Indeed the editors' cavalier attitude toward the book is further evident in the overall structure of the work. It is apparent that the book was cobbled together from a number of articles Luft has published over the years. While there is no problem with this in principle, in many places the seams between the articles are still showing. The same passages are repeated over and over throughout the book, evidently owing to their having appeared in a number of the articles in which the book originated. Indeed, the patchwork nature of the work is sometimes even apparent in changes in the author's idiom. Most noticeably, Luft throughout uses gender-exclusive language, with repeated references to the "first men" and with "he/him" as the default pronoun. However, one ten-page portion of the third chapter consciously adopts gender-inclusive language, evidently because this was the idiom of that particular article. One of the further effects of Luft's having cobbled articles together with little revision is that where Luft has something new to say in the text—that is, newer than the article that that portion of the text reproduces—she embeds it in long, cumbersome footnotes rather than working it into the text proper. While Continental philosophers are perhaps more than anyone sympathetic to the hors de la texte, Luft often has way too much hors and not enough text. This makes reading difficult, especially given the absence of a bibliography. Proper editorial supervision would have forced a major revision in the whole text, either recasting the book as an article collection or forcing a substantial rewrite to turn it into a real monograph (not an article collection posing as a monograph). With the right edit this could have been a great and important book; as it stands, it is a deeply flawed book with some great and important ideas. Particularly in light of Luft's twenty-year struggle to produce this book, Cornell's editorial indifference is a profound disservice both to her and to her readers.

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The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida
MATTHIAS FRITSCH

Matthias Fritsch has written a dense and provocative book that should prompt a renewed discussion of the Marxian past and the political future of Continental philosophy. Navigating the fragile bark of emancipatory politics into a non-utopian but still better future, argues Fritsch, requires
steering between Scylla and Charybdis. To the left is the danger that the memory of past suffering and injustice would be subsumed in the promise of a future liberation. To the right is the threat of losing any such promise in the memory of history’s victims. Without actually taking it upon himself to chart a course for us, Fritch seeks to temper the navigational advice of the three personages named in his subtitle: Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida. Unalloyed with the others, each of these pilots fails us, Fritsch maintains, but if their directives and injunctions are judiciously mixed, a real alternative to our present, disastrous course emerges.

Chapters 1 and 2 present Benjamin and Derrida, respectively, as critical heirs to Marx’s emancipatory project, with an emphasis upon the critical. Central to Fritsch’s argument is the claim, characteristic of critical theory, that Marx attempted “to speculate on capitalism, and in particular on the technology it brings about,” thereby re-enclosing himself in the profit-seeking logic of capital that he sought to overcome (33). According to Fritsch’s version of this critique, “Marx views the final materialization of his promise for the classless society as following the very same logic that brought about the suffering, such that the promise would in some sense justify the suffering and surpass a mournful memory of those victims” (15). Essentially, Marx is too teleological in that the end of communism justifies not only all manner of revolutionary excesses but also the very evils of capitalism itself, which must be undergone in order to prepare the way for its own overthrow. I will return below to the warrant for this reading of Marx. Suffice it to say that in Chapter 1 Fritsch is interested to locate this criticism in Benjamin’s own reading of Marx, and to show how Benjamin in turn avoids repeating Marx’s error. Benjamin, “despite his affirmation of Marx’s secular classless society, and his use of theological categories,” articulates a theory of political action that is radically anti-teleological (47). Political action, for Benjamin, is not motivated or justified by its goals but by an imperative to redeem the promises latent in past failures. Revolution embodies messianic time, in which every moment is shot through with promise, which we have an absolute duty to seize.

