

Spectres of Marx in the Lacanian Left: Between Melancholia and Mourning of Marxism

*Espectros de Marx en la izquierda lacaniana: entre la melancolía
y el duelo del marxismo*

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Abstract

Moving into the space of tension and contradiction between philosophy and psychoanalysis, I reflect on the spectral way in which Marx and his legacy appear in the Lacanian Left. I explain this spectrality through the impossible mourning of Marxism. I bring in three authors who prescribe mourning here and ignore its impossibility: Özselçuk, Stavrakakis and Alemán. I resort to Benjamin, Lacan, Allouch and Traverso to problematise the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholy in its application to Marxism. Instead of mourning with its post-Marxist bet, I defend an openly melancholic position based on the militant historical commitment to the dead and what Lacan has represented as the insurmountable directions indicated by Marx. I distinguish three great idealist attempts by the Lacanian Left to overcome the materially insurmountable directions: Laclau's anti-essentialist discursive postmodernism, Žižek's pessimistic Lacanian Hegelianism and Badiou's Jacobin political Platonism. I contrast the Laclauian democratic populist concessions with the Badiouan-Žižekian fidelity to Marxism and communism.

Keywords: Marx, marxism, lacanian left, melancholia, mourning.

Resumen

Situándome en el espacio de tensión y contradicción entre la filosofía y el psicoanálisis, reflexiono con Derrida sobre la forma espectral en que aparecen Marx y su legado en la llamada



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«izquierda lacaniana». Explico esta espectralidad por un duelo imposible del marxismo. Discuto con tres autores que prescriben aquí el duelo e ignoran su imposibilidad: Özelçuk, Stavrakakis y Alemán. Recorro a Benjamin, Lacan, Allouch y Traverso para problematizar la distinción freudiana entre el duelo y la melancolía en su aplicación al marxismo. En lugar del duelo con su apuesta postmarxista, defiendo una posición abiertamente melancólica basada en el compromiso histórico militante con los muertos y en lo que Lacan se representaba como lo insuperable de las direcciones indicadas por Marx. Distingo tres grandes intentos idealistas de la izquierda lacaniana para superar lo materialmente insuperable: el posmodernismo discursivo antiesencialista de Laclau, el hegelianismo lacaniano pesimista de Žižek y el platonismo político jacobino de Badiou. Contrasto las concesiones populistas democráticas laclauianas con la fidelidad badiouana-žžekiana al marxismo y al comunismo.

Palabras clave: Marx, marxismo, izquierda lacaniana, melancolía, duelo.

1. Introduction: spectres of Marx

No matter how many years have passed, we are still at the time when Jacques Derrida envisioned, in his own terms, a “great conspiracy against Marxism” (Derrida, 1993, p. 88). There are still many politicians, intellectuals and commentators who continue today, as Derrida said, “conjuring the return of Marx” by repeating that “Marx is dead”, which, in the end, “awakens suspicion” (Derrida, 1993, pp. 159-160). How can we not be suspicious when there is so much insistence on someone’s death? If Marx really were as dead as they pretend, then why should they insist so much that he is dead?

The insistence on the death of Marx seems to respond today to the same spectral presence that Derrida observed in his time. Now, as back then, the specters of Marx are hanging around the world, scaring, threatening and stalking. What Derrida wrote in 1993 is still valid today: Marx continues to be something that lurks, something like a “haunting”, that “organizes what dominates contemporary discourse” and appears again and again, no matter how “repressed” it is in the new hegemony of “neocapitalism and neoliberalism” (Derrida, 1993, p. 69). This post-Marxist hegemony itself implies, for Derrida, the haunting of what it denies, of Marx and Marxism, but also of modernity and of “history” itself (Derrida, 1993, p. 97). Post-historical and postmodern ideologies, haunted respectively by history and modernity, are inseparable from post-Marxism stalked by Marx and Marxism.

The lurking specters of Marx can be observed not only on the right, but also and above all on the left. There are several leftist currents, both socialists and progressives, as well as left populists, that are stalked by that of the Marxism that they imagine they have overcome or transcended. This is the case of the Lacanian Left that I approach now.

