The Dissident and the Spectre

Reading Havel with Derrida[1]

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Abstract:
In this paper I argue that there is an affinity between the 'dissident' in Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless" and the 'spectre' in Derrida's readings of Marx. Both are manifestations of a specific modern temporality that Derrida calls "disjointed", because it is haunted by a revolutionary force and claim for justice. Both also evoke the weak messianic power inherent in Walter Benjamin's historiography and the spectral responsibility recognised by this power, that is, our responsibility for past and future generations. In post-totalitarian Czechoslovakia, the "nonpolitical" dissident community prefigured the renewal of moral experiences of responsibility and solidarity. In contemporary discussions of democracy, the figure of the spectre is a reminder of the significance of the Marxist legacy beyond its ideological doctrine.

Keywords: Havel, Derrida, dissident, spectre, ideology, post-democracy, messianism

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1. Introduction

Václav Havel opens "The Power of the Powerless" with an indirect reference to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the West is called 'dissent'."[2] The dissident, we learn from the first paragraphs of the essay, is a historically specific category of powerless citizens. They are sub-citizens living within the post-totalitarian system, yet outside the power establishment. When characterising normalised Communist Czechoslovakia after the invasion that ended the politi-

1 I would like to thank the participants at the Havel Symposium at Södertörn University, my co-editor Niklas Forsberg, Martin Gustafsson, Hans Ruin and the blind reviewer of this paper for insightful questions and advice that improved the original paper.

2 Havel, V., "The Power of the Powerless", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 32, 2018, No. 2, p. 355.

cal liberalisation of the Prague Spring in 1968, Havel distances himself from the term "dictatorship", even in its bureaucratical form. In the essay, "post-totalitarian" indicates that this society is totalitarian in a manner different from the former. The dissident manifests this difference, in the sense that it appeared the moment the system could "no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power" but allowed for some, if only limited, expressions of nonconformity.[3] The most explicit expression of nonconformity at the time of Havel's essay was the Charter 77 human rights movement, alongside *samizdat* editions of books and magazines, underground seminars, concerts and exhibitions. Yet the Charter and the dissident movements are only intelligible against an "anonymous hinterland" of dissidents, by which Havel understands an existential form of resistance on the level of "human consciousness and conscience".[4] This resistance does not have the force of an identifiable opposition but "the strength of a potential" that can at any moment become actual in political acts and events.[5]

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Jacques Derrida quotes Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's original passage for a lecture in 1993: "A spectre is haunting Europe. The spectre of communism."[6] *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* was written for the Second Congress of the Communist League in London in the autumn of 1847. The proletariat had not yet gathered into a unified political power, let alone a party. Even in Germany, it still formed "an incoherent mass" scattered over the country, Marx and Engels write in the opening paragraphs. Whereas the powers of "old Europe" tried to exorcise the ghostly presence of communism, they claim, the *Manifesto* announces its arrival.

Derrida's lecture, published as *Specters of Marx* in 1994, is at once a critical intervention in the debate on American political scientist Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and a systematic elaboration of a "disjointed" temporality Derrida understands as defining modern Europe. If, as Marx and Engels claim, modern bourgeois society established the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as two antagonistic classes, and the latter was even "called into existence" by the former, the experience of the spectre and its revolutionary force, Derrida argues, "marks the very exis-

3 Ibid., p. 356. It remains unclear in Havel's essay how post-totalitarianism differs from dictatorships more precisely, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into more detail on that issue.
4 Ibid., p. 369.
5 Ibid., p. 370.
6 Derrida, J., *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. London & New York, Routledge, 1994, 4; Marx, K. and Engels, F., *Selected Works, Vol. 1, Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Moscow, Progress Publishers 1969, p. 98–137.

tence" of capitalist, and indeed neo-capitalist, Europe.[7] Against Fukuyama's claim that parliamentary liberal democracy will prevail, and his empirical evidence in support of a global decline of violence at the end of the Cold War, Derrida not only reminds us that wars and injustices are still devastating "so-called democratic Europe".[8] He also argues that these injustices call for a return to Marxism – not, however, to its ideological doctrine but to the many "spirits" of Marx, that is, to the heterogeneity of the Marxist inheritance. Since an inheritance, in Derrida's view, "is never one with itself", the readability of the legacy of Marxism both calls for and defies interpretation; it is one by dividing, differing and deferring itself. The question guiding his lecture is not where Marxism in its present or past historical realisations can lead us, but "where to lead it by interpreting it".[9] The legacy thus presupposes its own transformation, and the spectre "returns" not only from the past but also from the future possibilities of this transformation.

