



Specters of specters of Marx : A ghost that was named Derrida

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review of

Derrida, J. (2006) *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the New International*. New York and London: Routledge. (PB, pp xxi + 258, \$31.99, ISBN 9780415389570)

A ghostly encounter

What is that voice? Whose voice? And to whom is it addressed? A voice almost sepulchral. A ghost, an encounter. How are we surrounded by voices and ghosts like that? What can we learn from them? Let us go through this encounter with a ghost named *Derrida*.

Specters of Marx, published in English in 2006, is composed of lectures given at a conference entitled 'Whither Marxism?' held in 1993 at the University of California, Riverside. Composed of five distinct parts, the book is an astute and malicious typical Derridean play of resonance and words, here along the word 'specter'. Derrida leads a thorough discussion of some of the central concepts of Marxism as well, reclaiming its actuality through the lens of deconstruction. But above all, more than a text of circumstance, it is for Derrida a text of *resistance*. Back then, the time was indeed one of a certain

liberal euphoria: exhilarated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, voices announcing the end of history, and the contemporary conjuration of Marxism was having a field day. It is to resist this *Zeitgeist* that Derrida was appealing to the ghost – and not just any ghost, but that of Marx.

Times have changed since the publication of *Specters of Marx*. From the violent crisis of neoliberalism in 2008 to the rise of rightwing authoritarian regimes and revolts such as those of the Yellow Vests (not to mention the acceleration of the ecological crisis), many drawbacks have tempered the ardor of the proponents of such a triumphant liberalism – but many issues are specific to our situation. What's more, as Jacob Rogozinski, French philosopher, and former student of Derrida, showed that to think with and beyond deconstruction is perhaps the only path available so as to remain faithful to it (Rogozinski, 2005). Even though it may mean to think *against* it.

So does it mean that we are done with Derrida? How are we to read him critically in a time of pandemic? Are we done with ghosts in general? What heritage could we claim of him and deconstruction today?

To lead our discussion, we will focus on the core concepts at play in the *Specters of Marx* and more broadly in Derrida's thinking. We will introduce the question by showing to what extent Derrida's legacy remains very much alive when it comes to understanding the current political situation, as well as the field of critical management studies. We will then focus on the question of debt, political but also ecological, a topic so thoroughly discussed in *Specters of Marx*. Afterwards, we will turn to the notion of auto-immunity. Although developed in his later work, this notion is of high heuristic and political insight. Still, this is not to say that Derrida's concepts, as relevant as they are, could become the supreme explanatory principle. Some points call for a more critical discussion with other paradigms, such as biopolitics. The coronavirus not only highlighted how we remain vulnerable as a species, but also crudely exposed how biopolitical forms of power are distributed through the social and political field. Exhilarated racisms and the flare of xenophobia remind us how differential categories of human beings are being held up across several lines of fracture. Finally, this is where perhaps deconstruction must be at play against himself if it wants to keep Derrida's legacy alive.

Derrida and organization studies: a living legacy

Derrida is widely discussed in organization theory today. The appropriation of his rich corpus, though not exhaustive and still in progress, has nonetheless known a significant development in recent years. Whether it be the limits of any business ethics (Jones, 2003), the aporia at the heart of organizational democracy (King & Land, 2018), or a critique of the ontology of organization studies (Cooper, 1989), his heritage remains even more present across disciplines.

The notion of ‘hauntology’ that he developed in *Specters of Marx*, an ontology of the ghostly as opposed to an ontology of presence, has indeed contributed to a profound renewal of disciplinary fields as diverse as geography (Holloway & Kneale, 2008), cultural criticism (Fisher, 2012; Hardcastle, 2005) and, more recently, notably *via* a special issue published in *ephemera* (Pors et. al, 2019), in the field of management studies (Di Domenico & Fleming, 2014; Pors, 2016a, 2016b). As Pors et al. (2019) point out, the ghost is not just another conceptual category or metaphor. Disturbing the established criteria of knowledge, navigating between presence and absence, the ghost is not a metaphor nor another concept. As Pors et al. (2019) point out, the hollowness of the ghost suffuses the category of space and time, sealing an encounter with the Other:

For Derrida, the ghost is something that perhaps once belonged to knowledge but no longer does. It is something that (no longer) fits in any meaningful way with discourses, concepts and systems of categorization. As a sort of quasi-object/subject (Serres, 1991), the ghost brings with it a rather indecipherable message from a space beyond discourse and representation (Pors et al., 2019: 9).

So what if *Specters of Marx* was such a ghostly encounter? Could we wander into Derrida’s own crypt without getting lost or losing sight of our own predicaments? Could we try to *un-crypt* Derrida and perhaps *decipher* him?

Derrida un-crypted

Immediately, the book, by its very subtitle ('The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the New International') inscribes itself in a certain connection to the *debt*. The debt to which Derrida refers is of course the debt we owe to Marx, or at least of a certain 'spirit of Marxism', as he insists. This meditation about debt and death, life and legacy is foremost a meditation on mourning. But far from a fascination towards death, deconstruction unsettles the categories life and death itself (Derrida, 1993).