We must first recognize the Lacanian Left as a bastion of resistance against the current political righting of Lacanian clinical psychoanalysis. While many psychoanalysts remain isolated in their associations and give in to the ideological inertia of their liberal profession, the

exponents of the Lacanian Left tend to be closer to philosophy and philosophical academia. This could help them resist against the dominant right-wing tendency of psychoanalysis, but could simultaneously affect their links with Marx and with Marxism, which are intrinsically subversive of philosophical discourses. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Marx and Marxism haunt the Lacanian Left.

As I will try to show, the Lacanian Left responds to the spectral haunting of Marx and Marxism with two defensive reactions. The first, to which I have already referred, is the *post-Marxist* of the Essex School of Ernesto Laclau and his epigones, among them Yannis Stavrakakis and Jorge Alemán. The second defensive reaction against Marx is the *crypto-Marxist* of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek in the Slovene School. *Lacano-crypto-Marxism* and *Lacano-post-Marxism* have come to take the place of the old Freudo-Marxism.

2. Post-Marxism and crypto-Marxism

We know that, in its persecutory and conspiratorial delusion, the extreme right conceives crypto-Marxism as a secret, surreptitious and insidious Marxism concealed behind an anti-Marxist or, at least, non-Marxist profession of faith. Derrida refers to this delusion and considers it a reaction against the lurking specters of Marx, a reaction in which there is fear of a “metamorphosis” by which Marxism will return in an unrecognisable, “crypto-Marxist” form (Derrida, 1993, p. 88). My conviction is that, beyond the far-right paranoia, crypto-Marxism really exists and is itself a defensive reaction: it is a reaction against the spectral presence of Marx, but also an expression of that presence, an expression in itself and not only for those who fear it.

As I conceive of it, crypto-Marxism is itself a spectral Marxism in conflict with itself, defending from itself by dissembling itself. The conflict gives rise to an encrypted and indecipherable Marxism, like the one we sometimes find in the thought of Žižek or Badiou. Crypto-Marxism, which disguises as Marxism, must be clearly distinguished from post-Marxism, which claims to have left behind Marxism, yet both share their spectral aspect.

In the case of post-Marxism, spectrality manifests itself in a temporal phenomenon, well explained by Derrida, in which Marx’s Spectre erases the “border” between the present and “everything that can oppose it: absence, non-presence, ineffectiveness, in-actuality, virtuality or even simulation” (Derrida, 1993, p. 72). The result is that there is no longer any opposition between absence and presence, between past and present, so the post-Marxist present remains spectrally Marxist. This has been openly recognized by Laclau and Mouffe in their affirmation that their intellectual project was “*post-Marxist*”, emphasizing the *post*, as “*post-Marxist*”, accentuating the *Marxist*, because it was based on the “development of certain intuitions and

discursive forms constituted within Marxism, and the inhibition and elimination of certain others” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 4).

The same idea can be found in Jorge Alemán when he presented his Lacanian post-Marxism as a zone in which the Marxist left can “elaborate its Marxist ending” in such a way that the ending “acquires a value other than closure or cancellation”, here appearing as “an end that is not time fulfilled but an eventual opportunity for another beginning” (Alemán, 2009, p. 21). The Marxist left begins again like this, in a spectral way, in the Lacanian Left. This left is then both Marxist and post-Marxist in Laclau and Alemán, just as it was both Marxist and crypto-Marxist in Badiou and Žižek.

3. Negation, compromise formation and impossible mourning

Post-Marxism and crypto-Marxism are both spectral expressions of Marxism and defensive reactions against what they express. They are then like negations in the Freudian sense of the term. As in Freud (1990), negation (*Verneinung*) logically implies the affirmation (*Bejahung*) of what is negated. Marx and Marxism must be negated in the Lacanian Left because, by themselves, they affirm themselves through it, they impose themselves, they insist, they lurk, but they are always under a spectral form.

My impression is that post-Marxism and crypto-Marxism share the same structure: the structure of the symptom or of any other formation of the unconscious in Freudian theory. Post-Marxism and crypto-Marxism are structured into what Freud (1997a) calls “compromise formations”. Thus, they have an inherently contradictory structure, an expressive and defensive character, being and not being Marxists, affirming and negating the spectral Marxism that haunts them, repressing it and making possible its symptomatic return under the post-Marxist and crypto-Marxist spectral forms of the Lacanian Left.