The question guiding the present paper concerns not the future of Marxism but Havel's indirect reference to the spectre. What are the implications of this opening scene in Havel's essay? Keeping in mind that Havel is, after all, a playwright, it makes sense to ask what sort of dramaturgy his reference to the haunting presence of communism suggests for his conception of the dissident. In what sense is the dissident a ghost and why is it important that we recognise it as such? The more precise focus of my interpretation is the particular temporality actualised by the dissident. The figure of the dissident questions the ideological temporality upheld by the post-totalitarian system. In conformity with what Havel considers the pseudo-reality created by the system, this temporality is described in terms of an empty "present" removed from what phenomenologists have called the "living present", which is an intertwined past, present and future. Having lost contact with the origin that inspired it – the political movements of the nineteenth century – post-totalitarianism is not even utopian. On the most fundamental level, I will show that the life of the dissident reconnects citizens to reality as experientially lived. However, Havel's indirect reference to the *Manifesto* points beyond the phenomenological ramification. As I will suggest, there is an affinity between what Havel calls "post-democracy", towards which he gestures at the end of his essay, and the spectral temporality elaborated in Derrida's reading of Marx. This affinity becomes even more apparent if one

7 Derrida, *Specters*, p. 4–5.

8 According to Derrida, these injustices range from economic, national and ethnic wars to the unleashing of racisms and xenophobias, underemployment, homelessness and deportations, a ruthless global market, the spread of nuclear weapons and the power of "phantom states" such as the mafia and drug cartels.

9 Derrida, *Specters*, p. 59.

considers the heterogeneity of spectrality itself. In Derrida's reflections on his first trip to Moscow in 1990, the notion of a messianic promise takes shape that, akin to the dissident resistance, is voiced as a radical responsibility for those presently living, as well as for past and future generations.

In the first part of the paper, I will explicate the role of the dissident in post-totalitarian society and, on the basis of this reading, make a case for a spectral interpretation of Havel's essay that draws on the tradition of phenomenological thought.[10] I then turn to Derrida's imperative to interpret Marx, and the specific temporality suggested by the figure of the spectre. The "nonpolitical politics" of the dissident motivates my final discussion of the undecidability of the future in Havel's essay.

2. The life of the dissident

The term "dissident" appears within quotation marks throughout Havel's essay. The word was chosen by Western journalists as the label of "a phenomenon peculiar to the post-totalitarian system", he claims, but hardly ever occurring in democratic societies.[11] While from a Western perspective it applies to "citizens of the Soviet bloc", often intellectuals, who express their nonconformist views publicly and yet are protected from the most severe forms of persecution, Havel stresses that dissidents are "ordinary people with ordinary cares", expressing aloud what many either cannot or would be afraid to say.[12] Dissidents, he goes on to say, do not first of all deny or reject anything on the political scene, but are unified by the decision to "live within the truth", a potentially political ideal of freedom that draws on phenomenological conceptions of responsibility, justice and solidarity.[13] To institutionalise a select category of dissidents, therefore, would amount to denying those ethical aspects of resistance.

According to Havel, a full appreciation of the dissident requires a conception of the post-totalitarian system and its nature of power in distinction

10 Cf. Derrida's own remarks on the possibility of a Husserlian "phenomenology of spectrality" in *Specters of Marx*, 189n6. I share Hans Ruin's claim in response to this footnote, that the "spectral", as one name for the "indeterminate space between the dead and the living" and for "a difference within time itself", radicalises the phenomenological enterprise by problematising fundamental phenomenological themes, such as ideality, intentionality and the idea of the intentional object. Ruin, H., *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2018, p. 23.

