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The Spectral Proletariat: The Politics of Hauntology in *The Communist Manifesto*

Tim Fiskén¹

‘Everything begins by the apparition of a specter’, Derrida writes, describing both the *Communist Manifesto* and *Hamlet*.¹ But while in *Hamlet* the arrival of the ghost sets in motion a train of events in which the ghost does not participate, the *Communist Manifesto*, I will argue, begins *and ends* with the apparition of a specter. The specter of communism reveals a more general way in which the proletariat, as Marx construes it in the *Manifesto*, is itself spectral. The metaphysics, or rather anti-metaphysics, of specters and haunting that Derrida develops in *Specters of Marx* helps to explain the conception of politics which Marx develops in the *Manifesto*. The *Communist Manifesto* has tended to be interpreted either as a determinist work, based on a historical ontology in which the future is determined by what exists in the present, or as a voluntarist work, based on a subjectivist ontology in which the future is brought about by the free actions of independent agents.² I argue that, while these two approaches can both be seen in the *Manifesto*, Marx is, in accordance with the Derridean idea of hauntology, not concerned with what exists, but with what does not exist, and in particular with what does not exist *yet*. Reading the *Manifesto* in light of Derrida’s discussion of spectrality provides reasons to reject views which criticize Marx’s supposed essentialist understanding of class (I discuss, in particular, Laclau’s attempt to provide a post-Marxist alternative to Marx’s supposed determinism). That the proletariat is not fixed but is, rather, spectral, allows us to understand the particular futurity Marx associates with the class, and the politics he derives from this.

What is spectrality? A specter is of course a ghost, something dead, and Derrida turns to the figure of the specter in order to address pronouncements of the death of Marxism. However, a specter is not just dead, and it is this ‘not just’ that makes the specter useful for Derrida’s purposes and mine. Derrida makes this point by distinguishing specter and spirit.³ Where spirit is that immaterial quality which infuses the body in life and departs, perhaps to its internal reward, in death, the specter has a more ambiguous relationship both to the body and to the idea of departure (and return). The specter is what remains or returns after death and it is thus, as Derrida writes, a ‘paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal incorporation of the spirit’.⁴ Unlike the immaterial spirit, the specter is concerned with the human world of ‘flesh and phenomena’⁵ without being made of flesh or, properly speaking, a phenomenon because, as Derrida writes, it is ‘nothing visible’ (in the double sense of not being a visible thing, and being the way in which non-existence becomes visible).⁶ ‘There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed’.⁷ The specter, that is, combines an ambiguous relation to appearance with an ambiguous temporality, the appearance of something which is not present. It is the presence of these two forms of ambiguity in the *Manifesto* that I want to emphasize in this article. The specter has an ambiguous

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relationship to appearance, because seems to be an appearance without the proper relationship to a reality of which it is the appearance; and it has an ambiguous relationship to temporality because this appearance gives a certain kind of presence to something that is not present, does not exist in the present but might exist in some other time. It is my contention that these two ambiguities are crucial to Marx's description of the proletariat, and the particular politics he advocates in the *Manifesto*.

1 Spectral Appearances

One of the aspects of the specter to which Derrida draws attention is its anachrony, the way in which the specter's insubstantiality in the present is due to its arrival from, or presentation within the present of, *another* time.⁸ Derrida, in keeping with his focus on Marxism as an inheritance, tends to figure this anachrony as the presence of the past within the present, the haunting of the returning *revenant*.⁹ But anachrony, just because it draws attention to the 'out of joint' character of time, cannot be limited just to the past and the present; as Jameson points out, 'the future is also spectral...its blurred lineaments also swim dimly into view and announce or foretell themselves'.¹⁰ It is this future-oriented, or prefigurative, quality of the *Manifesto*, which is particularly important in understanding it as a political intervention. Indeed, it will be my contention in this article that we can only understand the way in which the *Manifesto* functions as a political intervention if we pay attention to the role of spectrality in the work, particularly as it functions in this futural mode. Thomas, describing the *Manifesto* as 'a tocsin, or a call to action', draws attention to the way in which spectrality provokes political action, because the specter is 'unsubstantiated, perhaps, but this is to say that it awaits its substantiation, a substantiation that only Marx and his readers can give it'.¹¹

This suggestion, that Marx might be calling on himself or us to substantiate or perhaps better (for reasons I will discuss below) *embody* the specter puts a rather different spin on what Derrida describes as Marx's hostility to the specter. 'Marx does not like ghosts any more than his adversaries do', Derrida writes, 'But he thinks of nothing else'.¹² The reason, according to Derrida, for this hostile obsession of Marx's, is that Marx thinks of the ambiguous being of the specter as a deficiency: the apparition of the specter represents a 'dividing line between the ghost and the actuality',¹³ a dividing line that 'ought to be crossed ... by a realization'.¹⁴ In opposing ghosts, then, Marx is setting up an opposition 'like life to death, like vain appearances of the simulacrum to real presence'.¹⁵ Thus Marx recognizes the specter in order 'to denounce, chase away, or exorcise its specters'.¹⁶ Derrida identifies a secret complicity between Marx and his adversaries in this act of exorcism which 'repeats in the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead'.¹⁷ Where Marx differs from his opponents, for Derrida, is that these opponents want to declare communism dead in order to have done with it, while Marx declares the specter of communism dead in order to *replace* it with a living communism.¹⁸ In both cases we have a specter that points towards the past, either as something dead and buried, or as a shade that has been replaced by the reality. A specter that is oriented towards the future, however, suggests a different relationship between the living and the dead, in which the specter is the shadowy outline of a future which is not killed or displaced in its coming to be, but is instead inhabited or embodied.

