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Silence, in the Archives: Derrida's Other Marx(s)

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Abstract. The idea that Derrida kept silent on Marx before the publication of *Spectres de Marx*, in 1993, has become a commonplace in Derrida studies and in the history of Marxism and French 20th century political thought. This idea has often been accompanied by a certain representation of the relationship (or absence thereof) between deconstruction and dialectical materialism, and fed the legend of deconstruction's «apoliticism» – at least before what some have called Derrida's «ethicopolitical turn», usually dated in the early 1990s. Against this narrative, this essay analyzes Derrida's notorious «silence on Marx» before *Specters of Marx* from the perspective of the archives. Archival research transforms the narrative: Derrida's «silence on Marx» was only «relative». Beyond the scene of publications, archives reveal *another scene*: multiple engagements with Marx and Marxist thought, marked and remarked in many archival documents – more particularly in a series of early seminar notes from the 1960s and 1970s. How does this archival scene transform our interpretation of Derrida's «silence»?

Keywords. Deconstruction, Marxism, Archives, Althusser, dialectical materialism.

*Concerning that about which one cannot speak,
isn't it best to remain silent?
I let you answer this question.
It is always entrusted to the other.
Derrida [1987]: 53*

This essay speaks about a certain silence: Jacques Derrida's apparent silence on Marx and Marxist thought before 1993 – that is, before he gave his famous lectures «Specters of Marx» during the conference «Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective» (April 1993, University of California). These lectures were published in French in the same year, and in Peggy Kamuf's English translation the following year (Derrida [1993c]).

The word «silence» was frequently used to describe Derrida's attitude towards Marxist theory before 1993. As we will see, the word

was adopted by a multiplicity of actors on the multilayered scene I will describe in this essay, including by Derrida himself. On this scene, the word «silence» runs like a rumor from one actor to the other – to such extent that the word itself seems to act as one of the actors in that configuration. The question of «silence» overdetermines many of the questions I want to address today with regard to Derrida's scene of writing – a scene which, as we will see, is also a scene of *teaching*. Said «silence» is usually mentioned by Derrida's interlocutors as an implicit critique, as an attack, or as a sort of friendly challenge, meant to offer him the opportunity to respond, to explain himself about his «silence on Marx». In several occasions, then, Derrida was led to acknowledge this silence, sometimes attempting to justify it with a certain impatience, sometimes exhibiting it with irony, even pride, going to suggest that this silence could be read as a strategic weapon or as a theoretical statement in its own right. For that matter, Derrida's silence and his tardiness in writing about Marx were made very explicit in *Specters of Marx*, in which the motifs of *contretemps* and untimeliness were connected to an important theme of the book – namely, «messianicity without messianism», the disadjusted-disadjusting promise of justice:

If one interprets the gesture we are risking here as a belated-rallying-to-Marxism, then one would have to have misunderstood quite badly. It is true, however, that I would be today, here, now, less insensitive than ever to the appeal of the contretemps or of being out-of-step, as well as to the style of an untimeliness that is more manifest and more urgent than ever. Already I hear people saying: «You picked a good time to salute Marx!» Or else: «It's about time!» «Why so late?» I believe in the political virtue of the contretemps. And if a contretemps does not have the good luck, a more or less calculated luck, to come just in time, then the inopportuneness of a strategy (political or other) may still bear witness, precisely [justement], to justice, bear witness, at least, to the justice which is demanded and about which we were saying a moment ago that it must be disadjusted, irreducible to exactness [justesse] and to law. (Derrida [1993c]: 109-110)

«Why so late?», Derrida asks, humorously mimicking the other's speech. «Pourquoi si tard?» When *Spectres de Marx* was published in 1993, it was indeed received as Derrida's first proper engagement with Marxist thought. At the time, Derrida did nothing to dispel this common preconception, quite the opposite: in the book, Derrida's belatedness came front and center, and in fact provided Derrida with one of his main arguments: «The time is out of joint». In that book, Derrida praised the political virtues of *contretemps*, and made of untimeliness a decisive philosophical and political concept. According to Derrida, «out-of-jointness» is the condition for a justice that cannot *present* itself, that can never be «right on time». The force of a certain *contretemps* is conceived as what propels the deconstruction of law, signaling its inadequateness and perfectibility and enjoining its transformation. In this way, Derrida wrote *Specters of Marx* also as a self-performance, as a staging, a *mise en scène* of his own belatedness, here understood as a political force of inquiry against the linearity of historical time, and as a potential strategic asset in some struggle, present or to come. In 1993, after the collapse of the USSR, and in the ideological context of neoliberal consolidation, Derrida depicted a global geopolitical and philosophical scene in which Marxist thought had perhaps become so *passé* that it might have retrieved some of its theoretical, political, and strategic power of subversion and transformation. In arguing for the political efficacy of afterwardsness, of Marxism's afterlife, Derrida somewhat justified his own tardiness: it was now time to break the «silence» he supposedly kept on Marx up until that point.

What I have just described constitutes, at least, the «official» narrative, one which Derrida did nothing to dissipate within *Specters of Marx*. Any casual reader would be entirely justified in believing that the book was indeed Derrida's first public incursion into Marx's philosophy and Marxist thought more generally. However, outside of the book itself, one can find signs that the self-narrative offered by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* was not quite accurate. The scene was somewhat staged.

For example, in the 1993 interview «La déconstruction de l'actualité», whose publication closely followed the publication of *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida explained that his so-called «silence» on Marx was only «relative». Answering a remark from the journal *Passages*, he mentions *another scene* – that of the seminar, a scene of teaching:

Passages: You spoke about Marx in a course at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the seventies, but only allusively.

Derrida: They were more than allusions, if I may say so, and it was in more than one course. But apart from such references, my book [Specters of Marx] is an attempt to explain that situation, that relative silence, and the difficult but, I believe, intimate connections between deconstruction and a certain «spirit» of marxism. (Derrida [1993d]: 38)

As a matter of fact, Derrida's discussions of Marx and Marxist theory in those early seminars were much, much more than mere «allusions». As we will see in the course of this essay, Derrida offered very lengthy and detailed readings of Marx and Marxist texts as early as some twenty-five years before 1993 and *Specters of Marx*. During the late 1960s and (perhaps more significantly) the early 1970s – a crucial and prolific period for French and international Marxist thought – Derrida wrote and taught extensively about Marx and Marxist authors (including Engels, Gramsci, Lenin, Benjamin, Kojève, Althusser, Balibar, Buci-Glucksmann, and many others), but none of this work was ever published during Derrida's life. It is a massive fact, one that any scholar conducting archival research cannot ignore: as Derrida explains in the above quotation, his «silence» was merely «relative». What remains to be done, then, is to rewrite the history of this «silence» from the perspective of the archives.