Hence, my first hypothesis is that the Lacanian Left expresses the same spectres of Marx from which it defends itself. My second hypothesis is that these spectres haunt the Lacanian Left because of the impossibility of mourning Marx and Marxism. Because the work of mourning is not consummated, we logically have phenomena of phantasmagoria, of spectrality, which we can associate with the Lacanian interpretation of the Freudian notion of the melancholic condition (Lacan, 2013).

Leftist melancholia is a matter on which much has been written since Walter Benjamin first diagnosed it in 1931. In recent years, in the context of postmodernity and end of history, leftist melancholy is often attributed to those who cling to the old modern Marxist and revolutionary left, here sometimes giving rise to a prescription for mourning work based on the Freudian contrast between mourning and melancholia. It would be necessary to overcome the melancholic position of the old left in mourning Marx and Marxism. This mourning, which I consider impossible for the left, is assumed to be possible and prescribed as a remedy

that clears the path towards post-Marxism. It is not strange that we find this prescription in the post-Marxist Lacanian Left of Stavrakakis and Alemán.

4. Mourning and melancholy of the left

Shortly before Alemán and Stavrakakis prescribed the mourning of Marxism in the Lacanian Left, Wendy Brown wrote a beautiful text on the left melancholy. Brown (1999) attributed the melancholic disease to a “narcissistic” left that despises both the young and new struggles (p. 22), a paradoxically “conservative” and, therefore, “self-destructive” left (p. 23), a left that “has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness”, a left that “is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure” and a left that “is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing” (p. 26). To cure such left-wing melancholy, Brown proposed reinvigorating the left with a “critical and visionary spirit” (p. 26) that “embraces the notion of a deep and indeed unsettling transformation of society” rather than “recoiling at this prospect” (p. 27). Against the melancholic retreat, what Brown proposes is the critique, radicalism and recognition of historical transformations.

Brown’s proposal found an echo in the Lacanian Left through the reflection of Ceren Özselçuk. The opposition in Özselçuk (2006) is no longer, as in Brown, an objective political-strategic opposition between the left’s melancholic retreat and its historically situated radical critique, but rather, it is a subjective psychopolitical contradiction between melancholic “resentment” (p. 231) and mourning based on “resubjection” and in “wanting of change” (pp. 236-238). The Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia replaces the Marxist distinction between forward and backward in history.

Brown’s political action gives way to Özselçuk’s affections and emotions, mourning, desire and resentment. Thus, we have arrived at psychoanalytic theory, and we have the right to worry about a psychologization of politics that could mean a depoliticization. Is there not a risk of neutralizing politics by focusing our interest on what subjects are and feel regardless of what they do, their strategy, their cause or their flag or their position in the great struggles of history?

The risk of psychologization and depoliticization is evident in a paragraph by Yannis Stavrakakis, in which he explicitly refers to Özselçuk. Although accepting Özselçuk’s problematization of the difference between mourning and melancholia, Stavrakakis did not hesitate to draw a (too) clear distinction between apparently healthy and realistic leftists, who mourn by “identifying with the symptom” of the crisis of the left, and the rather unrealistic leftists, who are sick with a “melancholic fixation” on “the dream of a radical revolutionary re-foundation of the social” (Stavrakakis, 2007, pp. 275-276). The left melancholics, as represented by Stavrakakis, are those who have not accomplished their mourning of the

“utopian revolutionary imagination” (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 275). What these melancholics seem to lack, in Jorge Alemán’s terms, is the “elaboration of their own ending” through a “mourning work” (Alemán, 2009, p. 21), a “mourning for the word Revolution” (Alemán, 2018, p. 28), a mourning for the “revolutionary metaphysics” of Marxism and for the communist dream of “society reconciled with itself”, a mourning that itself represents an “emancipation” (Alemán, 2018, p. 58). The left must emancipate itself from the revolutionary communist horizon, not only from exploitative, oppressive and alienating capitalism.

5. The post-Marxist melancholy of the Lacanian left

Both Alemán and Stavrakakis have promoted a break with Marxism and with its communist project of the revolutionary transformation of society. The break takes the form of a mourning that, in Stavrakakis, represents a cure against the melancholy of the radical left. The mourning of a certain radical Marxist perspective is what has allowed Alemán and Stavrakakis, both in line with Ernesto Laclau, to present themselves as post-Marxists and position themselves in what both called the “Lacanian Left”. This left is the one that has accomplished its work of mourning, working out the death of the most radical revolutionary communist dreams of the left, accepting this death instead of gloomily clinging to what is dead.

