinking the possibility of revenge. When there is no way, in other words, to soften a bad event with the traditional bromides, 'it was meant to be that way' or 'it was for the best'; when there is no angle from which one can squint at the past, transform its meaning and move on from it, then we begin calculating our come-back. Because, secondly, the 'it was' is then understood as "riddle, dreadful chance"; a turning away from the rightful progression of history. In other words,

when events make us not the heroes of our own lives, but the victims of someone else's, we think that time went awry; it got lost and fragmented upon its journey. The only thing to do if time gets lost on its journey, is to put it back on the proper course. And the only way to put time back on its proper course is to seek revenge; to redeem the mistakes of history. Redemption, Nietzsche argues, could only happen if the "fragment, riddle and dreadful chance" of time could be "composed into one" and brought together. But this is a dream, as, "alas, the stone 'it was' cannot be rolled away."²² Where the past has gone wrong, it cannot be redeemed, it can only be avenged. Rather than redemption, then, we have punishment. For "punishment," Nietzsche says, "is what revenge calls itself."²³ Revenge turns every historical 'accident' around, and so that while every "it was" of history cannot become "I wanted it thus," the dreadful riddle of chance which acted upon us, can be transformed by the creative will into a "thus shall I will it."²⁴

Once history is formulated in terms of a necessary progression, either those whom history treats unkindly will understand themselves as historically expendable, or they will understand that history has gone wrong and must be righted. And we have seen that it can only be righted through the extraction of punishment. As Marx himself says, "the tradition of all the dead generations weights like a nightmare on the brain of the living".²⁵ It is in this sense that in the context of an teleological understanding of history, justice can only be understood as revenge.

Derrida's treatment of this notion of justice as revenge -- one which he finds in a certain spirit of Marx -- makes use of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Specifically, Derrida weaves an intricate textual relationship between Hamlet's despairing cry against the fate which sets him the task of avenging his father's murder, and the fate of the revolutionary class whose task is to set history straight. In the first case, as Hamlet says, the "time is out of joint" and it is his "cursed task" to set it right.²⁶ In the second case, as the last enslaved class, the revolutionary class must turn

the page of history and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "complete the task of liberation in the name of generations of downtrodden."²⁷ In both cases, time has gone awry, and justice is demanded. Like Zarathustra, both Hamlet and the revolutionary class have the responsibility of composing time back into one and avenging the dreadful chance which has taken hold of history.

Like Hamlet, the revolutionary class must also be certain of what the future should hold, and must be certain of where the path has gone awry, as well as who should be punished. If history has a 'true' path, then it is to its interpreters to decide what that path is, and when and where it has gone off the track. Disputes between interpreters, then, take the form of disputes about the 'proper' progression of history; the illusion of which Derrida reminds us, however unavoidable, "could lead back to ... a sort of fatalist idealism or abstract and dogmatic eschatology in the face of the world's evil."²⁸

Derrida is clear that while "we not please the Marxists" with the insistence that there are several spirits of Marx, we are nonetheless enjoined to "sort them out".²⁹ And while that process of sorting, of choosing, like all other decisions, must "pass through the ordeal of the undecidable," it remains our responsibility nonetheless. Among the spirits of Marx that Derrida finds, two in particular stand out. The first gains its understanding of time and thus of history's proper end from Hegel. This 'spirit' is one in which, as the above description indicates, the history's path is clear making proper rewards and punishments uncontested. The second is a murkier 'spirit'; indeed a spectral spirit. This is the 'spirit' of Marx which Derrida endorses (as much as one can speak of Derrida endorsing anything) and he is making an elaborate argument for choosing it.

Before concluding that Derrida is suggesting we should live in a quagmire of philosophical purity and political inactivity, let me quote from him here at length:

People would be ready to accept the return of Marx ... on the condition that a silence is main-

tained about Marx's injunction not just to decipher but to act and to make the deciphering ... into a transformation that "changes the world" ... [I want to insist, therefore, that we must aim] to avoid the neutralizing anaesthesia of a new theoreticism, and to prevent a philisophico-philological return to Marx from prevailing.³⁰

It is not political quietism that motivates Derrida's intervention now, but rather a desire to seize a tradition hampered by remaining within the metaphysico-theological ideology of the present -- one which has lost sight of the foot it must always have in the door of what he calls the "democracy to come". This 'democracy to come' -- which Derrida is anxious to distinguish from any idea of a future democracy where the future would be a modality of the *not yet present* -- is associated with Marx's own injunction.