Derrida's reflection on mourning takes on a disturbingly contemporary resonance. The pandemic has completely unsettled the categories within which we think about life, death or mourning. Death has erupted in the intimacy of our lives; the macabre counting on a daily basis; the flabbergasting effect of trauma and the political sideration it causes. But this ghostly presence can become something other than a ghostly haunting. Derrida has, on the contrary, always insisted on the ethical and political issues at stakes with specters. More than a living-dead, it is a living legacy: 'And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations' [xviii].

The epidemics did not affect people randomly nor uniformly. It is first and foremost the most fragile populations on a socio-economic basis that were exposed in the first instance to disease and death (Ahmed et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2020). Care workers, delivery workers, nurses, cleaning workers; their work being disregarded or even simply ignored (a point we will come back to later, from a biopolitical perspective). But their sudden appearance onto the political stage also reminded us how these categories of workers were reduced to quasi-specters *before* the pandemic. Here the debt we owe them is not only a moral or psychological issue, nor a question of mere recognition and gratitude. It is, as Pors et al. (2019) acutely notes, a political question:

A ghostly encounter may allow us to realize that "distance" was always only a psychological and ideological construct designed to protect us from the nearness of things...and that we are, indeed, entangled to global chains of capitalism, even in our daily organizational work and efforts (2019: 22).

Coronavirus has not only exacerbated socio-economic disparities, but it also illustrated the radical ecological consequences of capitalism in an era of the Anthropocene. The question of ‘debt’ takes on a wholly different meaning when one considers it in reference to our ‘ecological debt’. As Latour (2014) has shown quite remarkably, one of the most enduring difficulties in situating ourselves in this new era lies in the very (lack of) resources available in our language. This challenge does not await organizations. It is already imminent in its urgency and immediate in its consequences. Coronavirus might therefore be a figure for such possible catastrophic outcomes, compromising the future of the next generations. One of the most ambitious and perilous challenges so far awaiting organizational theory and praxis is then radically confronting us with the ‘debt’ we owe to our Occidental conception of nature and resources.¹ As it is, are we able to get rid of it? To think our relation and the way we organize beyond reification of natural resources, beyond what Derrida called the ‘wearing in expansion, in growth itself?’ [92].

Auto-immunity and its limits

Borders have been closed. Factories were stopped. Populations have been massively displaced or, on the contrary, prevented from moving. For some, this meant life or death. Rhetorical and political means were deployed to associate the foreigner to the propagator of a lethal and highly contagious disease, feeding nationalist and xenophobic flares. How could things have turned upside down so quickly on a global scale?

Just as the antibodies that guard the immune system can turn against itself, a political body can sometimes act as if it were *suicidal*. This dialectic logic of a possible auto-destruction from within is precisely what Derrida identified as ‘auto-immunity.’ Far from reifying or biologizing the political or the social, auto-immunity disturbs the very category of identity. Because it is never a threat from the outside that makes the immune system derail, but a possibility that permeates from its origin within. Even a notion such as ‘origin’ is fundamentally flawed if it refers to an overarching founding substance.

¹ See, on this question of Anthropocene and organizations, among others: Banerjee et al., 2021; Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Wright et al., 2018.

Conceptually, the alteration is always consubstantial to the 'self'. What is 'proper' within a community is 'alter' from the very beginning.

Politically, the paradigmatic case of such an auto-immune situation was, according to Derrida, the reactions that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Although every situation is singular, a parallel with the Covid crisis could be insightful. In several texts (for instance Borradori, 2013; Derrida, 2005b), Derrida describes how democracy can mobilize its own defenses against itself. The range of auto-immune reactions could be quite vast and lead to various manifestations in different realms of the political system, from surveillance to coercion, from economic to military means. As disturbing as it may be, what the scale of the measures implemented during the crisis exposed is that the differential exposure to life and death is not a mere byproduct of exceptional measures taken to prevent the pandemic. Quite the contrary, it has exposed how exception is consubstantial to the normal state of affairs. Auto-immunity is therefore always a latent possibility at the heart of democracy:

There are numerous examples of autoimmunitary logic at work in the West's response to terrorism. They include attacks on privacy and human rights: civil liberties being discarded or eroded by spying, the interception of emails and telephone calls, arrests without charge, endless detention, the practice of "extraordinary rendition", and a general increase in torture sanctioned by western governments. Other cases are limitations on personal freedom: on travel, increased security, and restrictions on immigration. These all feed into increases in personal anxiety. The war on terror itself is an example of autoimmunity, as it has increased the likelihood of further terrorism. The problem of autoimmunity is also demonstrated by the treatment of refugees and immigrants in western countries. Claims that certain ethnic and national groups are likely to be terrorists are used to demonize refugees and immigrants and to detain them arbitrarily and indefinitely (La Caze, 2011: 609).

