



Ghost Hunters: Karl Marx — Max Stirner, Jacques Derrida and Hauntology

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Abstract

The philosophical, moral and political discourses that determine human relations sometimes attain a different meaning transcending the bodily existence of mankind. Typically, concepts and notions such as God, humankind, the Fatherland, the Emperor, the Pope, church and so on are of this nature. These concepts, which humans have transcended by abstracting human experiences, reincarnate again, materializing as specters. In this study, we evaluate how these abstractions are presented in a visible form and how these mental constructs transform into a specter each, in the context of Karl Marx, Max Stirner and Jacques Derrida. Marx and Stirner are both ghost hunters, but there is a deep discussion on the subject of who creates ghosts and who hunts them. Derrida, on the other hand, talks about the agora of specters and how they materialize, is showing how Marx, a ghost hunter, was smitten by Stirner. Not limited to these considerations, the study describes the ghost hunt by both thinkers. After all, what Derrida did was to demonstrate how the efforts of these two thinkers to expel or overcome specters haunted new ideas, in other words, Hauntology.

Keywords: Karl Marx; Max Stirner; Jacques Derrida; Ghost; Hauntology

Introduction

As the title of the study suggests, this research not only focuses on Karl Marx, but also on both Max Stirner, who is generally known as an individualist anarchist despite the arguments that he was an egoist, anarchist and nihilist, and Jacques Derrida, who portrays ghosts as visible beings in his work "Specters of Marx." We will evaluate what they understood from the term ghost/specter and the extent of the debate between them from the perspective of the "ghost" concept. Also, except where necessary, we will try to stay within the scope of the title and not delve into the mnemonic Marxism-Anarchism relationship. We will not evaluate the philosophical notion Derrida developed outside his referenced work or their theoretical backgrounds. However,

it would be useful to provide some background information on the origins of the debate, so that we can better understand how Marx, Stirner and Derrida converged on this intersection. Stirner, who was a Left-Hegelian, published his foundational work "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" (The Ego and Its Own) in 1844.¹ In his work, Stirner directs various criticisms at Marx's ideas: Stirner's critique of Marx targets all of Marx's ideas, from his social conceptualization to his future related designs, and Stirner treats each one of them as ghost-making

1 "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum," "The Ego and Its Own." Stirner's foundational work "The Ego and Its Own" does not only cover the subject that has been mentioned so far or will be mentioned later. There are many dimensions to the study. Although not emphasized much, Stirner is one of the first and important thinkers who criticize ideology.

ideas. Yet, these critiques are not left unrequited, and Marx, especially in his book “Die deutsche Ideologie” (The German Ideology) delivers a deep critical feedback, a rebuttal aimed at Stirner’s philosophy. According to Marx, the agora of ghosts is nothing other than Stirner’s “unique ego,” even though Stirner is only on a hunt for ghosts. But for Derrida, ghost refers to returning back to the body, one that is more abstract than ever. In this sense, the subject of Derrida’s work covers the subject of what a ghost is, the extent of the debate between Marx and Stirner, and how ghosts are made visible, a topic Marx specifically investigated. However, Stirner’s critique of Marx is aimed at his reinterpretation through different concepts of everything he criticizes, whereas Derrida’s critique is directed at all kinds of essentialism, thus making the specters of Marx visible.

