

## **Derrida and the Structure of the ‘Messianic’ in the *Specter of Marx***

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### ***ABSTRACT***

This paper sets out to explore the motive behind Derrida’s usage of the messianic, a term so already charged with religious significance. The messianic is a term that has so much baggage of a certain dogmatic, particular, and exclusive way of reading and interpreting human history. Why does Derrida employ the term messianicity? To what degree had he been successful in his usage of it? What has been gained or lost therein? Another line of inquiry that this paper sets out to follow is to find the difference that marks Derrida’s messianic from (other) previous ones, for instance that which characterize the institutionalized Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. and the sort of messianism that found expression in Marxism. Given the structure of Derridean Messianism, the paper attempt to see the relevant opening it could provide toward reading, de/re-constructing the cultural, socio-economic and political history of human kind. Derrida, though not one who believes in religion, this work shall attempt to show how he sets out in the *Specter of Marx*, to forge the link between Marx and some prophets, through the mediation of Shakespeare.

Keywords: Messiah; Messianic; Messianism; Differance; Infinite horizon.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As someone conversant to a certain degree with the story of Jesus Christ and the Messianic element or streak in Judeo-Christian tradition, it is tempting to see and identify in the thinking of Derrida the very project of Jesus Christ; especially in his *Specters of Marx*. Many parallels between these two figures present themselves and so effortlessly: the loud cry for justice as a cry to deter judgment, the upturning of traditions and institutions that had grown stale and become obstacles to the cause for which they were in the first place founded, the horror at seeing any human person in chains or under oppression, the relentless crusade on behalf of the weak and or the oppressed. With Jesus and Derrida we experience the subversion both of authority and the voice of Dogma. We find equally in them the *defer-rance* of absolute *meaning* and *closure*, and above all the

propensity for lifting the human gaze up to the *infinite horizon* that is forever coming, but never arriving, that which always beckons us upward and forward. In them both we find a project aimed at the realization of justice (and for Derrida) if there is such a thing. It is no wonder then that Derrida's work and personality had met with the sort of fate that was given to Jesus: ridicule, rejection, and *crucifixion* of some sorts. Such parallels also fruitfully suggest themselves between Socrates and Derrida's way of doing philosophy. There is in Derrida an echo, or a trace of the Socratic. But this lies very much outside the scope of this exercise. It would however be observed that almost invariably, any embodiment of the philosophic spirit must pass this singular battery of test. With this as a sole criterion, one could safely assert Derrida to be the only known person alive today that is actually engaged in the enterprise of philosophy (Derrida, 1998). And in his case, we encounter the transformation of philosophy from an establishment into a provocation and vocation. For Derrida, philosophy ceases to be mere commentaries on the history of thought, nor just the regurgitating, recycling and transference of tomes of ideas from old graveyards of bodies of learning to new ones.

According to Derrida (2012), there is to be found within religion as instanced by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. 'tensions, heterogeneity, destructive, volcanoes sometimes texts, especially those of prophets, which cannot be reduce to an institution, to a corpus, to a system'. So wants to lay claim to the right to (mis)read these text in a way which have to constantly reinvent. For Derrida (1996), this is something which can be totally new at every moment. His project is that he wants to receive necessary *provocation* (inspiration?) from the prophets and the Bible as an open field. This project fit in well with Derrida's overall aim (that is) targeted at the transformation of philosophy to an 'establishment' into a 'provocation'. But one is tempted to ask whether this is not a question of hermeneutics? And if it is not, is violence not done to a text by tearing it out of its content? So for insisting for instance 'the messianic without the messianism' and on its formality and abstraction from all 'metaphysical' and 'religious' determination, Derrida (1996) is seeking to free the notion from its culturally specific connotations. In a lecture on religion he places the notion of messianic in series of concepts which may have their counterparts in a religious discourse, but whose philosophical significance must be 'independent of all religion'. Included in these is the Heideggerian use of *offenbarkeit* as a revealability that is more originary than revelation *Offenbarung*. Just as for *offenbarkeit*, Derrida wants to propose that it is a more originary experience than the event of revelation that is the source of faith, so for messianicity; Derrida (1996) writes: "This messianic dimension does not depend on any messianism; it does not follow any determinate revelation, it does not properly belong to any Abrahamic religion."

