

## Deconstructive Marxism

Mariana Valverde

---

Volume 36, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt36re04>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Valverde, M. (1995). Review of [Deconstructive Marxism]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 36, 329–340.

# Deconstructive Marxism

Mariana Valverde

Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*, transl. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge 1994).

... what is now called Deconstruction, while seeming not to 'address' the problem of justice, has done nothing but address it, if only obliquely.<sup>1</sup>

People would be ready to accept the return of Marx or the return to Marx, on the condition that silence is maintained about Marx's injunction not just to decipher but to act and to make the deciphering into a transformation that 'changes the world' .... Some people seem to say, we'll treat him calmly, objectively, without bias: according to the academic rules, in the University, in the library, in colloquia? ... If one listens closely, one already hears whispered: 'Marx, you see, was despite everything a philosopher like any other; what is more (and one can say this now that so many Marxists have fallen silent), he was a great-philosopher who deserves to figure on the list of those works we assign for study and from which he has been banned for too long. He doesn't belong to the communists, to the Marxists, to the parties, he ought to figure within our great canon of Western political philosophy.' We have heard this and we will hear it again.<sup>2</sup>

IF ASKED TO GUESS the authors of the above quotes, many readers of *Labour* would attribute the first quote to some obscure feminist trying (vainly, in *Labour's* official view) to reconcile Derrida's theory with her own politics. Few would ever think that Derrida himself not only said those words but developed them in a long reflection on the need to further the emancipatory project that can be called the struggle for justice ('justice' as distinct from mere law). I will have more to say

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Force of law: the 'mystical foundations of authority,'" in D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld, and D. Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the possibility of justice* (New York 1992), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 32.

Mariana Valverde, "Deconstructive Marxism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 329-40.

about justice shortly; but let me go on, for the real challenge of this contest lies in the second quote. I gave it, minus the reference, to a historian friend: s/he immediately said, "I would know that eloquent sarcasm anywhere: I'm sure it's E.P. Thompson! Listen to that passionate challenge to the reader to quit theorizing and actually do something."

My friend was astounded when I revealed that the author of the second quote is also Derrida — not a youthful Derrida, but the mature Derrida, the most recent Derrida, who has decided to claim Marx for deconstruction and deconstruction for justice. How this has been accomplished, and what possible effect it might have on the tired debates about deconstruction in historical circles, is the subject of this article; but before explaining Derrida's "turn or return to Marx," let us briefly recall some of the events that created the binary opposition dividing deconstruction (and critical theory in general) from politics among left social historians.

### 1. *History vs. Theory*

FEMINIST and left historians generally consider Derrida to be a pernicious influence, in particular a depoliticizing influence. Derrida's deconstructive method is often thought to lead to a skeptical or even nihilist position in which there is no difference between right and wrong, between oppression and liberation. Although that may describe certain proponents of deconstruction, it misrepresents Derrida's position; but there are some grounds for believing it.

Deconstruction enables the critical theorization of taken-for-granted concepts by showing how each is merely one half of a binary opposition, an opposition in which the supposedly primary term can be shown to be in fact dependent on the other for its very existence. It thus becomes difficult to find any absolute grounds for deciding what 'the truth' is, or what 'the correct line' might be, for as soon as we try to specify, to fix the meaning of a term such as 'truth,' the deconstructive dynamic slips it out of our grasp. 'Truth' is revealed as the effect of culturally specific antitheses. Which does not mean that there is no such a thing as a lie or no such thing as an accurate interpretation: it simply means, more narrowly, that there is no absolute truth.

Now, most left historians would agree that some terms need and should be deconstructed. They are generally (if reluctantly) willing to admit that 'the West' only means anything at all by reference to an alleged East, and that perhaps the West is therefore as much a fictive construction as the more obviously mythical East, since its only content is a reversal of the qualities imputed to the East. We thus don't know what we are talking about when we discuss 'progress,' or perhaps even 'rationality,' since the meaning of these terms can be shown to be constructed purely through negation and exclusion, whether of the primitive Others abroad or the mad and crazy Others at home. The negation and exclusion of a clearly mythical 'primitive' Other can hardly result in a distinct, 'real' and self-sufficient entity: 'the

West' and its related term 'civilization' have therefore no existence prior to the discursive organization of mythical oppositions.

