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1993 French-language book by Jacques Derrida Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International Cover of the first editionAuthorJacques DerridaOriginal titleSpectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle InternationaleTranslatorPeggy KamufCountryFranceLanguageFrenchSubjectKarl MarxPublished 1993 (Editions Galilée, in French) 1994 (Routledge, in English) Media typePrintPages198 (Routledge edition) ISBN0-415-91045-5 Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International (French: Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle internationale) is a 1993 book by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It was first presented as a series of lectures during "Whither Marxism?", a conference on the future of Marxism held at the University of California, Riverside in 1993. It is the source of the term hauntology. Summary The title Spectres of Marx is an allusion to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' statement at the beginning of The Communist Manifesto that a "spectre [is] haunting Europe." For Derrida, the spirit of Marx is even more relevant now since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of communism. With its death the spectre of communism begins to make visits on the Earth. Derrida seeks to do the work of inheriting from Marx, that is, not communism, but of the philosophy of responsibility, and of Marx's spirit of radical critique. Derrida first notes that, in the wake of the fall of communism, many in the west had become triumphalist, as is evidenced in the formation of a neoconservative grouping and the displacement of the left in third way political formations. At the intellectual level, it is apparent in Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of ideology.[citation needed] Derrida commented on the reasons for that spectre of Marx: For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-anglise in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realised itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.[1] Derrida went on, in his talks on this topic, to list 10 plagues of the capital or global system. And then to an account of the claim the creation of a new grouping of activism, called the "New International". Derrida's ten plagues are: Employment has undergone a change of kind, i.e. underemployment, and requires "another concept". Deportation of immigrants. Reinforcement of territories in a world of supposed freedom of movement. As in, Fortress Europe and in the number of new walls and barriers being erected around the world, in effect multiplying the "fallen" Berlin Wall manifold. Economic war. Both between countries and between international trade blocs: United States - Japan - Europe. Contradictions of the free market. The undecidable conflicts between protectionism and free trade. The unstoppable flow of illegal drugs, arms, etc. Foreign debt. In effect the basis for mass starvation and demoralisation for developing countries. Often the loans benefiting only a small elite, for luxury items, e.g., cars, air conditioning etc. but being paid back by poorer workers. The arms trade. The inability to control to any meaningful extent trade within the biggest 'black market' Spread of nuclear weapons. The restriction of nuclear capacity can no longer be maintained by leading states since it is only knowledge and cannot be contained. Inter-ethnic wars. The phantom of mythic national identities fueling tension in semi-developed countries. Phantom-states within organised crime. In particular the non-democratic power gained by drug cartels. International law and its institutions. The hypocrisy of such states in the face of unilateral aggression on the part of the economically dominant states. International law is mainly exercised against the weaker nations. On the New International, Derrida has this to say: The 'New International' is an untimely link, without status ... without coordination, without party, without country, without national community, without non-citizenship, without common belonging to a class. The name of New International is given here to what calls to the friendship of an alliance without institution among those who ... continue to be inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marx or of Marxism. It is a call for them to ally themselves, in a new, concrete and real way, even if this alliance no longer takes the form of a party or a workers' international, in the critique of the state of international law, the concepts of State and nation, and so forth: in order to renew this critique, and especially to radicalise it.[2] See also Deconstruction Hauntology Hauntology (music) Post-Marxism References ^ Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge 1994, p. 106 ^ Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge 1994, p. 53 External links What is Ideology?, excerpt from Spectres of Marx Marcus Verhaeg Derrida's Specters of Marx and The Recognition of Pointless Identity Retrieved from "1 finally read a book I should have read long ago, Derrida's Specters of Marx. I found it strangely disappointing. I'm not even sure the book is worth discussing at any length; it is only about 14 years old, but it seems to belong to a long-vanished era of critical discourse. It seems like a fossil, in comparison to the more relevant discussions of Marxist theory, and of what Marxism might mean in our postmodern, post-everything age, by the likes of Hardt and Negri, Zizek, Badiou, etc. (not to mention the continuing far greater relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's attempts to renew Marxism). Nonetheless, I will work through my response to the book here, if only because the phenomenon of its obsolescence, its loss of relevance, is itself something that the book itself discusses (in relation to