Ghost Hunters

In discussing the issue of what “ghost,” which forms the essence of the debate, is, and what Marx and Stirner understood from ghost/specter or ghostly/spectral, it is an undisputed fact that social relations are affected by many factors. However, we have not been able to resolve yet, which factors (religious, philosophical, moral, political) define these relations more intensely, and it appears that this discussion is hardly ending at all. The agora of ghosts/specters and their emergence are explained through these philosophical, moral and political discourses that determine human relations, how concepts and notions such as God, humankind, fatherland, empire, pope, the church and so on, acquire an incarnate body and materialize in a visible form, how each of these mental constructs transform into a ghost, and how deep an effect they have in every dimension of human relations in world history.² Ghosts are born with abstractions, mental designs and constructs. And exactly for that reason, Marx’s communist society is a ghost as well. Ghosts are the products of fictions expressed to present a social design for future, revealing something more beautiful. And for any future-related design, the ultimate goal doctrine that has to be achieved expresses domination and turns lives upside down, just like a ghost. For this reason, these two thinkers, who try to hunt and flay the ghosts, depict all abstractions of ghosts, ideological obsessions, religious beliefs, various different meta-narratives, mental constructs and designs, various conceptualizations with alleged contents of value, from the aspect of their ability to haunt our lives like a ghost. However, both thinkers would never hesitate to blame each other as a ghost-maker. Therefore, in Derrida’s words, a ghost is, according to Marx, nothing other than a particular spectral and the sensual form of the soul, its bodily manifestation and paradoxical embodiment. More precisely, the ghost becomes

“something that can hardly be named; that is, it is neither a soul, nor a body, not one, nor the other.”³ According to Stirner, a ghost is all kinds of meta-narratives entertained only in the mind, which shape man and reflect both the hierarchy and the sole source of their production.⁴

In his work “Specters of Marx,” Derrida discovered the logic of ghosts through the specters of Marx. According to Derrida, Marx has shown that the “ghost hunting,” activity is needed to attain the objective of idealism. Stirner became the target of Marx, because he revealed the naked truth about the ghosts that still existed in Marx’s work.⁵ Stirner has been interpreted in many different ways. He has been viewed as a nihilist, existentialist, anarchist and libertarian. Because he trapped Marx in his own illusions as an idealist thinker, Marx accused or thought of him as a “petty bourgeois individualist intellectual.” Marx’s most important accusation against Stirner was that he ignored the “*material basis of ideology*,” and thus missed what is essential.

According to Marx and Engels, the Young Hegelians,⁶ Feuerbach, Bauer and Stirner were ideologists, even though they criticized ideology in their own ways. The reason for this is that they missed the fundamental reality of the material world, that is, how the material world determined all relations, and they ended up producing various abstractions, and precisely because of this, they made the mistake of producing meta-physical and ethereal “ghosts.” In order to disclose the backdrop or the depth of both the essence and the structure of an ideological mechanism, Stirner tried to hunt the ghosts that existed in the mechanism of ideology.

In “The German Ideology,” Marx and Engels examine Stirner’s philosophy from a critical point of view. They try to demonstrate that the idealist constructs that challenged the real laws that determine the development of humanity are fraudulent, and as such, they cannot go any further due to their theoretical constructs. This is where the first debate starts. Who produces ghosts is discussed for the first time

3 Derrida J (2001) Specters of Marx, Translated by Alp Tümertekin, Istanbul: Ayrıntı Publications, p. 23.

4 Stirner M (1995) The Ego and Its Own, Edited by David Leopold, Cambridge: University Press, pp. 30-35.

5 Newman S (2001) “Specters of Stirner: A Contemporary Critique of Ideology”. Journal of Political Ideology 6, Routledge Press, p. 309.

6 Young Hegelians; Also known as the Left Hegelians, this group or party was mostly known as the Society of Free People, active in Berlin, Germany. The Society of Free People is a very interesting group or party. Many different people from poets to researchers, literary professionals to thinkers, used to gather at this place. It was located on the busiest street in Berlin at that time. The community, which denounced all forms of formality, did not have a president. But the pioneers of Hegelian tradition were admittedly more effective in the group. In this environment, every type of criticism was expressed in an uncensored and sometimes cynical fashion. Of course a few glasses of drinks helped set the stage for this.

