Adjusting the Tone of Marxism: A Hauntological Promise for Ghosts of Communism in a Democracy-to-come

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If I have always trembled before what I could say, it was fundamentally [au fond] because of the tone, and not the substance [non du fond]. And what, obscurely, I seek to impart as if in spite of myself, to give or lend to others as well as to myself, to myself as well as to the other, is perhaps a tone. Everything is summoned from an intonation.

And even earlier still, in what gives its tone to the tone, a rhythm. I think that all in all, it is upon rhythm that I stake everything. It therefore begins before beginning. That is the incalculable origin of a rhythm. Everything is at stake, but may the loser win.

Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other

If it is tone rather than substance that moves Derrida to tremble before he speaks then we are being asked to think about matters—such as the future of democracy—in ways that exceed judgement based purely on the content of an argument. Now this might jar the ears of those who believe sound philosophical thinking ought to be weighed by putting an argument into standard form, or that one must reason only according to a logic of ‘for’ and ‘against’ positions. For what function could tone and rhythm possibly serve when assessing an argument to the best explanation? How could such a focus not cloud our judgement when distinguishing truth from falsity, good from evil, or communism from democracy, for example? And this concern is by no means insignificant; after all, if our passion is to seek the truth (pace Plato), then we want to be sure that our arguments on behalf of truth can be clearly supported. Importantly, raising the matter of tone does not necessarily betray the quest for truth, and nor does it have to spell the end of developing protocols—of good faith in scholarship and argument—from which philosophical discussions can take place. For, against many rumours that “Derrida’s work does not meet standards of clarity and rigor,”
his concern with tone and rhythm is rather to demonstrate that, habitually, for reasons that “are more serious” than our own levels of competence, clear and rigorous scholarship is contaminated by cryptic and shifting ontological foundations.

But debating Derrida and standards of scholarship is not what is primarily at issue here. In summoning the question of tone, Derrida declares that “[e]verything is summoned from an intonation.” This is to say tone and rhythm indicate that there is something more than meaning and truth at stake. And perhaps what is at stake is our relations to others, or what Derrida after Lévinas calls justice. And it is to this question of justice that I am asking you to ‘read with your ears’: to lend me your ears and listen for a certain tone. This tone will appeal to taking responsibility for and responding to a certain emancipatory promise which is connected to the heritage of Marxism, its ties to communism and its place in present struggles over the meaning and status of democracy. In doing so, the paper will also underscore the significance of not perceiving philosophy and politics as reducible to one another, but rather as neither separable nor inseparable from one another.

The Place of Tone within a Philosophical Community

Of course, Derrida is not the first philosopher to raise the question of tone. Kant, Hölderlin and Fichte have all done so. But with Derrida, even when the issue of tone is not explicitly addressed, there seems to be a tone and rhythm that invariably inflect his work in ways that make it difficult to separate the performance of his argument from that which is being argued. This is to say it is not difficult to detect a certain modulation of voice, a tapestry of speaking/writing in multiple registers that mark a promise to the Other in Derrida’s texts. At the same time, however, one can hear an obligatory response to philosophy. It is the tension between the rhythms of Derrida’s multiple voices and the normative register of philosophy that draws us to the question of tone. As Dalton notes, “[t]one derives from the Latin tonus, which in turn comes from the Greek tónoς, meaning ‘chord’ or ‘tension’, from teinein, ‘to stretch’. In speech and writing, due no doubt to the play of tonal difference, to the uncertainty of finding the appropriate tone, there is something ‘tense’, something ‘strained’.” So if philosophy has an obligatory role to play in the tone effecting the emancipatory promise, what kind of rhythm does it play to strike the appropriate chord?

When the emancipatory promise is situated within discourses of philosophy it must answer, at least minimally, to a regulatory register of reason. A philosophical community would not be possible without some recourse to reason. This does not mean, however, that the status of reason cannot been questioned for its possible exclusionary effects, as Foucault has done in his work, *Madness and Civilization*; or that principles of reason, such as that of non-contradiction, can be shown to reach a limit, as we will see later in Derrida’s reading of Marx. But even when reason is scrutinized within the domain of philosophy, it is done so by complying with certain norms and procedures which exhibit an allegiance to giving an
account of how a truth claim is made or falters. This is precisely what Kant asks for when he addresses the question of the appropriate tone for conducting debate within a philosophical community; he opposes this to the ‘superior tone’ taken up by those whose philosophical position rests on intuition.7