the claims, rejected by Derrida, that Marx himself is obsolete and no longer relevant in the post-Communist era). Derrida basically argues — quite elegantly, of course — that Marx, like every other thinker in the long history of Western metaphysics, falls victim to an ontology of absolute presence, and strives unsuccessfully to abolish the uncanny otherness, the trace of non-presence, the non-literal or irreducibly metaphorical, the difference, that nonetheless continues to insinuate itself within his texts. At the same time, Derrida — writing in the early 1990s, after the "fall of Communism," and in the first flush of neoliberal triumphalism — proclaims his fidelity to a certain spirit of Marxism, insofar as it maintains a call for justice beyond market values. He associates Marxism, therefore, with a certain religious impulse, what Walter Benjamin calls a "weak messianic force," a hope against hope or beyond hope that a better time is possible, and must come. What draws these two strands — the deconstruction of Marx's metaphysics, and the welcoming nonetheless of a Marxist inheritance — together is the figure of the specter, or ghost: a figure that Derrida traces throughout Marx's texts and many others (most notably Hamlet). The specter is something that is not present, not real, not there, but that nonetheless enters into (and disrupts the closure and self-presence of) whatever is present, real, and there. The ghost addresses us, interrogates us with its voice and its gaze; it's a call from Otherness to which we must respond, even though we are unable to adequately respond. Derrida argues that, in works like The German Ideology and Capital, Marx endeavors — unsuccessfully, of course — to exorcise the specter of impropriety or non-identity; that he struggles, for instance, to get rid of exchange-value and return us to the simple utility and presence of use-value (a reading of Marx that I have specifically argued against here; though Derrida's formulation of the argument is far more circumspect than those of Lyotard or Baudrillard). At the same time, Derrida presents the "specter of Communism" that haunts Europe in the Communist Manifesto as a "spirit" that neoliberalism similarly cannot exorcise, and that renders impossible the "end of history," or the definitive triumph of the market. I must confess that I am unable to greet this argument with more than a shrug of the shoulders, and a weary "so what?" It's scarcely news that Marx's texts can be deconstructed, just as Plato's and Kant's and Hegel's can be. As is so often the case with Derrida, I am more or less persuaded by his argument — I mean, by his close reading — without necessarily finding his claims or discoveries to be of any particular interest or importance. Now, of course the question of which parts of Marx are alive and which parts dead, or which parts are useful and interesting, and which parts are not, is itself an extremely important one. And Derrida, as always, warns us (rightly) that this is a difficult question precisely because we cannot ever simply separate the relevant from the irrelevant, or the "living" from the "dead." The uncanny apparition of the specter forbids us to make such a separation. We are always haunted by ghosts, and we cannot at all freely choose what we will be haunted by. We have, as Derrida continually reminds us, the responsibility of making such a separation, without the ability neatly and definitively to do so. Yet all that said, and even recalling that all such separations will be provisional ones — Derrida introduces, into nearly every sentence, clauses about how provisional and subject to revision all his claims and distinctions are; he so overdoes this that the effect is unintentionally comic — nonetheless, I still believe that there are much more interesting and useful ways to distinguish between what's valuable and what's not in Marx's writing, and in subsequent Marxist writing, than the particular distinctions that Derrida makes. For Derrida, it's a matter of deconstructing, and thereby dismissing, all of Marx's positive claims about history, about capitalism, etc., and only adhering to a sort of vague and general sense of dissatisfaction with the world as it is. Which is why Derrida ultimately rescues from Marx and Marxism only its ostensibly religious core, its messianic dimension, its utopian (though Derrida scrupulously avoids this word) promise of a better world — together, however, with the proviso that no such better world can actually arrive, because this would undo the dimension of hope, expectation, and openness to the future and to the Other that is, for Derrida, the essence of the religious or messianic. For instance, after reading Marx in Capital on commodity fetishism, Derrida writes that "as soon as there is production, there is fetishism: idealization, automatization and automatization, dematerialization and dematerialization, mourning work coextensive with all work, and so forth. Marx believes he must limit this co-extensivity to commodity production. In our view, this is a gesture of exorcism, which we spoke of earlier and regarding which we leave here once again our question suspended" (166). Derrida is too careful and sensitive a thinker to come right out and say that the processes he associates with fetishism (a list I won't take the time to comment on here) must occur in connection with all production, not just commodity production. This is why he leaves the "question suspended." Nonetheless, the evident deconstructionist implication of Derrida's reading indeed is that it's naive (to use the word that was — and probably still is — the favorite of all the deconstructionists I used to know in grad school) not to realize that all and any production (rather than just commodity production) is compromised by fetishism and its accompanying spectrality, which Marx makes the