2 Collinicos A (1996). “Messianic Ruminations: Derrida, Stirner and Marx”. Radical Philosophy, Vol. 75, p. 38.

begins. The idealism is formed around the idea of freedom. According to Marx, Stirner's biggest delusion was that he conceived his idea of liberation as independent from "the productive forces, which are realities." The idea of liberation, however, emerges only to the extent that the productive forces allow it.⁷ This kind of parallel reading and this kind of understanding is a religious understanding. In a religious context, relations of production cannot be conceived as is, and this replaces real production with the religious production of imaginary things. That is exactly what Stirner did.⁸ Again, according to Marx, Stirner was preoccupied with idealist constructs and lived in his own world of illusions, which he confused with reality. Even though Stirner states that the state is the sole center that creates domination, he does not/cannot even touch it because he disregards its material basis. In other words, Stirner is not a *ghost hunter*. Because this idealism ignores the material existence of the state, this in turn means that reality is disregarded. According to Stirner, in order for an individual to talk about an environment in which he/she can flourish, freedom must be established without idealization. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that socialism takes this important fact into consideration, and it is clear that individuality is reduced to a strict collectivism and that a collective "ghost" is produced. Still, according to the thinker, communism is as dangerous as idealism. This is because in idealism everything is explained with an absolute myth, while in communism, everything is examined around the idea of collectivism. In other words, in both of these two movements, the term "I" which is made of flesh and bone as the thinker puts it, is denied for the sake of the more general. Also, in communism especially, everything an individual owns is taken for the benefit of the society. According to Stirner, the communist idea is Christianity presenting itself under a different name. Christianity wanted the individual to give up everything in the name of God. Communism also wants to take away everything an individual owns but in the name of society, for the sake of common good. This is nothing but a "ghost," just like Christianity.

As the debate intensifies, Stirner, who displays a rather egoistic approach, starts to accuse Marx of Hegelian idealism. According to Marx, even though Stirner may seem to be positioning himself against Hegelianism, he is only an extension of the Hegelian precept, which sees history through an idealistic lens and believes in the notion that concepts must regulate life. He is a "ghost"-maker. Marx, says that Stirner was haunted by the writer of "Phänomenologie des Geistes" (The Phenomenology of Spirit). He cannot carry this burden and throws all up still fresh, just like a whale

that cannot digest what it has eaten.⁹ He accuses Stirner of both not understanding Hegel, and not being able to bear its burden, and acting exceedingly Hegelian in his research of the pedigree of ghosts.¹⁰ Because, according to Marx, Stirner evaluated history and historical entities from an idealistic standpoint and thus missed the material basis of society. Likewise, according to Marx, the thinker argued that the freedom of mankind was only possible by destroying mental illusions and meta-narratives, or by rejecting the sacred, and that this argument also revealed his philosophical contradiction, constituting an agora for the new ghosts. This is because what Stirner had opposed in Feuerbach, is what he is doing right now. He not only opposes all abstractions, thinks of our teachings and Feuerbach's human conceptualization as an idealization, which he criticizes, but also turns the notion of "ego" into a cult. Such an abstraction and idealization would mean, according to Marx and Marxists, being a "petty-bourgeois" and a harbinger of the totalitarian logic.¹¹ For Marx, the classical psychology of the alienated and isolated individual of the bourgeois society finds its expression in Stirner's philosophy.¹² This inference of Marx and Marxists, who made serious and equally meaningful criticisms at several places, shows that Stirner's critique had not been internalized and that it disturbed them a lot. This is manifested in a relentless, sarcastic and brutal style in the Stirner section, where a large part of the book "The German Ideology" is dedicated.