Cutting the knot of such lines of questioning, Derrida makes a distinction between religion and faith (Caputo et al., 2005). If then for Derrida, religion is a set of beliefs, dogmas, or institution – the church for instance, then it follows that religion *can* be deconstructed, and not only can, but should be, in the name of faith (Ungureanu 2019). Here, Derrida follows Kierkegaard closely in paradoxically contesting religious discourse on behalf of a faith that refuses to be domesticated or tamed, taught, controlled or locally understood. This is a faith that breaks artificial boundaries and limits; a paradoxical faith. Faith for Derrida (1994) is something that is presupposed by the most radical deconstructive gesture. For faith implies *the other*, and the other evoke from us faith.

Faith is so basic, so fundamental that one cannot address the other, speak to the other, without an act of faith, without testimony (Caputo, 1997) when one attest to something, one addresses the other and asks 'believe me'. To be believed--even if one is lying--one is addressing the other to trust one. For Derrida, this 'trust me, I am speaking to you' is of the order of faith, a faith that cannot be reduced to a theoretical statement, to a determinative judgment; for it is the opening of the address to the other. For Derrida, faith thus understood is strictly speaking not religious, for it cannot be determined by any given religion. It is therefore absolutely universal. Now that we have seen how Derrida arrived at the absolute universality of faith, let us follow him step by step as he sets up rungs on the ladder of his deconstructive argumentation.

Apparently, when the notion of the 'messianic' first presented itself, Derrida cringed and avoided it 'on the ground that it entailed the idea of an *Horizon of possibility* for the future and, hence, of some anticipatory circling of what is to come' (Caputo 1997). Under the influence however of Walter Benjamin, Derrida adopted the term *messianic* but *without* the messiah. Benjamin has spoken of a 'weak messianic power' the weak here corresponding to Derrida's without messianism. And which Benjamin associates with *historical materialism*. For Benjamin perspective the messianic moment is distinguished from history as a progression

Though the messiah completes and redeems all that happens in history, and even 'creates' it, history by itself cannot refer to anything messianic. For the kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal *ziel*. Viewed historically (or: from the point of view of history) it is not a goal, but an end (or: the end, or simply: it is end) *Historisch gesehen ist es nicht Ziel, sondern Ende* (Hammerschlag 2009, p. 189).

According to Benjamin, the present generation is to be viewed messianically, as those who were all along to come, those who were all along expected precisely in order to *redeem* the past. We today live in a pact with the disasters of the past, inheriting a promise we never made, to recall the dangerous memory of past suffering... a pledge not to be taken lightly. The *now*, the present time, is precisely a messianic time in which we are responsible for the entire history of humankind. It is this *now* of time that Derrida terms the *moment*, a strait gate through which the messiah might enter (Caputo, 1997).

Derrida (1994) therefore introduced the notion of the Messianic in *The Specter of Marx* primarily; it seems as a way of taking account of a certain class of experience of time or history, in particular experiences or fantasies of an *end of history* or evocations of an *end of philosophy*. Second, the *messianic* is used in the context of Derrida's ongoing inquiry into what one can call the ethical dimension of deconstruction, or rather, into deconstruction as a pursuit of the ethical, or of Justice- which in this work he links to the spirit of Marx. Not just any spirit of Marx, for they are many, but that spirit of Marx that is 'in principle and first of all a radical critique, namely a procedure ready to undertake its self-critique wants itself to be in principle and explicitly open to its own transformation, reevaluation, self-reinterpretation'. According to Derrida (2012, p. 111),

(t)o critique, to call for th(is) interminable self-critique is still to distinguish between everything and almost everything. Now, if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance (a consistent deconstruction must insist on them even as it also learns that this is

not the last or first word). It is even more a certain emancipator and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any *messianism*. And a promise must promise to be kept, not to remain “spiritual” or “abstract”, but to produce events new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth. To break with the “party form” or with some form of the state or the International does not mean to give up every form of practical or effective organization. It is exactly the contrary that matters to us here.

On the one hand, we can not anticipate the end of history as a regulative ideal or determinate *telos*. On the other hand we must take account of the precariousness of the historical-temporal situation, of what it might mean to be a political prisoner one day and an officially heralded hero or head of state the next.