The difference here is that Marx does not, in the *Manifesto*, propose that the specter should be replaced with something non-spectral. Rather, the specter continues to exist during the process of its embodiment. This is not to deny that Marx and

Derrida have very different purposes, and Marx is happy envision communism becoming, at some point, a fully present reality in a way which would be foreign to Derrida's insistence on a 'democracy to come' which is *constitutively* 'to come', and never present.¹⁹ However, this fully self-present communism is not the subject of the *Manifesto*. Derrida reads in the opening lines of the text, the declaration that 'it is high time that communists should openly, in the face of the hole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the specter of communism' as marking Marx's call for 'the final incarnation, the real presence of the specter, thus the end of the spectral'.²⁰ But Marx writes this declaration at the beginning of the manifesto of a party which does not actually exist,²¹ and so the manifestation he is both calling for and attempting to enact is not the replacement of the specter with its reality, but rather the manifestation of the non-existent: that is, just what Derrida would call spectral. As my reading of the *Manifesto* in what follows will attempt to show, at the moment of class struggle which Marx is discussing in the *Manifesto*, communism remains a specter. The communist politics Marx describes and prescribes in the *Manifesto* is a politics of embodying this specter which depends on, or deals with, its continued existence as a specter. Were this specter to become fully embodied and thus no longer spectral, Marx might regard this as a victory (while Derrida would not), but this full embodiment is not Marx's concern in the *Manifesto*, and if such embodiment were to occur, the analysis in the *Manifesto* would become largely irrelevant.

The connection between manifestation and embodiment is crucial to the *Manifesto* and to the role of spectrality within it. A specter is an apparition, which is to say that it appears, that it is an appearance, without the proper relation that any appearance ought to have to the real thing which it is an appearance of. Derrida calls this a 'paradoxical incorporation', an appearance of a body which is not in fact a body and therefore not quite an appearance either: 'it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition'.²² That is: with no body, the specter is not the appearance of the body; but, then, if it is not the appearance of anything in particular, in what sense exactly is it an appearance? This indefinite distance between appearance and embodiment is key to the rhetoric of the *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* makes manifest a communist movement, the appearance of which has a highly indeterminate relationship to reality. We will see in more detail how far the empirical claims of the *Manifesto* actually describe reality in due course, but such a judgment of the *Manifesto*'s representational accuracy is not intended to criticize it as inaccurate, but rather to suggest ways in which appearance might function in the text without being constrained by the demands of accuracy. An appearance which is not simply reflective of underlying reality is put forward to characterize a reality that is not yet adequate to this appearance in order to incite political interventions that would fill out this appearance. It is in this that the *Manifesto* exhibits a logic that is captured by Derrida's concept of spectrality.

2 The Communist Prosthesis

Here we might understand the relationship between the *Manifesto* and the communist party of which it is supposed to be the manifesto (and manifestation) in terms of the concept of prosthesis, which occurs in two somewhat different ways in Derrida's text. In his discussion of the apparition of the specter in *Hamlet*, Derrida gives a decisive role to the armor worn by the ghost ('which no stage production will ever be able to leave out'²³). It is, paradoxically, the corporeality of this armor which renders the

specter spectral, because by wrapping and concealing the ghost, the armor allows it to appear without revealing itself. It is at the level of the armor that the crucial ambiguity of the specter resides, because 'it prevents perception from deciding on the identity that it wraps so solidly in its carapace', such that 'we do not know whether it is or is not part of the spectral apparition'.²⁴ The specter has its hauntologically ambiguous being on the basis of this 'technical prosthesis', an artifact 'foreign to the spectral body that it dresses'.²⁵

Derrida returns to the dependence of the specter on prosthesis later in the text in order to differentiate the specter from a Hegelian 'spiritualization or even an autonomization of spirit, idea, or thought'.²⁶ What distinguishes the specter is that this spiritualization does not remain distinct from the phenomenal and corporeal world, 'for there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of the flesh'.²⁷ The genesis of specters is not a spiritualization, but 'a paradoxical *incorporation*' in which the spiritual or idea is incarnated 'in *another artifactual body, a prosthetic body*'.²⁸