An(other) Time: Of Ghosts, Messianism, and Singularity

To unpack the relationship between Marx's injunction and the democracy to come, I want to first turn our attention to what Derrida means by the 'democracy to come'. Given Derrida's elaborate critique of presence, and his radical questioning of futurity itself, it may be no surprise to learn that what he means by this is in no way a future wherein the 'present' will be fulfilled with presence. The future -- the 'to come' -- Derrida tells us, must somehow be conceived beyond the metaphysics of either a present *future*, or its usual alternative, the utopian lever of imagining the future *present*. This 'democracy to come' (the idea of which is "beyond the regulating idea in its classical form") will "never present itself in the form of full presence."³¹ Rather, we must think it as a 'here-now' without presence; "without lateness, without delay, but without presence".³²

For, as we have seen, the self-presence of time produced by Hegel, actually begs the question of the difference it requires for its own operation. The *original* difference -- the origin of difference -- is in fact missing.

In order to give time an *existence*, Hegel has had to supplement an original undifferentiatedness with a difference which could not, logically, exist. Time's existence then, is achieved in such a way that the meaning of the copula itself -- the *isness* of what is -- is strained beyond all endurance.

It is this straining of the meaning of the copula that directs Derrida's attention towards the ghost. What's interesting about the ghost, Derrida points out, is that it both *is* and *is not*. It is neither alive nor dead, neither matter, nor strictly speaking, spirit, insofar as a ghost was always a *somebody*. Ghosts, in other words, have identities. In this respect, the ghost is a figure which is un-ontologizable. And insofar as the history of philosophy has been a meditation on the question of "what is"; the question of ontology, the ghost, which, strictly speaking, is not, but also, insofar as it has an identity, *is*, challenges philosophical discourses' ability to cope. The relationship of the scholar to the ghost then, is a difficult one. Indeed, Derrida points out that there has never been a scholar who can speak to ghosts; who does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, what is present and what is not. The scholarly question that Derrida asks then, is how does Marx bind the ghost to an ontology?

This is not a trivial question, it seems to me. For once we see the consequence of Hegel's ontologization of time, and the way he presses the notion of historical experience into the service of a totalitarian notion of an historical end, the question of ontologizing the un-ontologizable becomes a political and not simply a philosophical or hyper-abstract question. Derrida's logic borrows from the lesson of the ghost which both *is* and *is not*. Thus his logic is not tentative or wishy-washy but rather, *spectral*. It attempts to think through what is not present -- and therefore cannot be thought -- in full awareness of its impossibility. For this reason Derrida emphatically embraces an approach to being, to time, to politics and to critique which is "not only the critical idea or the questioning stance ... It is even more a certain

emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation of ... the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the *perhaps*." ³³

While the notion of the messianic Derrida is attempting to develop is surely influenced by that also developed by Walter Benjamin, it is important to note from the outset that the two cannot be collapsed. Benjamin's notion of the messianic appeals to a quasi-divine mystery from the past, which if uncovered, may be able to redeem the present era. Unlike Benjamin, Derrida states unequivocally that he is advocating "the messianic without messianism."³⁴ In his separation of the messianic from messianism or a Messiah, Derrida is not proposing anything like the memorializing return of Benjamin's 'redemptive criticism'.

Indeed, Derrida's reference to the 'messianic without messianism' alludes to something positive he finds in the general structure of experience -- an openness to the pure event. At the baldest level, Derrida is referring here to the absolute unknowability, the necessarily unconditioned status of the 'next event' and our necessary, even helpless, openness to that. Our experience of the 'to come' is of a radical or absolute alterity. The condition of possibility for any experience, in other words, is the sheer fact that as it cannot have happened yet, we cannot know, anticipate or foreclose it by what Ernesto Laclau calls "any a *prioristic* discourse."³⁵ This is the sense in which Derrida argues that the 'present' must be understood as spectral, as strictly speaking, *unontologizable*, for it can only be collected, organized, gathered into being and imagined *retrospectively*. The 'messianic without messianism' -- what Derrida calls an "atheological heritage of the messianic" -- manages to avoid all theologicality by emptying itself out of hope. In this sense, it is a "despairing messianism", insofar as "hope is but the calculation of a program". Thus, the 'now' which Hegel fills with a future-oriented and directed presence, Derrida leaves "necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like ... given up to its waiting for the other."³⁷