But is it possible to write the history of a silence? Not of any silence, not of silence *in general*, but of a particular, singular silence? How does one interpret a certain silence? Can this silence be simply circumscribed, delimited, localized, exhibited and perhaps explained according to an archaeological or genealogical narrative?

These questions cannot be avoided by anyone undertaking archival research, be they scholars or archivists. The archive always has to do with a certain silence, and this for at least two reasons. *First*, quite simply because the archive seems to speak to us. It tells us something. If there is interest in conducting archival research, this is certainly because archives are a source of information: they provide us with something that was not general knowledge, something that was left unsaid by documents heretofore available to the public. Archival research discloses something that was kept hidden, silent. It doesn't matter, here, whether this silence was the result of intentional decisions or unintentional structures. Whatever the case, archival research has a revelatory function. In the context of philosophical and theoretical archives, it allows us to bring out new elements in order to better understand the history or genealogy of a work, of a concept or a text. Archival research brings out new knowledge from old «things»: it illuminates the biographical, interpersonal, institutional, socio-political contexts in which such or such philosophical or theoretical work was produced. As such, archival research always crosses limits and breaches a certain silence: it allows new discoveries by transgressing and sometimes redefining the limits or frontiers between silence and non-silence, between the private and the public – for instance between the privacy of drafting, note-taking, writing, and the stage of publication.

However, and *secondly*, these limits or borders are never simple and natural; they are always somewhat artificial, fabricated, and therefore deconstructible. As Derrida explains in his many theoretical works on archives, the process of archivization always supposes a number of exclusions, selections, repressions, in brief, a certain silencing violence which cannot and should not be ignored¹. This aspect is perhaps significant when

¹ See notably Derrida (1995; 1998). Derrida summarizes this law of archivization in the recently published seminar *Le parjure et le pardon* (1997-1998): «la loi terrible de la machine à archiver, qui sélectionne, filtre, commande et oublie, réprime, refoule, détruit autant qu'elle garde» (Derrida [2019b] : 342).

it comes to Derrida's seminar notes, which constitute an important portion of his archives. Most of his teaching notes are properly written down or typed. Derrida was reading out loud his texts during his seminars – for example at École Normale Supérieure (ENS) from 1964 to 1984. These texts are now available to the reader in the archives (at Irvine, California, or at IMEC, Normandy). However, if we simply read these seminar notes as regular texts, if we read them as if they were just more books to be added to Derrida's already impressive bibliography, we risk losing sight of the specificity of these objects *as seminar notes*: we miss the singularity, the material inscription, the situation of the archive. We risk forgetting that we miss all that which exceeds the written medium, the cuts and exclusions that made their archiving possible – the orality and aurality of the teaching scene, Derrida's voice, potential ad-libs or improvisations, the physical performance that goes with the text, his body language, etc. But we also miss broader contextual delimitations, Derrida's professional environment and correlated friendships, rivalries, or hostilities, the socio-political circumstances of such teaching (which is particularly significant when someone teaches Marx), but also various institutional constraints, the fact that Derrida had to teach specific notions, each year, that were part of the programme of the *agrégation* of philosophy, the discussions with students, students' exposés, their grading, and so on and so forth². The list is virtually unlimited. Certainly, we can always find *traces* of all this in the archives. Traces mark the archive *in absentia*. But there must always be some inarchivable remainder – a certain silence on which the process of archiving depends, one which can never be fully exhausted by archival research, however patient or sophisticated.

The question of what exceeds the archive is part of the archival question: it supposes a num-

ber of lines and borders between the archivable and the inarchivable, between the archived and its other. For the archive to exist, for it to become available to interpretation, it must be instituted, which implies a series of exclusions and incorporations, and therefore a certain «archival violence» (Derrida [1995]: 19), and perhaps a certain politics of the archive, one which affects the work of interpretation in sometimes unpredictable ways. If one wants to write the history of a silence, such as Derrida's «silence on Marx», one must always run the risk of *marking* and *remarking* this archival violence and the silencing effects of the archive's institution. This risk is that of *interpretation*. Through its institutionalization the archive keeps in itself, incorporates the silence of what it excludes. How can we *speak* about this silence? How do we *make* it speak, or perhaps *let* it speak? This silence, seemingly pre-originary and irreducible, is a fact that archival research must deal with, one which it must *interpret* – «interpret» either in the sense of an active hermeneutic practice, or in the sense of a musical performance: silence must be reprised, repeated otherwise.

Yet, this silence is always specific. It is what makes each archival document absolutely unique and singular. There is a silence of the archive because the archive preserves in itself the secret of its own institution, of its own production *as archive*. Archival research cannot ignore this silence. This is why one should be careful not to look in the archive for the final truth of a writer, of a thought, of a corpus, or even of a historical context, a «period» or an «age», an *épistèmè* – even though, if it is what one is looking for, the archive is not the worst place to start.

THE LAWS OF SILENCE: ECONOMIES AND STRATEGIES

Before I can show how archival research complicates Derrida's so-called «silence on Marx», let me describe briefly the historical context in which this silence «appeared», and how it might have been justified by Derrida and interpret-

² See Mercier (2020c; 2021) for a discussion of the institutional inscription of the seminars, and of Derrida's interrogation of these borders and limitations within the frame of his own teaching practice.

ed by his contemporaries. In a 1989 interview, Michael Sprinker asked Derrida about his «reticence» about Marx and more generally about his relationship to Althusser. There, Derrida tried to explain the circumstances of his «silence on Marx» – first when he was studying at ENS in the 1950s, and later, when he returned to teach at the same school with Althusser's support, notably during what Derrida calls «the big Althusserian moment», from the mid-1960s to after 1968: «I thus found myself walled in by a sort of tormented silence. Furthermore, all that I am describing was coupled, naturally, with what others have called an intellectual, if not personal, terrorism. I always had very good personal relations with Althusser, Balibar, and others. But there was, let's say, a sort of theoretical intimidation [...]» (Derrida [1993b]: 188). The 1989 interview is also the occasion for Derrida to offer a striking description of the broader conjuncture, hegemonic mechanisms and interpersonal relationships eliciting a certain silence – a warlike scene characterized by implicitness and avoidance:

Implicitly, underhandedly, there was such a war, so many maneuvers of intimidation, such a struggle for «hegemony» that one found oneself easily discouraged. Moreover, everyone was inevitably a party to it. There were camps, strategic alliances, maneuvers of encirclement and exclusion. Some forces in this merciless Kampfplatz grouped around Lacan, others around Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze. When it had any, that period's diplomacy (war by other means) was that of avoidance: silence, one doesn't cite or name, everyone distinguishes himself and everything forms a sort of archipelago of discourse without earthly communication, without visible passageway. (Derrida [1993b]: 194)

In the same interview, Derrida multiplies the justifications for his silence, stressing strategic and political implications. Besides intimidation, he explains that he feared that deconstructive critiques of the Marxist discourse be reappropriated by anti-Marxist (conservative) forces or actors: «What was called my paralysis a while ago was also a political gesture: I didn't want to raise

objections that would have appeared anti-Marxist. [...] And, right or wrong, giving in both to political conviction and probably also to intimidation, I always abstained from criticizing Marxism head on. And I stress “head on”» (192)³.

Derrida thus emphasizes the *circumstantial* character of his silence: «The silence was conjunctural. The fact of not speaking, of not lending, more precisely, *a certain public form* was both a conjunctural and a political gesture» (197). Derrida even goes to speculate about the positive impact of his silence *as silence*, on the possibility that his silence might have had concrete effects on the contemporary scene:

In fact, I think my texts and my behavior «spoke», expressing what was necessary to have understood for those who were interested and knew how to decipher it. For all that, I don't say that silence was right or in general the only possibility. It was the one that I believed right and the only one of which I myself at that place and time was capable. On the French scene I didn't wish to attack, in a conventionally coded, utilizable, and manipulable way, a Marxist discourse [Althusser's] that seemed, rightly or wrongly, positive inside the Party, more intelligent and refined than what one usually heard. Furthermore, as I've said, I felt intimidated. It wasn't easy. It seemed that maybe silence would be more effective. I believe it was not without effect. (197-198)

³ See also p. 197: «Since I couldn't formulate such questions without appearing to join the chorus of adversaries, I remained silent.» This justification, given in hindsight in 1989, is confirmed by a long letter sent by Derrida to his friend Gérard Granel in February 1971. There, Derrida explains that criticizing Marxism could be considered «a reactionary gesture in the present conjuncture», and adds: «I'll never fall into anti-communism, so I shut up [*je la ferme*]. And I know this annoys everyone [...]» (IMEC, 219DRR 47.1, my translation). This letter, marked by a certain irritated impatience, also includes several elements of self-analysis, as well as a long theoretical-political reflection on the post-May 1968 conjuncture in relation to Marxism, and to what could be interpreted as a philosophical «Cold War». I'll analyze the correspondence with Granel in more detail in future publications.

Of course, it is very difficult to evaluate the impact of Derrida's silence, and the effects it might have had – the effects which Derrida *believes* it had. How does one even begin to assess the *effects of silence*? In any case, and as a matter of fact, it is true that Derrida did not publish any text or book focused on Marx or Marxism before 1993. One can find passing references to Marx and Marxist thought in his published texts, but these references are rare and spare⁴. This apparent silence is particularly striking for at least two reasons: first, Derrida's writings during the same period covered a wide array of authors pertaining to the Western canon, from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel, Heidegger, Artaud and Foucault, from Husserl, Freud, Nietzsche and Benjamin to Austin, Valéry and Blanchot, and so on and so forth. Marx's absence was thus all the more striking. Second, the absence of any theoretical or political engagement with Marxist thought on Derrida's part was all the more significant because engaging with the Marxist tradition was then perceived as essential and decisive – particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially on the French intellectual scene, both for political and theoretical reasons.

In that context, Derrida's «silence» could only be considered as problematic, and was deemed disturbing by many. Here, already, the matter of «silence» becomes inseparable from that of interpretation – of an interpretative gesture which can produce contradictory and often incompatible effects: *on the one hand*, Derrida's «silence» could be interpreted by his friends, colleagues or interlocutors (notably fellow members of the Tel Quel group) as a tacit recognition of their own theoretical-political positions. For example, the collected volume *Théorie d'ensemble*, published by Tel Quel in 1968, includes not only Derrida's famous text «La différence», but also multiple contributions

⁴ See *De la grammatologie* (Derrida [1967]); *La dissémination* (Derrida [1972a], notably «Hors livre, préfaces»), but the book also includes passing references to Lenin, Mao, and Althusser); *Marges – de la philosophie* (Derrida [1972b], notably «La mythologie blanche» and «Les fins de l'homme»); and *Glas* (Derrida [1974]: 225-231). See Mercier (2020b: 2) for more details.

by Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleyne, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Jean-Louis Houdebine in which they explicitly attempt to articulate several of Derrida's notions (arche-writing, text, or *différance*) with dialectical materialism – notably through a general theory of textuality grafted on Althusser's structuralist Marxist-scientific Theory. In this perspective, Sollers and Tel Quel felt justified in interpreting «deconstruction» as an anti-idealist weapon, as a revolutionary device in the service of a Marxist-materialist politics of the proletariat. One can imagine that contemporary observers could feel equally justified in interpreting Derrida's *de facto* alliance with Sollers and Tel Quel, from 1965 until their split in 1971-72, as an objective agreement with their theoretical-political stances. But, *on the other hand*, Derrida's silence on Marx and Marxism could also be interpreted as a proof of the essentially *apolitical* character of deconstruction. The so-called deconstructive «method» was thus perceived by some as a pure textualism, as a purely academic practice uninterested in extratextual and economic-material matters. In this perspective, some could interpret deconstruction as the epitome of bourgeois idealism and ideology, as a conservative «pedagogy» without any grasp on political and material urgencies: a «counterrevolutionary» or «revisionist» weapon. This type of interpretation fueled critiques of Derrida coming from Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault in 1972, but also from members of the Tel Quel group, including Sollers and Pleyne, after the 1971-72 split – that is, after Tel Quel definitely broke from the French Communist Party to embrace Maoism and the Cultural Revolution.⁵