Spectrality, then, is not a type of idealism, because the specter is not an idea (as an illusion might be) that dominates matter. Rather, the specter is implicated in a deep if paradoxical way with materiality: it could not exist without the material of the prosthesis, but it cannot be reduced to that prosthesis. Cheah argues that spectrality is central to materialism, although this leads to a very different understanding of materialism to the dialectical materialism of the Marxist tradition.²⁹ It is this spectral materialism that Marx mobilizes in the *Manifesto* to show how political activity has a definite material location, a location not just in time and space but within a particular body, which definite location makes possible the presentation of an indefinite future. We can see this in the way Marx rhetorically delineates the embodiment of the specter of communism in the communist movement as prosthesis in such a way that this embodiment is at the same time a transformation of the historical moment in which the body is formed. This takes place in what is perhaps the most sustained use of a single rhetorical device in the *Manifesto*, the imagined dialog with the 'bourgeois objections to communism',³⁰ that takes up most of its second part. Marx responds to the claim that communists intend to abolish property, culture, the family, and the nation, and in each case his response follows the same pattern. Marx begins by responding *tu quoque*:

Do you mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant, a form of property that preceded the bourgeois form? There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already destroyed it, and is still destroying it daily.³¹

That is, Marx accuses the bourgeoisie of having already done what they accuse the communists of wanting to do, inasmuch as the establishment of capitalism abolishes pre-capitalist forms of property. Marx goes on to push this point further, arguing that bourgeois property is itself a form of the abolition of property. Most obviously, this is because bourgeois property depends on depriving the proletariat of property: 'Does wage labor create any property for the laborer? Not a bit'.³² Perhaps more interestingly, however, Marx argues that bourgeois property itself is not the kind of property lauded by the bourgeoisie as 'the fruit of a man's own labor...the ground work of all personal freedom, activity, and independence'.³³ Bourgeois property is not an extension of man's personality, but is capital, and 'capital is a collective product

and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the unified action of all members of society, can it be set in motion'.³⁴ In making capital into the prevailing form of property, then, the bourgeoisie has *already* made property social, has already abolished personal property; in the abolition of private property, 'personal property is not thereby transformed into social property';³⁵ rather, it is the private control of an already social property that is abolished.

It is on the basis of this analysis that Marx makes his final riposte to the imagined bourgeois critic, which is not to reject the criticism or (as the *tu quoque* argument might suggest) to accuse the critic of hypocrisy, but is, rather, to proudly accept the criticism, albeit with its terms now somewhat transformed by the critique. 'The abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so',³⁶ Marx writes, and slightly later adds, 'You reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so, that is just what we intend'.³⁷ The same pattern occurs in Marx's response to the other 'bourgeois criticisms': Marx argues that the bourgeoisie has abolished culture for the majority of the population, before going on to agree that communists will abolish bourgeois culture;³⁸ that the bourgeois has abolished the family for all but itself, and that communists will abolish the bourgeois family altogether;³⁹ that the bourgeoisie promotes in practice the community of women, and communism will abolish the bourgeois sexual ethics that treats 'women as mere instruments of production'; and, finally, that the bourgeoisie is already abolishing national borders, and communists will complete this abolition.⁴⁰

This pattern of responses has two key moments. Marx concludes in each case by *accepting* the description put forward as a criticism of communism ('precisely so'). Here Marx is responding to the 'nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism' by taking on the mantle of this nursery tale, not rejecting or exorcising the specter, but inhabiting it.⁴¹ However, in order to make this response, Marx prepares a context in which the accusation leveled against communism is part of a general tendency in which the bourgeoisie is implicated. This establishes communism as already having a spectral existence within capitalism, a future-oriented spectrality in which communism in the present is the prosthetic body that renders visible the communism to come. In these responses to bourgeois critics, then, Marx ties the idea of the communist movement as embodiment of the communist specter to a theme developed elsewhere in the *Manifesto*, the location of communism's possibility within a broader historical narrative. The role of this historical narrative within the *Manifesto* is fraught with difficulties, and perhaps inconsistencies, which we might subsume under the rubric of 'determinism'. Does Marx's location of the communist movement within a historical narrative commit him to a form of determinism in which communism is the inevitable outcome of a predetermined economic logic? Is Marx's historical narrative incompatible with the ostensible purpose of the *Manifesto* as a political intervention? I will turn to this question in a moment, but first I want to consider what will turn out to be a related question, whether the *Manifesto* contains a determinism that vitiates the claim to find a future-oriented spectrality in the work; this would be the difference between a future which is assured and one which is foretold only in its 'blurred lineaments'.⁴²

This problem in interpreting the *Manifesto* can be compressed into one of its most famous phrases: 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind'.⁴³ The last part of this phrase, the appeal to sober senses,

might suggest the kind of dry, scientific analysis we would associate with determinism (in which revolution is a matter of unchangeable and knowable objective forces, rather than subjective activity or enthusiasm). However, the profanation of the holy suggests something a little less sober, in which mystifications are challenged in a perhaps quite shocking way. The melting of solid into air goes even further, suggesting that this process of demystification might also involve an unsettling *remystification*: if the solidity of objective forces has evaporated, how are our sober senses supposed to study them? The more one studies this phrase, indeed, the more perplexing it becomes. This complexity points towards the highly ambiguous status of the historical narrative Marx gives in the *Manifesto*, and reproduces some of the tensions and problems produced by this ambiguity, in which determinism is sometimes (or almost) avowed, while existing in text the theoretical framework and political purpose of which seem to resist determinism. It is to these tensions which I will now turn.