Marx and Stirner are usually assessed together because, in Derrida's words, they possess a common theme. According to Derrida, even though both thinkers have ruthlessly criticized each other, they share a common ground, an intersection: criticizing the *specter*. When they both want to close the specter's file, or explore the essence of how visible, invisible ideological and material terms around us engulf human life, they are actually on a hunt for the specter, and they believe they can accomplish that.¹³ Because "the name of this common ground to be fought on is ghosts. Like Stirner, Marx wants to put a match at the root of ghosts, flay their skins and seize them too. In order to seize, it is necessary to see,

9 Derrida, *ibid*, pp. 187-188.

10 In "The German Ideology," Marx accuses Stirner not only for restricting himself to the Hegelian tradition and being unable to overcome the abstractions, but also for failing to grasp Hegel's philosophical depth. Although Hegel's influence on Marx is known, the influence of Hegel on Stirner is also ascertained by Marx. Above all, we should underline that Geist, as in the words soul and spirit, can mean ghost, and it is not difficult to deduce this from Hegel's philosophy. (See J. Derrida, 2001: 191).

11 Marshall P (2003) Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism, Translated by Yavuz Alagon, Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, p. 337.

12 Copleston F (1996) History of Philosophy - Nihilism and Materialism. Translated by Deniz Caneve, Istanbul: İdea Publications, p. 65.

13 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 196.

7 Marx K, Engels F (1999). *On Anarchism*, Translated by Sevim Belli, Ankara: Sol Publications, pp. 9-10.

8 Marx K, Engels F *ibid*, p. 70.

locate and identify something.”¹⁴ The fact that the common goal of these two thinkers is ghosts, reveals the differences in their evaluation of ghosts. Their differences show what the best solution or reality is, and their contrasts appear in the understanding of who the ghost is, who produces the ghost and who wants to defeat these ghosts. Each criticizes the other as a ghost-maker. Because both of them have abstractions and they differ on what they understand from reality. Marx, in general, accuses the German idealism and idealist thinkers for producing specters, and argues that what he does is literally about the material world and non-spiritual.¹⁵ For him, no spirit or specter can be derived from a discourse, which is non-spiritual and is based on material reality. Stirner, who argues the exact opposite, accepts that the perception of specter as something connected to only what is abstract or spiritual is an illusory notion and tries to explain that several arguments made by Marx on what he accepts as material or presents as reality could simply be spectral.

Stirner considers the humanist discourse the deification of man, the God–Human ghost, and by reversing the humanist rationalist paradigm, he has shown that the human essence is an ideological *ghost* and that this is masked in connection with power. From his point of view, the basic error Marx or others have made is that, in order for anything to transform into a means of domination, or in Derrida’s words, to start haunting our lives like a ghost, it does not have to be limited to things that are abstracted such as spirit, spirit, god and angel. Any kind of essentialism, any kind of reduction or a design related to the future (not present) of ego, will turn into a hierarchy or domination after a while. In the history of thought, many have drawn attention to the domination produced from the spiritual, and this is a true determination. But if this approach, which is correct when criticizing the sovereignty of the spiritual on human life, is to lead us to a slavery by other areas of power at the solution point, then this amounts to nothing but to create new sovereignty.¹⁶ Therefore, all kinds of essentialism must be rejected, and only “ego,” which represents what is fundamental in the form of flesh and bone must be taken into account. In this context, when the thinker makes an ideology critique based on the goal of reaching a ghost or ghosts, his aim is actually freeing himself from ideological determination.¹⁷ Marx intervenes right at this point, in reference to this statement, and blames the egocentric body, in other words, his primary target is Stirner’s egoist doctrine. According to Marx, Stirner is a

ghost-maker who defends the fight against ghosts. The ghost of all ghosts; is his egoist. The meeting place and agora of all the ghosts who return to their birth place is Stirner’s self-centered understanding. “Reduction, as the subjectification of the bodily form of the outer ghost, is nothing more than a meta-idealization and an additional ghosting.”¹⁸ In Derrida’s words, it is as if Marx wants to warn Stirner again: “If you want to defeat the ghosts, believe me, I swear, then a self-centered transformation would not be enough, any change in the point of view, or putting it in brackets, or a phenomenological reduction would not be sufficient either; one has to work. This cannot be expelled by suppressing only the ghost form of the bodies or by getting rid of it from the inside, neither the real emperor nor the pope...”¹⁹ Because a ghost never dies, it always comes and comes again.²⁰ Marx, who finds himself more competent on the subject of ghosts, speaks to Stirner and says: “If you want to salvage life, or get rid of the living dead, you need to get away from imaginary and self-scientific abstract and fictional structures with the help of words, linguistic expressions of mental constructs, and reach what is real, tangible, empirical and process them. Otherwise, you would be getting rid of the phantom of the body and not the body of the ghost, the state, the emperor, the nation and so on, in other words, the reality of meta-narratives.”²¹

