

The Political Shape of *Kairos*

Paul Casey
Occidental College

 [print version](#)

Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation.

Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*

What exactly is the difference from one century to the next? Is it the difference between a past world—for which the specter represented a coming threat—and a present world, today, where the specter would represent a threat that some would like to believe is past and whose return it would be necessary again, once again in the future, to conjure away?

Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

Preface

I think it entirely appropriate that the "Political Shape of *Kairos*" makes its way into a special double issue of *Enculturation* devoted to questions of disciplinarity. Writers in this issue, for instance, are asked to be aware of a now-time where both Rhetoric and Composition are marked in different ways by some sense of crisis. In a passage from the *Dissoi Logoi* attributed to the Sophist Hippias, Mario Untersteiner reads *kairos* as "unprecedented time" (306). A useful interpretation might include the idea that new imaginings are possible for momentary reconciliations between Rhetoric and Composition. Carolyn Eriksen Hill's reading of *kairos* underscores the potential for transformation in such times: "What we—our students and we—today tend to experience as binary oppositions, the static, intractable polarized thinking that shows up in our lives and in our discourse, was for Pythagoras a matter of those forces expressing themselves kairotically and energetically, shaping and changing our experience of time, and themselves being transformed by it" (213). We might add Rhetoric/Composition to the list of binaries that have interacted kairotically at times, producing momentary reconciliations between the two disciplines. These interactions have been a great boon to Composition. Current Traditional Rhetoric, Process Pedagogy, and Writing Across the Curriculum, all borrow important features from classical and modern rhetorical theory.

Quite possibly this double issue of *Enculturation* is a self-conscious act of *kairos*. Eric Charles White notes in his book *Kaironomia* that for Gorgias, "*kairos* stands for a radical principle of occasionality which

implies a conception of the production of meaning in language as a process of continuous adjustment to and creation of the present occasion" (14). The occasion created for this issue begins with a question: "Where's the Rhetoric?" In the field of Rhetoric, *kairos* might form the core of maintaining, over and over, its very existence against those for whom the study of intention is inherently dangerous to their positions of power. Much in the way Derrida wants us to maintain the "specters of Marx," that is, the ability of Marx's ideas to destabilize and haunt capital, a *kairos* for Rhetoric asserts itself as a way of revealing design and desire. Maintaining Rhetoric as an act of criticism is important for its continued departmental viability, yet rhetoric happens, regardless of the self-conscious act. Roland Barthes may have provided a semiotics of culture, to name one example, but Rhetoric seeks to unpack the shifting desires of those sign systems designed to move people in different ways.

What the following article offers is a reading of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* as an example of *kairos*. His intention is to re-invent and even rescue Marx from both the totalizing effects of Marxist scholarship and the death sentence of global capitalism. I hope that readers might be encouraged to take from this article not so much a plan for enacting *kairos* as a new awareness that comes from recognizing its transformative power.

The political shape of *kairos* is but one of its manifestations. In outlining these contours of *kairos*, I suggest a structure visible in the light of specific ideas pertaining to the political. Most of these ideas admittedly belong to the lugubrious region of Marxist philosophy. Reification of *kairos* within Marxism as a system is not my intention, however. It is just this sort of maneuvering that would limit *kairos*. For example, the theological shape of the term suggests a different though related approach. It focuses on an experience of "the fullness of time." Most notably, such programs of action were explored in relation to Latin American liberationist theologies, which harnessed the transformative power of *kairos* through the experience of faith. The *kairotic* interactions of often disparate ideas, Marxist/ Christian, democratic/communist, dialectic/ deconstruction, reveal something deep within human experience. Whether this something is the need for synthesis, the structure of promise, or glimpses of the eternal is unclear. The striking thing about *kairos* is its ultimate unknowability, which has led me to think about it in terms of Derrida's spectrology. Like the ghost of *Hamlet*, might we consider current world events not only as a time that is out of joint, but also "as a thinking of the other and of the event to come"? (*Specters* 59).