3 Myth or Specter?

But does this embedding of the proletariat within a framework of historical tendency not vitiate the spectrality I have been insisting Marx maintains? This idea that the proletariat has a specific role in the future which we can know in the present is central to one of the most widely criticized elements of Marx's thought, and of the *Manifesto* in particular, its purported determinism. This is visible in passages in the *Manifesto* which suggest that the end of capitalism, and its replacement by a superior economic system, are inevitable as the result of the internal economic logic of capitalism. Probably the most explicit endorsement of this position in the *Manifesto* is:

At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organizations of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.⁴⁴

Even here, however, Marx does not completely propose a determinist model: Marx does not write that the development of the productive forces *caused* a change in the feudal relations of property, merely that they 'became no longer compatible', and the relationship between the need for the relations of production to be burst asunder, and their actual bursting asunder, so suggestive of determinism, is only expressed by a frustratingly unclear semi-colon. More importantly for my argument, however, is that this almost determinist paragraph occurs in a discussion of the change from feudalism to capitalism, not a discussion of the end of capitalism. To the extent that this passage indeed puts forward a determinist account of history, it does so retroactively, that is, it sees the inevitability of the end of feudalism from a temporal point of view from which it is a completed event. By contrast, the struggle against capitalism that Marx describes is an ongoing and incomplete event, and Marx is interested in both understanding and promoting this event in its incompleteness. The use of language that suggests determinism in the *Manifesto* is, I will argue, a rhetorical strategy adopted by Marx to incite action in the present, rather than a confident prediction of the future.⁴⁵

To explain what I understand Marx to be doing with this rhetorical invocation of the proletariat, it is useful to contrast this idea of the proletariat as a future-oriented specter with Laclau's critical account of the way in which, he believes, this category of the proletariat has supported a determinist and reductionist form of Marxism.⁴⁶ Laclau presents the concept of determinism in a way that owes a great deal to structuralist forms of Marxism. The determinist moment in Marx, according to Laclau, arises when history is taken to be a unified and closed structure, in which every development can in the end be explained by elements of this structure.⁴⁷ Laclau's critique of determinism, then, proceeds via a critique of structuralism, a formal critique of structuralist ontology intended to show the logical limits of this kind of closed totality. The reason for this limit is the impossibility of objectivity, that is, the impossibility, according to Laclau, of comprehending history from a viewpoint independent of any subject position.⁴⁸ Particularly, determinist forms of Marxism have held that the subject position from which the history of class struggle can be understood, the proletariat, is itself completely objectively identifiable⁴⁹ and, Laclau argues, if class struggle is itself objectively determined, it would cease to be antagonistic.⁵⁰ This is because antagonism is fundamentally the contradiction between an identity and something which, external to the identity, prevents its full realization, the 'constitutive outside'.⁵¹ Class struggle is not, then, for Laclau, something that can be understood as taking place 'within' the economy, in the sense of a confrontation between two groups that could be identified fully by reference to economic factors. Rather, what makes class struggle antagonistic is that classes cannot be fully identified because they exist only in a relationship of mutual exteriority, that is, each class prevents the full realization of the other's identity.⁵² Laclau draws the consequence of this that 'class struggle' as such cannot be fundamental, because the antagonists engaged in it are only contingently economic classes, and could just as well be or become some other category.⁵³ Thus the rejection of determinism, for Laclau, comes to entail the rejection of what he takes to be the traditional Marxist conception of the proletariat, that is, the proletariat conceived as a positive identity, defined by economic factors, and thereby given a specific and knowable role in the revolution of the future.

Identifying some of the internal contradictions and complexities of Laclau's theory here will, it turns out, help to explain what I believe to be Marx's rhetorical deployment of determinist themes in the *Manifesto*. The central point of disagreement between Marx (as I read him) and Laclau (as he reads the Marxist tradition) is the way in which the proletariat is construed. For Laclau, the idea of the proletariat is a rather outmoded and reductive identity held onto by those theorists who do not realize the impossibility of objective identities. For Marx (I will argue), the proletariat is a potential and spectral identity; for this reason, it is worth looking more closely at the relationship Laclau proposes between identities and potentiality. Laclau argues that all identities are dislocated, or, equivalently, that no identities are complete objectivities, because the construction of any identity is necessarily blocked by something external to it. For example, in his argument that, in class struggle, 'antagonism is not inherent to the relations of production themselves, but arises between the latter and the identity of the agent outside', Laclau explains that

A fall in a worker's wage, for example, denies his identity as a consumer. There is therefore a 'social objectivity'—the logic of profit—which denied another

objectivity—the consumer’s identity. But the denial of an identity means preventing its constitution as an objectivity.⁵⁴