The trouble with Benjamin’s revision of Marxism, according to Fritsch, is that he lacks a concept of temporality that would tie a disenchanted and liberated future to the memories of past injustices. In jettisoning teleology, Benjamin also jettisons any non-accidental connection between the memorial imperative to act and the future promised in that act. Therefore, in Chapter 2 Fritsch turns to Derrida to supplement Benjamin. In Derrida’s “notion of differential iterability,” Fritsch locates “an account of historicity” that establishes “as a conceptual (not merely political or psychological) necessity, the relation between Benjamin’s ‘disenchanted’
future and memory” (69). Ironically perhaps, this linkage is secured by emptying Marx’s promise of any content, showing that a radical futurity (“il faut l’avenir”) inhabits every experience and event, giving rise both to a projection of a horizontal regulative ideal and to the impossibility of that ideal ever being fulfilled. Fritsch has a wonderful facility with Derrida, and appreciates the fact that “any deconstructive reading ... must borrow its resources from its object, demonstrating the efficacy of these structures anew with each reading” (75). Therefore, he situates his Derridean supplement within Derrida’s own reading of Marx, which has as its task “to show how Marx’s promise in particular ... led to totalitarianism while also containing the elements that destructure and exceed all totalitarianism” (78). The reader’s reaction to this chapter, therefore, will likely follow upon the reader’s opinion of Derrida’s Specters of Marx.

With Chapter 3, Fritsch moves into fresh territory. In order to amalgamate Benjamin’s account of political action with Derrida’s account of temporality, he must remove the mediation of Marx and allow Benjamin and Derrida to address one another. This encounter takes place over the question of violence or power (Gewalt). Benjamin’s opposition to historical teleology also implies a rejection of “teleological concepts of action and power,” a refusal to justify either action or power instrumentally (103). Rather than embracing a Kantian morality of action, which seeks to avoid violence by taking refuge in actions that are ends in themselves, Benjamin calls for “a politics of pure means” (106). For Benjamin, the telling example is the general strike, a work stoppage without conditions, and hence without a goal. According to Fritsch, “The relationship between the strike and its outcome ... is an ‘enactment’ that suspends the projection of goals and interrupts the positing of ends, thereby revealing ends as posited” (133). The question is whether such an interruption can itself become permanent, in the sense of a permanent revolution, or whether any act of “breaking through” must fall back into the economy of means-end violence. Fritsch, siding with Derrida, argues that “[t]he oppressed, both in the past and in the present, are, in some sense, a part of the system of power and violence,” and that, therefore, “[a]s participants in this system, and as contestants of its dominant interpretation of itself, the oppressed cannot claim ‘pure violence’ (the non-violence of refraining from positing law) for themselves” (150). There is no way to engage in politics with a good conscience, even as it remains necessary to engage in politics, and to receive the messianic call of the dead.

The final chapter works to trace, if not unbind, this knot: “The call to responsibility in relation to a ‘tradition of the oppressed’ is not to be opposed to the history of violence in a binary fashion, but must precisely be seen as produced and carried along by this tradition, as if in spite of
itself” (158). Fritsch sees Benjamin and Derrida as most productively engaged with one another on this question of the responsiveness and responsibility to the dead. Bringing together Benjamin’s historical method, which rescues the detritus of history by tearing it from its context and constructing a montage-like image of these “rags,” and Derrida’s memorial repetition of inherited tradition, which necessarily, and without gratitude, surpasses that tradition, Fritsch argues that these two thinkers need one another. Derrida insists upon an originary responsibility to an absolute victim as a condition for the possibility of any determinate responsibility to determinate victims of empirical history. This quasi-transcendental claim lacks the normative teeth required for political action, however, and Fritsch suggests that Benjamin’s “ambiguity” as to the origin of the messianic claim—whether it derives from historicity as such or from our particular history—is “a necessary, or at least a productive ambiguity” (187). At the same time, Derrida’s “recognition of absolute loss, the deferral of justice to a future to come, and the consequent negation of a good conscience” are just as productive and necessary for Benjamin, for they guard against the collapse of his emancipatory project.

