

**EXORCISING POLITICAL SPECTRES
WITH THE AID OF MARX, SARTRE, AND DERRIDA**
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Abstract

Pregiudizi e precomprensioni indotti dalla forza delle ideologie possono incatenare il nostro giudizio e deformare la nostra comprensione storico-politica diventando dei fantasmi. Risulta difficile distinguere fra pericoli concreti ed illusioni inconsistenti. Partendo dallo spunto offerto dal testo di Derrida *Spettri di Marx*, McBride utilizza le riflessioni di tre grandi filosofi "esorcisti" (Marx, Sartre e Derrida), utili a depurare le nostre coscienze, intervallandole con istantanee storiche capaci di dare corpo al problema. La riflessione di Marx pur muovendosi contro gli spettri ideologici diventa a sua volta uno spettro. Si creano dei nuovi fantasmi, protagonisti di un meccanismo che replica ed amplifica il terrore e che degenera ancora di più traducendosi in diffidenza nei confronti dell'altro. A chiusura, l'autore sottolinea la necessità da parte degli Stati Uniti, segnati dalla paura del terrorismo post-11 settembre, di riformulare il loro ruolo nello scacchiere internazionale per ridimensionarlo. Solo così essi potranno fronteggiare i veri pericoli della postmodernità.

Prejudices and preconceptions caused by the force of ideology can enchain our judgment and distort our historical-political comprehension becoming ghosts. It's difficult to distinguish between actual dangers and groundlessness illusions. Starting from the inspiration provided by the Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, McBride uses the reflections of three great philosophers "exorcists" (Marx, Sartre and Derrida), useful to purify our consciences, spacing them with historical snapshots that are able to give shape to the problem. Marx's philosophy while moving against idealogical specters becomes, in turn, an ideological spectrum. New ghosts are created, they are protagonists of a mechanism that replicates and amplifies the terror and degenerates even more translating it in suspicion of the other. At closing, the author underlines the need for the United States, marked by fear of terrorism post-September11th, to reformulate their role in international political scene to resize it. Only in this way they will face the real dangers of postmodernity.

Les préjugés et les idées préconçues causés par la force de l'idéologie peut enchaîner notre jugement et déformer notre compréhension politique et historique en devenant

des spectres. Il est difficile de distinguer entre les dangers réels et les illusions incohérentes. À partir de l'inspiration fournie par le texte de Derrida *Spettri di Marx*, McBride utilise les réflexions de trois grands philosophes "exorcistes" (Marx, Sartre et Derrida), utiles pour purifier nos consciences en leur proposant des instantanés historiques qui soient en mesure de donner forme à ce problème. La réflexion de Marx, bien qu'elle aille contre les spectres idéologiques, devient à son tour un spectre. Ainsi, se créent de nouveaux fantômes, protagonistes d'un mécanisme qui reproduit et amplifie la terreur et qui dégénère encore en se traduisant par une méfiance de l'un envers l'autre. En conclusion, l'auteur met l'accent sur la nécessité pour les États-Unis, marqués par la peur du terrorisme post-Septembre 11, de reformuler leur rôle dans l'échelle internationale, afin de lui redonner mesure. C'est seulement alors que les États-Unis pourront faire face aux dangers réels de la postmodernité.

My title reference is above all to the book by Jacques Derrida entitled *Spectres of Marx*. Those who have read this book will remember that, at least in some sections, it deals almost as much with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as with Marx, even though its sub-title, "The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International," implies a serious political purpose – and Derrida indeed had such a purpose. They may also remember that he recounts, at the beginning, his *déjà vu* experience in preparing for the gathering at which he first presented the core of this text, a 1993 conference entitled "Whither Marxism?" that was held at the University of California at Riverside. He had sent the organizers his title, "Spectres of Marx," a year in advance and later decided that, as part of his preparation, he should go back to read Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, which he had not read for decades. He says that he felt ashamed of himself when, as he began reading, he realized that "spectre" was the very first noun in its very first sentence: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism." Derrida had not remembered that when he had submitted his title.