Against the melancholic ailment, Stavrakakis prescribed a work of mourning that allows the left to concentrate on the bourgeois democratic game and calmly resign to the death of the communist revolution. What is disconcerting and profoundly paradoxical about this prescription is that it comes too close to what Walter Benjamin understood by left-wing melancholy when he introduced the term in 1931. Following Benjamin conceptualization, the true melancholic would be Stavrakakis, not those to whom Stavrakakis attributes left melancholy.

The left melancholics, as characterized by Benjamin, bear an uncanny resemblance to Stavrakakis and the other exponents of the post-Marxist Lacanian Left. Like them, the left melancholics “sacrifice their idiosyncrasies”, lose their “revolutionary reflexes” (Benjamin, 1931, para. 3), delight in a “negativistic tranquility” (para. 5) and indulge in the characteristic “fatalism” of the intellectuals, of “those who are furthest away from the production process” (para. 7). Are not fatalism and negativism distinctive signs of the post-Marxist Lacanian Left that have been resigned to melancholically renounce the communist revolutionary horizon? This resignation is melancholic for the left because it implies losing itself as a left, committing suicide and defenestrating itself to fall into the abyss of generalized capitalist devastation.

The only global alternative to capitalism remains communism. The only way to go towards the communist horizon and get out of capitalism continues to be the rupture, the profound

transformation of society and revolution, in the most radical sense of the word. This is at least what has been shown in the history of the past two hundred years.

What history has taught us is that renouncing the revolutionary path and communist horizon, as in the populist and reformist Lacanian Left, simply means resigning oneself to an attenuated and sweetened capitalism but, ultimately, to capitalism, that is, to a system destined to satisfy the death drive of the vampire of capital that devours everything alive to transmute it into more and more dead money, thus destroying culture, devastating nature and threatening to annihilate all of humanity. This fatalistic and suicidal option, even though it allows delaying the fatal moment of suicide, seems to correspond more to melancholia than to mourning.

6. The impossible and the irreplaceable

Rather than mourning the lost left, the post-Marxist left seems to lose itself as a left, committing suicide by resigning itself to capitalist death. The post-Marxism of the Lacanian Left would then be, in the Freudian typology, more at the pole of melancholia than at that of mourning. However, instead of maintaining this normative polarity, would it not be better to read Freud differently by acknowledging the fundamental continuity between mourning and melancholy, here the melancholic undertone of mourning with its impossibility in a foundation where it is indistinguishable from melancholy?

Coinciding with melancholy, mourning is fundamentally impossible because its object, as Jean Allouch (2020) has demonstrated, is irreplaceable. Of course, communism and revolution can be replaced by populism and democratic reform, but this replacement cannot take place without irreparably losing something that cannot be lost without losing the left because it forms part of the very being of the left. This to which I refer is literally what is at stake, both in the left and in its revolutionary path and in its communist horizon. What is at stake here is the object of melancholy, the object that Lacan associates with the object *a*, here understanding it as an irreplaceable object underlying the imaginary, empirical and replaceable objects of communism and the revolution.

To put it in Freudian terms, the post-Marxist Lacanian Left knows that it has lost communism and the revolution, but it does not know “*what* it has lost in” communism and the revolution (Freud, 1997b, p. 243). What has been lost here is a piece of the left itself that constitutes it as the left, an irreplaceable object. Mourning this object is neither possible nor desirable. The only way the left could mourn that object would be to mourn itself, but because it would have already died as the left, it could not accomplish its mourning, which, therefore, would be impossible.

Instead of post-Marxist mourning, it would be better to think of a Marxist melancholia like that promoted by Žižek (Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000). One would have to think of a melancholic identification not with the inherent loss of post-Marxism, that of Marxism that

is lost when it is left behind, but with the lack proper to Marxism, that of what it has always aspired to, that of its most intimate desire, that of the object that is the cause of this desire. In other words, the melancholic identification must be with what animates a struggle, with what drives a movement and with what is committed to betting on the revolutionary path and the communist horizon.