Many left historians would also allow that the masculinity of the traditional working class might be usefully analyzed by feminist analyses showing that the supposedly self-sufficient qualities constituting 'skill' are really more negation of despised qualities associated with femininity. This move, which deconstructs the taken-for-granted opposition between 'male' and 'female' as well as the oppositions built on top of that (for example, breadwinner vs. occasional worker), is increasingly accepted within labour history as a useful move, not a purely destructive one.

And yet, most left historians persist in believing that while the west/east and the male/female oppositions might indeed be usefully deconstructed in such a way as to make left history both more politically progressive and more analytically sophisticated, the same methods ought not to be applied to certain central concepts: 'labour,' for instance, or 'class.' Aijaz Ahmad, in a response to Derrida's 'return to Marx' published in *New Left Review*, applauds Derrida's clear refusal of neo-liberalism and his 'reconciliation' with Marxism, but then chastises him for his "refusal of class politics."<sup>3</sup> Ahmad's grounds for maintaining that 'class' should be placed out of reach of the deconstructive move are never spelled out. He does not ever argue that class is more 'real' than 'the West': he simply assumes it. From a post-orthodox perspective, however, one has to admit that if the deconstruction of 'the West' or 'masculinity' is admitted even by Marxists as a useful analysis, there are no logical and solid grounds for confining the deconstructive method to entities other than 'class.'

Extending the reach of deconstruction to 'class' does not have to mean rejecting Marxism, any more than a deconstructive approach to gender necessarily means one is undermining the women's movement. It would, however, involve developing a less metaphysical, less economist, less essentialist, more critical form of Marxism. And that is precisely Derrida's project in this book.

Joan Scott made an influential attempt to extend the reach of deconstruction within historical writing to the certainties of class.<sup>4</sup> Her argument was limited in

<sup>3</sup>Aijaz Ahmad, "Reconciling Derrida: 'Spectres of Marx' and deconstructive politics," *New Left Review*, 208 (November/December 1994), 88-106, esp. 96. Ahmad's piece performs the typical Marxist manoeuvre of evaluating every text by its closeness to orthodoxy. Thus, insofar as Derrida has moved closer to Marxism his text is automatically worthwhile and ought to be praised, but everything that differs is automatically suspect. Ahmad never considers the possibility that Marxism might reciprocate the reconciling move and learn even just a few things from its Others (whether feminism or deconstruction). It is perhaps telling that *New Left Review*, which scored quite the publishing coup by printing the original Derrida lecture, could not find a more sympathetic reviewer for it.

<sup>4</sup>Joan Scott, *Gender and the politics of history* (New York 1988). I reviewed this, together with Denise Riley's *Am I that name? Feminism and the category of 'woman' in history* (Minneapolis 1988) in a review-essay in *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 227-36.

many ways, however, and it is rather unfortunate that most historians' opinions about Derrida are really opinions about Joan Scott and her perceived politics. Six years after the publication of Scott's book, it now seems to me that Scott probably used her new-found theories to justify a break with Marxism that she, like so many other former leftists on both sides of the Atlantic, wanted to make anyway. Although few feminist historians bought Scott's rather exaggerated claims about what great male French theorists can do for feminism, the book undoubtedly made an important contribution to the feminist analysis of both politics and history: but it did so, or at least gave the appearance of doing so, at the expense of working-class history. She denounced left historians, most notably E.P. Thompson, for their inability to critically theorize the object of their study (the working class). While some empiricist feminist historians are criticized as well, most readers probably concluded that the writer of *Gender and the politics of history* is still a feminist but is not a Marxist, perhaps not even a leftist.<sup>5</sup>

The effect of the book was to critically analyze the male/female binary opposition only to implicitly construct an antithesis between theoretical sophistication, on the one hand, and labour/working-class history on the other. And it was obvious which half of the dichotomy Scott believed to be the superior one. There were of course plenty of people on the other side happy to accept the binary while reversing the value ascribed to each half: for many labour historians, any hint of theoretical sophistication became *prima facie* evidence of political backsliding. So by about 1990 it seemed that one could either be solidly political or solidly theoretical, but not both.<sup>6</sup> While it might perhaps be possible for feminist historians to take a few well-chosen bits from contemporary French theorists to analyze gender (although even that was suspect), good old working-class history had to stay away from such theory — indeed, all theory except Marxist theory — in order to guard its political virtue.