Alas, Derrida has himself become a spectre since then, as will be the fate of us all. I remain haunted – and this is not a mere play on words – by an event of November 2007, Unesco's World Philosophy Day in Istanbul, at which I had the honor of being given thirty minutes in which to eulogize three recently deceased American philosophers, all of whom I had known fairly well in different capacities: Alan Gewirth, Iris Young, and Richard Rorty. Our Turkish hosts had hung huge photographs of the three of them above the dais, and those photographs were left there throughout the entire day and a half of meetings. Ever since then, that image constantly recurs to me. I do not find this upsetting, except that it reminds me of my grief over lives cut short – particularly Iris's, since she was by far the youngest of the three to die – but it

is, there is no better English word for it, haunting. And so I think we can conclude that there are appropriate ways, fitting and proper, in which to be haunted by real spectres from the past – what Derrida called, in the middle phrase of his sub-title, “the work of mourning, *le travail du deuil*” – and to draw valuable lessons from them. Some of these lessons will be positive – here was a life well lived, a career that brought benefit to the community of the individual being remembered – while others will be negative. An example of the latter that Derrida analyzes is Marx’s account of the circumstances surrounding Louis Napoleon’s *coup d’état* of December 1851, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which the nephew imitated his uncle’s move of a half-century earlier by having himself proclaimed Emperor of France. (Incidentally, it is at the beginning of this masterly piece of historical criticism that Marx, recalling a remark by Hegel to the effect that great historical events occur, as it were, twice, gives us one of the most often-cited lines from all of his writings: “He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”) In this essay I propose to consider some ways in which, with occasional glances back at past history and with the help of the three philosophers mentioned in my title, we may better distinguish legitimate hauntings from illusory ones and thus become better positioned to exorcise the false spectres that plague and possess us today, impede our potential progress towards a happier, more peaceful world, and ultimately threaten to lead the human race, demonically, to perdition.

I shall begin by looking a little more closely at Derrida’s encounter with Marx. For students of philosophy and of cultural trends in general, the book, *Spectres of Marx*, has considerable significance. For it is a clear confirmation, against critics who proclaim that postmodernism as a way of thinking is too relativistic to allow its proponents to hold any value commitments, that this postmodernist thinker *par excellence* – at least, that is how Derrida is generally regarded – held very strong political views, views over which, precisely, the spectre of Marx hovered. To be sure, Derrida was never anything close to being an orthodox Marxist – and as he also reminds us, Marx, after learning about what some of his followers in France were making of his philosophy, said that there was one thing certain, namely, that he himself was not a “Marxist”. Derrida expresses several sentiments with which I am in complete agreement and which help frame what I shall be saying here: first, that we all owe a great intellectual debt to Marx (this being one meaning of the first phrase of his sub-title, “the State of debt,” which also punningly refers to over-reaching modern governments, such as today’s deficit-ravaged United States); next, that neoliberalist triumphalism, best epitomized at the time of the book’s publication by Francis Fukuyama in his work proclaiming “the end of history” in the society of market capitalism, *The*

End of History and the Last Man, is at best premature and at worst thoroughly reprehensible; and finally, that the ghost of Marx, Marx the advocate of serious political change and not the mere speculative philosophical spirit to which some people would like to reduce him, is still very much with us all as a spectre – a spectre, according to Derrida’s definition at one point, is a spirit incarnated – and cannot be exorcised from our injustice-filled world.

Derrida’s book does a remarkable job of highlighting the many, many references to ghosts and fantasm or phantoms that are scattered throughout Marx’s writings – something that I do not believe any previous work about Marx has ever done so thoroughly. As one may imagine, Marx’s conscious purpose in writing about spectres was usually – in the spirit, so to speak, of the Enlightenment to which he was in so many ways an heir – to try to get rid of them, including all the illusions that he called “ideologies,” beginning with the central ideological claim of Hegel’s philosophy of history, namely, that human history is the self-realization of Spirit, the Spirit of God. (This idea of Hegel’s was, of course, the inspiration behind the title of Fukuyama’s book, although Fukuyama did not subscribe to many of the more metaphysical or theological aspects of Hegel’s thought.) So Marx generally aspired to being an exorcist, and not a defender of ghosts – although his fascination with his favorite author, Shakespeare, including in particular *Hamlet*, suggests that he was exceptionally well attuned and sensitive to the power of ghost stories. As I shall go on to try to show, that is what makes him especially useful in the task of political exorcism with which we are faced today. However, in the famous first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, already mentioned, it is Marx himself who conjures up the spectre, and it is a spectre not from the past, but from the imagined future. Let us for a moment consider exactly what Marx (and his colleague Friedrich Engels, because the document bears both their names as authors) intends by this way of beginning.