Introduction: Derrida's Kairotic Moment

In his discussion of contemporary interpretations of *kairos*, James Kinneavy highlights the fact that the word is usually associated with a temporal condition marked by some flaw: "It [*kairos*] certainly is closely allied to Walter Benjamin's notion of being aware of the 'now-time,' the revolutionary possibilities inherent in the moment, the 'state of emergency' in which we live, the potentials for change inherent in the

historical situation" (90). Derrida picks up a similar theme in *Specters of Marx*, a book written in large part as a response to those who claim that Marx and his ideas are dead. The first line of the book, "Maintaining now the specters of Marx," (3) is an act of *kairos* on Derrida's part, an assertion that it is important in this now-time to maintain a spirit of Marx against those, such as Fukuyama, who are attempting to stabilize the necessarily disturbing features of Marxism by "installing an unprecedented form of hegemony" (50). Pronouncements of a new world order led Derrida to cite the line from *Hamlet* "The time is out of joint," to call up the many associations of the ghost who comes to set things right. He borrows from Shakespeare to illustrate the ethical content in Marx, one "spirit" (according to Derrida there are many), that he develops to account for the structure of promise. Thus the spirit of Marx that interests Derrida is the one containing a messianic promise, the one he says "we are nicknaming the messianic without messianism" (73). Derrida's book is an instance of *kairos* because it is a response to crisis in the world, grounded in the contingencies of the now-moment. When Derrida speaks of a "Hegelian neo-evangelism" (100), he does so in order to name the specter, which contains no *Dasein*. At the same time, the ghost reveals uncanniness, what he calls the "frequency of a certain visibility" (100). In essence, what he is speaking of are apparitions of the ghost of communism. The frequency of visibility of the ghost is what I might term the pulse of *kairos*.

***Kairos* without Content**

Kairotic reconciliations that respond to political exigency are those responding in some way to the need for justice. A common theme among writers on *kairos* is the element of *dikainon*, the Greek word for justice. However, there is no one political "system" (system implying a kind of stability that *kairos* resists) that the term naturally falls into. Having said that, *kairos* appears most at home in democratic communities. It appears to function at the political level as an experience of timeliness where injustice dissolves or is at least temporarily reconciled. An echo of Derrida's messianic promise, one that reconciles the difference between democracy and communism, is clearly present here. I might tentatively claim that the most important *kairotic* reconciliation is this one. Gayatri Spivak calls Derrida's messianism one "without content, carrier of merely the structure of a promise which cancels out the difference between democracy and Marxism" (66). From Derrida's point of view, this promise is "irreducible to any deconstruction . . . a certain experience of the emancipatory promise" (*Specters* 59).

The ineffable quality of *kairos*, its pulsation, is the experience of momentary reconciliation with the infinite. While Derrida may not like the term infinite because it hints at some metaphysical content, we are speaking of emancipatory promise in terms of its ability to transcend the finitude of political reality. The concept of justice, wrought from Utopia as "Nowhere," makes sense when we consider the idea of a messianism without content.

Praxis as a First Encounter

Before developing the *kairotic* character of Derrida's Marx in more detail, I wish to look at the structural features of praxis in Marxism. The role *kairos* plays in Derrida's Marx is better understood as a second movement. Yet, this movement cannot be attempted until a first encounter, a recognition of praxis, opens up the possibility for this "emancipatory promise."