For the messianic, for Derrida, is also linked to the

promise implicit in the opening to the "Other". This point returns me again to the 'missing original difference' which Hegel's logic covers over. The Hegelian metaphysics of presence requires that the exteriority of Nature -- the radical outside to, and absolute difference from time -- be assimilated to the same, in a gesture that disappears a difference which is logically necessary. This gesture duplicates the tendency in the Hegelian system, to find all absolute differences digested, in the 'now' of Absolute Knowledge, to the same. The following point Derrida is very clear on: in order to be respected, to be understood as truly other, rather than merely the 'other of the same', the Other must be other to the system, and in that sense, incalculable. The openness to the absolute alterity of the next moment which Derrida finds in the general structure of experience, is also an openness to the absolute alterity of the "Other". Human individuals, in other words, must not be understood as calculable on the basis of some abstract, prior determined notion -- of universalizability, of numerical equality etc. -- but are rather experienced as *unequal*, non-calculable, singular.

Thus, Derrida's long and seemingly interminable critique of 'presence' returns us to the heart of Marx's notion of justice: the pure singularity, the un-enforceable, non-generalizable, unequal notion of right which animates it. According to Derrida, the next event which cannot be anticipated, this 'Other' which cannot be quantified, known in advance, or generalized, is the singular at the heart of Marx's theory of justice. It is the singular that we must think in order to combat a notion of history in which we already know, like the plot of a standard Hollywood film, how it ends. It is then, through this interpretation of the normative heart of Marxism that Derrida finds a way to think about how to maintain a critical foot outside of metaphysical notions of time, teleological notions of history, and bourgeois notions of justice as equality, as universalizability, and as revenge.

This is what Derrida means when he says that justice cannot be thought on the basis of restitution, which as we have seen, flows from a teleological notion of

history, and from a 'cinematic'³⁸ understanding of time. Rather, justice must be thought on the basis of the 'gift' -- "that is, beyond right, calculation, and commerce" -- or it risks being reduced again "to juridical moral rules"; the bourgeois rules of distribution and of abstraction which Marx dismisses.³⁹ As Derrida says elsewhere:

wherever there is time, wherever time predominates or conditions experience in general, wherever time as a circle ... is predominant, the gift is impossible.⁴⁰

The gift is impossible wherever time is thought as a circle because gifts, to be gifts, ought not to *appear* as gifts; they ought not to be recognizable *as gifts*. In order to be truly free, they must incur no debt, no recognition, no obligation. They must, in other words, be outside the sphere of circulation, outside the circle. Indeed, the gift as that which obligates no one, is precisely the figure which disrupts the economy of exchange, and breaks one out of the amortizing economy of debt, of memory and thus, of justice as revenge. It is in this spirit that Derrida says,

[c]an one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance?⁴¹

This is a justice not linked to a notion of the present; either in the sense of the dominant ideology of the present, or in the sense of making the present 'now' take on a presence. This is a precarious and unjustifiable notion of justice; one that cannot guarantee that, for example, this direction is the right one, and that direction is "the bad".

Inconclusive, Concluding Remarks

Thus, it comes to us finally, to decide if Derrida's careful textual work can add anything to the traditional

debate about "Marx and justice". And I think it can. For so long as the implicit understanding of justice at work within the tradition remains caught in a Hegelian metaphysics of presence, it is reduced to "sanctioning, restituting and doing right". It can never get beyond right. The consequences of this notion of right, as we have seen are a dogmatism -- a certainty of the shape and texture of the 'to come', a destructive and tendentious orthodoxy -- within the tradition which we are attempting to 're-think'. But if time is understood as, strictly speaking, philosophically un-masterable, the historical end is opened up; it is no longer tied to the necessary end found first emphatically in Hegel, and second, ambivalently in Marx.

