

The Transcendence of Death is Political

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While a topic of some historical discussion, it is clear that over the last few decades there has been a resurgence in the notoriety and the significance that has been lent to the spectral content of the writings of Karl Marx. What was once taken as pure metaphor, written to be evocative, has been studied much more intently, and the Gothic elements of Marx's writing have been drawn out into delicate and nuanced studies in the desire to use the imagery provided to reflect on the content that it embellishes. To a large extent, this has been successful: texts such as Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* through to more contemporary discussions of hauntology in the writing of Mark Fisher, have seized upon the ghostly concepts in Marxist discourse and used them to construct a biting critique of lost futures, promises un-made, and potentials left only to exist as unfulfilled realities that could have been.

Left generally unaddressed, however, is the manner in which these spectral remnants may be returned to the world of possibility. The question must be asked: what happens when the hitherto metaphorical images of spectral politics are taken as an avenue for legitimate investigation? Which alternative practices can be opened up to us as radical milieus in which experimentation and counterculture can be built?

It is with a particular sense of irony that we must approach this. Marxism has been overwhelmingly materialist throughout history for obvious reasons rooted deeply within Marx's own Epicurean background, and yet it is largely through the construction of esoteric semantic fields that much of Marx's popular writings have been popularised and much subsequent work has occurred. One does not need to search far within Marx's writing to find discussions of vampires, the 'spirit' of capital, and most famously the 'spectre' that 'haunts' Europe. This trend is carried through a great deal of modern writing that draws from Marx: Derrida famously writes that 'after the end of history, the spirit comes by coming back'¹, although he was careful not to imply too much – a spectre 'of a communism to *come* [...] Already promised, but only promised.'²

While this appears to be plainly supernatural when taken on its face, an author such as Mark Fisher comes in quickly to neutralise the apparently mystical aspects of Derrida's discussion. Fisher ascribes a haunting nature to the '*agency of the virtual*, with the spectre understood not as

¹ Jacques Derrida, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and The New International*, (Routledge, New York, 2006), p. 11

² Ibid, p.46

anything supernatural'³ and distinctively creating categories of hauntological affect – in which that which has been continues to remain effective, or that which has not yet been has effects prior to coming into being. Yet this seems particularly unsatisfying. The power of Marx's analogy is drawn entirely from the apparently otherworldly nature of the comparison used, and while ultimately it may be important to draw his concepts towards the more 'real' world, Fisher's and, to some extent, Derrida's withdrawal of such otherworldliness so early seems premature.

Fisher explores the concept of the haunting, but is forever tentative about embracing it wholeheartedly: Derrida, likewise, veers away from the true image of the ghost – his ghost must never arrive, for 'the spectre that Marx was talking about then, communism, was there without being there [...] It will never be there.'⁴ Derrida's ghostly discussion wanders from the implication of a true supernaturalism into the meandering of Marx's semantics with regularity from this point onwards, as though Derrida found it difficult to truly peer through the obscurity of the veil separating the natural and the supernatural.

What is interesting, therefore, is to turn away from this apparent embrace of the metaphorical perspective on Marxist theory – to turn away from spectres as merely useful images – and to examine the (super)natural consequences of taking this image on its face. What happens when it is imagined that the much lauded 'natural science' of Marxism has a ghostly counterpart: that supernaturalism, spiritualism, and the ghostly are taken as the natural mirrors of a theoretical construct which always calls for the arrival and resurgence of dead labour? After all, if Fisher writes of capital as being 'at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing'⁵ which nonetheless has important material effects, it cannot be ignored that the metaphorical conception of dead labour may also hold material weight. Where there is room for metaphor, there is room for literalism – what happens when dead labour is removed from the world of rhetorical flourish and imagined as physical reality; as the truly revived forms of those minds and futures crushed under capitalist society.