Therefore, it is an understatement to say that Derrida's «silence» did not go unnoticed. This «silence» was not kept silent: it is often mentioned and thematized as such, as «silence», by Derrida's interlocutors, notably in private correspondence and in the course of interviews. This might explain why, besides the passing references I mentioned above, one may find relatively

⁵ On these polemical questions, see Forest (1995) and Peeters (2010: 230-255).

longer engagements with Marxism and dialectical materialism before 1993 in interviews, usually because Derrida is pressed for answers and justifications by the interviewers⁶. For example, in the June 1971 interview «Positions», Houdebine asks Derrida about the necessity of an «encounter» between deconstruction and «the materialist text», before mentioning «the passage of “*La différance*” where you speak of putting into question “the self-assured certitude of consciousness” and refer to Nietzsche and Freud, leaving in suspense (but this suspense itself is perfectly legible) any reference to Marx, and along with Marx to the text of dialectical materialism» (Derrida [1972c]: 61-62). To which Derrida responds:

You can imagine that I have not been completely unconscious of it. That being said, I persist in believing that there is no theoretical or political benefit to be derived from precipitating contacts or articulations, as long as their conditions have not been rigorously elucidated. Eventually such precipitation will have the effect only of dogmatism, confusion, or opportunism. To impose this prudence upon oneself is to take seriously the difficulty, and also the heterogeneity, of the Marxist text, the decisive importance of its historical stakes. [...] Do me the credit of believing that the «lacunae» to which you alluded are explicitly calculated to mark the sites of a theoretical elaboration which remains, for me, at least, still to come. (Derrida [1972c]: 62)

As usual, there is a great deal of preterition, not to say prestidigitation, in Derrida's answers, as he then proceeds to present a number of preliminary remarks as to what the «encounter» between deconstruction and Marxist materialism could look like. I cannot analyze those remarks here, but let me note for now that they chiefly concern the question of a non-metaphysical «concept of matter» and of its relationship to what is called «ideology» in Marxist language. One can imagine that, in the French post-68 intellectual and socio-politi-

cal context, the stakes were very high. In any case, one could easily infer from Derrida's above statement that the work of «theoretical elaboration» which is «*still to come*» would eventually result in *Spectres de Marx*, published in 1993, more than twenty years after this interview. In terms of publications, this is certainly the case. But it is without counting on another scene.

ANOTHER SCENE: THE SEMINARS

Indeed, one thing that Derrida does not mention in his answer to Houdebine is that a version of the «encounter» between deconstruction and the materialist text, and of the work of clarification this encounter requires, had in fact already started to take place in the context of Derrida's seminars at ENS⁷. Already in the years 1969-1970, in the seminar «Théorie du discours philosophique: la métaphore dans le texte philosophique», Derrida had offered a series of reflections on the status of metaphor in the philosophical text, which included long analyses of Marx's theory of use-value and of his critiques of metaphoricality. These reflections were later included in much shorter form in the published version of «White Mythology» (Derrida [1972b]). In the same seminar, Derrida also discussed the use

⁷ A footnote to the interview (p. 106) mentions a seminar on Plato's «*chora*», but does not say that the seminar actually begins with a long analysis of the status of «matter» and «materiality» in Hegelianism and Marxism – an analysis which infuses all subsequent discussions, in the same seminar, of Plato, Aristotle, and Heidegger on the topic of *chora* and materiality. This seminar was given in the years 1970-1971, that is, shortly before the interview took place. I'll say a few words about it in a moment. Let's also note that, in the late text «Corona Vitae» dedicated to Gérard Granel, Derrida (2001) mentions a «seminar on Marx» given «in 1968, after May». Unfortunately, I haven't found (yet) any trace of this seminar in the archives – another reminder that archival research is always a work-in-progress, perhaps an endless task. Archives have so far remained silent on that front. All other unpublished seminars I will discuss in this section can be consulted at IMEC (fonds Derrida, 219DRR).

⁶ See notably *Positions* (Derrida [1972c]), and the 1975 interview «*Ja, ou le faux-bond*» (Derrida [1977]), which I discuss in Mercier (2021).

of metaphors in Marx's texts, notably in relation to the Marxian opposition between «theory» and «praxis», and included a quick reference to Althusser's work on the topic.

The following year, in 1970-1971, Derrida continued and expanded this reflection from another angle. The (protracted) title of this year's seminar was: «Théorie du discours philosophique 2. La forme du texte philosophique: les conditions d'inscription du texte de philosophie politique (l'exemple du matérialisme)». While the notion of «materialism» appears in the subtitle of the seminar, it would be an overstatement to say that it is a seminar *on* Marx or Marxism. Nonetheless, the seminar's first two sessions include a long analysis of the presuppositions of Marx's self-proclaimed «materialism» and interrogate the conditions of possibility for producing a *concept* of «matter» in a non-idealist way. Through readings of Hegel and Marx, Derrida demonstrates that the (Marxist-materialist) *reversal* of idealism should require not the replacement of «idealism» with «materialism» (both attitudes being described as equally metaphysical) but, rather, a *deconstructive* analysis of the *conditions of inscription* of the philosophical discourse – that is to say: a thinking of the trace, of general text and writing. Derrida explains that what we call «materialist philosophy» risks being complicit with idealism by erasing its own dependency on the marks, on text, and on the trace-structure. Materialism can always resemble a logocentric discourse of the Idea, an idealism of the concept – starting with the *concept* of «matter». Derrida claims that despite their differences, Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism tend to share «the same ignorance of the conditions of textual inscription of their own discourse» (Session 1, p. 4; my translation).