11 Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", p. 380.

12 Ibid., p. 382.

13 Ibid., e.g, p. 285. For an excellent overview of Havel's relation to phenomenology, in particular to Jan Patočka's work, see Gubser, M., *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Eastern Europe*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2014.

from classical, totalitarian dictatorships. Whereas the latter are bound up with a limited group of people taking power by force, and thus with the lives of those who establish it, the post-totalitarian system of Czechoslovakia is part of "a power bloc controlled by one of the superpowers".[14] This condition also has temporal implications. While classical dictatorships are viewed as contingent in the sense that they lack historical roots, the post-totalitarian system owes its historicity to the "authenticity" of the nineteenth-century proletarian and socialist movements from which it originated, however much it has alienated itself from these movements.[15]

Although Havel explicitly rejects Marxism and distances himself from Soviet state communism, it would be a simplification to view him as merely a liberal advocate of individual rights. As Robert Pirro points out, it is difficult to classify Havel on a traditional political scale.[16] For instance, in the essay the communist post-totalitarian society is discerned as just "another form of the [Western] consumer and industrial society" and the Chartists as giving voice to "thousands and millions" of unorganised anonymous people struggling for freedom.[17] A full appreciation of Havel's political thought depends rather on an awareness of its roots in phenomenological philosophy.[18] Not only did the East European literati in the 1970s see phenomenology as a "philosophical diagnosis of the modern crisis facing both Soviet and Western Bloc countries", Michael Gubser convincingly argues; it also offered a "vision of personal freedom and transcendence" in sharp contrast to the realities of late communism.[19] And while professional philosophers were committed to the task of developing a social phenomenology, he notes, the Czech and Polish dissident communities of the 1970s and 1980s looked to phenomenology "to reinforce and articulate… an everyday 'practice of dissent'" and were attracted by the "emancipatory promise it contained".[20]

Havel confirms this historiography, writing in his *Letters to Olga* (1979–82) that "most dissidents were drawn to the 'atmosphere' of phenomenology rather than to its 'particular theses, concepts, conclusions'."[21] His essay on

14 Ibid., p. 356.
15 Ibid., p. 357.
16 Pirro, R., "Václav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy". *Political Theory* 20, 2002, No. 2, p. 228.
17 Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", p. 358.
18 See, e.g., Findlay, E. F., "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique: Political Philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka". *The Review of Politics* 61, 1999, No. 3, p. 403–438; Tucker, A., *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*. Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press 2000; Gubser, *The Far Reaches.*
19 Gubser, *The Far Reaches*, p. 133.
20 Ibid., p. 136.
21 Havel, cited in Gubser, *The Far Reaches*, p. 136.

the dissident movements is also evidence of a positive engagement in phenomenological social critique. Dedicated to the memory of Jan Patočka, the essay thematises the question of technology, as well as the political meaning of responsibility and authenticity. References to Husserl are more implicit, but the idea of a crisis of modern Europe underlies his argument, as does the notion of spiritual "renewal", both of which evoke Husserl's phenomenology of culture and ethics. With particular relevance for the topic of this paper, Havel's description of post-totalitarianism evokes Hannah Arendt's analysis of ideology in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

As the "logic of an idea" applied to history, ideology, according to Arendt's analysis, is assumed to explain every historical occurrence by "deducing it from a single premise".[22] This premise could be the "class struggle" (as in Stalinism) or the "natural selection of races" (as in National Socialism). Ideologies, in other words, treat the course of events as though it follows the same "law" as the logical exposition of its idea, pretending to know "the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future".[23] As historical, ideologies are not concerned with what Arendt calls "the miracle of being" – the event or sudden happening that "dislocates time" and "changes its direction", to quote the contemporary phenomenologist Françoise Dastur.[24] Rather, history is viewed as a continuous movement to which the logic of the idea is supposed to correspond.