In another (mis)leading or appropriation, this time of Fukuyama, pillage/salvage material to (de)construct his notion of *messianism* without the messiah. Although Fukuyama's logic is inconsistent and indecisive, Derrida finds in it something essential to ground his concept between conceiving a *telos* (end) or inner logic of history, and measuring historical progress only in terms of actual development. Depending on how it works to his advantage and serve his thesis, Fukuyama defines liberal democracy sometimes as an *actual* reality and at other times as a simple *ideal*. The event is now at one the realization, at another, the heralding (announcement) of the realization (Derrida, 1994).

For Derrida (1994), this *anachronistic complication* point to a general truth about our experience of history and of time, of what Derrida calls simply *the event* or eventness, *evenementialite*. It is at such a general account that Derrida sets aim. And to achieve this, Derrida makes use of Heidegger's concept of *authentic temporality*. Our experience of history is not exhausted by the concept of the actual or effective present, by the notion of time as a succession of identical *nows* (Caputo, 1997). Always, when Derrida read any given (text) there (are) is something(s) taking place at so many levels. He is deconstructing the text as well as being deconstructed by the text. Earlier as we saw, Derrida had, in distinguishing between religion and faith, delineated religion as circumscribed by time. Religion can be deconstructed, but not so faith. Faith we saw had a universally absolute character. Only through faith could one address the other. Now Derrida will join this absolute universality of faith to Heidegger's authentic temporality. What we get from this deconstructive hybrid/mongrel is Derrida's structure of the messianic.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE MESSIANIC

As soon as one address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience. Some One is to come, is now to come. Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other, with the promise... this universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with Justice-that is what I called messianic (Sherwood & Castelli 2016, p. 91).

Each time I open my mouth, I am promising something. When I speak to you, even if I lie, the condition for my life is that I promise to tell you the truth. So the promise is not one speech act among others. For every speech act is fundamentally a promise. This universal structure of the promise: of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice-this is what Derrida calls *the messianic structure*. And according to Derrida, this structure is not limited to what is called messianism for instance Judaism, Christianity or Islam. For Derrida, these are only determined forms of messianisms. And as soon as one reduces the messianic structure to messianism, one reduces its universality; thereby determining it, framing it, imprisoning it in a mold. This, for Derrida has immense political implications. It means that one favors one tradition, accrediting this one tradition among and above all others. So we have the concept of an “elected nation, a royal, a people set apart...” a people of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism. This for Derrida is the cause of all forms of violence perpetrated by institutions, systems or individuals.

It is for this reason that Derrida takes very seriously the difference (however subtle) it may appear between the messianic and messianicity. Caught between two opposing dominant tendencies, the first, which sets out to dissociate Marxism from any teleology or messianic eschatology (Derrida, 1994), the second, anti-Marxists in nature which sets out to determine their own emancipator eschatology by giving it a metaphysical or onto-theological content that is always deconstructible. Derrida favors the line of a deconstructive thinking that highlight the irreducibility of affirmation and therefore of the promise, as well as the undeconstructibility of a certain idea of justice as dissociated from the law (Derrida, 1994). According to Derrida, this critique

belongs to a movement open to the absolute future of what is coming, ... a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to its waiting for the other and for the event. In its pure formality, in the determination that it requires, one may find yet another essential affinity between it and a certain messianic spirit (Culler 2003, p. 283)..

On the side of messianicity, there is no society, says Derrida “without faith, without trust in the other. Even if I abuse this, if I lie or commit perjury, if I am violent because of this faith,... even on the economic level, there is no society without this faith, this minimal act of faith” (Hobson 2014, p.105) . According to Derrida, what is called credit in Capitalism and economics has to do with faith- and the economists according to him are aware of that. Derrida sternly warns that this faith be not reduced or defined by religion as such. I would hasten to neither add nor by any determining (limiting) *isms* of race, gender etc.

## A DERRIDEAN PROBLEMATIC

A problematic, thus far left unresolved by Derrida is whether the religions (of the Book) are but specific examples of the general structure, of messianicity-in which case the general structure of messianicity-as the structure of experience and on this groundless ground-there have been revelations, a history which one calls Judaism or Christianity etc.; the possibility of which Derrida contemplates and which he says would entail us having a Heideggerian gesture style that is, one has to get back from these religions to the

fundamental ontological conditions of possibilities of religions, in order to describe the structure of messianicity on the groundless ground on which religions have been made possible.