7. Fidelity and commitment

The melancholic identification must be not with the defective historical reality of socialism and the socialist revolution but with the defect itself, with the lack and the desire that animated those who made these historical feats possible. We come here to Enzo Traverso, for whom “left melancholy does not necessarily mean a nostalgia for real socialism”, but rather “memory and consciousness of the potentialities of the past: fidelity to the emancipatory promises of the revolution, not to its consequences” (2018, p. 107). This melancholic fidelity was defended by both Derrida and Badiou: the first conceiving it as a “fidelity to a certain spirit of Marxism” (Derrida, 1993, pp. 148-149) and the second as an “active fidelity” to the event of the revolution and communism (Badiou, 2009a, pp. 87-97).

The left’s melancholic fidelity implies a militant historical commitment to the dead who have been left behind. Symbolically keeping those dead alive, protecting them from what Lacan (1986) identified as the second death, requires us to support the desire for revolution and communism, for which they fought and died. As long as that desire lives on, the coin will be in the air, defeat will be suspended, and victory will still be possible for the millions of communists killed in the Paris and Berlin Communes, in the Russian and Spanish Civil Wars, in the antifascist movement, in the resistance of the Second World War, in the processes of African national liberation, in the Vietnam War, in the South American dictatorships or in the anticommunist persecutions in Indonesia and Central America.

Commitment to the dead not only keeps them alive and prevents their defeat, but it also brings enormous strength to the left. I am referring to that force evoked by Benjamin in his famous twelfth thesis *On the Concept of History*: the force of “hatred and the will to sacrifice” that “are nourished by the image of the oppressed ancestors and not by the ideal of the living descendants” (Benjamin, 2009, p. 72). Something that Benjamin understood very well was that this force that comes from our dead, this typically melancholic force, is something that is lost in the left that turns its back on the past and is obsessed with the present and future, as is the case of the post-Marxist left in its different versions, including the Lacanian one.

The first thing that post-Marxism leaves behind, forgetting it in the past, is what Benjamin has described as the “main nerve” of the left force, linking it with the class that “in Marx appears as the last slave class, as the avenging class, which carries out the work of liberation on behalf of the generations of the defeated” (Benjamin, 2009, p. 72). By leaving this class behind, the post-Marxist left not only loses a force, the force of a desire that remains alive, but

it also loses itself, losing part of its own being, losing part of its own lack, a cause of its desire, which is the irreplaceable object implicated in communism and revolution. Pretending that this object could be substituted leads us to the “straying” that Lacan discovered in those who “contradicted” Marx (Lacan, 1991, p. 81) when they believed they could “overcome” his “true orientation” (Lacan, 1986, p. 245).

8. Anti-essentialist discursive postmodernism

A good example of post-Marxist straying is that of the specifically Laclauian Lacanian Left. This left began to stray when Laclau and Mouffe (1985) were guided by two old epistemological prejudices when recapitulating the history of discussions around the notion of hegemony in the context of the Second International. A first prejudice, that of adequacy, made them assume that Marxist political thought, like any other, corresponded to a reality and was more or less adapted to it according to a realistic conception of truth as *adequatio rei et intellectus*. The second prejudice, that of progression, made Laclau and Mouffe consider that the same thought, from Marx to Gramsci, would somehow have progressed by encountering obstacles and transforming itself to explain these barriers, here according to an evolutionary or progressive idea of science and philosophy.

Even if they were concealed in an antirealist and antievolutionary poststructuralist rhetoric, the two prejudices of adequacy and progression had to operate so that Laclau and Mouffe could aspire to “surpass” the Marxist intellectual tradition, overcome it as a “river” whose waters tortuously advanced towards a new left (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 4-7), propose in a Foucauldian key the “*genealogy*” of a concept as “hegemony” that would denote a really existing “fault” and distinguish this “concept” from the social and political “practices” to which it refers. It is true that Laclau and Mouffe claimed that they “reject the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices” but only to maintain the insurmountable difference between discourses and their “objects”, conceive more “valid” objects than others (pp. 107-111) and found everything in an antagonism that “escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language” (p. 125). In any case, although this antagonism cannot be apprehended, it is something real that can be glimpsed and conceptualized in a progressively more adequate way in the theory of Laclau and Mouffe.