In the second sentence, after the initial proclamation that the spectre of Communism is haunting Europe, it says that all the powers of old Europe – the Pope and the Czar and so on – “have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre.” It is then noted that it has by now – this is the year 1848 – become a common scare tactic everywhere for those in power to brand opposition parties as communistic, and that from this we may draw two conclusions, one factual and the other practical: first, that Communism has itself come to be regarded as a power in its own right, and second that something like the present *Manifesto* needs to be published, stating the views and aims of Communists, precisely in order to “meet this nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism.”

So, we may well ask, just what are Marx and Engels saying about this spectre of theirs – that it is a real spectre, which should be feared, or a merely illusory one? In any case, what would a “real” spectre be, what would that mean? In order to show just how difficult this question is to answer, let me cite two sentences from a powerful passage in which Derrida suggests that the development of Leninist and later Stalinist Bolshevism out of the Marxist tradition, and of Naziism as, among other things, a fierce reaction to Bolshevism, were two opposite but in many respects similar reactions to the spectre that Marx had conjured up, a spectre that had eventually occasioned as much panic in the Marxists themselves as in their opponents:

In short, the entire history of European politics at least, and at least since Marx, might be seen as that of a pitiless war between camps internally unified and equally terrorized by the phantom, the phantom of the other and their own phantom as phantom of the other. The Holy Alliance is terrorized by the phantom of Communism and wages against it a war that is still going on, but it is a war against a camp that is itself structured by the terror of the phantom, the one that it faces and the one that it bears within itself¹.

If there is truth to this speculation on Derrida’s part, the spectre has acquired a life, a certain reality, of its own that is far longer-lasting than the life of any human being on this earth. And that life revolves around its capacity to terrorize.

Today we are again – or should I say “still”? – being terrorized, no longer so much by the spectre of Communism, at least not by Communism in the form in which Marx and Engels proceeded to spell it out in their broadsheet, but by other spectres which, while they are to some extent fueled by events and realities in the non-spectral world – the famous attack on the Twin Towers, for instance –, have assumed their own identities and are manipulating us, or at least being used to manipulate us with the connivance of some of our fellow human beings, along ultimately self-destructive paths similar to that taken by Hamlet in the play. Just as the revelations made by his father’s ghost propel Hamlet along a path at the end of which all the principal characters save one, the scholar and philosopher Horatio, lie dead, so we are constantly being prodded to join in a crusade against only vaguely-identified Forces of Evil which, given the very vagueness of their identification and the consequently indefinite enormity of their numbers, is guaranteed not to end before our deaths or the deaths of our children or grandchildren, but in fact to be unending. This is the ultimate implication, usually left unstated, of the expression, “the War on Terror.” Hence once again, to recall Derrida’s words, we, the Holy Alliance which now goes, or at least went for a short time, by the name of “the Coalition of the Willing,” are being terrorized by the

phantom of the other and our own phantom as phantom of the other, by the phantom that we face and the phantom that we bear within ourselves.

It would obviously be better for us not to be terrorized in this way. If it is true, as Aristotle said and I believe, that the purpose of both individual and communal life is *eudaimonia*, happiness and well-being, then to live in perpetual terror is to fall far short of our human potential. So, how can some of the philosophical perspectives of the three individuals whom I have singled out in the title of this essay – Marx, Sartre, and Derrida – be of assistance in rescuing us from this reign of terror that is to such a considerable degree, as I believe it is and as the theme of this lecture series also appears to assume, self-imposed?

First Marx. I have already referred briefly to, but would now like to elaborate on, two types of illusions that he has called to our attention and that continue to be instructive. One of them, which is illustrated by the phrase, “the spectre of Communism,” is the illusion that those who adhere to a certain set of ideas and/or practices that are unfamiliar to us and that include elements in conflict with our own prior beliefs are therefore necessarily totally alien and hostile and must be fought, as it were, to the death. I do not wish to declare absolutely that no such sets of incorrigibly hostile ideas have ever existed. Hitler’s Nazism is a good candidate for such an exception, although before asserting categorically that it is such we would first need to explore just how and why it managed nevertheless to attract so many ordinary Germans, along with many German philosophers in addition to Martin Heidegger, some of whom no doubt initially brushed aside Hitler’s virulent anti-Semitism as a relatively unimportant, maybe even slightly embarrassing, part of a generally upbeat doctrine of national renewal. But I do not have the space to undertake such considerations here. What I want to emphasize is that the tendency to demonize whole classes of people and the ideas associated with them as alien “others” to be despised and if possible obliterated – “the Jews”, “Islamic Fundamentalists”, “illegals”, even “feminists” and “liberals” for those who identify themselves as the so-called “Right”, and, of course, “terrorists” for almost all “right-thinking” people in the West, just like “the Communists” from Marx’s time until the recent past – is extremely strong among us today. But in fact it is the demonizers’ own demons that are in desperate need of exorcism. The fact that, for example, a prominent Presidential candidate (Senator McCain) in the country which some Iranians have called “the Great Satan” could sing a lighthearted song suggesting that it would be desirable just to “bomb Iran” demonstrates very well the pervasiveness of the type of illusion to which I am referring. A proud and complex people, with many conflicting internal factions, still traumatized from a war in which they were attacked by a neighboring country’s dictator named