Laclau argues, that is, that what prevents the objectivity of any identity, or produces the primacy of dislocation, is that any identity necessarily comes into conflict with another identity. Laclau does not go into great detail as to exactly how this conflict between identities occurs, but we can draw some conclusions. Laclau emphasizes the anti-Hegelian nature of his theory, that antagonism is not contradiction, that is, the antagonism between two identities does not mean the actual existence of two logically contradictory things at the same time. Rather, what are incompatible are the possible future developments of these identities, which is why Laclau equates the denial of an identity not with the rejection of it as it exists, but with the interruption of a process of which the present identity is a moment, ‘its constitution as an objectivity’.⁵⁵ What is it, though, that renders this an antagonism? There is nothing incompatible about two actually-existing identities which do not logically contradict one another, so why, for Laclau, can these non-contradictory identities not exist alongside one another? The answer implied in Laclau’s argument is that these actually existing identities are subordinate to something else, a potential objectivity, and it is in the incompatibility of these potential objective identities which the antagonism lies. Note however that in making this argument Laclau is implicitly depending on the idea that he is attempting to reject, that is, the idea of fixed and given identities. To be sure, in Laclau’s argument such identities do not *actually* exist—there is no actual group which fully instantiates the identity of the proletariat, for instance—but what prevents the actual existence of such identities is the contradiction between their potential existence—the concept of the proletariat cannot be instantiated because it comes into contradiction with the concept of the bourgeoisie. Laclau’s argument for the primacy of dislocation does not eradicate the concept of fixed and objective proletarian identity; on the contrary, it depends on the continued coherence of this concept as a possibility.

We can see further evidence of the way in which Laclau maintains an essentialist understanding of identity as a horizon in his assertion that antagonism depends on an external source of change. Arguing against a Hegelianism which would explain any change by reference to an ultimate positivity, Laclau poses as the alternative an antagonism in which ‘it is an ‘outside’ which blocks the identity of the ‘inside’.... With antagonism denial does not originate from the ‘inside’ of identity itself but, in its most radical sense, *from outside*’.⁵⁶ The consequence of this which Laclau fails to draw is that, in the absence of an external impetus, these identities would be completely stable, that is, essences classically conceived. Laclau would argue that, because he understands the outside of an identity to be a ‘constitutive outside’ which is ‘part of the conditions of existence of that identity’,⁵⁷ there could be no case in which the identity is not blocked, and so no case in which the stable identity actually exists. However, as I have argued, the ‘outside’ is only antagonistic (rather than simply external) on the basis of the potential identity which it blocks, so, although the constitutive outside may prevent the actual existence of these stable identities, it does not prevent, indeed it requires, their potential existence. Laclau attempts to present a dichotomy between positive, objective identities, and dislocated identities blocked by a constitutive outside. What he does not consider is the possibility of internal negativity, of an identity which exists in conflict, not with something external to it, but with itself.⁵⁸

Although Laclau does not recognize the extent to which his theory depends on positing objective, positive identities, he does explore a somewhat similar idea in his suggestion that identities provide us with a mythical fullness. Myth, for Laclau, is something that emerges from structural dislocation, and in particular from the traumatic effect of this dislocation: ‘the ‘work’ of myth is to suture that dislocated space through the constitution of a new space of representation.... It involves forming a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements’.⁵⁹ Myth, that is, is the objectivity we imagine could be formed by reorganizing the elements of the dislocated structure we find ourselves in. It is this vision of a complete objectivity which renders the myth politically potent—in contrast to the vision of completed objectivity presented by the myth, the actually existing dislocated structure appears as an arbitrary collection of dislocations, and the myth can serve to unite criticisms of present conditions.⁶⁰ What makes the myth mythical, however, is that the objectivity it presents could not actually be realized (as Laclau insists, such a realization is impossible), but rather it presents something which can present itself *as* an unfulfilled fullness: ‘the fascination accompanying the vision of a promised land or an ideal society stems directly from this perception or intuition of a fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present’.⁶¹

Laclau’s idea of myth thus provides a way of thinking about the non-actual which can be usefully contrasted with the spectral. Myth is fundamentally epistemological, concerning the gap between what is imagined and what exists. The way in which myth is non-actual is that it imagines a future fullness which does not actually exist; its mode of non-existence is fictionality. By contrast, spectrality is ontological (or, better, hauntological): its non-actuality is not a gap between the real and the imagined, but a gap within reality. Spectrality is the presentation of an absence, the ‘paradoxical incorporation’ of something which does not exist. The specter is thus internally divided in a way in which the myth is not; the myth is not paradoxical, because it does not actually exist (it only exists imaginatively or fictitiously) while the specter is paradoxical because of its existence, or its peculiarly paradoxical mode of existence as non-existence. We are now in a position to see more specifically what spectrality means for the proletariat, and how the spectral proletariat differs from both traditional Marxism and post-Marxism. The proletariat of traditional Marxism, as Laclau sees it, is an objective identity, something with determinate identifying characteristics which actually exists in the present and can be known to have certain objective interests and capacities. The traditional Marxist proletariat’s relationship to the future is that it is destined, via the workings of objective historical forces, to bring about a particular future (namely, communism). The post-Marxist proletariat would be one among many mythical subjects, which exists only inasmuch as some people ally themselves with an imagined future state of affairs. The relationship of this post-Marxist proletariat is that it is guided or inspired by a particular vision of the future, even though, according to Laclau, we know that this vision can never be fully realized.