Given all of this, Derrida's new book is nothing short of a bombshell. It completely upsets the terms of the by now tedious debate counterposing theory to working-class history by quietly deconstructing the theory/politics binary, thus pulling the rug out from under the feet of both Scott and her critics. The book clearly reclaims not only 'the left' or 'socialism' but the much more specific projects

<sup>5</sup>The by now standard Marxist critique of Scott is that of Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse. The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990).

<sup>6</sup>A notable exception was an interesting panel at the Berkshires women's history conference in 1993 in which Judy Walkowitz (identified with the 'theory' camp) and Ellen Ross (identified with the 'old-fashioned history' camp) discussed their influence on each others' recent books. Their collaborative low-key deconstruction of the opposition between theory and working-class history did not seem to have much subsequent influence, however, perhaps simply because it was low-key; in this whole debate, bombastic and one-sided claims seem to have got a great deal more attention than more sensible and limited claims.

denoted by the terms 'Marx' and 'communism,' and as the second of the initial quotes makes clear, it claims Marx not as a philosopher but as a revolutionary.

## 2. Marx/Communism

CONTRARY to Derrida's usual practice of refusing discussions of authors' agency and proceeding purely textually, the Marx of *Specters of Marx* is a great deal more than a series of texts. Ahmad's response to Derrida in *New Left Review* notes (in a puzzled tone) that Derrida's lecture on Marx is a kind of funeral oration or dirge,<sup>7</sup> that is, a homage to a person, not just an analysis of texts. The 'funeral oration' genre is rehearsed in a moving dedication to the South African communist Chris Hani, killed as the book went to the publishers:

I recall that it is as a *communist* as such, a *communist* as *communist*, whom a Polish emigrant and his accomplices, all the assassins of Chris Hani, put to death a few days ago, April 19 [1994]. The assassins themselves proclaimed that they were out to get a communist. They were trying to interrupt negotiations and sabotage an ongoing democratization. This popular hero of the resistance against Apartheid became dangerous and suddenly intolerable, it seems, at the moment in which, having decided to devote himself once again to a minority Community Party riddled with contradictions, he gave up important responsibilities in the ANC and perhaps any official political or even governmental role he might one day have held in a country freed of Apartheid. Allow me to salute the memory of Chris Hani and to dedicate this lecture to him. (xvi)

But if Derrida chooses a style enabling him to pay homage to Marx and all the fallen comrades in a way that one seldom hears outside of revolutionary struggles, nevertheless, as a deconstructionist, Derrida does not dwell on the alleged biographical truth underlying the names invoked. Hani's proper name does not belong only to him or to South Africa: it is invoked in this dedication partly to make the point that communism is by no means dead and ineffective, and to that extent it is de-personalized even as the individual is remembered. Marx's proper name, in turn, seems to stand not for a person but rather for a quality in the texts themselves, a quality that inspires readers to carry on changing the world, a quality that ensures that Marx is still effective and hence still alive. Derrida's text clearly seeks to achieve the same quality, that is, to inspire and to move its reader to political action. He calls to us to struggle against the neo-liberal project that he calls, in a phrase typically resonant with meanings, "the state of the debt."

Now, left historians would also say that they see Marx not as a dead white European male on a par with Aristotle but rather as a living and powerful force. Derrida agrees with this in a certain way. In a brilliant and sarcastic critique of the <sup>7</sup>Derrida's original lecture "Spectres of Marx," the keynote speech at an international conference entitled "Whither Marxism? Global crises in international perspective" and held at Berkeley in April of 1993, was published in *New Left Review*, 205 (May/June 1994). The book *Spectres of Marx* is a much expanded version.

key organic intellectual of neo-liberalism, he shows that the supposedly alive Francis Fukuyama is nothing but a poor imitation of the dead European theologians who saw history as the progress of a disembodied spirit towards an ahistorical, timeless, and changeless (and therefore lifeless) end. By contrast Marx, though pronounced dead not just in 'the West' but even in the former Soviet Union, is in Derrida's view an extremely powerful force. Marx/communism is the spectre silently haunting neo-liberalism, the spectre that —like the ghost of Hamlet's father— is dead but is powerful enough to set a major chain of historical events in motion.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as Marxism/communism is the disavowed Other, it actually shapes the meaning and content of liberal democracy.

