

How the Night Moves

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Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx* of a world at the end of history that is haunted by what it excludes. A world that detaches its logical form from its historical content. A world that proclaims triumph in the midst of struggle, victory in the midst of defeat. A world that is ever so sure that it is the best possible—except for all of the others that might come to be. “End of this parenthesis.”¹

For Derrida, the very fact of a word like “socialism” marks the *loss* or *absence* of an original One, of the sense of a unitary Being containing socialism and non-socialism and so on. Jonathan Culler explains:

If a cave man is successfully to inaugurate language by making a special grunt signify “food,” we must suppose that the grunt is already distinguished from other grunts and that the world has already been divided into the categories “food” and “non-food.”²

Derick Varn makes the same point in reverse when he says that when you argue that something should not be normalized, “you are probably realizing it has already been normalized.” In each case, *you only need a word for something once that something is worth having a word for*. The sign is premised by a gap within and underneath social reality itself, a gap between one thing deferred as another: “difference as detour.”³

For the classical political economists, man’s encounter with the natural world was literally *essential* to the human condition. To work on one’s own property was to infuse it with one’s own human *essence*. Locke: “Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath *mixed his Labour with*, and *joined to it something that is his own*.”⁴ Mill: “The objects supplied by nature are only *instrumental to human wants* after having undergone some degree of *transformation by human exertion*.”⁵ Improvements or “trade fixtures” were held at common law to be the property of the tenant, not the landowner,⁶ because every human subject had “by the original grant of the creator a right to pursue and take any fowl or insect of the air, any fish or inhabitant of the waters, and any beast or reptile of the field.”⁷

An extraordinary, even a frightening power indeed. The human being is unique among all known forms of life in this regard. Marcuse, at his most Heideggerian:

If man can make the species of every be-ing into his object, the general essence of every be-ing can become objective for him; he can have every be-ing as that

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Conjuring—Marxism,” in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* 61, 77 (Bernd Magnus & Stephen Cullenberg eds., Peggy Kamuf trans., Routledge 1994).

² Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* 96 (1982).

³ Jacques Derrida, “Différance” (1968), reprinted in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* 278, 291 (Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan eds., Blackwell Pub. 2d ed. 2004).

⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, bk. 2, § 27, at 287-88 (Peter Laslett ed., Cambridge Univ. Press student ed. 1988) (1689).

⁵ J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, bk. 1, § 1, at 19 (Stephen Nathanson ed., Hackett Pub. abridged ed. 2004) (1848).

⁶ Poole’s case, 1 Salk. 368, 91 Eng. Rep. 320 (K.B. 1703).

⁷ 2 Wm. Blackstone, *Commentaries* * 403.

which it is in its essence. It is for this reason [...] that he can *relate* freely to every be-ing. He is not limited to the particular, actual state of the be-ing and his immediate relationship to it, but he can take the be-ing as it is in its essence beyond its immediate, particular, actual state. He can recognize and grasp the *possibilities* contained in every be-ing [...] Man cannot simply accept the objective world or merely come to terms with it; he must appropriate it. He has to transform the objects of this world into organs of his life, which is manifested in and through them.⁸

It is for this reason that Marx *politicizes* what Hegel presents as a *philosophical* problem: the *alienation* of the subject from the object, of the human subject from the objects that actually exist in the world. According to the capitalist social relation, one's *own essence* is taken and whisked away as soon as it is worked into the widget on the factory line. The worker is artificially separated from the fruits of their own labor—from the very essence of the human being as a “species-being,” as a member of this extraordinary category of “human subject.”

Socialism is—has never been *anything more than*—the resolution of this originary gap between the human subject and its essence, of the “return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being.”⁹ It is not, as Derrida argues, a messianic *hope* that one day this *might* happen, if only we remain faithful and resist the temptation of the capitalist world order and whatnot. It is the *real-world phenomenon* by which this resolution is *actually happening*.

We are haunted by our own ghosts.

We will face them sooner or later.

For the owl of Minerva flies only in the night.

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism” (1932), reprinted in *Heideggerian Marxism* 86, 96 (Richard Wolin & John Abromeit eds., Univ. Neb. Press 2005).

⁹ Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” in *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 99, 102 (Martin Milligan trans., Prometheus Books 1988) (1932).