The spectral proletariat, however, presents a third possibility distinct from the two considered by Laclau. The spectral proletariat does not exist as a fully formed objectivity; however, unlike the mythical proletariat, it also does not exist in relation to a vision of future objectivity. The spectral proletariat is related to the future only inasmuch as its existence in the present is as something not present, that is, in its existence as temporal discontinuity. The spectral proletariat is not related to a specific future, that is, but is instead related to futurity as such, the possibility of the non-

present or of something other than the present. To return to the location of the proletariat within history which we saw in Marx's response to the bourgeois critic of communism, the spectral proletariat is located within history as a site of possibility. This possibility has a definite location but no guaranteed outcome, unlike both Laclau's traditional Marxist and Laclau himself (with the twist that, for Laclau, this guarantee will always be reneged upon). Having established, then, what is specific about the spectral proletariat, I now need to show that this is indeed how Marx construes the proletariat in the *Manifesto*.

4 The Specter as Commodity

We do find a definite discussion of a fixed and objective proletariat in the *Manifesto*, but this is an object of critique; it is the various forms of non-communist socialism, which Marx critiques towards the end of the *Manifesto*, that propose a reified vision of the proletariat. Both the 'conservative or bourgeois socialism' of Proudhon and the 'critical-utopian socialism and communism' of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, in Marx's dislodgement, reify the working class by treating it as an object of philanthropic concern, rather than as the subject of the socialist movement. These forms of socialism attribute to the working class a set of interests that derive from their status as 'the most suffering class' and 'only from the point of view of being the most suffering class does the proletariat exist for them'.⁶² This way of identifying the proletariat leads to a politics which would maintain the *existence* and status of the proletariat while improving its conditions, a policy 'desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society'.⁶³ These socialists 'desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements'.⁶⁴ This fixed idea of the proletariat can have one of two consequences: for the bourgeois socialists it leads to a desire to preserve the role of the proletariat, it requires 'that the proletariat should remain within the bounds of existing society, but should cast away all its hateful ideas concerning the bourgeoisie'⁶⁵ and accept that 'the bourgeois is a bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class',⁶⁶ as Marx acerbically puts it. For the utopian socialists, on the other hand, the fixity of the proletariat is due to viewing it as 'a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement'.⁶⁷ They thus try to derive the principles for the emancipation of the working class from something outside of the historical development of the proletariat:

Historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradual, spontaneous class organization of the proletariat to an organization of society specially contrived by these inventors. Future history resolves itself, in their eyes, into the propaganda and the practical carrying out of their social plans.⁶⁸

The utopian socialists' belief in the fixed, objective character of the proletariat leads them, according to Marx, to a dogmatic attachment to their particular utopian vision and a 'fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science'.⁶⁹ The alternative that Marx proposes is 'historical action' which does not depend on drawing up detailed plans for 'future history'.⁷⁰

This understanding of the proletariat as historical carries with it an understanding of the proletariat as transitory, and it is because of this that by historicizing the proletariat, Marx also renders the proletariat spectral. The kind of

historicism that Marx practices in his description of the proletariat in the *Manifesto* doesn't fix the proletariat historically, but submits it to flux and change. This is the importance of Marx's insistence throughout the *Manifesto* on the fact that the proletariat is produced. This is true from the proletariat is introduced into the text, when after an extended panegyric to the bourgeoisie, Marx writes that in developing its own power the bourgeoisie has 'forged the weapons that bring death to itself' and 'has also called into existence the men who are to wield the weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians'.⁷¹ This rather mystical-sounding conjuration of the working class is then expanded on through an account of the production of manufacture of the working class in the most literal sense: 'Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine'.⁷² This is, then, a very unnatural, and non-naturalized, account of the proletariat, the proletariat not as something fixed or given, but as artificially and mechanically produced.⁷³ Note that what is produced here is not (just) individual workers, but something collected, or at least unindividuated: 'the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character', Marx writes, and so produces 'masses of labourers, crowded into factories'.⁷⁴ It is in this rendering of labor power as an undifferentiated mass that capitalism produces the proletariat in a very specific form, as 'a commodity, like every other article of commerce'.⁷⁵

It is through this category of the commodity that the process of the production of the proletariat comes to be at the same time its mystical conjuration, and we can turn again to Derrida to see why this is so. Derrida points out the close connection between the commodity and the specter, which Marx himself draws when he explains commodity fetishism by reference to the haunted table at a séance.⁷⁶ What makes the commodity so difficult to analyze is that, as exchange value, the real commodity is indifferent to 'the immediately visible commodity, in flesh and blood'.⁷⁷ The commodity is a physical thing indifferent to its physical properties, a 'sensuous non-sensuous' in which 'what surpasses the senses still passes before us in the silhouette of the sensuous body that it nevertheless lacks of that remains inaccessible to us'.⁷⁸ The commodity thus exhibits the same properties as the prosthesis of the specter, that uncanny body that presents the non-present; in the case of the commodity, however, Derrida emphasizes the technical character of this prosthesis, the way in which it depends on 'automatic autonomy, mechanical freedom, technical life'.⁷⁹ The spectral quality of the commodity, that is, comes from its essential location within a system of mechanical production which does not endow it with a predictable mechanism but an uncanny, dislocated unpredictability. The commodity, that is, shares the logic of the prosthesis, in which it is the physical 'body' incarnating the specter which allows the specter to be disembodied.⁸⁰