The two prejudices of progression and adequacy are problematic not only because they contradict the historical relativization of thought proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, but also because they ignore several details that Lacan could have taught them: first, Marx reveals a truth as *aletheia* that is the decisive truth in Marxism; second, this truth is verified by its effects and does not require any progressive adaptation to reality; third, thought is part of the structure that appears as reality; fourth, there is no metalanguage here and there is nothing that suggests a progression because what is gained on the one hand is lost on the other hand. If the Laclauian Lacanian Left had been more Lacanian, perhaps it would have been able to remain Marxist. What is certain is that it would not have felt the need to situate itself in a

progressive-evolutionary way in a “post-Marxist terrain” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 4), nor would it have accepted a realistic adequacy criterion to discard certain Marxist formulas for their “little connection with what is really happening in the world” (Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000, p. 306).

One of the Marxist formulas that Laclau deemed inadequate and outdated is that of class and class struggle, but only because he interpreted it in an idealistic way, oscillating between two poles of idealism: the empiricist concrete pole, with the opposition between observable actors, and the logicist abstract pole, with the dialectic between contradictory principles. This has prevented Laclau from understanding the radical antagonism inherent in the relationship between capital and labour power, between the dead that exploits the living and the living that resists the dead; it is for this reason that he could conclude that Marxism abides to a definition of the worker as a simple “seller of labour power” from which it is not possible to “logically deduce the notion of resistance” (Laclau, 2011, p. 187-188). In reality, resistance is not a simple notion and should not even be logically deduced in a materialist perspective like that of Marxism, but this cannot be understood in a Laclauian idealist reading in which there is no “essence” (pp. 76-77), the economic is reduced to the “discursive” (p. 108), the “passage through the referent” is judged “illegitimate” (p. 118) and the thing “does not exist as such” (Laclau, 2011, pp. 291-292) but only as its representation in an “object elevated to the dignity of the Thing” (p. 149). This discursive anti-essentialism, which claims to reconstitute politics, could be nothing more than a postmodern form of the old idealism.

9. Lacanian pessimistic Hegelianism and Jacobin political Platonism

Laclau’s postmodernism has already been criticized by Žižek. Žižek’s central argument is that Laclauian discursive anti-essentialism, with its “shifting-dispersed-contingent-ironic-and so on political subjectivities”, is a historical expression of the current “deterritorializing” capitalism, by which “all that is solid melts into air” (Žižek, 2000b, p. 108). The logic of capital is then a “positive condition”, not a limit for “generalized hegemony”, as Laclau conceives it (Žižek, 2000d, p. 319). Laclauian thought obeys capitalism and—perhaps precisely because of this—cannot think about it. It proceeds in this way exactly as an ideology, in the classical Marxist sense of the term, when thinking about something so as not to think about its truth, its cause and its conditions of enunciation.

The classic example of ideology for Marx is idealist philosophy. This spectral philosophy generates a dense phantasmagoria of ideas that prevents seeing the cultural, historical and socioeconomic materiality on which Marx focuses: the materiality on which ideas are based, which produces them and which is expressed in them in a symbolic, metonymic and metaphorical way. Operating much like the compromise formations to which we have

already referred, phantasmagorical ideas are there simultaneously to manifest and disguise their truth, but also to disguise their dissimulation by rationalizing it.

Laclauian ideas about discourse, the emptiness of the signifier, the constitutive lack of society and the resulting necessity of hegemony are the rationalizations of an idealization of the material with which Marx worked. Thinking in a Maoist key, it seems to me that these idealist attempts to overcome the insurmountable are supposed to be successful, being presented as post-Marxist, and for this very reason, they fail, thus clearly distinguishing themselves from another equally idealistic and phantasmagorical attempts to overcome the material with which Marx worked, the crypto-Marxist attempts, which are recognized from the outset as defeated and, therefore, which are successful. We find here the pessimistic Lacanian Hegelianism of Žižek, but also the Jacobin political Platonism of Badiou, who recognizes, in fact, with Jean-Paul Sartre, that “Marxism is the insurmountable horizon of our culture” (Badiou, 2016, p. 67).