This, of course, leaves open the question of what the 'to come' might actually mean -- why a socialist and not a totalitarian or fascist future? This question cannot be resolved within the confines of this debate, and must be left for another moment. However, what I can conclude with is the following: to the extent that we can agree that Marxisms' secret standard of justice conforms to the justice Derrida is sculpting here -- beyond calculation, organized in and through a messianic notion of time, and thus beyond abstract right -- we may be able to agree on the following notion. While not all political programs which do not seek a guarantee are *Marxist*, any political program which does seek a guarantee is not Marxist. If, in other words, we attempt to understand the spirit of Marx which embraces the un-ontologizability of the future, and therefore faces squarely the responsibility to act in the world without guarantee, we may have found a thought for politics appropriate to 'our time'.

Finally, of course, Derrida's work on Marx tells us more, in the end, about Derrida, than about Marx. For Derrida goes on to tell us that the heart of Marx's theory of justice animates not just Marxism, but deconstruction as well. For those already familiar with Derrida's work, *Spectres of Marx* ties together a variety of themes he has worked (in some instances, less enigmatically, elsewhere). These include: the 'gift', the critique of a metaphysics of

presence, a preoccupation with the impossibility of thinking the singular, and the ineradicable chasm between justice and the law.

This last point, and in particular Derrida's insistence on deconstruction as a kind of justice, is most usefully illuminated by this text. As he says,

deconstructive thinking ... has always pointed out the ... undeconstructability of a certain idea of justice; [one which] has never had any sense or interest ... except as a radicalization ... of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*.⁴²

Justice, Derrida insists, is the absolute singularity which cannot be absorbed by the generality of any law. The chasm between law and justice is that which cannot be closed; the disjuncture between them is precisely what allows for deconstruction. Indeed, politics is precisely the deconstruction of law on the basis of justice.

For, as I hope I have shown, the difference between the two different notions of time, history and the good at play in Marx's notion of justice is not benign. In time thought in such a way in which the present is privileged as presence, history is understood teleologically wherein the future avenges the past and one in which the present - or at least the future present -- is strictly speaking, non-present.

It is, in the end, a question of justice that animates Marxists, and socialists of all stripes. But this question of justice must be radically contingent; we cannot know where we are going, but that does not discharge us from the responsibility of acting. Derrida charges us with the responsibility of remembering the past, and of being open to an infinitely incalculable future; to re-question Marx's own theories of politics, while holding onto the fundamental justice claims which animate it.

Notes

1. There are, of course, lengthy and important debates

about the meaning and legitimacy for all of these principles of justice. See, for example, Rawls, Nozick, Habermas etc.

2. Norman Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice" from *New Left Review* (Vol. 9, 1982). Geras draws our attention in particular to the following works: Cohen, Nagel and Scanlon eds. *Marx, Justice and History* (Princeton, 1980); Nielsen and Patterson eds., *Marx and Morality* (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 7, 1981); Pennock and Chapman eds., *Marxism* (Nomos XXVI, 1981).

3. Ernesto Laclau "The Time is Out of Joint" in *Diacritics* (25, Summer 1995, Vol. 5, No. 2). This is an obviously hyperbolic point, as the question of the nature of the Soviet Union, or the possibility of the party, or any number of other questions could equally be considered central. The point, I think that Laclau is making, is that the question of Marx and justice is central to a philosophical problematic within the tradition.

4. Characteristically, Derrida here questions the viability of the 'future' of Marxism by way of a radical questioning of futurity itself.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) xix, xx.

6. It has been suggested that Derrida's tendency to find a deconstructive logic everywhere he looks is the result of a misrecognition of the logical structure of critique. While Derrida's traditional interlocutors -- Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud -- are clearly located within the same tradition as that which gives us immanent critique -- my point here is that the attention paid by a deconstructive logic to the inapparent side of the logical paradox of critique gives rise to new insights. For more on the above point, see Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror*:

Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). Derrida himself addresses this issue when he says, "deconstruction is not a critique of critique, according to the typical duplication of post-Kantian German ideology." *Spectres of Marx* op. cit. p. 162

7. Marx in *Capital Vol 1*. p. 929, quoted in Geras, op. cit.

8. Karl Marx "Critique of the Gotha Program" *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (New York: Hackett, 1994) p. 321.