As an instance of this general conception of ideology, Havel understands the "logically structured" and yet essentially flexible ideology of the post-totalitarian system as one legacy of the socialist origin, articulated as the correct understanding of social conflicts at the time when the original movements appeared.[25] Ideology in the post-totalitarian Soviet system provides citizens with an "immediately available home" in an era when metaphysical and existential certainties are in crisis, and when people are made superfluous and alienated. The price for this "low-rent home", however, is that one hands over one's judgement and responsibility to a higher authority, so that the centre of power and the centre of truth become identical. In Havel's analysis, the Czechoslovak post-totalitarian system represents a "radically new" form of power base and has resulted in intricate mechanisms for direct and indirect manipulation of the population. In order to describe these mechanisms, he introduces the fictive example of the manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop, "the greengrocer". A slogan is displayed on a poster in the green-

22 Arendt, H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace 1976, p. 468.
23 Ibid., p. 469.
24 Ibid.; Françoise Dastur, "Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise", *Hypatia* 15, 2000, No. 4, p. 178–189.
25 Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", p. 357.

grocer's shop window: "Workers of the world, unite!"[26] If ideology in Arendt's analysis reinforces a notion of history as a continuous movement, ideology in Havel's example essentially repeats an empty present that has lost contact with historical reality and change.

Havel distinguishes the semantic content of the slogan (the ideal it expresses) from the slogan as sign and argues that the "real" meaning of the slogan is to be found in the hidden message the poster conveys. He suggests the following translation of this message:

> I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace.[27]

Although the greengrocer might be indifferent to the slogan's semantic content, the ideological surface of the poster ("Workers of the world, unite!") indicates a level of "disinterested conviction" that at once conceals the "low foundations" of the greengrocer's obedience, and those of the power exercised within the system. Driven by a "blind automatism" this power works against "life", which aims towards "plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization". Ideology thus conceals the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life and constitutes "a world of appearances" and lies "trying to pass for reality".[28]

The distinction between appearance and reality is virtually assimilated to that between lies and truth: as it is permeated with "hypocrisy and lies", post-totalitarianism "falsifies everything", according to Havel, including language, statistics, and temporality.[29] He does not further develop how time is falsified, and yet stresses this point: "[The regime] falsifies the past. It falsifies the present and it falsifies the future."[30] Two remarks on language, however, suggest a phenomenologically oriented interpretation. First, the ideologically formalised language that replaces reality with "pseudo-reality", Havel writes, is deprived of semantic contact with reality.[31] Formalisation indicates abstraction from the language in which we live, and hence from the reality we perceive, spatially as well as temporally. Second, this pseudo-reality is upheld by the mutual repetition of ideological slogans in shop windows and offices: "[W]ithout the greengrocer's slogan the office worker's slogan

26 Ibid., p. 359.
27 Ibid., p. 359.
28 Ibid., p. 361.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 362.

could not exist, and vice versa. Each proposes to the other that something be repeated, and each accepts the other's proposal."[32] In the essay, at least, living within a lie means to distance oneself from life's plurality and diversity, and, as a consequence, from its intrinsic unpredictability.

Hypocrisy is ultimately the perspective from which the "real meaning" of the slogan in the greengrocer's window should be interpreted, according to Havel. By placing the sign in the window, as the ritual prescribes, the greengrocer displays his loyalty to the system.[33] This should not be taken to mean evidence of loyalty, however, since there is no need for evidence: the greengrocer has "voted as he should" in trade union meetings and acted like a "good citizen" in national elections, "even signed the anti-Charter".[34] The function of the slogan in the greengrocer's window, and thousands of similar slogans exhibited in shop windows, on lampposts, bulletin boards, etc., is to contribute to the "panorama of everyday life". The citizens' mutual indifference to the slogans is therefore an illusion, inasmuch as through the slogans "each compels the other to accept the rules of the game" and to confirm the system.[35]

An entire district town covered with slogans that no one will read illustrates what Havel calls the "social auto-totality" that draws everyone into the system and turns every individual into both a victim and a supporter of the system. This idea relates to what Arendt, and before her Alexandre Koyré, termed "the modern lie".[36] In contrast to the traditional lie, which concerned particulars, involved the hiding of secrets and stood out against a background of truth, the modern lie implies both deception and self-deception and requires a "rearrangement of the whole factual texture".[37]