Saddam Hussein who was at the time encouraged rather than discouraged from this aggression by the United States government, is thus reduced to the status of a kind of unreality, or rather to the quasi-reality of a spectre, which it then becomes permissible to contemplate devastating. To me an even more shocking example of such spectral thinking, shocking because at least at one point quite recently it was being taken very seriously by many thinkers and even diplomats worldwide, is Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, which in its rigidity and stereotyping of different cultures represents a reversion to a pre-Rudyard Kipling worldview.

Now it is only fair, especially since I have just introduced the name of the great bard of British Imperialism, for me to mention in passing that Marx himself, however helpful he is in getting us to see what is going on when we begin imagining terrifying spectres and allowing our behavior to be guided by these illusions, was far from free of this type of practice. One might think that I am referring here to his attitude toward the bourgeoisie, but that aspect of his thinking is in fact much more complex. He makes it clear in one famous text, for example, that he regards the capitalist and the landlord as themselves enmeshed as much as ordinary workers in a system in which they cannot fail to play their assigned exploitative roles without coming to ruin, however much some of them might subjectively aspire to being philanthropic. Rather, I am referring to Marx's often very condescending and dismissive remarks about the inhabitants of the sub-continent of India, Kipling's own focal point of attention. It was the Indians who played the role of alien others for Marx, at least in some of his texts.

My reference to the existing capitalist system that was the object of Marx's lifelong critique brings me to the second type of exorcism for which I believe Marx is still extremely useful to us, namely, in trying to exorcise the Hegelian-Fukuyaman illusion that we have attained the end of history with our present dominant form of socioeconomic structure – in other words, the illusion that global free market capitalism is unsurpassable and, from the standpoint of human welfare, unexcelled.

Do I have to remind any reader, I wonder, of one of the all-time great spectres of Western literature, Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand"? This is supposed, of course, to be the Hand of God, but it is a God Who encourages above all the pursuit of private self-interest, of systematic selfish acquisitiveness, because, Providentially, the free market has the innate power to make everything turn out for the best. Adam Smith himself had a much more complex view of the world than this metaphor taken in isolation implies; in fact his serious concerns about the parlous condition of the workers who are the ultimate creators of economic value were central to the development of Marx's own economic thinking, which can rightly be seen as

a kind of extended internal critique of Smith's conceptual framework. But the idea that the efficient pursuit of profit by the owners of capital is the most desirable basis for organizing social life and should be regarded as the supreme human value, at least on this earth, has come to be considered an unassailable dogma, more inflexible than the teachings of any church, by government officials, media commentators, and even intellectuals in many parts of the world, above all in the United States and Western Europe. "Privatization" – a word that only a few decades ago still had a primarily negative or at best neutral connotation in English-language dictionaries – has come to be regarded, to recall the late Richard Rorty's famous, or infamous, words about the market economy, as "the Great Good Thing." Now, I can well understand arguments to the effect that Marx's call, in *The Communist Manifesto* itself, for the abolition of the private ownership of *all* large-scale means of production – factories and so on – is simply too sweeping, too broad, since private initiative can and sometimes does produce outcomes favorable to the common good. But it seems to me that the broad, sweeping opposite point of view that I have just been describing, which has underlain so many recent government policies (in many countries) favoring private interests over the long-term good even of the earth's very ecosystem, can be explained only through some kind of deep mechanism of haunting, whereby a mere illusion is treated as if it were not just a private interest-friendly ghost, but an absolute truth. And so we can still benefit, and benefit ever anew, from Marx's constant reminder that free market capitalism is not the highest conceivable stage of human evolution, and that we need to exorcise the illusion that it is. Perhaps the present period of economic downturn and uncertainty may be an opportune time to begin to do so again.