In this way, Derrida raises the stakes for the refutation of idealism (including in the form of materialist philosophy), and proposes to conceive deconstruction as a thinking of non-substantial materiality, one which would not share materialism's persisting reliance on the concept of matter (for example, inasmuch as it is indebted to classical oppositions such as ideality/matter or theory/

praxis). Derrida leaves the door open for interpreting deconstruction as a form of «materialist», non-idealist thought, and perhaps as *even more* «materialist» than doctrines that bear the name «materialism», precisely because deconstruction aims to reinscribe the logocentric (or idealist) concept of matter within the trace-structure – through which concepts of «matter» and «ideality» find themselves radically dislocated⁸. In the same seminar, Derrida pursues this deconstructive thinking of ideality-materiality through a long reading of Plato's concept of *chora* (in *Timaeus*) and of its interpretations by Aristotle and Heidegger. This reading aims to interrogate the theoretical inscription of «matter» and of «the political» – a textual inscription through which they are both made the docile objects of the philosophical discourse. In deconstructing this forceful gesture of inscription, Derrida enjoins his students to think of a politicized and materiality emancipated from the authority of idealism and philosophy – or, to be more precise, from what remains irreducibly idealist in the logocentric gesture of philosophy, even in «materialist» form.

Taken together, these two seminars – which belong to the same «ensemble», that of a «theory of the philosophical discourse» – gesture towards a novel interpretation of the articulation between deconstruction and Marxist-materialism. In these seminars, Derrida signals that the concepts of materialism, of politics and political engagement dominating the contemporary scene remain in fact traditionally metaphysical in their form (and possibly in their results), specifically because they are predicated on classical philosophical oppositions such as ideality/matter or theory/praxis. Derrida thus suggests that the work of deconstruction started in previous years, while it might have seemed to be focused on «text» and «writ-

⁸ This gesture could be interpreted as prefiguring Derrida's future reflections on «materiality without matter». See for instance his discussion of Paul de Man's singular «materialism» in «Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)» (Derrida [2002]).

ing», had in fact more to say about questions of political engagement and resistance than many contemporary discourses that present themselves as overtly «political» or «materialist». It is the case because deconstruction targets the forceful gestures of inscription, delimitation, exclusion and appropriation on which the philosophical discourse relies – all that through which philosophy enforces its totalizing authority over other «regional» fields and hampers the political by restricting its scope and prerogatives.

In the seminars of the following years, the references to Marxist thought became more and more frequent and frontal. In the 1972-1973 and 1974-1975 seminars, Derrida offered lengthy readings of Marxist authors: Marx and Engels (in 1972-1973), but also Lenin, Gramsci, Althusser, Balibar, Buci-Glucksmann and others (in 1974-1975). In these two seminars, Derrida pursued his critical exploration of Marxist thought by focusing on the concept of ideology, analyzing its underlying metaphysical presuppositions⁹. The first session of the 1972-1973 seminar, «Religion et philosophie», offers a long analysis of Marx and Engels's critique of Feuerbach and deconstructs the relationship between ideology and religion in *The German Ideology*. In the second session, Derrida continues this reflection through a deconstructive reading of the logic of commodity fetishism exposed by Marx in *Capital*. There, Derrida tries to identify something in the Marxian text that exceeds the strict opposition between concept and metaphor¹⁰. Similarly, Derrida refutes the possibility of rigorously dissociating «science» from «ideology», and challenges the notion of a strict scientificity of the Marxist discourse that could be a priori immune to the effects of ideology, be it

in religious or philosophical (metaphysical) form. The 1972-1973 seminar testifies to Derrida's suspicion against the strict opposition between ideology and science, which was a structuring dichotomy in the Marxist theoretical-political landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. Derrida does not mention Althusser by name in this seminar, but he raises a number of objections against the notion of «epistemological break» – a codename directly referring to the type of investigation conducted by Althusser and the Althusserians in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Even though Derrida does not refer explicitly to Althusser in the 1972-1973 seminar, he will offer many discussions of Althusser's texts, some of them long and detailed, in the following years: in the 1974-1975 seminar «GREPH, le concept de l'idéologie chez les idéologues français», in the seminar «Walter Benjamin» (the exact date of which is uncertain, but which was probably given sometime between 1973 and 1975)¹¹, and in the 1976-1977 seminar «Théorie et pratique», which is entirely structured around a discussion of Marx, Gramsci, Althusser and Heidegger on the subject of theory, praxis, and technique – this discussion

⁹ For a detailed analysis of these two seminars, see Mercier (2020b).

¹⁰ This is also done in the seminar «Walter Benjamin», which took place around the same years. There, Derrida justifies Benjamin's interest in allegory, in literature and in the metaphoric powers of language and ideology, against «rationalist» critics – notably Arendt and Adorno – who criticized Benjamin's «mystical» or «poetic» appropriation of Marxism.

¹¹ I must say a few more words about this rather brief seminar (only three sessions). Although it prefigures some later texts by Derrida on Benjamin, the seminar is very singular in its form and in its orientation, and most of it remains unpublished. There, Derrida explains that his readings of Benjamin are meant to interrogate «a Marxist theory of culture» (session 3, p. 2). In addition to readings of Benjamin, the seminar discusses Brecht, Arendt, Adorno, Althusser, and Sam Weber, and concludes with a reflection on the theme of the «messianic», drawing on Benjamin's «The Task of the Translator» (1923). Given the overall «Marxist» orientation of the seminar, it is difficult not to think that, in addition to providing the background for Derrida's «Des tours de Babel» (Derrida [1985]), the seminar was also the occasion for Derrida to experimentally interrogate a certain figure of Marxist messianicity, thus anticipating the promissory structure of «messianicity without messianism» that will become so important in *Specters of Marx* and beyond. Let me recall that this structure was elaborated by Derrida with reference (and in contrast) to Benjamin's «weak messianic force» (see Derrida [1993c]: 68-69 and 227-228; [1999]: 248-253).

being triggered, notably, by a deconstructive reading of the Theses on Feuerbach¹².

Taken together, all these seminars comprise hundreds and hundreds of pages of material specifically dedicated to Marx, Marxist thought, Althusser and dialectical materialism. But Derrida did not publish any of this material – while a lot of the work done in the same years on other authors (Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and so on), sometimes in the same seminars¹³, was later revised and published, often with little change, in such or such publications.