3. Post-totalitarianism and post-democracy

The conflict between "the aims of life" and "the aims of the system" is not one between two socially separate communities and only on a generalised level between the ruler and the ruled.[38] In comparison to oppositions in Western democratic societies with parliamentary systems of government, the dissident movement is not "a political force on the level of actual power".[39] Rather,

32 Ibid., p. 365.
33 Ibid., p. 361–362.
34 Ibid., p. 364.
35 Ibid., p. 365.
36 Arendt, H., "Truth and Politics", in *Between Past and Future*. London, Penguin 1993, p. 227–264; Koyré, A., "The Political Function of the Modern Lie". *October* 160, 2017, p. 143–151.
37 Arendt, "Truth and Politics", p. 252.
38 Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", p. 366.
39 Ibid., p. 377.

since ideological manipulation implies self-deception, the conflict between life and the system "runs de facto through each person", Havel claims. To the extent that the post-totalitarian society is upheld by such "universal" suppression of the aims of life to a hidden existential sphere, resistance to the system must originate in this "semidarkness", on the inward level of consciousness and conscience, and anyone may at any moment be struck "by the force of truth".[40] The potential resistance can become actual in political acts and sudden explosions of civil unrest, events that are not restricted to protests by intellectuals, for example a worker's strike, a rock concert or any revolt against manipulation.

Hence the Prague Spring, Havel argues, which appeared to be a clash between two opposing groups, was really "the final act and the inevitable consequence of a long drama originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society".[41] At the beginning of this drama was no organised resistance, but rather individual poets, painters, musicians or ordinary citizens called by their conscience. Indeed, Charter 77 and other movements can be properly understood only against this hidden "hinterland" of dissidents. And while the "second culture" created through *samizdat* editions of books, magazines, private performances and concerts is the most articulated form of resistance, this "parallel polis" is not an aim in itself, according to Havel, but "points beyond itself and makes sense only as an act of deepening one's responsibility to and for the whole".[42] The aim of the dissident movements, he even claims, is not primarily to affect the power structure but to address "the hidden spheres of reality" and demonstrate "living within the truth" as a human and social alternative. His reflections at the very end of the essay not only reinforce this claim but also, as we will see, resonate with the spectral temporality articulated by Derrida ten years later.

Havel asks rhetorically whether "certain elements" of the concrete post-totalitarian experience do not "point somewhere further, beyond their apparent limits", and whether they are indeed "quietly waiting for the moment when they will be read and grasped", like a non-distant future, having been here "for a long time".[43] In this context he introduces the term "post-democracy" in order to describe the hope for a "moral reconstitution" of the post-totalitarian society.[44] Post-democracy should not be taken as an alternative political model but as "a radical renewal" of experiences of rootedness, re-

40 Ibid., p. 369.
41 Ibid., p. 370.
42 Ibid., p. 397.
43 Ibid., p. 408.
44 Ibid., p. 407.

sponsibility and solidarity, prefigured by the dissident communities. Havel's reflections on the "nonpolitical politics" of the dissidents indicate a political transformation that is emancipatory but not politically utopian, revolutionary and yet unpredictable. In distinction from the empty present of ideological time, and from a linear conception of time, post-democracy recognises a historical order where the past lives on in the present and the future is already "around us and within us". The figure of the dissident manifests this different historical order. While Havel insists that the dissident community does not "assume a messianic role" or lead anyone, the post-democratic promise nevertheless evokes the "weak" messianic power Walter Benjamin thematises in "Theses on the Philosophy of History".[45] This power admits a hidden historicity, articulated in the second thesis as "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one". From this perspective, history is not a "progression", understood as the "causal connection between various moments in history", but a fact becomes historical posthumously in a "constellation" between the present and the past, or in a specific "time of now" [*Jetztzeit*].[46] When Benjamin acknowledges the unpredictability of historical events, he relates to a tradition within modern Jewish philosophy according to which the "light of Messiah" is a flash of lightning that breaks through the temporal order of events without any foreseeable outcome.[47] I will show in the final part of this paper that there is a correspondence between Havel's "dissident" and Derrida's "spectre" on the level of the messianic historical order. Derrida's reflections on Marxism at the time of perestroika testify to a heterogeneous origin of the spectre and, like Havel, evoke Benjamin's philosophy of history.