There is much more that could be said about the continuing usefulness of Marx as a ghost-buster, but I do not wish to slight the other two philosophers whose names appear in the title of my paper, particularly Sartre, about whom I have as yet said nothing. In any case both Derrida and he were themselves influenced in the development of their thought, during some periods more than during others, by certain insights drawn from Marxian critical theory; it is hard for anyone concerned with sociopolitical issues today not to be so, even if the influence is only sub-conscious. There was a point in his career at which Sartre's principal intellectual goal was to conjoin his earlier existentialism with Marxism, when he chided the so-called "orthodox," Communist Party-based form of Marxism for having stagnated and for neglecting the concerns of the human individual and downplaying the reality of human freedom, but nevertheless regarded Marxism as the philosophy of his time. Near the very end of his life, it is true, he distanced himself more from Marx again; this was an interesting development that I have to forgo

discussing so that I can focus instead on Sartre's own talents as a political exorcist. From among the numerous possible illustrations of these talents, I have chosen three, the first of which has to do with real *versus* illusory freedom, the second with Manichaeism, and the third with the taking of oaths.

Freedom as a concept and a reality, in its many dimensions, abounds throughout Sartre's philosophy, early and late. Here, I want to concentrate on its political dimension. Both Sartre and his almost lifelong partner, Simone de Beauvoir, repeatedly argued that we, humanity as a whole, could never be fully free, in the sociopolitical as opposed to the ontological sense, until everyone the world over was free, and that incantations about freedom in the mouths of Western political leaders who at the same time strongly defend structures of dominance and subordination, structures of exploitation, are simply hypocritical – in other words, pure illusions. Some of Sartre's most forceful language describing this phenomenon occurs in the Preface that he wrote to Franz Fanon's diatribe against colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*. That Preface begins with the words, "Not so long ago, the earth contained two billion inhabitants, perhaps five hundred million men and one billion five hundred million natives. The former dispensed the Word; the others borrowed it."² He goes on to say that in every colony a small elite was selected, sent briefly to Paris, London, or Amsterdam to have their heads filled with empty slogans, such as "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," that were irrelevant to the lives of their fellow colonial natives, and then sent back to their homes in Africa or Asia to repeat those slogans to their brethren under the illusion that these ideals really applied to them. Later generations of natives, such as Fanon himself, began to see through this trickery, and thus began the uprisings that the French and other colonial powers tried to put down through intimidation, military force, torture, and other forms of terror. But this would ultimately prove to have been in vain, and eventually, Sartre predicts, the past violence inflicted will turn around and begin to explode in the homelands. He wrote that essay in 1961, when France was still attempting to keep control over Algeria, where Fanon was then living.

Sartre was also among the French intellectuals who courageously condemned, at the risk of seriously negative consequences to himself, the French government's effort to keep its colony in Indochina. And then came the turn of the United States, taking up where the French had left off, its government insisting that it was defending freedom through its enormously costly and destructive war in Vietnam. Sartre of course saw this as an illusion, as did so many others all over the rest of the world, and as did, increasingly, so many Americans as well. His biting essays on the topic and his eventual participation in Bertrand Russell's War Crimes Tribunal testify to

his ongoing concern, which stemmed from a deep respect for the real freedom and humanity of those people who were being subjected to such military violence, so many casualties and deaths. Has the lesson yet been learned that it is an illusion to try to impose one's own political and economic structures on others under the pretense, half believed, half bad faith, that by doing so one is giving them liberty (if not also equality and fraternity)? I think not, at least not nearly well enough. The very real spectre of Vietnam still hovers over us.

On the topic of Manichaeism in Sartre's philosophy I can be brief, because in a sense I have already discussed it when speaking of Marx. I thought it convenient, when analyzing some implications of Marx's reference to "the Spectre of Communism," to draw larger inferences which I found implicit in that reference; but it is Sartre who actually spells out, at length and in a number of texts, some of the mechanisms whereby illusory evil spectres are created. One of the best-known of these texts is his short book, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in which he argues that it is the anti-Semite who creates a supposed essence of Jewishness that he can then hate, along with all the Jews who incarnate that essence. Manichaeism was, of course, a Christian heresy based on the idea that a real essence of evil, incarnated in an evil deity that is almost as powerful as God Himself, actually exists. In his work on Genet, the playwright, Sartre shows how Genet accepted the label of himself as a thief, given to him when he was still a child, and lived out his early life thinking that he was essentially evil. In a few pages of his long *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre offers a fascinating analysis of the so-called "Great Fear," a panic that swept parts of the French countryside in 1789 and was based on the belief that evil terrorist "brigands," as they were called, sometimes said to be in an implausible alliance with the aristocracy, were threatening to annihilate the peasantry. And in some of his later works, including the *Critique* and the brief Preface to Fanon's work that I have cited, Sartre analyzes racist ideologies held by European colonists toward the "natives" that resulted in identifying the latter as the hated "other."