The question of Derrida's friendship with Althusser certainly deserves a few more words, here. This friendship – intense, complex, multi-layered – started in 1952 and lasted until Althusser's death, in October 1990. I cannot reconstitute all the biographical, interpersonal and historical implications of this relationship within the limits of this essay. Derrida tried to expose a number of those implications in his 1989 interview with Sprinker, but they should be complemented with a study of their correspondence, which testifies to their unconditional friendship (they often read like love letters) while showing signs of potential disagreements in theoretical and political terms. For example, as early as 1964, Derrida wrote to Althusser to give him a few comments about his essay «Marxism and Humanism», which will become the last chapter of *Pour Marx* (1965). After praising the text's originality and radicality, Derrida raises a few objections which concern, precisely, the concept of ideology:

I found the text that you sent to me excellent. I feel as close as one possibly could to that «theoretical anti-humanism» that you set out [...]. I was less convinced by everything that links these propositions

¹² The seminar was recently published in David Wills's translation (Derrida [2019c]). In a recent article, Michael Naas (2020) offers a powerful analysis of the seminar, very much related to our topic.

¹³ Take for example the four sessions on Hegel from the seminar «Religion et philosophie» (1972-1973), the bulk of which was later reproduced in *Glas* (Derrida [1974]). See Mercier (2020b: 8-16) for more details.

to Karl Marx himself. There is probably a great deal of ignorance in my mistrust and in my feeling that other – non-Marxist – premises could lie behind the same anti-humanism. [...] And, even though everything you say about over-determination and about the «instrumental» conception of ideology satisfies me completely – about the conscious-unconscious too, although ... – the very notion of ideology bothers me, for philosophical reasons that are, as you know, far from «reactionary». Quite the opposite, in fact. The notion strikes me as still imprisoned by a metaphysics and by a certain «reversed idealism» that you know better than anyone in the world. Sometimes, I even have the impression that the notion of ideology hampers you yourself.... We'll have to talk again about all this, with Marx's texts in hands... and you'll have to make me read.¹⁴

The result of this promise – «We'll have to talk again» – is not archived, as far as I know. But in 1989, Derrida told Sprinker:

At every step, I would have liked to have had a long discussion with [Althusser] and his friends and ask them to respond to questions I felt necessary. The fact is, as strange as it might seem, this discussion never took place. And yet we lived in the same «house» where we were colleagues for twenty years and his students and friends were often, in another context, mine. Everything took place underground, in the said of the unsaid. It's part of the French scene and is not simply anecdotal. An intellectual sociology of this dimension of French intellectual or academic life remains to be undertaken and notably of that normalien milieu in which the practice of avoidance is stupefying. (Derrida [1993b]: 193)

In any case – and without being able to undertake, here, this «intellectual sociology» – one could raise the hypothesis that Derrida's reluctance to frontally engage with Marx and Marxism in publications was partly due to his friendship with Althusser. This hypothesis was formulated as such by Gérard Granel in a letter written to Derrida in September 1967. In that letter, Granel

¹⁴ Derrida's letter to Althusser, September 1st 1964 (IMEC, 20 ALT/72/68 [ALT2.C2-03]). My translation.

praises Derrida for his deconstructive analyses of the Western philosophical canon (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger) but also for his willingness to critically discuss works in humanities and structuralism pertaining to anthropology, history, linguistics, or psychoanalysis (notably Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Saussure, or Freud). But Granel immediately adds: «I note in passing that the works inspired by Marx are missing from this list: is it because you want to leave Althusser in peace?»¹⁵. Granel's question is interesting not only because it indicates that Derrida's friends and interlocutors were well aware of Derrida's more or less calculated silence on Marx and Marxism, but also because it demonstrates that some of them were not shy in offering interpretations of said silence. Unfortunately, I could not find Derrida's response to Granel in the archives. In any case, it is hard to ignore the fact that Derrida's first publication on Marx and Marxist thought, *Specters of Marx*, postdates Althusser's death in 1990, which more or less coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union – a double «coincidence» that can only be left to interpretations.

At the current stage of my archival research, the first substantial discussion of Althusser by Derrida I could find, besides passing references in the 1969-1970 seminar, intervenes in the fifth session of the 1974-1975 seminar «GREPH, le concept de l'idéologie chez les idéologues français». The session offers a close reading of Althusser's famous essay «Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche)», first published in 1970 in the journal *La Pensée*. There, Derrida patiently deconstructs a number of oppositions structuring Althusser's argument: science/ideology, physical violence/ideological violence, family/society, and so on. Later in the same seminar, in sessions 8 and 9, Derrida pursues this reflection on ideology through extensive readings of Marx and Engels, and proceeds to analyze the Hegelian provenance of several Marxian concepts, such as dialectics, effectivity (*Wirklichkeit*), labor (*Arbeit*), production/reproduction, and so forth. Derrida draws

a series of theoretical and political consequences from the persistence of Hegelian metaphysics in the Marxian text. In particular, Derrida gestures towards a deconstructive thinking of labor (and division of labor) that would precede and exceed the Hegelian and Marxian dialectical-ontological systems and their underlying humanistic teleology of reappropriation. As is often the case with Derrida's deconstructive gesture, this is done by accounting for a number of motifs overly neglected by those systems – motifs such as sexual difference, animality, and metaphoricity, which, while being largely ignored by Hegel and Marx, remain silently at work within their systems, effecting from within their deconstruction, or self-deconstruction¹⁶.

The 1974-1975 seminar is important for another reason. As indicated in the title, the seminar was given in the context of the political-institutional engagements of GREPH (*Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique*), that was officially founded in January 1975. The group aimed to interrogate the ways in which the philosophical institution, the teaching of philosophy, and the forms taken by the school system and the university are articulated to power, to the general structures of society and the state, and to the forces that make up their socio-political and economic field of inscription – notably the articulation between education and the division of labor. In the wake of the May 1968 events, the members of GREPH aimed to interrogate the apparent objectivity and neutrality – in axiological and socio-political terms – of the French philosophical institution, starting with the institutional conditions of the teaching of philosophy¹⁷. Although GREPH did not have any official leadership, Derrida was the main animator of the group. And it is per-

¹⁶ For detailed analyses of economic, psychoanalytic and political implications of Derrida's readings of Althusser and Marx in this unpublished seminar, see Mercier (2020a; 2020b: 16-50; and 2021).

¹⁷ For more information about GREPH see Derrida (1990) and Orchard (2010). For a detailed analysis of Derrida's attitude towards his own teaching practice in seminars, especially in relation to Marxism and Althusserianism, see Naas (2020) and Mercier (2020c; 2021).