Marx draws on the proletariat's status as a commodity to emphasize the connection between the historically and materially produced status of the proletariat and the proletariat's spectral, unformed, and thus revolutionary character. Laborers are, Marx writes, 'a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market'.⁸¹ The proletariat differs from previous classes in being a commodity, and because of this, unlike previous class forms, it is not fixed.⁸² Thus, the growth and development of the proletariat which takes place as a result of the increasing economic dominance of capitalism is not a consolidation of the class in the sense of an increase in its identity and stability, but rather an increase in its instability:

With the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised.⁸³

This strength goes hand-in-hand with, and indeed is a consequence of, this increased equalization and commodification, which also leads to increased precariousness of the proletarian identity:

The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious.... Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots.⁸⁴

This compresses Marx's account of the proletariat into a nutshell: as capitalism develops, the proletariat becomes increasingly powerful because of its increasingly dislocated place within that system, which leads to a general tendency to the breakdown of the system, though the nature and location of that breakdown is contingent and unpredictable. Further, it is not just that the proletariat is located at the site of the breakup of the capitalist system; rather the proletariat embodies this breakup in itself:

In the condition of the proletariat, those of old society at large are already virtually swamped. The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industry labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.⁸⁵

Marx is doubtless exaggerating here, describing his projected proletariat of the future rather than the barely existing proletariat of Germany in 1848. But this is rather the point, because the existence of the future in an incomplete form is essential to Marx's concept of the proletariat. It is in this indistinct presentation of futurity that the proletariat that Marx draws in the *Manifesto* exhibits what Derrida calls spectrality.

Marx writes at the beginning of the *Manifesto* that it is 'high time that communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, and their tendencies'.⁸⁶ This openness is not, however, a simple act of transparency, the manifestation of an already existing, already constituted communist movement. The openness Marx exhibits in the text is not so much an openness about a previously secret communist movement, but an openness towards a future in which a communist movement might exist. To the extent that the *Manifesto* makes anything manifest, it does so by constructing an appearance which does not (yet) have any essence to be the appearance of. This reflects a general philosophical approach which we can see operating in the *Manifesto*, and which, despite Marx's differences with Derrida, we could reasonably call hauntological in its displacement of attempts to

provide ontological foundations for politics. This requires a reassessment of the role of class in the *Manifesto*, as class has frequently been taken to be *the* ontological underpinning for Marxist politics. The *Manifesto*, on my reading, begins to develop an understanding of class that is compatible with hauntology, although this remains incomplete here, and indeed will remain incomplete until the fuller analysis of capitalism given in *Capital*.⁸⁷

This suggests that those who criticize Marx for an essentialism about class would be mistaking their target. While it could hardly be denied that class has been an abiding focus of the Marxist tradition, the hauntological status of the proletariat in the *Manifesto* suggests first the recourse to the category of class is more situational and contingent than it is foundational, and that the category itself is more open and flexible than might previously have been thought. This provides support for the project of those writers who have attempted to use Marx's categories to analyze dimensions of oppression other than class.⁸⁸ Marx's depiction of the political significance of the spectral proletariat might serve as a model for thinking about thinking about other political categories which have a close connection to material oppression without being reducible to it.

Notes

1 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Kamuf, Peggy (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

2 These two readings are, broadly, those of Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, volume 1, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy 1818-1850* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), and Alan Gilbert, *Marx's Politics: Communists and Citizens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), respectively. For a useful overview of determinist themes in the *Manifesto*, see John Cunliffe, 'Marx's Politics—The Tensions in the Communist Manifesto', *Political Studies*, Vol.30, 1984.

3 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 6.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 18. It is worth noting that Derrida has received some criticism for his reliance on these terms, notably from Carver, who argues that Derrida, in zeroing in on the reference to the specter and haunting in the first line of the *Manifesto*, is relying on a mistranslation (Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 22n28). Carver himself translates 'Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa' as 'A spectre stalks the land of Europe', on the grounds that *umgehen*, meaning literally to walk around, has nothing to do ghosts or haunting (Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, trans. by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1). Carver rather overstates his case here: *umgehen* is the characteristic activity of *ein Gespenst* in much the same way that haunting is the characteristic activity of a ghost, and in a general sense there is nothing particularly misleading about the translation. However, as Thomas points out, 'umgehen' carries a range of connotations that 'haunt' does not, including ideas of dissemination and infection, as well as hunting or pursuing (which presumably inspired Carver's use of 'stalk'), while 'haunt' likewise carries connotations that 'umgehen' does not, notably the idea on which Derrida seizes, that of a reappearance or remnant of the past (Paul Thomas, 'Seeing is Believing: Marx's Manifesto, Derrida's Apparition', *Socialist Register*, Vol.34, 1998, p. 207). Thus, for Derrida to put so much weight as he does on the hauntological character of the specter is problematic. Nonetheless, I believe Derrida's concept of spectrality is relevant to the *Manifesto* whether or not it derives directly from Marx's terminology; the rest of the article attempts to argue this case.