This is not to say, of course, that Sartre refused to believe that there is much actual evil-doing in the world and therefore did not take evil seriously; quite to the contrary, as anyone familiar with his writing knows. As he saw very well, one of the frequent accompaniments of the Manichaean worldview that creates the false spectre of essential evil and locates it in an "alien" group is the hypocritical failure to see the defects in oneself and those whom one considers one's peers, a refusal to admit that they are capable of doing evil or that one is capable of it oneself, especially if the evil deed is to be performed on one of the aliens. We have only to consider current polls and even some recent official government documents that reflect a widespread

acceptance, within the United States, of the notion that it is all right to torture and otherwise abuse members of an “evil” group, most often those labelled “terrorists,” because they have supposedly placed themselves outside the bounds of human society and become demonic. In 2008, a bill passed by the United States Congress to stipulate the impermissibility of certain types of interrogation techniques was vetoed by the Chief Executive. This, as it seems to me, is not only a terrible self-deception but also a step on the road to national self-debasement.

Finally, speaking of terrorists, I have indicated that I want to discuss Sartre's contribution to the exorcising of some of our spectres through his analysis of oath-taking. This requires some initial explanation. I am not referring to oaths of the type taken in courts to tell the truth, etc., but rather to oaths in the sense of “pledges,” which is the term for Sartre's French word for it, *serment*, in the official English translation of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But “oath” is, I think, a better translation of “*serment*” in this context, since the one historical example of it of which Sartre was thinking the most was what our history books call the “Tennis Court Oath” taken by the Deputies in the early stages of the French Revolution. Moreover, “oath” includes some reference to the supra-sensible, bordering on the magical, which “pledge” does not, at least not to the same extent. In any event, what Sartre's analysis of this phenomenon is meant to show is the means by which groups that have enjoyed some initial success in a new joint project and feel the need to begin to organize for the long term and achieve a measure of stability agree to take an oath. To me, this is somewhat reminiscent of Hamlet's father's ghost when he keeps saying “Swear” to Horatio and Marcellus to ensure that they will never speak to others of what they have seen and heard in Hamlet's company. The term Sartre uses to characterize the atmosphere of such oaths, or pledges, has been controversial, but I find it quite apt: it is “fraternity-terror.” The idea of the oath is that it binds us in a new way, as brothers (or sisters, of course, although “*sororité*” is not recognized as a word in the French language), but that it also imposes a new threat which we mutually accept: to wit, that if any of us breaks the spirit of this oath and turns traitor, then he or she becomes liable to be the object of the group's terror. In much of his analysis of various possible stages of group formation and disintegration, to none of which Sartre assigns any necessary sequence, he writes as a mere observer, refraining from value judgments. He himself does not explicitly identify the taking of the oath as an example of spectre-creation. But I think that it can be seen in that way, and as such it helps explain what I consider one of the greatest and most threatening of all spectres in modern times, the spectre of the nation and the spectre of unquestioning patriotism that is its subjective counterpart. For there are

many, both in the United States and in numerous other countries, who consider their country, meaning always their particular conception of that country, to be a sacred entity, so that any disloyalty towards it, which of course means whatever they themselves regard as constituting disloyalty towards it, merits a charge of treason and the consequences that flow from such a charge. One is expected to “pledge allegiance,” to swear, not merely to a flag, but also to the nation symbolized by the flag, a nation which, *a priori* and by definition, bestows liberty and justice on all.

But what if, in the real world as distinct from this pure ideal, in specific instances the government of that country does not appear to be promoting liberty and justice for all? True believers in the spectre of the nation would say that this is somehow impossible, that of course errors may occur, but that the nation’s cause is just, and that its leaders are *ipso facto* committed to furthering that cause, sometimes even despite themselves. And so they brand strong critics of national policies as potential, if not actual, “terrorists,” to be excluded from the national “fraternity.” In fact, it seems especially paradoxical – a paradox that a number of other observers have noted – that there has been a revival of nationalism in various parts of the world at the very time at which the large forces of what is commonly called “globalization” are eating away at the whole previous structure of a world of national sovereignties. In this increasingly interrelated world, the most dangerous imaginable of nationalist obsessions would be, by definition, one that would come to afflict citizens and especially government officials of the most powerful, at least the most militarily powerful, country in the world. Alas, *de nobis fabula narratur* – it is about us that the tale is told.