4. Spectral temporality

Derrida thematised Marx for the first time during a visit in Moscow in February 1990, but it was only a few years later that he became seriously involved in Marxist philosophy. The focus of his concern was the "ghosts" Marx left behind, that is, the inheritance of Marxist thought. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida distinguishes this inheritance, a heterogeneity demanding interpretation and selection, from "the Marxist dogmatics linked to the apparatuses

45 Benjamin, W. "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York, Schocken Books 1968, p. 253–264.

46 Ibid., p. 261, 263.

47 Bouretz, P., "Messianism and Jewish Modern Philosophy", in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Michael L. Morgan & Peter Eli Gordon. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 174.

of orthodoxy".[48] Although Derrida has been criticised for his nonpolitical angle, stressing the philosophical inheritance of Marxism does not, according to him, erase its revolutionary and emancipatory dimensions. Spectrality ultimately concerns a responsibility for "the ghosts of those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet", a responsibility that disjoins the living present, not as its negative reversal but as reaching "*beyond [therefore] the living present in general*".[49] As literary theorist Colin Davies puts it, the spectre addresses "the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future".[50] In contrast to the traditional notion of "ontology", where being is conceptualised in terms of self-identical presence, the dramatisation of the ghost that opens *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* suggests to Derrida a "hauntology" that he elaborates in terms of such disjointed temporality. The presence of Shakespeare is unmistakable, and one central question in Derrida's lecture concerns the meaning of Hamlet's curse in the first act of the play. What does it mean that "time is out of joint" and to "set it right"?

In his reflection on the many French translations of Hamlet's phrase, Derrida observes that André Gide's translation from 1945 gives the expression an ethical and political meaning: "this age is dishonored" (*cette époque est déshonorée*) adds a quality of "decadence or corruption of the city" and of "dissolution or perversion of customs".[51] On Derrida's reading, Hamlet's curse opens a space that, on the one hand, concerns Hamlet's destiny to set a disjointed time right, "by making of rectitude and right ('*to set it right*') a movement of *correction*, reparation, restitution, vengeance, revenge, punishment."[52] On the other hand, Derrida tentatively proposes, the curse also concerns a "disadjustment" that opens up an "infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other", and thus transcends vengeance:

> [C]an one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance? Better than removed: infinitely foreign, heterogenous at its source? And is this day before us, to come, or more ancient than memory itself?[53]

48 Derrida, *Specters*, p. 64.
49 Ibid., p. xx (italics in original).
50 Davies, C., "État présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms". *French Studies* 59, 2005, No. 3, p. 378f.
51 Derrida, *Specters*, p. 18. As he observes, "time" could mean time as temporality, history or even world.
52 Ibid., p. 21 (italics in original).
53 Ibid., p. 21.

Rather than repeating the circle of revenge, Derrida writes in a related passage, the principle of this justice would be to recognise the respect for “those others who are no longer or … who are not yet *there*, presently living”.[54] In a footnote, he identifies the “logic” of such spectral justice with the messianic force Benjamin associates with historical materialism in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”.[55] Whereas Havel’s indirect reference to Marx, as I have suggested, indicates a spectral dimension of the dissident, Derrida’s direct reference to Benjamin draws attention to the heterogeneity of spectrality itself. The crucial passage is, again, Benjamin’s second thesis on the history of philosophy:

> The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. Historical materialism is aware of that.[56]