Derrida claims that the new international order is just as haunted by the spectre of communism as the old European powers were in 1848. In 1848, however, communism was a vision of the future, while today communism appears not only to neo-liberals but even to many progressives as nothing but the ghost of revolutions past. Deconstruction offers left historians a powerful tool to undermine this fact/myth of the death of communism. It turns out, however, that to reclaim the living power of Marxism one cannot act as if Marx had already given all the answers. In opposition to the 'it's all in the Bible/Capital' approach, Derrida suggests that to truly inherit and continue Marx's project we have to critique the more metaphysical, eurocentric side of Marx's work.

Key to Derrida's critique is his insight that Marx was constantly disowning his own spectres, that is, refusing to acknowledge the historical forces shaping his own life and work. Marx desperately wants to leave behind not just capitalism but the past in general, all of human history homogenized (in a rather eurocentric way, I would add) as "the history of class struggle." In a well-known passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx deplors French revolutionaries' tendency to borrow rituals from ancient cultures, and exhorts his followers "to let the dead bury their dead" in order to begin a completely new future. But for Derrida there is no such thing as leaving the past behind. For rather obvious reasons, only the living are able to bury the dead, Derrida says to Marx. That means that revolutions cannot help but be haunted by the people and events too often lumped together condescendingly as 'the past.' Marx tries to reject all the spectres of past struggles in his vision of a

<sup>8</sup>The book develops an intricate analogy between the ghost of Hamlet's father and Marx himself as 'appearing' to us. At the very end of the book Derrida positions himself in relation to Marxism by indirectly comparing his own role to that of Horatio: the final words are taken from *Hamlet*: "Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio." Through this implicit comparison Derrida tells us, it seems to me, that although his text is calling us to action he himself will not try to replace the Chris Hanis of the world, since he is "a scholar," not a leader. In this way he already answers Ahmad's subsequent criticism about the vagueness of Derrida's ideas for a "new International." My sense is that Derrida would not think it appropriate for him or for any other scholar to come up with some transitional programme for a political movement.

'new Man' living in a 'new world' without stain and without any alienation or contradiction.

Derrida's critique is, despite its basis in philosophy, a very useful one for historians, I would argue, since it helps us to uncover and critique the lingering metaphysical/utopian elements in Marx. It also helps us to remember that history, as a living force, is precisely not the mere description of 'the past,' the binary opposite of 'the present,' but is rather the analysis of change over time. (One can, after all, do a history of today's headlines.)

Marx's typically 19th-century sense of 'the future begins here' could be described — although Derrida himself, who is most definitely no historian, does not argue this — as a failure of historical nerve. His attempt to confine history to 'the past' amounted to a self-deluded attempt to prevent the return of the repressed. This was accomplished, Derrida points out, by denying the effectivity of ghosts in general and of the spectres he was personally haunted by in particular. Derrida seems to imply, though this remains undeveloped, that the excesses of Stalinism were partly due to the futile quest to completely eliminate the past, the desire to kill the ghosts (of nationalism, of the peasantry) dead. (From a feminist perspective one could add that the call to 'let the dead bury their dead' also amounts to a masculinist fantasy of the self-made man with no debts to history or to one's mother; but Derrida does not take up this analysis,<sup>9</sup> preferring to rely on Freud's analysis of the ways in which the attempt to deny loss, death, and inheritance leads to neurosis).

While clearly and passionately siding with marxism against liberalism, therefore, Derrida does not accept Marx's definition of his own project as unambiguously true. Marx is not at all dead, he (it?) is a powerful force: but he is a spectral force, a force that is alive and dead at the same time, and the dead or outdated aspects have to be acknowledged alongside Marx's living power. Indeed, it is precisely the figure of the 'spectre' that helps Derrida to develop the key point within Marx's philosophy that must be critiqued and rejected. He asks Marxists to consider the possibility that Marx, and Marxism after him, made a mistake by attempting to identify with and claim 'life' one-sidedly while rejecting and disavowing death. Let me explain.