It is gratifying to read such a careful and sensitive discussion of the inseparability of Derrida’s textual practices from at least some strands of the Marxian political project. Fritsch is obviously sympathetic to both Benjamin and Derrida and wants to examine each of their projects in the best light. Thus, for example, he does not rest content with Derrida’s at times harsh reading of Benjamin but insists upon “a much more generous reading” in order to bring out the depth of the connection between the two thinkers (105). The strengths of Fritsch’s book stem from this generosity, for one can see that Derrida, like Benjamin, is unwilling to wait for some mythical right moment to enact the interruption of the law. Just as Benjamin’s writings enact the montage that they valorize, Derrida’s deconstructions evince no separation of theory from practice.

Because of these strengths, I am puzzled by what seems to me the one glaring weakness of Fritsch’s book. It seems that Fritsch is exceedingly unjust to Marx, and that he recognizes this fact, and repeatedly attempts to apologize for it, but without being able to undo it. The example that goes straight to the heart of the matter appears right at the start of the book. Even before he lays out his critical interpretation of Marx, Fritsch cautions the reader: “The reading of Marx advanced here is a reading that is willing to emphasize teleological tendencies and economic determinism but does not, on the whole, seek out other tendencies—with the exception of uncovering the extent to which Marx was concerned with a memory of injustice. This reading does not claim to be
the only possible one. Different texts as well as different layers of Marx’s writings might, with good justification, be mobilized. Nonetheless, the reading presented is a legitimate one, especially if one keeps in mind its purpose in the present context” (14). In other words, Fritsch defends himself by arguing that his act of reading, despite its apparent injustice, is lawful, and this lawfulness is evident in light of his purposes. I cannot see this as anything other than the sort of teleological justification that is criticized again and again throughout the book, yet here it is offered up as an apology for Fritsch’s own reading of Marx. This act and its legitimization, it seems to me, reverberate throughout the text, like a tell-tale heart. Let us linger for a moment on the ways in which Marx, from beyond the grave, makes himself heard in Fritsch’s text.

Fritsch knows that “Marx’s philosophy of history is by no means devoid of performative elements,” which might be taken to upset the teleological, determinist reading that Fritsch proffers; he reassures us, however, that “Derrida ... underlines this performativity as much as possible” (16). Derrida shall be offered up as a witness, it seems, to the legitimacy of Fritsch’s reading. If Derrida underlines Marx’s performativity “as much as possible,” and Fritsch’s reading relies upon Derrida’s, then Fritsch is suitably insulated from any perturbations caused by that performativity. Yet Fritsch himself seems to confess that it is possible to underline Marx’s performativity even more than Derrida does. Fritsch cites Marx’s famous injunction from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*—that “the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead”—as evidence that, “instead of placing his hope in memory, [Marx] opposes that latter to the future” (93). But then Fritsch introduces into an endnote the following consideration: “It is perhaps significant—and in the Marx book, Derrida does not seem to be aware of this—that this call is itself inherited, an unacknowledged quotation from the Bible whereby Marx slips into the role of Jesus” (212 n. 61). I can only second Fritsch’s intuition that this “is perhaps significant,” and wonder why attention to this performative element does not trouble Derrida’s reading of Marx. After all, if Marx’s call to let the dead bury their dead is itself a citation, an active involvement with the dead, it would seem there is something more complicated going on in Marx’s text than a celebration of unencumbered futurity.

It seems that the generosity that Fritsch extends to Benjamin and Derrida is not, for whatever reason, extended also to Marx. For if the nearness of Benjamin to Derrida could only be acknowledged on the condition of a new reading of Benjamin, one that went beyond Derrida’s own reading, then perhaps the same is true of the nearness of Marx to Derrida. But, as much as Fritsch hints at the need for such a new and “much more generous” reading, he nonetheless allows Derrida’s own
reading to stand in its place. Given Fritsch's own acknowledgment that "a
certain relinquishing of specters is inherent in every inheritance of them" (94), and his citation of Derrida's own dictum, "the specter is the future" (96), Fritsch's book seems to call out for, but not supply, a new reading of Marx's invocation of a poetry "from the future." Are Marx and Derrida so opposed as Fritsch would have it?