9 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.

10 Fredric Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in Michael Sprinker, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx* (New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 26–67, here: p. 59.

11 Thomas, 'Seeing is Believing', p. 209.

- 12 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 46.
- 13 Ibid., p. 39.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., p. 47.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 48.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 101-2.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 64-5. It may be worth mentioning that, when Derrida invokes the necessary futurity of the democracy to come, he is not directly criticizing Marx, but Fukuyama.
- 20 Ibid., p. 103.
- 21 On the minimal existence of any kind of organized communist movement before 1848, see Stedman Jones's introduction to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 39-49.
- 22 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 6.
- 23 Ibid., p. 8.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., p. 126.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Pheng Cheah, 'Nondialectical Materialism', *Diacritics*, Vol.38, 2008, pp. 142-158.
- 30 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 243.
- 31 Ibid., p. 235.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., p. 236.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 237.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., p. 238.
- 39 Ibid., p. 239.
- 40 Ibid., p. 241.
- 41 As Thomas, 'Seeing is Believing', p. 210 points out, this pattern of the condemnation of a movement preceding and promoting its actual existence is not uncommon.
- 42 Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter'.
- 43 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 223.
- 44 Ibid., p. 225.
- 45 Marx does close this section of the *Manifesto* with the declaration that 'Its [the bourgeoisie's] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable' (ibid., p. 234). However this, I will argue, should be taken as incitement rather than prediction.
- 46 I refer here to Laclau's account in his 'New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time', rather than his earlier presentation, with Mouffe, of related ideas, because this later representation focusses on the philosophical background of their critique of Marxism, rather than the historical deconstruction of the Marxist tradition which concerned *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but which, as it focuses primarily on work *after* Marx, is less relevant to my interests here.
- 47 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 8.
- 48 Ibid., p. 16.
- 49 Ibid., p. 50.
- 50 Ibid., p. 16.
- 51 Ibid., p. 17.
- 52 Ibid., p. 16.
- 53 Ibid., p. 50.
- 54 Ibid., p. 16.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid., p. 17.
- 57 Ibid., p. 21.
- 58 Although Laclau attributes the idea of the constitutive outside to Derrida (ibid., p. 9), Laclau's constitutive outsides are fully exterior, as they must be in order to produce the kind of

antagonism he wants, and thus are rather unlike the outside considered by Derrida, which 'penetrates and thus determines the inside' (Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977), p. 152). Thus for Derrida, unlike Laclau, a constitutive outside is always also an internal negativity (see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 39).

59 Laclau, *New Reflections*, p. 61.

60 Ibid., p. 62.

61 Ibid., p. 63.

62 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 254.

63 Ibid., p. 252.

64 Ibid. The bourgeois socialists are thus rather like those who believe in Laclau's myth, without being aware of its mythical character.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., p. 253.

67 Ibid., p. 254.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., p. 256.

70 Ibid., p. 254.

71 Ibid., p. 226.

72 Ibid., p. 227.

73 This idea of the proletariat as one of the mechanical components of capitalism is explored by Marx in chapter 15 of *Capital*, in which he describes how 'the workers are merely conscious organs, co-ordinate with the unconscious organs of the automaton' Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 395.

74 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 227.

75 Ibid.

76 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 151. Derrida is here referring to Marx's analysis of the commodity in *Capital*, not the *Manifesto*. Indeed, the *Manifesto* does not contain any detailed explanation of what Marx means by 'commodity'. It is almost certainly the case that Marx did not have in mind the theory of commodity fetishism when writing the *Manifesto*, indeed Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 54-6, argues that it was the failure of the revolutions of 1848 that led Marx to eventually develop the analysis of fetishism. The connection between commodity and specter, which is indirect in the *Manifesto*, is reinforced in Marx's later work.

77 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 150.

78 Ibid., p. 151.

79 Ibid., p. 153.

80 Ibid., p. 8.

81 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 227.

82 Marx describes society prior to capitalism as '*Ständische und Stehende*', which the standard translation renders as 'solid', missing the connection between this fixity and feudal estates (*Stände*); Carver instead translates this as 'fixed and feudal' (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 223; Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 4).

83 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 229.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., pp. 231-2.

86 Ibid., p. 218.

87 Indeed, it might be better to say that it remains incomplete even in the mature Marx, awaiting the never completed volume of *Capital* on wage labor. See Michael A. Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

88 The most extensive example would probably be the attempt to modify Marxism to provide an account of the oppression of women, for which see Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972), and Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), which hews especially closely to the technical economic categories of Marx's work. For a discussion of Marx's own writings dealing with non-class forms of oppression, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), esp. ch. 3 on race and ch. 6 on gender.