Marx's theory hinges on his claim that capitalism inverts the 'proper' relationship between life and death. In his early writings, he discussed how the necessity to sell one's labour power in order to survive amounted to an alienation of one's very humanity, one's very life. And in *Capital* he wrote some brilliant passages on that key mechanism known as 'commodity fetishism,' that is, the process by which the lifeless products of human labour (from consumer commodities to capital itself) appeared to not only be more alive than the people producing them but seemed even to exercise a god-like power of life and death over them. Pointing out that

<sup>9</sup>At one point Derrida equates this forgetting of the past, the disavowal of those who have fallen, to a "forgetting of the maternal," (109) but this is not pursued.



money and capital have become fetishes presupposes a particular taken-for-granted binary opposition of living beings (labour) to lifeless objects, a binary that was by no means invented by Marx but was rather absolutely crucial to the development of the Romantic intellectuals of his generation.

The life/death binary turns out to be a key support for the other key term in Marx's thought, namely 'materialism': the philosophical debate he constructs between idealism and materialism is based on the everyday opposition of what is unreal (dead?) to what is real. But how can one ever claim to know exactly where the line is between real and unreal? Some things or people may be more real than others in certain contexts, but can there ever be an absolute line drawn by which the real and the unreal become tightly sealed, mutually exclusive categories?

Derrida does a reading of the first sections of *Capital* volume I that shows that 'exchange value' is precisely the kind of "spectral apparition" (46) that Marx was always denouncing in Hegel's work. Use value — the 'natural' uses of a thing — is constructed by Marx as the primary term in the binary opposition of use vs. exchange: exchange value thus appears as parasitic, as secondary, as fundamentally unreal. And yet, Derrida asks, how can there be any use in "strict purity," any use value without at least potential exchange? "Marx wants to know and make known where, at what precise moment, at what instant the ghost [exchange value] comes on stage, and this is a manner of exorcism, a way of keeping it at bay: before this limit, it was not there, it was powerless." (161) Marx assumes that one could find an origin for human alienation, a moment in which the 'natural' relation between humans and things was unspoiled by exchange. This is, however, as much of a myth as the Biblical myth or any other myth of origin. That dialectic of death and life that Derrida calls 'spectrality' is in fact the condition for the possibility of life itself, and hence of use value itself. There is no purity, no origin, no life before alienation. We all simply have a psychological need to imagine such a condition, just as we Europeans are invested in thinking that 'the West' actually existed before 'the East' was discovered.

What I would emphasize about this deconstruction of life vs. death, labour vs. capital, use vs. exchange, is that Derrida does not simply say, 'ahah, there is a binary opposition of reality and unreality, and any binary must a priori be a false opposition,' which is how most people think deconstruction works. Derrida proceeds much more empirically, demonstrating through detailed readings that the distinction between real and unreal in fact repeatedly collapses every time that Marx tries to fix and solidify it.

Contemporary semiotics has — from a different perspective — shown fairly conclusively that the old distinction between 'the material' and 'the ideal' breaks down as soon as we begin thinking about communication and meaning, for the exact same meaning (for example, 'Canada') can be equally conveyed by intangible ideas or by 'real' monuments, so that the ontological status of the signifiers becomes quite irrelevant. Within historical practice, the old debate between Marx

and Hegel has been inherited and carried on in the debate about whether discourse analysis is or is not an 'idealism,' a debate which presupposes that one could easily separate the ideal from the real and somehow 'take sides.' Derrida's deconstruction of Marx's real/unreal binary opposition might thus help historians to break through the persistent belief that anyone who uses discourse analysis as a *method* is somehow tied irrevocably to an idealist metaphysics.<sup>10</sup>

The life/death binary, key to Marx's theories of alienation and fetishism, effects materialism by giving Marx a language with which to distinguish his work from that of Hegel and other idealists.<sup>11</sup> It also sustains Marx's effort, cited above, to differentiate the communist revolution from earlier ones: bourgeois revolutions are criticized for always resurrecting the past, while communism, in Marx's view, is not indebted to the past. Communists are told to do the impossible: they "must cease to inherit. They must no longer even do that mourning work in the course of which the living maintain the dead, play dead, busy themselves with the dead ... bear their name and hold forth in their language." (113)

Derrida's point here seems to be essentially Freud's: it is the warning that those who do not understand the powerful weight of inheritance, those who refuse to listen to ghosts because they say they don't believe in them, are precisely those who are condemned to repeat their own history while loudly disavowing it. The revolutions of 'the past' need to be constantly remembered and invoked, not only for the sake of history but for the sake of collective sanity.