An impasse is quickly reached. While it is true that spiritual practices might have some use, it quickly becomes apparent that they ultimately fail to satisfy. To speak to the dead is useful, but is it limited and clearly not enough, just as Marxist thinking has thus far failed to truly overcome the trials of the capitalist world. The methodology of Marxist spiritualism seems to embrace only the palest form of transgression. The other world is contacted – it holds influence – but that influence is entirely second hand: for Marx, the ghosts and spectres work as disembodied concepts which weigh on the material world, rather than the legitimate recollection of the dead to the world of the material. Desire remains unfulfilled in this case; the ultimate goal of those who seek to commune with spectres, spirits, ghosts, and phantoms is the ability to call them back to life in reality; to assume Derrida's conception, the desire is to discard the idea of 'never [being] there', and rather to wrench the virtual future free of its conceptual bonds in order to pull it into reality. To return the ghost to flesh to 'disturb the pause'⁶, as one might put it.

Magical thinking has long since assigned terminology and practices to this framework: the desire to return departed spirits to material form, to bring life back to reality, is the practice

³ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*, (Zero Books, UK, 2014), p. 19

⁴ *Specters of Marx*, p. 125

⁵ *Ghosts of my Life*, p. 11

⁶ William Godwin, *The Lives of the Necromancers*, accessed online: <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/william-godwin-lives-of-the-necromancers#toc21>

of necromancy. If Marxist thinking, at least in regards to the spiritual potential of liberation, is entirely too focused on what is passed and what is gone, could it be that necromancy as a practice provides an alternative avenue towards seeking liberation?

Necromancy is, indeed, arguably the least commonly accepted aspect of magical practices which – for all the ‘rational’ pushback against them – have made various attempts to return to the mainstream over the last few decades. It is amusing, then, that it is theoretically very close to the sort of séance themed communication that has spread like a fungus across mainstream television, magazines, and newspapers. Alongside the ever present horoscope, it is now not uncommon to find advertisements for psychics who will speak to the dead; television shows which are predicated on calling back truths from the always-vaguely-Christian ‘other side’ pop up with alarming regularity, and almost everyone will at least know someone who has attended a psychic reading. The distinction which remains, however, and the distinction which we will seek to erode is that between *actual* life, and merely *echoed* life: the spectre is acceptable, for a number of reasons including its obvious deniability – the revenant (to usurp a term from Derrida) is quite the opposite.

The barrier between ordinary life and necromancy is detailed by William Godwin in his *Lives of the Necromancers*, in which he calls the practice of calling up the spirits of the dead ‘sacrilegious’, and further, commands us to ‘leave them in the hands of God’⁷, however in doing this Godwin makes clear the barrier between necromancy as useful tool and morality; ultimately, the designation of death or the afterlife as an untouchable reality for humans is often a religious belief: a belief which places the world beyond life into a zone of incontestability. However, since Godwin’s own lifetime there has been much movement in this field and the cry of ‘No Gods’ has become as commonplace as the following ‘No Masters’. Given this movement away from the particularities of faith with named Gods and specific doctrines, the compulsion to place necromancy into a forbidden territory becomes much less influential: the discussion shifts from the realm of the forbidden merely into the realm of taboo.

With the removal of this impassible religious barrier, the legitimacy of which cannot be satisfactorily supported, the question of how life and death are delineated comes forth. Surely, to place death on an untouchable pedestal is to privilege death beyond the experience of life: a grave mistake. While it is undeniable that a life which extends endlessly would ‘run out of steam’⁸, as it were, to place death into a realm that cannot be touched is to avoid closeness with it. In reality, it can be argued that to a certain extent dying, and the knowledge that death is coming, is part of what defines humanity and to ignore this is to close oneself off from the entirety of experience. In reality, the chasm between life and death is only one of perspective: we gift a certain degree of primacy to life, as that is the side of the equation of which we have direct experience, but in reality we are necessarily cut off from the experience of death and therefore cannot speak to its value. ‘Death haunts a human life’⁹, yes, but as we have already established, to haunt is always an incomplete return: that this return must remain incomplete is an assumption of which we cannot be certain. If death is what defines humans on at least some level, is it not a dereliction of curiosity to leave such a world unexplored?