When Kant mocks the superior tone adopted by those ‘wanting to philosophize under the influence of a higher feeling’ it is to expose such ‘intellectual intuition’ as mere pretence to philosophy—which, for Kant, will beckon philosophy’s death.8 Kant claims that these so-called philosophers announce that one need “only listen to and enjoy the oracle within oneself in order to bring all the wisdom envisioned with philosophy into one’s possession.” In doing so they absolve themselves from having to do any of the necessary work that accompanies the “methodical development [of reason] and systematic arrangement of concepts.”9 Furthermore, Kant admonishes these philosophers’ recourse to an interior voice for their wisdom, as such inward authority works against any progress toward developing a philosophical community. As Kant puts it, “no one but this philosopher can come up with the notion of acting superior, because, being up there, he speaks from his own viewpoint, and so he is not bound to speak with anyone.”10 With the ideal of community and the death of philosophy at stake, Kant seeks the proper tone in which to peacefully negotiate conflict in philosophy, and by implication, conflict in history.

While Kant favours a calm tone embodied in Reason, his response to the enthusiasts and mystagogues who listen to the oracle within is delivered with sarcasm and a somewhat mocking tone. In Derrida’s reading, however, he notices that Kant is at the same time careful to leave room for a compromise with the enthusiasts.11 Kant wants to reach a truce. After all, he is aligned to his adversaries insofar as he and they both want to speak and reveal the truth. So Kant offers a kind of peace treaty or contract to the mystagogues: not to personify the inner voice of moral law as some kind of veiled goddess, but rather to hear this law as the voice of reason. Kant supports his argument by claiming that “the didactic procedure of bringing the moral law within us into clear concepts according to a logical methodology is the only authentically philosophical one.”12 This concurs with the widely held belief among philosophers today that philosophy, through Reason, supposedly speaks with a neutral tone. The question remains—whether or not such a pretence to neutrality is in fact another kind of tone, and a tone that cannot be open about its own hidden clauses within the contract it offers for resolving philosophical disputes and conflicts?

Furthermore, whether the neutral tone of reason is the only tone appropriate for elaborating the emancipatory promise is highly questionable. For how can we remain neutral about such a promise? Why, after all, should such a promise be answerable to a community of philosophers? Doesn’t the promise belong to an ethico-political community? In other words, the promise set in motion through the response to the Other—which according to Lévinas precedes thematization—is preontological.13 We are beginning to feel the tremors in the ground of ontology here, the ground upon which careful scrutiny reveals a ‘faulty language’ attempting to sustain such oppositional predicates as theoretica/practical, transcendental/empirical, ideal/material. Such oppositions apparently maintain the distinction between philosophy and politics—but if these oppositions are shown to reach a limit where they lose their
ability to be thought as independent and equal opposites, then we have to re-think relations between philosophy and politics. We will come back to this in Derrida’s reading of Marx. In effect, though, we are asking, what exactly are we doing when we examine the emancipatory promise within the domain of philosophy? Are we asking that the promise justify its grounds in philosophy, and/or are we asking whether its elaboration must be accountable with recourse to reason? A brief detour through particular instantiations of the status of the emancipatory subject can help us set a context from which to explore this question more carefully.

The ‘Grounds’ for the Emancipatory Promise

The question of securing the ontological grounds on which the emancipatory promise can be based dominated debate in the previous two decades for those of us whose political and philosophical allegiances were once dominated by Marxism, but were increasingly being informed by what came to be known as poststructuralist theory. As the category of class began to lose its efficacy in providing the promise of a collective subject for social change, other liberation movements—many of them based on categories of identity such as gender, race, and sexuality—began to emerge as contenders for ‘completing’ what appeared to be missing from the emancipatory subject. In many instances, this led to a ridiculous situation of tallying subjugated identities together such that the subject with the most markers of oppression (e.g., the black, third-world lesbian in a wheelchair) trumped the bid for the new agent for social change. Somehow, the revolutionary perspective accorded to the proletariat’s role in exposing the unequal relations between capital and labour had proliferated into the field of identity politics where any oppressed subject was heralded as providing the correct perspective and ‘ontological grounds’ from which to realize the promise for emancipation. Such positions were inferred from ‘standpoint theory’ articulated in feminist critique of science.14