Although Badiou opts for a political dimension that he conceives as practically nonexistent in liberal and neoliberal capitalism, Žižek prefers to accentuate the economic element and reproaches Badiou for his “Jacobinism”, which makes him emphasize politics (Žižek, 2009, pp. 55-56). The truth is that both Badiou and Žižek, in continuity with Marx and with Marxism, know that the heart of the problem is capitalism; they do not renounce the revolutionary strategy and mistrust the post-Marxist confidence in liberal democracy. This has distanced them from the Lacanian Left of Laclau, but it did not stop them from agreeing with it in what I see as its idealism, as an idealization of materialism in which the legacy of Marx subsists spectrally.

10. Idealism

The Badiouan idealist perspective, heir to Plato, reduces Marxism to a “thought” (Badiou, 2016, p. 52) and communism to an “idea” (Badiou, 2009b, p. 181). Even if this idea has an eventual origin, is sustained in “the real of a truth procedure” and includes “real sequences” and “historical events suitable for symbolization”, it does not stop being an “intellectual operation”, even an “imaginary operation”, while history, in the strict sense, is not “real” for Badiou (2009b, pp. 181-194). The communist action and its historical plot are reduced to “mental structures” and “intellectual schemes” (Badiou, 2007, pp. 132-133).

Unlike Badiou who renounces the Hegelian reality of history, Žižek maintains it, thus assuming its idealism. This idealism can be seen at the very point where Žižek situates his materialism, in the Hegelian owl of Minerva that spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk, as a “thought” that comes after “being”, like philosophy that only understands historical events once they have happened (Žižek, 2012a, pp. 220-221). Idealism lies precisely in the retrospective philosophical claim to understand, as if ideal understanding were not

part of material history, as if it could understand it, encompassing it, thus operating as a metalanguage.

With there being no metalanguage, as Lacan has taught us, there can be no comprehension of history either, only history and its events, like the crowing of the Gallic rooster in which Žižek believed he found a sign of Marx's idealism, interpreting this crowing as something ideal and not as the material event of the French Revolution. In addition to this revolutionary crowing, there are two other indications of idealism that Žižek detected in Marx and that are of particular interest to us here. The first is the "teleological notion of communism", which would appear as an "inherent capitalist fantasy", that of the "fantasmatic scenario for resolving capitalist antagonisms" (Žižek, 2012a, p. 257). The second indication of Marx's idealism for Žižek, which is closely linked to the previous one, is the inability to conceive the "repetitive return" of the insurmountable "abstract negativity", of totally irrational violence without cause or purpose, which "violently unbinds social links" and that would have been glimpsed by Hegel, who would be thus "more materialist than Marx" (Žižek, 2012a, pp. 452-453).

By admitting abstract negativity and renouncing the communist horizon, Žižek betrays a certain pessimistic vision. The same pessimism is confirmed in other of Žižek's disagreements with Marx and Marxism, including the notion of the final crisis of capitalism as "a prolonged process of decay and disintegration" that does not necessarily end in revolution and communism (Žižek, 2018, para. 3) or the rejection of the "Aristotelian positivity of the productive potential of workers" in favour of the Hegelian vision of "from nothing through nothing to nothing" (Žižek, 2012a, p. 250). Žižek opts again and again, in Gramscian terms, for the pessimism of the intellect, but instead and at the expense of the optimism of a will kept alive in Marx and in the history of Marxism. The lack of optimism of the will in Žižek is perhaps explained simply because he works not with his will, but with his ideas, with his intellect, being an intellectual and not a militant. This explains his idealistic orientation, which, then, seems to be inseparable from his pessimistic vision.

11. Communism

Žižek's pessimism has something melancholic about it. Is there not a kind of melancholy, a melancholic lucidity, in Žižek's insistence on nothingness, on abstract negativity, on the decadence and disintegration of our world or on the lack of horizon, end and purpose of history? If Žižek harbours a hope, it is in the contradictions of current capitalism that are "potentially even more explosive than those of standard industrial capitalism" (Žižek, 2000d, p. 322). His hope, closer to Kautskian Marxism than to Leninism, is directed more towards objective contradictions than to a revolutionary communist subject.