Analysis

Marx’s reduction of Stirner to an idealistic line and seeing him only as Hegel’s extension is an incomplete and inaccurate assessment. On the contrary, Stirner did not reduce the state or any claim of sovereignty to only production relations or economic power which Marxists did, but studied it from a deeper perspective.²² Unlike Marxists, Stirner’s evaluation of the state and essentialism goes beyond the pure conception of the class. In his view, the state is not just a mere apparatus of those who possess the production power as Marx claimed, but is both dramatic and diversified. The state is both a monster and a machine: It is not only a lion and an eagle, both the rapacious kings of the animal kingdom, but also a giant mechanism, a complex system. It is both God and Satan who demand that the individual renounce himself, as well as a monster that enslaves, limits, tames and subjugates the individual.²³ It is a giant mechanism, an enemy of individualism that attempts to

18 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 197.

19 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 199.

20 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 154.

21 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 215.

22 Newman S (2006) *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Translated by Kürşat Kızıltuğ, İstanbul: Ayrıntı Publications, p. 117.

23 Leopold D (1995) “Introduction,” *Max Stirner, The Ego and Its Own*. Cambridge: University Press, p. XXV.

14 Derrida, *ibid*, p. 200.

15 Rayner A (2002) “Rude Mechanicals and the Specters of Marx”. *Theatre Journal* 54 (4), John Hopkins University Press, p. 542.

16 Stirner, *ibid*, pp. 30-35/105-111.

17 Newman S (2001) *ibid*, p. 310.

declare its lordship over my reality, to replace my soul with its own, and to build abstractions such as the State, Empire, Church, God and morality instead of my ego.²⁴ It is a monster that tries to build ghosts.²⁵ What many people, including Marx, are mistaken about is that ghosts exist only in the mind or can only be constructed by the mind. The extent of a child's morality is only that of an animal, as a living being. However, cultural motifs shape the child, which introduces a hierarchy. In other words, although non-cultural realities are never a part of children, they cannot resist the power of speculative philosophy and ghosts, and end up succumbing to their subjugation.

Derrida plays on this idea of ghost and spirit. He reflects on Marx's dismissal of the terminology of ghost or specter by Stirner. According to Derrida, Marx's chapter on Stirner's critique is actually an expression of his own wish that he could banish the genie of Ideology that Stirner had debunked. There are several points where both Stirner's and Derrida's concepts coincide: They both talk about a *hauntology*, which try to demonstrate that ghosts continue to haunt the structures and ideas such as religion and meta-physical ghosts, which claim to have expelled and overcome them.²⁶ In this sense, "hauntology," defines the methodology of determining how new ghosts are made by those who claim to try to defeat the ghosts. Every hunting activity for ghosts is based on the invasion of the hunting space by the new ghosts. Every epistemological criticism and determination to be pursued in the name of salvaging people from ghosts that haunt life, every evaluation as to where their place and theater is, every activity performed in the name of combating them, and every kind of *weapon* that will be a tool in this

struggle, actually produces nothing but new ghosts. This exact determination was made by Derrida. Demonstrating how the activity to expel or overthrow meta-physical ghosts can still haunt the ideas: Or *Hauntology: Making Ghosts Visible*.

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24 Stirner, *ibid*, p. 68.

25 Stirner, *ibid*, p. 273.

26 Newman S (2006) *ibid*, p. 193.