Of course there are more complex interventions regarding the future of the emancipatory promise, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.15 In taking up the challenge of responding to the ever-widening sphere in which social conflicts were taking place, Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge the untenability of assigning any one social group with the role of fulfilling an historical task for the emancipatory promise, but remain optimistic that new political possibilities can be achieved by working through the ‘contingent foundations’ upon which various identities acquire their meaning. They argue that exposing the contingent foundations on which identities are constituted also exposes the contingent foundations on which hegemonic practices become sedimented, exposing spaces in which counter-hegemonic articulations can be developed. Yet while their call for a radical democracy acknowledges the impossibility of grounding the emancipatory subject with recourse to the language of ontology on the one hand, their project cannot help but seek a way of ontologizing the emancipatory promise, on the other hand, in wanting to actualize its content. As logical as this may appear at first
sight, Derrida argues that claiming to know what the content of the emancipatory promise looks like in actuality—thus ontologizing the promise—in actuality, kills its future. It is the opposition between the actual and the ideal which will soon be taken up in a demonstration of how Derrida works the language of ontology otherwise such that the promise remains open to a democratic future.

This question of grounds further complicates the elaboration of strategies from which the making of political decisions could be articulated. Some political theorists respond to this crisis in ‘grounding’ by relegating questions of ontology below what is perceived to be the more pressing imperative of ‘the political’. On the one hand, such theorists might be held accountable to the Kantian accusation of merely listening to their own ‘interior voice of wisdom’. On the other, as John Caputo observes, we do not wait for all the cognitive reports to come in before we take action on our ethical and political imperatives. But arguing that one does not need an ontological base from which to justify one’s politics is one thing. To presume that politics has no business with the language of ontology is quite another.

To put it boldly and bluntly—but equally, to caution for a careful reception to its hearing—the fact that there is no ontological backup from which to ground the emancipatory promise does not mean that the emancipatory promise no longer needs to negotiate with the language of ontology. This can be inferred from Derrida’s long engagement with the thought of Lévinas, and has been argued eloquently in Caputo’s Against Ethics. Furthermore, when elaborating the emancipatory promise, we need to negotiate with something that is beyond reason, or as Derrida might put it, beyond calculation. This is not to say that the promise is therefore annulled, or that philosophy does not have any role to play in affirming the promise and participating in its elaboration. But it does mean that we must negotiate the language of ontology in ways that situate the promise otherwise than in terms of ‘what is’—in terms of presence. Derrida’s reading of Marx is instructive here. Not only does he demonstrate how the regulative register of philosophy is accompanied by a more urgent tone inhabiting the rhythm of politics, he also manages to weave through a tone that makes an appeal for us to respond to the countless calls coming from (the ethical command of) others.

Re-engaging with the emancipatory promise in Marxism

When Derrida responded to the call to deliver a lecture on the future of Marxism, it was shortly after the ‘event’ marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc shortly after. While this ‘event’ had been heralded by the mass media and the remaining superpower as ‘the death of communism’, for many of ‘us’ who identified with the ‘left’, the promise of communism had died long ago—having been appropriated in the empirical world by totalitarian regimes. In many ways, the dissolution of the communist bloc made it easier to speak more openly about re-evaluating Marxism. But how were ‘we’ to situate ourselves against the victorious tone of the remaining superpower’s claim that the
correct path to humanity’s emancipation had finally arrived under the banner of ‘democracy’ to the majority of the world?

Perhaps an interrogation of the question of the arrival of the emancipatory promise, particularly as it had been articulated in our Marxist heritage, can help advance a response. If there is complicity between Marx’s communist ideal and the totalitarian regimes that appropriated this ideal, it is situated in the presumption of presence. In announcing that the spectre of communism was haunting Europe, Marx and Engels simultaneously called for the spectre to manifest. In other words, there was a call for the apparition to transform into actuality as the arrival of communism as event. Derrida questions the ability to presume the presence of such an arrival. And it is by attending to the impossible, yet necessary, presupposition of presence in marking an event that enables Derrida to rework the Marxist distinction between materiality and ideality, a distinction crucial to current re-negotiations with actual and ideal articulations of democracy.

Recalling the famous Marxist axiom that it is being that determines consciousness and not consciousness that determines being, it is not difficult to see how dispensing with the phantasmagorization of consciousness becomes an imperative for isolating the work to be done on practical, material structures of social existence. As many students of Marxism would know, the mere labelling of a philosopher as idealist—sometimes caricatured as being overly concerned with the realm of ideas and consciousness at the expense of real material structures—would often be taken as sufficient evidence for marking a philosopher’s political impotence. But, as Derrida suggests, actual material conditions of existence cannot be situated other than with recourse to what he calls a ‘quasi-transcendental’ structure of ideality without which the material structures in need of transformation could not be recognized as such.