The second Derridean (other) hypothesis is that the events of revelation, the Biblical traditions, the Jewish, and Christian and Islamic traditions, have been absolute events which have unveiled this messianicity. And we would not otherwise had know what messianicity is without messianism, without these event which Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ, etc. In that case, singular events would have unveiled or revealed these universal possibilities, and its only on that condition that we can describe messianicity. Derrida oscillates between the two given possibilities, but think some other scheme has to be constructed to understand the two at the same time and to do justice to the two possibilities (Smith 1998). But in the mean time Derrida keeps the word *messianic* which refers to the word messiah and as he understand it, does not belongs to a certain culture: Jewish or Christian. Messianism for Derrida at the moment is not a didactic tool; rather an aid to letting people understand what he is trying to say when he speaks about messianicity. But in doing so Derrida still maintain the singularity of a single revelation that is Jewish, Christian revelation, with its reference to messiah. After all isn't Derrida re-interpreting the tradition of the Messiah? And isn't this interpretation always a deconstruction?

## DEATH AS A NAME FOR THE MESSIAH

Deconstruction's messianic tone is its openness toward the future (McSweeney 2011). This is not the relative and foreseeable, not the programmable and plannable future of *strategic planning*- but the absolute future the welcome extended to another whom I cannot, in principle, anticipate, *toute autre* whose alterity disturbs the complacent circles of the same (Caputo, 1997). Derrida re-tells a story of the Messiah unrecognized, at the gates of Rome, dressed in rags of a beggar. One man recognized him and asked "when will you come? Meaning that there is some inadequation between the now and now. The Messiah is coming now; the messiah does not wait. This is a way for waiting for the future, right now. The messiah is not some future present; it is imminent and it is this imminence that Derrida is describing under the messianic structure. So that the messianic future to come, absolutely to come, the justice, the democracy, the gift, the hospitality to come (Caputo, 1997).

If I am getting to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice*. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer *present*, and where it will never be, no more than the law, reducible to laws or rights (Derrida, 2012, p. XVIII).

Derrida's insistence here on a spectral logic-compellingly illustrated by the opining bars of the *manifesto of communist party*, in which communism exists only as ghost to haunt Europe. As a ghost of something to come posing as a ghost of something that has already been, this figure gathers the legacy or heritage of communism into the very moment of its inception. Derrida (1994) writes: One can never distinguish between *future-to-come*

(*l'a-venir*) and the return/coming-back (*revenir*) of a specter.” Here, as we saw with Fukuyama’s argument, is a matter of asking whether “to announce one’s self is not already to be there, in some way (Derrida, 1994),” or already to have been there.

Derrida then uses the notion of the specter to Heidegger’s critique of vulgar temporality:

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and specially the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence,...etc. There is first of all the doubtful *contemporaneity* of the present to itself. Before knowing one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must ask oneself whether the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition ... between actual, effective presence and its other (Derrida, 1994). And says Derrida (1994, p. 75):

Both Marxism and anti-Marxism had traditionally presupposed this opposition. Here Derrida introduces the notion of the messianic as **death**. Unlike the end as *telos* or as regulative ideal (as posited by Fukuyama), or presumed by a popular understanding of Marxist or Hegelian historiography, “the future to come can announce itself as such and in its purity only on the basis of a *Past end*: beyond, if that’s possible, the last extremity.

So as to take into consideration the fact that a true event cannot be calculated or dated in advance, but nonetheless to maintain the possibility *that there is a future* (a possibility which by definition cannot be foreclosed), so that to acknowledge that not knowing in advance the gate of the event is not a private form of non-knowledge (not a lacuna) (Derrida, 1994). Derrida draws a distinction on one hand *teleology* and on the other *Messianism* or *eschatology*. Benjamin aligns the *historical* with the *teleological*, and opposing both to the *messianic*, while Derrida sought to elaborate a non teleological understanding of history in terms of the messianic. The basic idea of messianism is the same. Though the course of history (which for Benjamin) is *the order of the profane*- may help to bring about the advent of the messianic kingdom, it cannot direct itself to it as to a goal.