Derrida comments briefly on this passage in *Specters of Marx*. The messianic inheritance is “turned toward the future no less than the past”, he writes, “in a heterogenous and disjointed time”.[57] The idea of a spectral temporality, however, is outlined already in the “phantom narrative” from his trip to Moscow in 1990, written as a commentary on Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary* (1926–1927), Gide’s travelogue *Return from the USSR* (1936–1937) and René Étiemble’s autobiographical travel notes from the 1930s.[58] These texts are all bound to the October Revolution and to the progress of the USSR. In Gide’s words, “[w]hat we dreamed, what we scarcely dared to hope but toward which all our will, our force tended, took place over there. And so it was a land in which utopia had a good chance of becoming reality.”[59] As such, Derrida comments, this tradition of texts is linked with a “unique, finished, irreversible, and nonrepeatable sequence of political history” that has come to an end at the time of perestroika. Yet whereas USSR as construction, “chosen fatherland” and promise has failed, he claims, this failure has opened the

54 Ibid., p. xix (italics in original).
55 Ibid., p. 180n2.
56 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, p. 254.
57 Derrida, *Specters*, p. 181n2.
58 Derrida, J. “Back from Moscow, in the USSR”, in *Politics, Theory, and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Mark Poster. New York, Columbia University Press 1993, p. 211. For a discussion on the relation between Derrida’s Moscow narrative and his philosophical interpretation of Marxism in *Specters of Marx*, see Ousmanova, A., ”Derrida on the Territory of Ghosts”. *Athena* 13, 2018, p. 100.
59 Derrida, “Back from Moscow”, p. 220.

era of reconstruction – "construction that begins or rebegins after a new departure".[60]

Derrida's narrative reveals that the two historical moments – that of the revolution and that of perestroika – are unified by a particular undecidability or "paradox of *anticipation*". His crucial point is that the experience "in progress" of the USSR, as well as the experience of the utopian travelogue that is being written, is a "construction" that is suspended, which means that "it remains as undecided and undecidable".[61] On the one hand, Derrida notes, these texts are talking about a "time to come", or an "anticipation of the future: will the promise be kept?"[62] The epigraph of Gide's travelogue, which is a Homeric hymn to Demeter, illustrates this anticipation in suspense: Demeter is "'leaning forward, as if over a future humanity, above a radiant nursling' in whom something 'superhuman is being prepared'".[63] Gide's continued text is "myth, religion, pilgrimage, and hope", Derrida suggests when he interprets this passage, but also – since hope is projected on a political construction – the "end of myth" and the beginning of history. This structure corresponds to the structure of messianism, but the undecidability of the future is thematised already in Benjamin's reflections on Moscow.

Among the possibilities the city reveals, Benjamin writes in a letter to Martin Buber after his return from Moscow in February 1927, is "the possibility that the Revolution might fail or succeed".[64] And he continues: "[S] omething unforeseeable will be the result and its picture will be far different from any programmatic sketch one might draw of the future." Gide's and Benjamin's "supposed taking into account" of the failure of the construction, Derrida notes in retrospect, anticipates perestroika as the origin of a new political construction. Although the meaning and result of perestroika remain as undecidable as the first construction, there is clearly a "reversal of direction" in comparison to the utopian travelogues: "[T]oday there could not possibly be any back from the USSRs," he writes in 1990. To the contrary "one claims to go see 'over there' … whether perestroika is 'working,' if the delivery went well, if the travail is happening as it should".[65] As if in response to Havel's essay, Derrida confirms that the presumption in the West is that perestroika is to "forge a society … on the model of Western parliamentary democracies, liberal in the political and economic sense".[66] The discourse

60 Ibid., p. 222.
61 Ibid., p. 221.
62 Ibid., p. 222.
63 Ibid., p. 219.
64 Ibid., p. 225.
65 Ibid., p. 223.
66 Ibid.

dominating the West, he claims in the same passage, is articulated as a question: "Are these people going to succeed … in resembling us by entering the now more than ever assured space of democracies and their market (whether it is called capitalist, neocapitalist, or mixed …)?" Here, as in *Specters of Marx*, this political question translates into a question concerning time: "Are they finally going to enter history?"[67]

5. Concluding remarks

Derrida was far from unfamiliar with Charter 77 when he wrote his lecture on Marx. In his extensive biography of Derrida, Benoît Peeters narrates the events around Derrida's arrestment in Prague on New Year's Eve 1981.[68] As vice-president of the French branch of the Jan Hus Educational Foundation, he lectured on the evening of 27 December to a group of students and colleagues at the home of Ladislav Hejdánek, professor at Charles University. The content of the secret lecture was not political but based on a seminar Derrida had given at the Sorbonne in the same year on Descartes's relation to language. He nevertheless had the sense of already being followed at Orly airport, according to Peeters. Just before his return flight to Paris, four days later, Derrida was arrested at Prague airport and accused of "producing, trafficking and transferring drugs".[69] News of the arrest was soon made public, however, and Czech president Gustáv Husák, facing a potential diplomatic crisis, released him on the evening of 31 December.