Similarly, the comrades who have fallen before us have to be remembered, not only for the sake of their dignity but for the sake of our own understanding of the (inevitably used) names we bear, the voices we re-enact. This involving of other voices is never a simple repetition, since even when we quote the words of someone like Marx we cannot possibly say exactly the same thing. In this book Derrida does not develop this analysis of 'iteration' (the re-enactment which is and is not a repetition), but again, this direction of analysis might be a fruitful one for present-day historians worrying about our relationship to our sources. Applied to the question of communism/revolution, the concept of iteration would mean that the future revolutions will re-enact or at least invoke past ones without ever being repetitions. Applied to the question of Marxism, it would mean that the orthodox attempt to simply reproduce Marx/Marxism is bound to be a self-deluded one, for nobody can fully and completely repeat the past. But Derrida believes that today's

<sup>10</sup>For more on this, see Lorna Weir, "The wanderings of the linguistic turn," review-essay in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 6 (June 1993), 227-45.

<sup>11</sup>Those interested in Marx's sense of himself with respect to Hegel will find in *Spectres of Marx* a detailed and highly sophisticated discussion of Marx's ultimately unsuccessful efforts to disassociate his work from that of Max Stirner and other members of the 'Holy Family.' I cannot here, for reasons of space and also of relevance, discuss this aspect of the book, but will only say that Derrida's analysis turns, as one might expect, on the obsession that Marx had with the figure of the 'ghost.'

main danger is the opposite one. Marx worried that his generation's political leaders were living exclusively under the shadow of past heroisms, but today's leaders generally make the opposite claims: that they have no inheritance, no politics to speak of, not even any particular political experience. Neo-liberalism, with its utter contempt for inheritance, for history, for those who have fallen and continue to fall as global capital increases its power, is here shown to be fundamentally flawed not only at the level of its theory of social relations but even at the psychological level.

### 3. *Justice*

THE SKEPTICAL READER will by this point be asking: That's all very nice, but how can Derrida have any place from which to denounce neo-liberalism or for that matter genocide? Hasn't he deconstructed the opposition between the real and the unreal, life and death? How can he then say that neo-liberalism is bad because people suffer? Hasn't he given up on terms such as 'bad'?

The answer is (as any reader who has come this far can undoubtedly anticipate): yes and no. On the one hand, Derrida's approach necessarily rejects any absolute criteria not for the experience of suffering (which does not have to be inscribed into a binary moral logic) but for our claims to know how to draw an absolute, immovable, and mutually exclusive division between 'good' and 'bad.' So he would in no way deny that there are real and overwhelming experiences of suffering, but he would — or more accurately, I think he would — reject the claim of anyone who presumed to know that situation X was absolutely bad.

Historians ought to be able to sympathize with this. After all, as a careful historian one can say that a certain mass murder caused much suffering, and even claim that the suffering was avoidable: to that extent one can indeed ascribe responsibility and achieve a denunciation. But to claim that it was bad on some absolute scale would presume that we can know that the opposite outcome would have been 'good' on an absolute scale. Such absolute denunciations also presuppose that the historian can possess at least some nuggets of truly 'objective' knowledge, a clearly questionable claim. Derrida points out that it takes a very long time for events such as revolutions to unfold and reveal all their potential. He would advise leftists to cease making instant pronouncements about which is the correct line to take in particular situations — while still exhorting us to act against neo-liberalism and in the spirit of people like Marx and like Chris Hani.