metaphysical error of thinking that he can "exorcise" or otherwise get rid of. So Marx, like every other metaphysician from Plato onward, is guilty of trying to hypostatize absolute presence and preserve it from difference, to pretend that alienation and otherness can be overcome when in fact they cannot. Well, perhaps this is true. But to push the question to this level of metaphysical generality is to ignore the particular ways that Marx's formulations work. Derrida convinces me that, yes, there is a logic of spectrality at work in Marx's discussion of exchange-value and commodity fetishism; but to say this is not to exhaust the implications of Marx's theory. Marx says that, but he also says a lot more. And that more is where Marx specifically addresses the particular implications of capitalism and commodity production. A different mode of production would involve different specters, different forms of "spectral incorporation," different implications for human life and society, a difference in the extent of human suffering. Indeed, Derrida keeps on reminding us that the underlying problem is the one of which specters we are dealing with; but at the end of his analysis he ignores his own warning, in favor of just saying that Marx is trying to exorcise ghosts, and that he can never really accomplish this, and that therefore all his concepts (use- and exchange-value, commodity and surplus value) are compromised and should not be retained. It's a lame and weak conclusion, after so much textual and conceptual exegesis. What I'd rather see, what I'd find much more interesting, useful, and relevant, would be an approach that considered the already-deconstructive implications of Marx's own categories. That looked, for instance, at how the logic of the supplement (or Bataille's logic of "general economy") is already at work in Marx's notion of surplus-value (which is not simply an empirical quantity in the sense that profit is, for it implies a radical incommensurability at the heart of the process of buying and selling labor as a commodity); or at how the spectrality that Derrida exhumes at such great length is coextensive with — how it haunts — the regime of money as "universal equivalent." But Derrida has too much invested in arguing that deconstruction goes beyond mere critique to be willing to see such deconstructionist virtues as already operating within Marx's form of critique. (I myself would want to argue that deconstruction is indeed different from Hegelian critique, but that it falls entirely within the purview of Kantian critique. But that is a subject for other posts). So I don't really find Specters of Marx very illuminating on the subject of Marx. I do, however, like the way that Derrida reformulates his (usual deconstructive) logic in terms of spectrality, of ghosts. In his earlier writings Derrida tends to emphasize difference or the trace as a sort of negativity, an infinite mediation disrupting any claim to presence. But in Specters of Marx (as in much of his later work) Derrida (more radically, I think — and in line with Blanchot's formulations) shifts his emphasis to the way that this trace is a radical non-negativity, a kind of residual, quasi-material insistence, that disrupts and ruins every movement of negation or negativity. That's what the ghost is, after all: something that is gone, or dead, but that refuses to be altogether absent; something that is not here, not now, but that continues to stain or contaminate or affect or impinge upon the here and now. Hegel, Mallarme, and Lacan all proclaim that the symbol is the death — the murder — of the thing (i.e., that the word "flower" or "tree" necessarily implies the distancing, the negation, the loss, the inaccessibility of the actual Thing that is being called a flower or a tree). But Blanchot responds that this murder is ultimately ineffectual, for the Thing (not the idealized form that we call a tree or a flower, but its creepy, always-decomposing-and-recomposing materiality) returns at the very heart of its supposed absence, like a zombie arising from its grave. The living thing we have murdered is never restored to us, but its death, its having-been-murdered, tracks us relentlessly and will not let us go. This is what Derrida means by specters, ghosts, and haunting. The finest invention in Specters of Marx is Derrida's neologism hauntology, which he argues is more basic, more (pre)originary, than Being or than ontology. (The pun works better in French, where *hauntologie* and *ontologie* are almost indistinguishable in pronunciation). And indeed, it's been the recent brilliant discussion of hauntology in the blogosphere, by k-punk especially (also here and here), that led me (so belatedly) to read Specters of Marx and to think along these lines. Although I tend to be more interested in how the present is haunted (as it were) by the future, than in how it is haunted by the past (this is one reason for my obsession with science fiction), these two dimensions or directions of time cannot of course be separated, once we have realized that the present is not a "living presence," but rather that it is riven within itself, traversed by forces that are not contemporary with itself. Shelley's "gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" and Poe's returned cadavers, haunting us with their insistent evidence of their deaths, are two sides of the same coin (a financial metaphor that is therefore particularly appropriate from the perspective of Marxian political economy). I need to think more about k-punk's comments on "hauntology now," on how it has become (as he writes with deliberate awareness of the temporal paradoxes involved) a "zeitgeist," and on its implications for understanding our culture today beyond the already-stale-and-banal formulations of "postmodernism."

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