Unfortunately Derrida’s recourse to such a quasi-transcendental structure, and his criticism of Marx’s complicity with a metaphysics of presence, had prompted some commentators to accuse Derrida of fleeing from the call to political action.18 As discussed earlier, questioning the ontological grounds upon which the emancipatory subject and promise is presupposed can be too readily deemed as obstructing the path of ‘getting on’ with realizing the emancipatory promise in the political domain. It is thus worth contemplating the status of the quasi-transcendental a little more carefully. For it is only by attending to such a space that the regulative tone of philosophy can keep itself open to interruptions from the urgent tone of the political, and the responsive tone of the ethical, without collapsing or rendering mutually exclusive all the oppositions that effect the progress of the promise’s future.

The Quasi-Transcendental Structure of the Ghost, Hauntology and Spectrality

As with his readings of other philosophers and thinkers, Derrida is concerned with an ineluctable presumption of presence in works that at one and the same time depend upon procuring an impossible point of origin for their existence. In the example of Marxism, the
The presumption of presence is manifest in the priority of the material over the ideal, the actual over the virtual, being over consciousness, the empirical over the transcendental, the concrete over the abstract, action over thought, and so on. Now as much as Marx might have wanted to maintain that these binary pairs stand in a dialectical relationship with one another that is in constant flux, the imperative to exorcise the German ideology of phenomenological Spirit bound him to the name of living presence as material actuality. That is, in order to uphold the thesis that material, actual structures of social existence need to be changed, Marxism becomes invested in chasing away all that renders the material intelligible and communicable. But this does not mean that such intelligibility can be explained by merely reversing the order of binary pairs so that the material is made subordinate to the ideal; the ideal does not exist in a vacuum. It acquires its form through being related to the material world. What is taking place, then, is the inability to maintain these conceptual opposites (the material and ideal) as pure, equal and independent from one another. This inability is equally pertinent in examining the operations of the opposition between the ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ as articulated in the victorious tone of the so-called democratic super-power. On the one hand, the collapse of the communist bloc is upheld as signifying an empirical, actual event that democracy has finally arrived. But when we look to the empirical world to take account of how democracy measures up against its own ideal, we do not need to go very far to see that all is not going well in the capitalist nation states that have appropriated its name. As Derrida puts it, when ‘chalking up to the account’, when measured against the ‘plagues’ of unemployment, homelessness, economic wars between countries, and the unequal application of international law, amongst other things, the logic of the ‘so-called empirical event’ is discredited by the advocates announcing that democracy is here. We can see that whether the emancipatory promise is situated in the ideals of Marxism or the ideal for a democratic future, we are troubled by the inability to say what the ideal actually is, or to be able to name its arrival. Yet this does not lead to abandoning the promise or maintaining the ideal.

In reaching a point where the oppositions, such as the material and ideal, or the empirical and ideal, cannot account for a simple point of origin for their existence, we inevitably reach certain limits of our thought. Far from leading to a relativistic dissolution of conceptual distinctions, Derrida calls for an-other logic:

once the limits of phantasmogorization can no longer be controlled or fixed by the simple opposition of presence and absence, actuality and inactuality, sensuous and supersensible, another approach to differences must structure (“conceptually” and “really”) the field that has been reopened. Far from effacing differences and analytic determinations, this other logic calls for other concepts. One may hope it will allow for a more refined and more rigorous restructuration. It alone in any case can call for this constant restructuration, as elsewhere for the very progress of the critique.

This other logic is put to work in Spectres as the logic of the ghost, hauntology, or spectrality. Like the term diff érance, hauntology is a neologism invented by Derrida to mark an infrastructure within a text that makes possible the effects of presence without itself being
given over to the present.