Some may complain that he never quite tells us what precise political project is denoted by 'the spirit of Marx.' But I find that openness rather refreshing, as an activist who has always been suspicious of anyone's claim to hold the monopoly on interpretation. As a historical researcher, I also believe that absolute binary opposites such as bad vs. good do not add very much to our ability to make judgements on complex historical events; on the contrary, they hinder us, for while we desperately see the absolute good we neglect to make the more limited and modest judgements that may be much more politically useful. A deconstructive

approach, which does not reject all evaluation and judgement but does reject absolute 'objective' judgements, might appear to some to be lacking in ethical and political will; in my view, however, it is only lacking in the kind of arrogant will to absolute knowledge that the West's history has had rather too much of.

While I would stop there, Derrida does not. He makes it very clear that he sees an irrevocable need for an ethical perspective that is not based on ontologized absolutes but is nevertheless beyond (or beneath) deconstruction. This is where he differs completely from Foucault: from a Foucaultian perspective one can only describe, analyze, show the conditions that were necessary for neo-liberalism to emerge. One cannot condemn or approve except indirectly, through the description itself. But for Derrida — who is not as relentlessly anti-humanist as Foucault — there is such a thing as an ethical ground for the possibility of all deconstruction, a space (or more accurately a longing, a desire) that cannot itself be deconstructed. This longing (sometimes referred to as a 'promise,' with the Jewish connotation of a promise that constitutes a people but is not fulfilled) Derrida calls 'justice.'

What is justice? First of all, it is not law. Law requires a logic of equivalence and restitution, whether it's an eye for an eye or two years for a robbery. Certain events have to be treated as equal to others (and how a robbery could be equal to two years is an interesting question for deconstructive criminology). Law is ultimately about exchange and therefore about vengeance. Justice, by contrast, is precisely that which exceeds law. It is a gift rather than an exchange.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore "incalculable" and not amenable to the calculus of punishment of contemporary legal and quasi-legal systems. Justice is therefore something that can never be fully actualized, for it exceeds the logic of identity. It is therefore always effective but never effected, always demanding something of us but never fully present in any actually existing 'ism.'

In an interesting essay called "Force of Law: the mystical foundation of authority,"<sup>13</sup> Derrida develops this idea of justice. In doing so he relies a great deal on Walter Benjamin's peculiar mix of communism and Jewish eschatology. While this might not appeal to many of *Labour's* readers (it does not particularly appeal

<sup>12</sup>In *Given time: counterfeit money* (Chicago 1992), Derrida presents a critique of the traditional anthropological notion of 'the gift' as a kind of exchange. Derrida believes that as soon as a gift is recognized as such (that is, as soon as it creates obligation or even just gratefulness), then it stops being a gift, for if 'gift' means anything, it must mean that which exceeds and transcends exchange and obligation. Therefore gifts are constantly disappearing as gifts, turned into their opposite (obligations). The same analysis is briefly suggested in *Spectres of Marx* for the distinction between 'law' and 'justice,' with law as the circulation of obligations that can never embody justice, since justice is necessarily other than law/obligation.

<sup>13</sup>Cited in note 1 above. For more on Derrida's interpretation of 'justice,' see Costas Douzinas and Ronnie Warrington, *Postmodern jurisprudence* (London 1991) and Peter Fitzpatrick, *The mythology of modern law* (London 1992). See also the special issue of *Social and legal studies* on "Beyond criticism: law, power and ethics," 3 (September 1994).

to me, perhaps because my only experience of mysticism is the off-putting one of the Catholic church), it certainly makes it obvious that those who believe that Derrida is a nihilist are completely deluded.

The book under review, in any case, does not ask the reader to follow Derrida down that particular path. What it does — and this is a book that ‘does’ rather than ‘says’ — is to ask leftists to keep Marx’s memory alive, while daring to question Marx’s own theory of life. It asks us to remember Marx as our own spectre and to also re-think those spectres which Marx tried to conjure away (idealism? non-scientific communism?). It asks us to remember that history is never dead even if it is disowned, and that communism is neither past nor dead but is rather that which provides neo-liberalism a foil with which to construct its “state of debt.” It asks us to denounce neo-liberalism and think about the possibilities for “a new International.” And that, from the pen of an author generally believed to be a pure academic of dubious politics, a mere interpreter of texts!

*I would like to thank Lorna Weir for helping me to think about deconstruction.*