In seeking to combat this last-mentioned obsession and to see more clearly and realistically, we may now take leave of Sartre and return, not so much to Derrida’s text, but to one of its underlying ideas, namely the idea that lies behind the third and final part of his book’s sub-title, “the new International.” Of course, the old Internationals – there was a succession of them – were associated with the Marxist tradition. But Derrida’s reference here is to the new importance, in this new age into which we have entered, of international law. He connects this idea with another one, frequently cited by his admirers, that he labels “*la démocratie à venir*” – the democracy to come, or the future democracy. This is meant not to be a spectre, but a hope. It is vague and ill-defined, necessarily so because it cannot be imposed by anyone, yet it has considerable appeal.

Although Derrida’s legacy includes other writings, in addition to *Spectres of Marx*, in which he deals with politically-relevant issues – for instance, his book about Europe entitled *The Other Heading (L’Autre cap)* – I prefer to conclude this essay from a more predominantly American and even

personal perspective. The United States, despite its relatively brief national history, is already cluttered with spectres from its past: on the one hand, terrifying spectres, such as the ghosts of the Indian peoples driven from their lands and decimated, or the ghosts of the slave ships and their cargo in the Middle Passage; on the other hand, the old, often inspiring, but never fully realized ideals of “Manifest Destiny,” “the City Set on a Hill,” the “*novus ordo seclorum*,” which still appears on the Great Seal on our one dollar bills, and so on. Most if not all of these salient ideals bespeak in various ways a strong sense of one big idea: American exceptionalism, as it has so often been called. One of the reasons why the attack on the Twin Towers was utilized to create a climate of fear, the fear of unending terrorism to which I alluded earlier, was that, for many, an important aspect of our alleged exceptionalism had been the illusion that American territory was immune to attack by foreign forces. Like all illusions, of course, this one was without solid factual basis (one need only recall Pearl Harbor, as many in fact did in September 2001), but its abrupt and brutal shattering, in many citizens’ minds, certainly facilitated the transition from the fear of the dying spectre of Communism to that of global terrorism. On the basis of the survey that I have offered of certain ideas from my three authors and my commentaries on these ideas, then, let me now propose a brief list of practical steps that could be taken, beginning now, to stimulate among ourselves and our fellow citizens a healthier, less fearful, less obsessive climate, in which we might begin once again to imagine a more hopeful possible future.

First, the United States must rejoin the world of nations, at this time when nationhood itself is, objectively speaking, rapidly diminishing in importance despite the small but often deadly counter-currents that have recently been observed in certain regions such as the Balkans. What I mean by “rejoining the world of nations” is, above all, reversing the practice of selectively interpreting international law by stressing it when it is thought to be to the special advantage of the United States and rejecting it when government leaders deem it disadvantageous, as when the Geneva Conventions have been drastically reinterpreted and in fact disregarded, decisions of the International Court of Justice in The Hague that are not to our leaders’ liking have been simply flouted – I am thinking of the case of the mining of Managua harbor and the Court’s holding that the United States had been in violation of international law –, and treaties signed in good faith, such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, are treated like worthless scraps of paper. I also mean that other treaties and agreements such as the one banning landmines and the one endorsing the new international court and the one promoting global warming, with respect to all of which the United States remains among the few holdouts in the world, should be signed in good faith.

I also mean that the dangerous, deliberately provocative policy of announcing that this country feels free to engage in pre-emptive attacks on any country that our leaders regard as even potential future threats must be rescinded. In these and in many other ways American exceptionalism in recent years has come to be seen in many, probably most, parts of the world as real and really threatening – no longer the exceptionalism of the city set on a hill, but the exceptionalism of a rogue state which, unlike those entities to which our State Department has attached this label in recent years, is really powerful and potentially capable of doing enormous damage.