As the ‘word’ suggests, hauntology conjures up our relations to ghosts. Now while Derrida is not asking us to believe in ghosts as in a film like The Sixth Sense, he is asking us to acknowledge the figure of the ghost as that which disrupts our distinctions between the living and the dead, the actual and the inactual, being and non-being, and so on. In short, the ghost troubles the security of negotiating decisions—political, philosophical, or otherwise—in terms of the living present. This is to say the figure of the ghost forces us to deal with what Derrida calls the ‘virtual space of spectrality’: a space that can never be fully present to itself, which in turn does not mean that we are then marking a space of total absence. That is presence and absence do not operate as simple opposites to one another within the logic of the ghost. This prompts us to think of the here and now as occurring within a time and space that is dis-adjusted with itself. As an apparition, the ghost is neither here nor there, neither then nor now, marking its absent presence in more and less than one place and time. Derrida meticulously draws out the implications of such a disjunction by offering a reflective reading of Shakespeare's Hamlet, in particular Hamlet's dilemma ‘to be or not to be’ in the face of an inherited responsibility. Hamlet's confrontation with the ghost of his father precipitates the judgment that ‘The time is out of joint’ and it becomes his responsibility, as his father’s heir, to set things right. And just as Hamlet must deal with issues of inheritance, responsibility, and the promise for a future in response to the ghost of his father, Derrida claims that all of us living now—in this dis-adjusted time of the present—must deal with the question of inheritance, responsibility and the promise of a future in response to the ghost of Marx.

And now that Derrida has joined those who are no longer here, it is up to us who are living to respond to the inheritance that Derrida leaves behind. As Derrida repeatedly reminds us that there are several spectres of Marx, and that these spectres cannot be gathered into one, we learn that an inheritance always involves interpretation, translation and choice. For Derrida, an inheritance—such as Marx’s work, or the concept of democracy itself—is not merely given to us as some kind of transparent injunction. It involves work. It is a task of choosing how we negotiate the various spectres that attempt to possess a body of work. Derrida’s negotiation of the spectres of Marx is also a negotiation with the spectres competing to embody the spirit of democracy today. For although the signifiers of communism and democracy were situated as opposite forms of governing nation states, the supposed opposing ideological positions to which they were tied—of the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ if one likes—both had their roots in the promise to emancipate humanity from all forms of oppression. The very same texts (the Bible, Nietzsche’s works, Heidegger’s works, Marx’s works) can give rise to both a progressive and a regressive politics. But how can ‘we’ negotiate these opposing possibilities such that the promise for a more just world does not get continually possessed by ‘communities’ (whether they be nation states, corporations, lobby groups, political parties, and so on) who appropriate the name of democracy to unjust ends?

To reiterate: as Derrida demonstrates, if justice is to have a chance of coming (not arriving), we must understand that what is happening ‘now’ always takes place in a dislocated present. Furthermore, and more importantly, we can no longer claim in good faith the ability to
anticipate what the presence or arrival of an emancipated society would be. There can be no inheritance of the injunctions of Marx and equally no promise for justice without working with dis-adjustment—that is, working between “two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet.” Thus plans for transformation must account for this, and learn to work otherwise the very axiomatic of the metaphysics of presence, to which the (impossible) readability of such injunctions must remain bound. In *Spectres of Marx*, these two directions of absence are marked at the beginning of the book in a performative gesture that re-marks the emancipatory promise of Marxism.

Between the Empirical and Ideal: Countersigning Marx’s Promise to a Democratic Future

The mark of singularity and the unique characterization of an event often punctuate and characterize Derrida’s works. These works “do not limit themselves to making a point, but also perform and enact it.” While tension between multiple registers is visibly identified in written texts such as *Glas*, such tension is managed differently in Derrida’s delivery of lectures. This might take the form of drawing attention to the date in which Derrida conveys the lecture, as he did in Melbourne when he spoke on the theme of forgiveness on Hiroshima Day. Underscoring the singularity of the occasion in this way usually involves (re)negotiating empirical actuality—with recourse to names, dates and events—with a regulating ideality—which, in this case, Derrida refers not to Marx’s communism, but as a democracy yet-to-come. This re-negotiation involves steering away from the temptation to settle on either side of the empirical and ideal as opposing terms.

If there is a tone and a rhythm that ‘begins before beginning’, it is marked in Derrida’s dedication, exordium and initial quotation (“The Time is Out of Joint”) before the main text of *Spectres of Marx*. These seven pages create an atmosphere in which the supposed community of Marxists that Derrida is addressing is being asked to receive a message. The dispatch of the message comes from the ghosts of the Marxian legacy, and it passes through those who are listening in a media of communications that are necessarily muffled, entangled and discordant. This does not mean that there is a deliberate attempt to obscure the Marxian legacy. Rather it suggests that the Marxian legacy is not something that is given to us transparently. In other words if we are being asked to countersign a certain emancipatory spirit within this inheritance, it is not without “getting caught up, like a responsibility, in the snares of an injunction that is already multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, divided.” Our responsibility therefore begins by moving between the supposed opposites of an empirical actuality and a regulating ideality, both made possible through a necessary disjunction in presence.