If Žižek still bets on communism, it is on communism understood as a "problem", not as a "solution", because "the classic Marxist solution failed, but the problem remains" (Žižek, 2018, para. 11). Marx could intervene here by recalling that the insoluble problems for theory,

for “speculative philosophy”, can only be solved in “practice” (Marx, 1987, p. 497). This practice could even lead us to the supreme Žižekian concept of act, but Žižek (2012b) himself recommended that we think instead of act. His recommendation was that of a philosopher because Žižek is, above all, a philosopher, an intellectual, a theoretician and not a militant, at least not a grassroots militant, which also partly explains his idealism.

Žižek’s idealistic orientation does not compromise his obvious political radicalism. This radicalism can be seen as very different from the one that Laclau promoted through his radical democratic populist project founded on the constitution of a people through a “set of equivalential demands articulated by an empty signifier” (Laclau, 2011, p. 215). In Laclau’s version, populism does not necessarily exclude capitalism, just as it does not exclude liberal bourgeois democracy.

Žižek was right to criticise Laclau for never envisaging “the possibility of a completely *different* economic-political regime” (Žižek, 2000c, p. 223), but Laclau was also right to reply that Žižek “is not doing so either” (Laclau, in Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p. 289). There is not in Žižek a clear affirmation correlative with his negation of the present. This affirmation only seems to be found in one of the three great exponents of the Lacanian Left to which we have referred, Badiou, who is quite clear about what he means by communism: first, in the timeless subjective form of the communist militant, an “egalitarian passion”, a “deposition of selfishness” and an “intolerance towards oppressions” (Badiou, 2012, pp. 18-19); second, at the level of the idea or intellectual representation, a “promise of universal emancipation”, a “historical hypothesis of a world freed from the law of profit and private interest”, an “imaginary operation by which an individual subjectification projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narration of a History” (Badiou, 2009b, pp. 8, 54, 189) and a “conviction that it is possible to extract all of humanity from the harmful power of capitalism” (Badiou, 2014, p. 62), hence the “only modernity” that can compete against the capitalist one (Badiou, 2016, p. 70); third, on the communist horizon, an “egalitarian society, a society that by its own movement breaks down walls and separations, a society of polyvalence and variable paths”, a society without “hierarchy of places” and a society characterised by three dimensions: “de-privatization of the productive process, extinction of the State, polymorphism of work” without division between manual and intellectual activities (Badiou, 2014, pp. 51-63). All this unfolds another world completely different from the one imposed by capitalist modernity.

12. Conclusion

Communism is not just a spectre in Badiou’s work. We could almost say that this work, like the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, is the result of a communist who exposes his “concepts, aims and tendencies” (Marx & Engels, 1973, p. 110). What is certain is that Badiou’s communism does not have a spectral character like his Marxism, but one of the

spectres of this Marxism is precisely Badiou's communist idea, one in which we can glimpse a trace of Marx, his shadow, like that of a ghost.

What is certain is that the ghost of Marx haunts the Lacanian Left. Perhaps the strange sensibility that Lacan brought to Badiou, Žižek and Laclau prevents another kind of manifestation of Marx. Perhaps Marx is doomed to take on a phantasmagorical form here.

The ghostly shape is not necessarily deplorable. After all, as Derrida noted, "the future belongs to ghosts" in such a way that Marx, as a ghost, "is the future, he is always to come, he only presents himself as what could return", always being "ahead" and not only "behind" us (Derrida, 1993, pp. 41, 69-71). Marx lurks from the horizon that has not yet been reached in the space opened up by Laclau, Žižek, Badiou and their followers.

As post-Marxist as it claims to be, the Lacanian Left could still be pre-Marxist. Marx is still today, as in the time of Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre, the insurmountable horizon of our culture. As Lacan warned us in 1960, we cannot "go beyond" Marx (Lacan, 1986, p. 245), and for this reason, as Sartre noted in the same year, "a so-called 'going beyond' Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism; at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond" (Sartre, 1960, p. 12).

It is as if it were still too early for this left to assimilate Marx and allow him to present himself as no longer just a spectre. It is even as if it were *always too soon* for the spectre of Marx to materialize and stop haunting those who have a sensibility that Lacan has taught them and that he himself owes to Freud. It is worth remembering, again with Derrida, that Freud "disregarded Marx", and that, from then on, "Marx has not been received", being like an immigrant "still clandestine, as he always was" (Derrida, 1993, p. 276). We can say that Marx has entered a field where he cannot be legalized, symbolized and live, except as something spectral, illegal, unacceptable, impossible, *real*.

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