It could be argued then that the current health crisis constitutes another paradigmatic case of an auto-immune response. In this respect, organizations are not spared from these questions: how can the very integrity of the democratic system be preserved without compromising the immune strategies (medical and political) that are necessary to halt the pandemic? How are we to distinguish exceptional measures that had to be taken from more or less obvious infringements of democratic fundamental laws? If there

is perhaps no clear-cut answer to this question, a satisfying problematization should invite us here to depart from the sole paradigm of auto-immunity.

As insightful as the logic of auto-immunity proves to be, it nonetheless can discard many issues regarding power, racism or even the concrete ways in which security apparatuses were deployed during the crisis; the obtrusive inequalities that prevail may be analyzed further on more political and socio-economical grounds. Thus, we would like here to open a discussion that could be prolonged between auto-immunity and biopolitics. What's more, the complexity of the ongoing situation should guard us from relying overtly on a unique paradigm; calling for a fertile debate between various philosophical and intellectual traditions.

Derrida after Derrida

Can we think of Derrida after Derrida? What could it mean for us to think *after* Derrida? Did not Derrida warn us to avoid the two symmetrical pitfalls of worship or destruction? And what could 'after' even mean here? Is it about chronology? Is it a pure philosophical issue? Is deconstruction *undeconstructible*? Perhaps. But perhaps this call to vigilance is another name for deconstruction. Confronted as we are with multiple challenges, there is no doubt that deconstruction remains a critical and decisive intellectual tool in order to elaborate a theory as well as a praxis for emancipation. Activists, academics and all those struggling for a more just world can find themselves in Derrida's legacy. Still, as Derrida reminds us, to remain faithful is to remain *unfaithfully* faithful.

In a recent contribution, Jean-Luc Nancy² (2021a, 2021b), went as far as labeling the coronavirus a 'communovirus.' What did he mean by that? First, he wanted to make a point about how the pandemic unveiled the current state of our common dependency as a species towards our environment. Thus, to a certain extent, it was argued that the virus served as a catalyst of an

² Nancy, who passed away during the Covid crisis, was a former student of Derrida and, along with Lacoue-Labarthe, with whom he wrote many books, a foremost and original continuator of deconstruction.

ontological premise: the ground upon which a new *common* human condition could result may lie in our very exposure to the virus. This interpretation is disconcerting on many aspects. First, Nancy based his reading of the crisis on an ontological presupposition of the human condition as being-in-relation. This could be supported or not on a speculative ground. But on another perspective, it considerably dismisses the socio-political basis of any community. Is not auto-immunity here somehow assuming a homogenous exposure of everyone to the virus? Indeed, biopolitics operates differently, by *fracturing* the continuum of human life along racist, sexist and economic lines of division. And these lines of fracture remain as acute as ever. One just has to consider here with angst the alarming rise of xenophobic and racist politics (Lorenzini, 2021).

Secondly, biopolitics is more than a mere set of institutional and technological control apparatuses. Biopolitics presupposes that power in modern society is configured through a certain production of *subjectivity*, itself resulting from specific socio-political structures. These are what define how we think about ourselves prior to any ontological premise. Therefore, placing the discussion on ontological ground can prove misleading and leave aside some decisive issues. As such, despite its profound insights on ethical and political issues, deconstruction is not exempted from *auto-immunity* as well. To be sure, raising these difficult points should not be considered as taking a pessimistic counterpoint to Jean-Luc Nancy's position, nor throwing away deconstruction as such. Many different fronts have been opened during the pandemic; the point here is more to critically assess different paradigms so we may find new ways of organizing and thinking.

One of these fronts is of course social movements. This is not to downplay the challenges awaiting us nor to promote a unitary and homogeneous vision of them. But more than the common exposition of our immunity, the pandemic and social movements could be considered as a 'battlefield' (Pleyers, 2020); a battlefield that is political as well as theoretical. From auto-immunity to biopolitics, these are quite concrete and sometimes different questions that are then outlined. Among them, perhaps the most urgent: is another 'politics of life' (Fassin, 2009) possible? How are new forms of collective subjectivities emerging? What's our situation, what's our heritage?

‘Our heritage was left to us without a testament.’

This sentence by French poet René Char, to which Arendt liked to refer, perhaps defines our situation now. We are left with no clues nor testament on how to invent the future. This might be our risk but also our chance, as Derrida might have put it; and it is certainly our most challenging and daunting task. But it should not prompt us to believe that we are settled in any way with the ghosts. Perhaps the ghost is not behind us. Is it ahead then? Perhaps waiting for us. Or us waiting for it? Or for him? But who? The ghost might as well be our future. Might we learn from it? Can we learn to live *after* Derrida? Perhaps. But not without him for sure. Not without reading him. But also, as it is implied, not without *questioning* him. After all, it was him who urged us to do so; this excruciating and never-ending task of speaking with ghosts: ‘Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost? To whom? To him? To it, as Marcellus says once again and so prudently? “Thou art a Scholler; speake to it Horatio. Question it.”’ [221].

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