Derrida’s opening address to the colloquium, “Whither Marxism?” (April 22, 1993), begins with a dedication to Chris Hani, a popular hero of resistance in the anti-apartheid movement. Thus, before embarking upon his duty as a philosopher, his dedication to a freedom fighter
inscribes his address to a community of Marxists with a political tone that has recourse to the domain of the empirical, actual world. In this instance, in the empirical context of the build up to the first free elections to be held in South Africa where the black majority had the right to vote, in the advent of the birth of South Africa as a 'democracy', Derrida dedicates his lecture to a communist. While Derrida remarks that the proper name ought to capture the uniqueness that designates the time occupied by a unique life/death—a motif that he has written about at length in other works—he emphasises three times in his dedication that Chris Hani was assassinated because his killers were out to get a communist. So amid the remains of the post Cold War media ‘conjuration’ against Marxism and communism, and against the triumphant tone of the so-called democratic super-power, Derrida inscribes his address to the colloquium, “Whither Marxism?” with the proper name of Chris Hani, as a communist. The proper name of Chris Hani therefore stands before the colloquium as a ghost to which the common noun of communism—as it has been tied to injunctions of Marx—is obligated to respond as much as it (communism) is obligated to respond to the ghosts of any of its other instantiations. For what the common noun of communism had supposedly represented to the Polish emigrant and his accomplices who were out to ‘get’ a ‘communist’, what the same common noun had come to represent through its historical totalitarian instantiations, and what the same noun currently signifies to those celebrating the so-called triumph of democracy, is also not the same in each case. As subject to the internal dissension of meaning—as exemplified through the quasi-transcendental of hauntology in this case—each instantiation of communism is prevented from being gathered into an identity that is unified to itself; as with Marxism, Derrida signals that communism is also ‘more than one/no more one [le plus d’un].’ Put more simply, the meaning of communism is multiple (made possible through effects of presuming presence) and divided (rendered inaccessible through the impossibility of ever being fully present to itself). Yet, in dedicating the lecture to Chris Hani, Derrida re-marks and enacts a certain emancipatory spirit that will continue to haunt the future of communism’s name, no matter what determinate forms of oppression communism has come to be associated with. It is this emancipatory spirit, inscribed through the singular life/death of an inspirational communist freedom fighter that prepares our ears for coming to terms with the contradictory injunctions inscribed within the various spectres that have fused Marxism and de facto communism together. These injunctions can be read only by their virtue of belonging to a generalised economy of readability.

Because any mark, sign, word, message or even the interpretation of a legacy can always mean more than one thing, and also because such vehicles of communication cannot be gathered into one thing, they are always open to an unanticipatable otherness that might graft onto their ontological, political and ethical status. In other words, a progressive politics can always not arrive at its intended destination. And this is what we must learn to live with. Derrida draws our attention to this in the exordium that follows his dedication to Chris Hani. Here, Derrida’s opening sentence is ‘I would like to learn to live finally’. Noting that the phrase stands initially unattached to any context, he then proceeds to set it forth by situating the act of learning to live within a disadjusted time of the present:
No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born and those who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist or other kinds of exterminations, victims of oppressions of capitalism or any forms of totalitarianism.26

Pledging a Tone for the Emancipatory Promise

Clearly, Derrida is not opposed to struggles against oppression that can be aligned to the emancipatory discourses and interventionist politics of Marxism, feminism, anti-racism and so on. But to take responsibility for these discourses, he insists upon reckoning with the many spectres that have competed to inhabit the ‘same’ spirit of their emancipatory promise. The ghosts and spectres that emancipatory discourses must reckon with will always be more and less than what is taken to be actual in the so-called real world of political interventions. For just as the emancipatory promise of Marx’s communism had been appropriated by totalitarian regimes, and just as equally can be inhabited by the spirit of a freedom fighter, so too can ‘democracy’ be appropriated toward subjugation as much as freedom. Today, over a decade after the USA claimed victory over communism and guardianship over democracy’s name, we have a situation where this super-power can indicate that “a rogue state is basically whomever the United States says it is.”27 Such an autocratic attitude to international politics by the world’s supposedly leading democratic nation is the most striking example today of the use of non-democratic means to achieve apparently democratic ends. Moreover, on the domestic front of the world’s democratic nations, the name of democracy is being called to account on charges such as disregarding majority rule and failing to be representative of the will of citizens. Yet the bulk of public criticism against so-called democracies today is couched in terms that presume the meaning of democracy is unambiguous and that the these nations are merely behaving in an undemocratic manner. While this is a valid criticism on many levels concerning prevailing conceptions of democracy, and serves a vital form of counter-hegemonic criticism, it remains bound to the assumption that the ‘idea(l)’ of democracy can co-incide with itself in the empirical world.