9. Karl Marx, *ibid.* p. 321

10. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum Publishing) p. 3, Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p. 260.

11. This phrase from *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* [*Die Vernunft in der Geschichte, Einleitung in die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*] in *Samtliche Werke*, ed. G. Lasson (Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1923) Vol. 8 p. 133, was drawn to my attention by Derrida in "Ousia and Gramme". *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p. 35.

12. Derrida is clear that Hegel is not a 'culprit' here. As he says, the "concept of time thought in terms of spatial movement or of the now ... was not born out of a philosopher's carelessness or from a theoretical lapse. It is intrinsic to the totality of the history of the Occident, of what unites metaphysics and its technics." Indeed, following Derrida, it is possible to argue that the power and continuing resonance of Hegel's thought can be in part attributed to his particularly brilliant rendition of what Heidegger called the 'vulgar concept of time'. *Of Grammatology* (Translated by Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) p. 72.

13. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature* by A.V. Miller (trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 36

14. Derrida treats Hegel's rehearsal of Aristotle's theory of time in "Ousia and Gramme" op. cit. Aristotle treats the problem of time in *The Physics* 217b33-18a6. (Translated by Hardie and Gaye, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).

15. As Hegel says, "The first or immediate determination of Nature is Space: the abstract universality of Nature's self-externality, self-externality's mediationless indifference. ... [T]his asunderness ... contains no specific difference within itself." *Philosophy of Nature*. op. cit. p. 28.

16. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 487.

17. Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Edited by Allan Bloom, trans. James Nichols Jr., New York: Basic Books, 1969). p. 134

18. The logic which Hegel proposes here is time as the circle which disappears itself as circular. Time, in other words, dissimulates the appearance of the circle in its actualization. As he says, "Time is the Notion itself that is there and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears as Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not grasped its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time. It is the outer, intuited pure Self which is not grasped by the Self, the merely intuited Notion; when this latter grasps itself it sets aside its Time form, comprehends this intuiting, and is a comprehended and comprehending intuiting. Time therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself." *Phenomenology of Spirit* op. cit. (p. 487, emphasis in original) It is worth noting that Aristotle too understands time as the appearance of the circle. "Time appears as the movement

of the sphere because other movements are measured by this one, as is time itself. This also explains the common saying that human affairs form a circle ... even time itself is thought to be a certain circle." *Physics* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1930) b.

19. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) p. 21.

20. Rebecca Comay "Redeeming Revenge: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger and the Politics of Memory" from *Nietzsche as Postmodernist* Clayton Koelb ed. (Albany: SUNY: 1990) p. 25-26.

21. Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin, 1961) p. 161.

22. Frederick Nietzsche, *ibid.* p. 162

23. Frederick Nietzsche *ibid.* p. 162

24. Frederick Nietzsche *ibid.* p. 163 (emphasis mine).

25. Karl Marx "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton and Co., 1978) p. 595.

26. William Shakespeare. quoted in Derrida, *Spectres of Marx op. cit.* p.3

27. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of Nature" *op. cit.* p. 260.

28. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx op. cit.* p. 87

29. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 87.

30. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 32.

31. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 65

32. *Ibid.* p. 31

33. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 35, 88.

34. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 73, 89. Derrida comments upon Benjamin's notion of the "weak messianic power". p. 181 n. 2.

35. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 89 Ernesto Laclau "The Time is Out of Joint" in *Diacritics op. cit.* p. 90.

36. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 168,9.

37. Jacques Derrida. *ibid.* p. 90 "Some," Derrida says, "will find this despairing 'messianism' has a curious taste, a taste of death." *ibid.* p. 169. Elsewhere, Derrida makes a curious and provocative link between justice as singularity, Hegel's reading of Sophocles *Antigone*, 'woman', and the work of burying the dead. See *Glas* (Trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1986) esp. p. 142a - 175.

38. The phrase 'cinematic' -- as evocative of a series of little nows, like a series of little frames -- is Derrida's in "Ousia and Gramme" *op. cit.*

39. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx op. cit.* p. 27, 28.

40. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time* Translated by Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 8

41. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx op. cit.* p 21

42. Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 90, 92

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