I think a similar question can be asked about Marx and Benjamin. Fritsch makes much of what he calls "Benjamin's explicit critique of Marx," but, like the messiah, this is much announced but never arrives, so far as I could see. Fritsch seems to locate this explicit critique in a passage from Benjamin's notes to the "Theses on the Concept of History." The text he cites reads: "With Marx, the structure of the basic thought presents itself as follows: In the course of historical development, humanity arrives at the classless society through a series of class struggles. But the classless society is not to be conceived as the endpoint [Endpunkt] of an historical development. From this erroneous [irrigen] conception emerged, among other things, the idea held by his epigones of a 'revolutionary situation' which, as is well known, never wanted to come" (34). I have two reservations. First, to say that "the classless society is not to be conceived as an endpoint" is not to say that Marx's texts conceive of the classless society as an endpoint. The text cited is rather ambiguous regarding this attribution, an attribution that is even more elusive in the other texts cited by Fritsch, wherein Benjamin directs his criticism solely at Kantian Marxists and Social Democrats. Moreover, even if Benjamin did so read Marx's texts, that is no reason for us to do so. Once again we are confronted by the need for and simultaneous lack of a new approach to Marx's own texts. One of the major differences Fritsch alleges between Marx and Benjamin is over technological progress: Marx shares the nineteenth century's "widespread enthusiasm for technology" and "speculates" on the return it will bring after the revolution. Benjamin is disillusioned in this regard, eschewing both the teleology and the utopianism of technology. But Fritsch never discusses those texts—"The Author as Producer" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" leap to mind—wherein Benjamin seems to evince his own peculiar brand of "enthusiasm for technological progress and the process of modernization" (33). Fritsch recognizes that Benjamin's texts are complex and difficult, and argues, on that basis, for distancing Benjamin from Marx. But that consideration ought to cut both ways. Are Marx and Benjamin really as distant as Fritsch would have it?

What is at stake here is not, I hope, my own personal sympathy for Marx. As Fritsch writes, "The past we inherit—and this is certainly true of the history of Marxism and of Marx's text—is saturated with latent promises that arise from missed chances, lost struggles, and failed
I think the absence of a renewed encounter with Marx is such a missed chance in Fritsch’s own inheritance. That absence cannot be justified by the immense value of Fritsch’s encounter with Benjamin and Derrida. That absence can only be remembered and recognized for the loss that it is. That loss, too, is saturated with promises.

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Derrida, un Égyptien. Le problème de la pyramide juive
PETER SLOTERDIJK
Paris: Maren Sell, 2006; 76 pages.


La première rencontre avec Derrida se fait par l’intermédiaire du sociologue allemand Niklas Luhmann. Ce penseur du système permet l’introduction du thème de la survie. L’occasion est bonne pour Sloterdijk de faire voir chez les deux penseurs un trait commun: ils ont tous deux élaboré des philosophies totales, à la manière de Hegel. On sait que Luhmann a lu Derrida et lui a déjà rendu hommage en lui attribuant le mérite d’avoir trouvé une fondation possible dans le flexible et le décentralisé; ainsi, «la déconstruction survivra à sa propre déconstruction» (20). L’utilisation du verbe «survivre» n’est pas anodine pour Sloterdijk: Luhmann avait compris que l’ambition de Derrida était de créer une théorie adéquate à jamais, un projet de construction qui viserait la production d’une machine de survie indéconstructible» (21).

Le deuxième auteur dont fait mention Sloterdijk est Sigmund Freud. Plus précisément, celui de l’Homme Moïse et la religion monothéiste, son dernier livre: un Freud tourmenté par son œuvre qu’il questionne à nouveau. Dans cette suite de trois essais, Freud soutient que Moïse aurait été un Égyptien adorateur du Dieu solaire; voyant le peu de succès de cette religion en Égypte, il l’aurait introduite chez le peuple hébreu en esclavage. Dans ce livre, Freud semble abandonner certains de ses