What remains unaccounted for in such criticisms is the fact that ‘democracy’, like any other term, will always be less than a complete entity in itself, and therefore the sources and destinations of its emancipatory promise is contaminated from the start. It can never be proper to itself and this is why Derrida adds the ‘to-come’ whenever he invokes its name. As he often remarks, the ‘to-come’ does not signify a future present that has not yet arrived; it is not a deferral of politics. Rather it is the point where the regulative tone of philosophy lets itself be interrupted by an urgent and responsive tone that binds a philosophical community (if there is one) to ethical and political injunctions called for in the here and now.
Moreover, if the ‘to-come’ that marks the dis-adjusted time of the present is always already haunting ‘actual’ political interventions in the real world, we can never rest assured with the good conscience of having made the right decision. All such decisions are structured with what Derrida deems a necessary equivocation—including the decision of whether democracy is the most appropriate name by which to pledge our political convictions and allegiance to the promise. This is to say, if the measure of a progressive politics is made reducible to the production of a program that aims to anticipate and prescribe which decision ought to be made in a given circumstance, then this would effectively betray the making of a decision. It would rob the decision of the possibility of responding to a new and unique situation with a fresh judgement, of enduring the ‘ordeal of the undecidable’ which is the condition of possibility for a decision to be made, and it would neutralize the necessity and urgency with which decisions must be made to respond in the here and now. Derrida refers to these characteristics of the decision as the aporias of justice. Such an ethics and politics aligns itself to the here and now, but without permanence and presence. Far from alleviating my responsibility toward others, these characteristics that mark the making of a decision call for a kind of responsibility that is responsive to the singularity of the time in which a decision has to be made.

In this sense, the question of ‘who’ the emancipatory subject ought to be cannot be given in any general or transcendental form. This idea runs counter to the Marxist conception of naming the emancipatory subject in the form of the proletariat, or any such re-development of the concept of a collective agent for social change. Thus, the tone governing the ‘who’ of the emancipatory promise is driven by an ethico-political imperative that first of all tries to be responsive to the screams and calls of countless singular others, who clamber to be heard in the quest for emancipation. As implied here, responsibility toward others is infinite. Ethics in this sense does not involve the mere application of well-worn maxims, but becomes reacquainted with the fear and trembling that accompanies any decision; answering the call to one is always at the expense of another. The rhythm that marks the incoming of these calls is urgent and the tone is piercing, and this is perhaps why the Kantian tribunal of a ‘parliament of reason’ might not be able to strike the appropriate chord for summoning the promise to come.

In contrast, while paying respect to a neutral, constative analysis, the logic of the ghost is also faithful to a performative gesture that takes on the tone of a promise. As if immobilised by the droning rhythm and lack of promise that the tone of neutrality infl exes upon the future of democracy, the logic of the ghost inhabits the emancipatory promise with a performative fidelity to what a promise calls for. The dedication to Chris Hani pledges remembrance to a singular life/death which at one and the same time assures the emancipatory spirit of communism is re-marked in a democracy ‘to-come’. The apocalyptic tone in re-situating Marxism within a democracy to-come is characterised as a ‘messianism without the messiah’, summoning the coming of the other with the biblical twist of a prophetic promise: as Caputo situates it, “of the one who comes to ‘to bring good news to the oppressed’. Yet bringing the good news to the oppressed in the above sense is not of the same order in which the USA and its allies are claiming to spread the good news of democracy to
the rest of the world today. For the promise of a democracy ‘to-come’ will not name the emancipatory subject or the content of its emancipatory promise. This is not to suggest there are no identifiable oppressed subjects or that the content of what is happening in the world today under the banner of democracy is not of significance. And neither is it to suggest an abstinence from taking sides on such political issues, or participating in political interventions concerning them. Such conclusions can be made only if the domains of philosophy and politics are presumed as reducible to one another. Derrida’s reading of Marx in this paper demonstrates that philosophy and politics are neither separable nor inseparable from one another. This allows us to re-read Marx’s “Thesis XI” in a way that remains faithful to the imperative not merely to interpret the world, but change it—yet not in a way that makes thought and action reducible to one another. Put very simply, there is nothing stopping a person who philosophises about the promise for a democratic future from attending public protests, signing petitions, donating to aid agencies, voting as a citizen, participating in lobby groups, forming organisations that attempt to transform the powers that be and so on. What one chooses to do, however, cannot be decided in advance by an already prescribed political and philosophical program that does not distinguish between the two domains.