¹⁵ Granel's letter to Derrida, September 8th 1967 (IMEC, 219DRR 47.1). My translation.

haps important to note that it is in the context of a GREPH seminar that Derrida seriously amped up his work on Marx and Marxist theory. There, Derrida tried to demonstrate that the Marxist critique of ideology, either in Marxian or Althusserian form, is not enough to analyze the multiplicity of forces at work in the functioning of philosophy and to understand its influence on the reproduction of the socio-political and economic structures of society. To put it schematically, Derrida considers that the Marxist critique of ideology tends to reproduce metaphysical schemes which hamper the deconstruction of philosophical hegemony and remain overly conservative in their elaboration and their results. By providing deconstructive readings of Marx and Althusser in the seminar, Derrida thus proceeds to interrogate from within the forces and powers at work in the teaching of philosophy and in education in general. Derrida's deconstructive practice is thus put to work *in* the classroom, through the deconstruction of the seminar-form: the (deconstructive) seminar is a way, for Derrida, to *put deconstruction in practice* or, in other words, to exhibit the practical implications of deconstructing discourses and practices that make up what we call «philosophy», and to do so from within the institution of philosophy, in the very practice of *teaching philosophy*.

This deconstruction of the teaching of philosophy from within the seminar was pursued in the following years in «La vie la mort» (1975-1976)¹⁸, «GREPH, séminaire sur Gramsci» (1976), and «Théorie et pratique» (1976-1977). In these three courses, very different in form and in content, Derrida systematically recurs to readings of Marx and Marxist texts in order to challenge preconceptions underlying the teaching of philosophy, the program of *agrégation* and the seminar-form, and more generally the various resources of hegemony, cultural production and reproduction. This tells us

something about the role of Derrida's critical readings of Marx and Marxist thoughts in the shaping of his socio-political engagements and deconstructive practices, starting with his own relationship to teaching and to philosophy as an *institution*.

LETTING/MAKING THE ARCHIVES SPEAK

By way of conclusion, I would like to describe three ways in which archival research helps to reconsider the work of a philosopher – here, concerning more specifically Derrida's relationship to Marxist thought before *Specters of Marx*.

1. First, archival research reveals that Derrida's «silence on Marx» was in fact relative, multiple, pluralistic, penetrated by different voices, registers, modalities of writing and teaching. While Derrida refrained to engage with Marxism on the public scene, partly to avoid participating in public polemics and fueling anti-Marxist discourses, the study of archival materials helps to bring out another scene, an alternative corpus in which Derrida engaged in depth with Marx and Marxist authors much earlier than is commonly considered. Given that these engagements all have theoretico-political implications – concerning notably the metaphysical presuppositions of political economy, the division of labor, gender politics, and more generally the deconstruction of socio-political institutions – this other corpus also contributes to challenge the notion of an «ethicopolitical turn» of deconstruction, which some claimed took place in the early 1990s¹⁹. By giving us a glimpse into another (non-public) scene of writing-teaching, archival research thus allows to complicate the public persona of the philosopher «Jacques Derrida» – one which Derrida himself contributed to establish, for better or worse, through his publications and public interventions.

¹⁸ This seminar, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Pascale-Anne Brault, was recently published (Derrida [2019a]). An English translation by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas is now out (Derrida [2020]). For an illuminating analysis of this seminar, see Vitale (2018).

¹⁹ In a retrospective interview given in 2003, Derrida offered a critical reflection on this so-called «turn», notably in relation to his reading of Marx (see Derrida [2004]: 10-13).

2. However, one should not forget that archival documents (here, seminar notes), are not publications: they are teaching documents, and they must be read according to protocols that differ from the exegesis of a published book. Certainly, the two scenes I have described in this essay – one public, the other confined to the semi-public, semi-private pedagogical stage of the seminar – are inseparable and communicate in various ways. But they remain heterogeneous. Taken together, they allow us to grasp the internal conflicts and strategic compromises which shaped Derrida's corpus and the constitution of a certain body of work – a body that is internally divided and heterogeneous, however cohesive it might appear in hindsight.

This is why archival research supposes an attention to contexts of emergence and a constant recontextualization of archival documents. It is a matter of reinscribing the philosophical work in the historical, intellectual, and socio-political landscape of its elaboration, made of biographical intersections, interpersonal relationships, and institutional crossings. The «alternative scene» I have described in this essay demonstrates the importance of a certain *medium*: notably, Derrida used the seminar stage as a platform to approach topics that were perhaps too «touchy» for publications. As a teacher, Derrida could address questions and problems that were immediately relevant on the contemporary intellectual or philosophical scene, without however giving them the fixity, the gravity, or the weight of a publication. The seminars I have discussed in this essay testify to Derrida's desire to insert deconstructive reflections into contemporary debates that could hardly be ignored – concerning, for example, the Marxist and Althusserian critiques of dominant ideology, the theoretical-political influence of Marxist thought, the sexual and political economy of the division of labor, and so forth. Perhaps the seminar stage was the venue Derrida chose to acknowledge such contemporary polemics on the French-Parisian intellectual scene, without falling into polemical discussions by giving them the importance, dignity, or longevity of a «proper» publication – also probably not to engage in a cri-

tique of his friend and colleague Althusser on a public platform. In any case, it is, I believe, crucial that Derrida's perhaps most pragmatic, most practical deconstructive analyses of the institution of philosophy and of the socio-political violence of power structures in which teaching is inscribed first intervened *within his seminar*, and on the background of a reflection on Marx and Marxist theory. Let's not forget that the ENS seminars were the occasion for Derrida to teach to bright and privileged students, bound to become future teachers and professors; one can imagine that Derrida also wanted to train his students in the theoretical and practical deconstruction of philosophy, and to share with them his politico-institutional engagements in favor of a radical transformation of the educational system.