The messiah is not simply the One, the Other, that I am constantly waiting for. There would be no experience without the waiting on the coming of the other, the coming of the event, and Justice. But the messiah may also be the one I expect even while I do not want him to come. There is the possibility that my relation to the messiah is: I would like him to come, I hope that he would come, that the other will come, as other, for that would be justice, peace, and revolution-and at the same time, I am scared. I do not want what I want and I would like the coming of the messiah to be *infinitely postponed*, and there is the desire in me. And that is why, says Derrida, that the man who addressed the messiah said, *when will you come?* At least you are coming. And that is the condition for me to go on asking questions and living. So there is some ambiguity in the messianic structure. We wait for something we would not like to wait for. That, says Derrida, is another name for death. In his dedication of *The Specters of Marx* to Chris Hani, slain by an assassin’s bullet, Derrida writes:

One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonymy. In its past as well as in its present, by diverse

paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, where ever one is and where ever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience (Blazan 2007, p. 173).

I see that Derrida's openness to the vision of the messianic is a messianic of hope beyond any messianism, and one that must be for "a universalizable culture of singularities, a culture in which the abstract possibility of the impossible translation could nevertheless announce itself." But why this culture of the 'new international' as he calls it should belong to anonymity is rather most baffling. I am no more an anonymous Marxist than the Sultan of Mecca is an anonymous Christian. I find Derrida's claim rather preposterous that (w)ether they know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism (Derrida 1994, p. 91). But it would seem rather clear when he adds a little bit further down that this anonymity is that of being heirs of the absolute singularity of a project- or of a promise- which has a philosophical and scientific form, a form that is in principle non-religious in the sense of a positive religion, not mythological. Therefore not national and therefore far beyond even the alliance with a chosen people. For Derrida, the form of this promise or of this project remains absolutely unique. it's event is at once singular, total, and uneffaceable--uneffaceable except by a negation and in the course of a work of mourning that can only displace, without effacing, the effect of a trauma (Derrida, 1994).

Against the triumphalism of *the new world order* that thinks Marxism is dead and buried, says Derrida, the Specter of Marx haunts Europe today, like a spectacle of justice, like a memory of suffering not quite repressed like a call for justice in the midst of the most obscene extremes of wealth and poverty. The ethical, political, and religious questions surrounding 'Europe today' have more and more taken center stage in the work of Derrida. For him 'there is no precedent whatsoever for such an event. In the whole history of humanity, in the whole history of the world and of the earth, in all that we can give the name of history in general, such an event of a discourse in the philosophic-scientific from claiming to break with myth, religion, and the nationalist 'mystique' has been bound, for the first time and inseparably, to worldwide forms of social organization (a party with a universal vocation, a labor movement, a confederation of States, and so forth).

A messianic promise, even if it is not fulfilled, at least in the form in which it was uttered, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history. And says Derrida, whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot be its heirs. And for Derrida, this calls for responsibility on our part, a responsibility which in this case is but 'the reaffirmation of a debt, a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation, which is why in the first place, he distinguished several spirits of Marx.

## CONCLUSION

By the sub-title: 'the state of the debt,' Derrida wishes to announce with this equivocal expression several ineluctable themes, but above all that of an ineffaceable and



insoluble debt toward one of the spirits inscribed in historical memory under the proper names of Marx and Marxism. It is this debt that (even unconscious or disavowed) Derrida seems to be at work particularly in political philosophy which structures implicitly all philosophy or all thought on the subject of philosophy. This sub-title problematizes the concept of the State or the state with or without capital initially in three ways. First, that since one cannot establish the state of a debt, one makes one's self accountable by an engagement that selects, interprets, and orients. Second, the false prophet/hypocrisy of a statement (statist or inter-statist) that holds a mass of humanity under its yoke in a new form of slavery. Last, as consequence, the call for a profound and critical re-elaboration of the concept of the state, of nation-state, of national sovereignty, of citizenship. This is a call Derrida says, for 'a re-inscription, a re-delimitation of the State in space that it no longer dominates and that moreover it never is dominated by itself (Derrida, 1994).' 'The specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility but the visibility of the invisibility. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains... beyond the phenomenon or beyond being (Derrida, 1994).

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