Notwithstanding the lack of content of the promise, we are nevertheless invited to countersign a pledge to its future. The pledge is *tonal*. It is a tone that maintains the tension of remaining open and responsive to the ethical appeal of the Other, whilst attending to the urgency of political decisions. If philosophy maintains a regulative role in this, it is not because it can tell us the truth about ethics and politics, but rather because it draws our attention to the limits of thought. Such limits inhabit the investments we place in concepts like democracy. Attending to the heritage of the concept as it has been played out in the domains of philosophy and the world of politics where it has been opposed to ‘communism’ and now ‘terrorism’, moves to a slower rhythm in response to the incoming calls from others. How we hear this rhythm, however, and lend its ear to the singular beats of each incoming call from the Other is a task that must also negotiate with the ever changing and discordant rhythm of politics. The task remaining before us, then, relies on how well we attune ourselves to the tension between these rhythms. Accordingly, articulating the content of what democracy *is* will close off its chance for a future if it does not also attend to setting a tone that acknowledges that democracy must always remain to come.

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Notes

1. This accusation was levelled at Derrida during what has come to be known as the ‘Cambridge Affair’ in 1992. Debate was sparked after a ‘non-placet’ or negative vote was cast against Derrida when he was nominated for an honorary degree at Cambridge. This quotation is extracted from an open
letter sent to the London Times newspaper. The letter was signed by nineteen prominent academics and appeared in the popular press before any official voting took place at Cambridge. Despite the controversy surrounding the affair, the final vote awarded the degree to Derrida. For a publication of the letter, and an interview with Derrida regarding the affair see, Jacques Derrida, "Honoris Causa: This is also Extremely Funny," trans. M. Hobson and C. Johnson, Points: Interviews, 1974-1994, ed. E. Weber (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1995) 399-421.


3. Relations between Derrida and Lévinas' work are intricate, and are articulated through a long dialogue spanning near to thirty years. Derrida concurs with Lévinas' contention that the 'nakedness of the face' of the Other confronts the self as a summons to responsibility in the encounter of the Other's death. The self's responsibility for the singularity of the non-subsumable face of the Other is characterized as the ethical relation, or justice. For an accessible entry into literature that examines relations between the two thinkers see Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell) 1992.


5. Dalton, "Rendering the Tone" 42, fn13.


8. Kant, "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy" 51-81.


10. Kant, "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy" 53.

11. Jacques Derrida, "Of An Apocalyptic Tone" 142. Both Derrida and Fenves make note of Kant's The Conflict of the Faculties, where the latter is also concerned with finding the correct procedures from which to conduct rational debate.

12. Kant, "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy" 71.


16. John D. Caputo, Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligations with Constant Reference to Deconstruction (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1993).


20. Derrida, Spectres 163, emphasis added.


22. Derrida, Spectres 27 In Spectres, Derrida adds to his lecture lengthy remarks on Heidegger’s
contemplation of injustice and disjointure in the latter’s, “The Anaximander Fragment.” In this text Derrida argues that Heidegger implies that injustice is located between the disjointure of the two movements of absence. For Derrida, disjointure is the necessary condition, the condition of possibility, which opens the space for the incoming of the Other, which is related to justice. The singularity of the other is “what comes before me, before any present, thus before any past present, but also what, for that very reason, comes from the future: as the very coming of the event.” Derrida, Spectres 28. Thus, without disjointure there can be no possibility of justice, or the coming of the emancipatory promise.


25. Derrida, Spectres 27.


27. Jacques Derrida, Rogues: Two Essays on Reason, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2005) 96. Derrida is paraphrasing the words of Robert Litwark, Director of the Division of International Studies at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, who was also part of the Clinton team serving on National Security Council Staff.