3. But the seminar stage also provided Derrida with the opportunity to satisfy one of the demands of deconstruction – namely, the necessity to reformulate questions *otherwise*, to interrogate existing presuppositions, to transform a certain theoretical-political heritage, and perhaps to radicalize Marxist questions by transforming the coordinates of the debate, without however opposing Marxist thought frontally and publicly. The scene of Derrida's public «silence on Marx» and the work he accomplished, laterally, on the seminar stage can and should thus be read together, as two different aspects of one same strategy. This can be inferred from the following passage from the 1989 interview:

But, again, I didn't wish to formulate these political objections and risk having them confused with conservative reticence. I didn't want that. I realize that others (few, in truth) found a clear way to take that risk which I didn't take. But I would say also that they did so in a code and according to an axiomatic with which I wanted nothing to do, which were not in tune with the discourse that I was elaborating. That is the deepest reason for my silence rather than shyness or intimidation. I never let myself be intimidated when I can say what I want with the desired rigor. Basically some of my silences or abstentions still today may be explained thus: the code in which I am asked

to express myself seems laden with unacceptable presuppositions. It seems already deconstructed, already deconstructible to me, in any case too inadequate (for there is no adequation possible or that holds here) with respect to the code I seek to elaborate and which I know to be both indispensable and yet impossible, not to be found. (Derrida [1993b]: 198)

Therefore, from the perspective of a quasi-genealogical critique, the seminars can be approached as a sort of laboratory for deconstructive interrogation, in which Derrida attempted to analyze, displace and deconstruct the stakes of contemporary debates, testing notions and ideas that would *later* contribute to a reformulation of Marxist questions on the public stage. For that matter, it is interesting to note that Derrida's reflections on *khôra*, on materiality without matter, on the animal question, but also on messianicity without messianism – all notions that would become decisive in later texts – were in part developed in seminars, and in the context of readings of Marx and Marxist thought. It is easy to see how these notions complicate and radicalize a certain Marxist line of questioning, without being strictly speaking «non-Marxist» or «anti-Marxist». Since the seminar notes on Marx and Marxism I have discussed in this essay were not turned into books or published during Derrida's life, they cannot simply be read as drafts or manuscripts (for example following the methodological protocols of genetic criticism); however, they do tell us something about Derrida's practice of teaching-writing, understood as a scene of (self-) exposure and experimentation in which Derrida took perhaps a number of theoretical or performative risks that could not be taken in his publications. Archival research thus gives us a glimpse into Derrida's deconstructive work in its phase of elaboration – an elaboration that incorporates a certain relationship (complicated, differential) to Marx and Marxist thought. Derrida seemed to say as much to Sprinker in the 1989 interview:

[My work] integrates to a certain extent motifs that could be considered Marxist, which in any case owe something essential to that heritage, to a passing from

Marxism, through Marxism. Inasmuch, for example, as my discourse is freed from certain idealistic naïvetés. But that's not enough to call it a Marxist discourse, don't you think? It's not a discourse dominated by the Marxist reference. It's not a discourse foreign to Marxism or anti-Marxist either. Moreover, I will always wonder if the idea of Marxism – the self-identity of a Marxist discourse or system or even a science or philosophy – is not in principle incompatible with the event-Marx. (Derrida [1993b]: 221)

In this passage – which anticipates *Specters of Marx* in many ways – Derrida gestures towards the idea that, in the same manner that the presence of *explicit* references to Marx is not enough to make a discourse Marxist per se, the *absence* of any such references does not suffice to draw the conclusion that such discourse is non-Marxist or anti-Marxist, not already affected by «the event-Marx». The implications are massive, and very difficult to fully master²⁰. Because it is structurally heterogeneous and self-contradictory, the «event-Marx» which Derrida has in mind is impossible to fully delimit and circumscribe: it may even «speak» through «relative» or «virtual» silences which thus remain to be interpreted. This supposes that what we call «silence» can never carry one and only meaning, quite simply because «silence», just like the archive, remains to be read and interpreted.

The implications of all this become virtually limitless if one takes as seriously as one should what Derrida says in *Specters of Marx* about «this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction»: «deconstruction would have been impossible and unthinkable in a pre-Marxist space» (1993c: 115). If we accept that what we call «deconstruction» incorporates in a non-reducible way this relationship to Marxism, to the theoretical and practical space opened by a certain Marx, and to the intellectual and political scene which was made possible by the «event-Marx», and of which the «event-Derrida» is also

²⁰ For an analysis of effects of silent haunting, spectrality, and nonlinear inheritance between Marx and Derrida in the Marxist and post-Marxist «fields» and beyond, see Mercier (2020a).

a part, an actor and an effect, then we must *also* admit the possibility that a certain reference to Marx and to Marxism was perhaps silently at work in every one of Derrida's writings, somewhat haunting the scene of what has come to be called «deconstruction»²¹. In this way, Derrida's «silence» on Marx could always be interpreted as a silent repetition, a silence perhaps always-already ventriloquized, parasitized by the «event-Marx» – thus repeating, reprising, interpreting otherwise and transforming the Marxist gesture, perhaps even before the name «Marx» was ever pronounced or written by Derrida.

But this analysis could very well be reversed, if one considers that the «event-Marx» was and remains structurally heterogeneous, itself deconstructible and deconstructive, self-deconstructive, thus effecting its own transformation, its self-deconstruction in absolutely unpredictable ways, in which case one could argue that something like «deconstruction», save the name, was silently at work in and through the «event-Marx» – linear time be damned. There, one silence haunts another, although, or because, silence remains to be interpreted: it becomes a resource for transformative interpretation, and as such remains, as Derrida says, «entrusted to the other». Beyond determinate silences, beyond the circumscription of such or such silence, deconstruction compels us to reconsider the very notion of silence, the constitutive otherness of a text or of a corpus, for example a body of work that finds itself reconfigured in and through archival research. A certain otherness always communicates through what may first appear as a certain silence. Far from being insignificant,

such silence can speak volume; it can *let* or *make* the other speak, for instance by promising the proliferation of interpretations to come:

Even if I decide to be silent, even if I decide to promise nothing, not to commit myself to saying something that would confirm once again the destination of speech, and the destination toward speech, this silence yet remains a modality of speech: a memory of promise and a promise of memory. (Derrida [1987]: 15)

A memory of promise and a promise of memory – in other words: the gift, the chance of an archive.

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²¹ How to ignore the fact that «deconstruction», which was from the outset conceived as an anti-imperialist and anti-binarist thought, with philosophical, political, and cultural implications, was conceptualized and elaborated in the context of the Cold War, and probably carries within itself the traces of this historical context, marked by both Marxism and anti-Marxism, but also by diverse strategies of non-alignment, anti-imperialist and decolonial struggles, and so on. For an analysis of this philosophical «Cold War», of its binarism and uncanny speculation, see Derrida (1993a).

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