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Todd May, *Death*, (Acumen, Stocksfield, 2009), p. 80

⁹ Ibid. p. 91

So it has been established that engaging with non-life purely on the level of the spectre is insufficient: it provides an insight into a potential but never aims to bring that potential to fruition. Further, beyond merely the spiritualist there is a magical avenue which does at least approach completing this incompleteness: necromancy offers the ability to pull those spirits from the ether and give them form in this life. Finally, we have ascertained that without an inherent faith in a God – or morality otherwise – which places barriers between the worlds, there is nothing in death that is untouchable for us: rather, death seems ripe for exploration and investigation. Given this, we must recognise that which is inherent to the necromantic project: the eradication of barriers. Barriers between morality and immorality; between life and death; between potential and actual.

If this is the case, we are being pointed in a clear direction. Eradicating the supremacy of life over death is the removal of a hierarchical claim which privileges the experienced over the non-experienced, the known over the unknown, and the vital over the moribund. Necromancy demands of us to abandon these kinds of prescribed levels of being, and instead view existence as being essentially on one level: a Spinozist approach, almost, where to resurrect the dead is not to draw the spiritual into the realm of the material, but rather to engage in the active arrangement of the material of the world itself in such a way that what is seen to be inaccessible is brought to life. This kind of elimination of the barrier between these worlds is similar to the living eternal life as described by Westover in his book *Necromanticism*, where he details the manner in which Coleridge, having achieved some measure of immortality via his writings, already appeared as an individual who ‘partook in death’¹⁰.

Given these thoughts, perhaps it is time to move away from the esoteric back to the ‘real’, using the conventional definition of these terms, and find out where this has pointed us. If Marxism is forever bound to the world of spirits, of immaterial hauntings, of a communism which cannot be (at least in some sense), then it appears that reverse engineering necromancy – the mystical counterpart which insists that these spirits can regain form, assume flesh, impact the living – should reveal to us an avenue which must either supplant or (more realistically) support Marxism in order to progress towards a less theoretical discourse. It is amusing that one must sometimes take these circuitous routes in order to point directly at a consequence. In doing so it becomes clear that the method of thought currently best suited for drawing upon the barrier-less forms of necromancy is *anarchism*, a mode of social thought and practical organisation which already lays its roots on the removal of these hierarchies.

It is by the embrace of such a-hierarchical systems of thought that the ghostly apparitions of Marxism can, at least in some sense, be dragged into the physical form in the same way that it is by necromantic magic that a spirit can be restored to the material world. Moreover, it is clear that this is the kind of thought demanded by certain kinds of Marxist in their more intense moments: as Walter Benjamin compels us to realise that it is ‘the avenging class’ which carries out the revolutionary actions of the future, and just as we cannot be content with imagining ourselves the ‘saviour of future generations’, we must retain the righteous anger that nourishes itself ‘on the picture of enslaved forebears, not the ideal of emancipated heirs’.¹¹ Who better to give flesh to this avenging class than those who do not see the sharp divide between life and death? Who

¹⁰ Paul Westover, *Necromanticism: Travelling to Meet the Dead 1750-1860*, (Palgrave, UK, 2012), p. 93

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, trans. Dennis Redmond, *On the Concept of History*, accessed: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

better than those whose entire project revolves around the demolition of such arbitrary, petty, and personal divisions which privilege that of which we have experience over that which defines us equally?

The radical implications of a necromantic-political seem evident, even at first glance. If we intend to construct a new world, divorced from the unsatisfying and derelict present, then we must be dedicated to not only carving out new pathways but also to resurrecting the slaughtered potentials that our current world saw into the grave. We must seek a world in which barriers continue to be eroded and new lines of living are constructed. Should it be the case that glancing through the veil drives a new revelatory libertarianism in any individual, then this should be embraced and the misted darkness of an anarcho-necromancy should be counted as an ally in the struggle to abolish the present state of things. 'To think', after all, is 'always to follow the witch's flight'¹².

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, *What is Philosophy?*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), p. 41

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