The relation between Derrida and Havel that I have drawn attention to here is not biographical but systematic. I have argued that there is an affinity between the dissident as articulated in Havel's essay on the "power of the powerless" from 1979, and the spectre that Derrida elaborates in his reading of Marx in 1993. Both are manifestations of a specific modern temporality that Derrida (with Hamlet) calls "disjointed", because it is haunted by a revolutionary force and claim for justice. Derrida argues that spectral resistance or hauntology (the return and persistence of past injustices in the present) is intrinsic to or defines capitalist and neo-capitalist Europe, and hence also Western democracy. My more modest suggestion along the same lines is that dissident resistance (a hidden, potential resistance that can "at any time" become actual) is intrinsic to post-totalitarian Eastern Europe. The dissident is a "ghost" in the sense that it haunts the empty ideological temporality that Havel claims characterises normalised Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. The

67 Ibid.
68 Peeters, B., *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown. Cambridge, Polity Press 2015, p. 332–341.
69 Ibid., p. 334.

promise of this resistance is certainly not a "return" to the ideological doctrine of Marxism. Yet the existential revolt of the dissident community restores space for reality and truth that evokes something of Marx's original rebellion against a system that constrains human self-constitution and diversity. The dissident, like Derrida's spectre, is a "ghost" in the sense that it radicalises the Marxist legacy, and attending to its forgotten message is first of all an ethical injunction.

The emphasis in Havel's essay, furthermore, is not so much on the past as on the future: the dissident movements anticipate a "renewal" of experiences of responsibility and solidarity, and these experiences are already "around us and within us". In other words, while Havel's opening allusion to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* is more than a rhetorical, perhaps ironic, gesture, the stronger evidence for a "spectral" reading of his text is his original conception of post-democracy, which he understands not in terms of Western parliamentary democracy but precisely as an "inward" future that will express itself in nonconformist actions and manifestations. According to the interpretation suggested here, this non-oppositional, "nonpolitical politics" (remember Havel's reference to experiences "quietly waiting for the moment when they will be read and grasped") evokes the weak messianic power Benjamin articulates in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from 1940. The "secret agreement" between generations that this power recognises translates into a responsibility not only for the presently living, as Derrida puts it, but also for those others who are no longer there, and for those who are not yet there. In addition, the dissident prefiguration of the future recalls Benjamin's experience of the "progress" and "unforeseeable result" of the October revolution in his reflections on Moscow. In spectral terms, post-democracy remains to come in the way the failure or success of the revolution is held in suspense at the time of writing.

Derrida's interpretation of Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, alongside Gide's *Return from the USSR* and Étiemble's autobiographical travel notes from the same period, reinforces the critical link or "generational agreement" between Havel, Benjamin and himself. When Benjamin takes into account the failure of the October Revolution and of the USSR as a political construction, Derrida claims, he in fact anticipates perestroika as a *new* political construction, as undecided and undecidable as the first. What Derrida says about democracy in 1990, Havel (in a reversed direction) could have said ten years earlier:

> To say, for example, that "democratization" is in progress and to mean by that all the movements in progress in the East is not perhaps false but it is surely very confused. Especially when this supposes that we have a

rigorous model of democracy, an assured experience, a frozen concept, at home, *chez nous* in the West and especially, therefore when a naïve euphoria or a very calculated strategy tries to credit the idea that what they ought to want in any case, is to rejoin us and resemble us by taking part in the great space of liberalism, both political and economic.[70]

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70 Derrida, "Back from Moscow", p. 206.

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