Second, as a corollary to the first, we must take stock of just who we are, where we stand, objectively speaking, in the world today, whatever our standing even in the recent past may have been. We are no longer the center of global production in most industries. The formerly “almighty dollar” has declined by an extraordinary amount relative to other currencies. Although we still have outstanding institutions of higher education, tests of average intellectual acumen and knowledge in our population as a whole consistently produce embarrassing results as compared with a number of other countries. Although residents of the United States constitute roughly 5% of the world's population, we consume roughly 25% of the world's energy and have almost the same percentage of the world's prison population, in which it was recently reported that the United States' numbers are not only relatively, but now also absolutely, the highest in the world. And of course our annual military expenditures constitute, depending on just which estimates one accepts, either a little less or, more likely in my opinion, somewhat more than 50% of annual global military expenditures. Of course one could find other areas of national life about which it would be possible to be more positive, and of course, too, there are those – remember the short-lived fad of conjuring up the ghost of Imperial Rome that sprang up in the early years of the Iraq episode – who would like to think of the United States as aiming above all to be, to cite Vergil's *Aeneid*, “*populus bello superbus*”⁵, a people outstanding in war. But these aspects of our current national life that I have just mentioned, which are to me highly problematic – and there are several others that seem equally problematic that I have refrained from mentioning – are serious and central, and they need to be faced, not in the spirit of criticism for criticism's sake, but rather in the spirit of what I have called “taking stock” – being honest with ourselves about who we are. It is, in short, time to abandon sloganizing and cheerleading.

Third, we need to work to restore a sense of decency, of civility, to our public discourse, which is now so filled with abusiveness, hatred of “the Other.” Insulting, even demonizing, rhetoric has been the rule on so-called “talk radio” for some time now, and of course it is also rampant on Internet

blogs. But it seems to me to be increasingly pervasive on television news channels as well, as has recently been publicly noted especially by Hispanic organizations. In this regard, Cable Network News in this country seems increasingly to be pandering to those viewers who prefer hearing heavy-handed, often highly personal, attacks to genuine news. I say “in this country,” because the news programs of the same network that one is able to hear when traveling abroad, whether in Europe or in Asia or in Latin America, retain a much higher tone and offer much more information, as I have had considerable opportunity to observe in my travels in recent years. The judgment concerning the American people that this implies is obvious: namely, that we want spectres, so they should be given to us.

The “defense,” if that is what it should be called, of those who provide such programs is that they are privately owned and should therefore be expected to make judgments in accordance with what they think is likely to accrue the greatest profit for their directors and chief shareholders. This point prompts my fourth proposal, which is that we must adopt new measures to regulate and restrain the practices of rampant capitalism, which are harming us in so many different ways. Far from being, as is often alleged, the economic system that is most compatible with democracy and freedom, capitalism often works in diametrical opposition to these things, as it seems to me any sober, clear-eyed analysis of our public life today – the enormous costs of elections and of health care, the terrible effects of unregulated subprime mortgage lending, and on and on – must conclude. Indeed, what need to be put into question as well are certain fundamental illusions about liberal democracy itself, beginning with the illusion that, at least in the globalized world in which we live today, it is possible to promote democracy of a sort within the political life of a single country while simultaneously accepting the absence of democracy in most workplaces and the anti-immigrant ideologies that are called, in the title of one excellent book on the topic, *Ideologies of Exclusion*³ I should mention in passing that what the opponents of open borders most fear and decry, widespread unemployment of workers in more affluent countries, could be prevented by careful regulation of certain practices of current capitalist enterprise, such as the practice of simply pulling up stakes and moving elsewhere for the sake of the so-called “bottom line.” But these are matters for another paper at another time, too broad to deal with here today.

As I hope it will be realized, these concluding, all-too-sketchy proposals of mine have been put forward as positive measures made possible by the exorcising of the false spectres that have been my principal focus of attention here. These are just a few proposals of many that I could make – and that, indeed, I think all of my readers could make as well; I have

had no desire to be esoteric here. They suggest, at least to my mind, a possible future of hope, hope that can be shared by secular and religious minds alike, since they seem to me to be in keeping with time-honored religious values, such as brotherhood and sisterhood, honesty, charity, and moderation, to which non-religious people of good will should also find it easy to subscribe. At the same time, I think that, although I would of course not expect unanimous agreement on all of my points, failure to change our ways along some such lines as I have sketched will eventually bring us and the whole of global humanity to confront what are probably the most formidable of future spectres that the Christian tradition has produced, the four horses and riders of the *Apocalypse*. They are war, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts – or in modern translation, nuclear war and, either in tandem or in sequence, the collapse of our ecosystem. By comparison with these, the spectre of Communism was a very friendly ghost indeed.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993), p. 171. (The translation is mine.)

² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Les Damnés de la terre,” in *Situations*, V (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 167. (The translation is mine.)

³ Referring to Aeneas's sojourn in Carthage, in Libya, and its future destruction by the Romans, Vergil says: “*hinc populum late regem belloque superbum / venturum excidio Libyae.*” -- P. Vergilius Maro, *Aeneid* I, 21-22. [Here, a people with broad dominion and outstanding in warfare would come to liquidate Libya.]

⁴ By Phillip Cole. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.