It is important to distinguish real praxis from its approximation. The *kairos* principle is one way to think about reconciliations of political theory and revolutionary action (praxis) in terms of how they respond to justice. One important feature that *kairos* can bring to political theory is its historicizing effect. In other words, *kairos* is a barometer for a praxis of the now-moment, one that looks to the conditions of a current crisis and lends its ethical component to praxis. False Praxes, those lacking an ethical dimension, have historically led not to the dissolution of a class system but to its reification in large communist bureaucracies. But *kairos* also needs the historically oriented dialectic, which gives to *kairos* a subject/object schema. Only in the dialectic can the recognition of one's existence as a subject within a class system become a reality.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the innovation of Marx had less to do with a concretization of the subject/object scheme of Hegel than with the entry of a "new mode of historical existence": "Marx [introduces] a new mode of historical existence and of meaning: *praxis*. Everything we have mentioned concerning the relationships between subject and object in Marxism was only an approximation of praxis" (47). He goes on to note, "Class consciousness in the proletariat is not a state of mind, nor is it knowledge. It is not, however, a theoretician's conception because it is a praxis; it is a polarized existence, a possibility which appears in the proletarian's situation at the juncture of things and his life" (47). Praxis, according to Merleau-Ponty, is thus a type of historically produced subjectivity, a politicization of subjectivity at a moment in time. While praxis is the recognition of a polarized existence, *kairos* is the ethical response to the possibilities opened up by this new understanding. Thus, praxis takes us only so far in the movement toward a just society. Praxis is recognition of injustice, in this case the recognition of polarized, class-based existence. Takahisa Oishi finds in Marx's description of praxis this same crucial first step toward revolutionary change: "Marx does not think that the labour under the command of other men is a natural, eternal form of productive activity, praxis, but only historical and transitory. Praxis is an essential activity for man to become a social=human being. Production and consumption is not to be understood only in an economic sense (in the sense of creation and use of material wealth), but in the sense of the objectification and confirmation of human nature" (125). It is important to add an understanding of *kairos* to Merleau-Ponty and Oishi's praxis definitions so that the movement toward authentic social existence resists reactionary or totalizing discourses and methods.

I believe it would be a gross overstatement to claim that *kairos* supplies the deconstructive element that forces praxis to historicize itself in each now-moment. It is important to note, however, that *kairos* relies much

more on contingent knowledge, which does lend itself to critical reflection on the *particular* as unique rather than the application of the universal on the particular.

***Kairos* as a Second Encounter**

Derrida's writing of *Specters* makes possible future appearances of *kairos*. What the book offers is a way to re-read Marx as a destabilizing, "haunting" force, yet, ironically, one that allows us to encounter *kairos* as momentary reconciliation. What is this reconciliation? It is the emancipatory promise in Marx: "Whether the promise promises this or that, whether it be fulfilled or not, or whether it be unfulfillable, there is necessarily some promise and therefore some historicity as future-to-come" (73). The book, as mentioned earlier, was a response to those proponents of the end of history. He notes a certain jubilatory incantation among these writers, as if they wished to raise the specter of Marx through a work of mourning, only to put the ghost to death once and for all. For Derrida, the idea that justice has been achieved in the world, that Marx and his ideas are no longer valid today, should be a call to the ghost to reappear and haunt such an idea.

What would such a haunting entail? First, Derrida says, "Marxist critique remains urgent and will have to remain indefinitely necessary in order to denounce and reduce the gap *as much as possible*, in order to adjust 'reality' to the 'ideal' in the course of a necessarily infinite process" (86). Classical Marxism is certainly helpful here in clarifying a praxis moment, one that recognizes the need to reduce the gap between philosophy and history so that this urgency of Marxist critique can be applied to social conditions. This reconciliation brings philosophy and history together in the "now-moment" of *kairos*. Matt Perry suggests that Marx found in philosophy the tendency to "undermine the claims of historical knowledge" (144). He also contends that for Marx, the job of philosophy is to "examine the ways in which human society conceals and disorganizes historical truth" (144). Marx himself commented on the obscuring role philosophy plays in the interpretation of events:

It is therefore the task of history, now the truth is no longer in the beyond, to establish the truth of the here and now. The first task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, once the holy form of human self-alienation has been discovered, is to discover self-alienation in its unholy forms. The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics. (qtd. in McLellan 122)

This *kairos* is problematized, however, by the assumption that any philosophy which proceeds to examine consciousness apart from the material, economic realities of the present leads to self-alienation. Nietzsche found the very products of alienation in identification with herd mentality. Kierkegaard, as I will outline later, found authenticity in a kind of withdrawal from the public sphere. Yet, as Habermas makes

clear, it is "the performative attitude of the subject who chooses himself" (qtd. in Matustik 245). Such a self-relation happens, claims Martin Matustik, "while situated in concrete life histories of existing individuals" (245).

Philip Kain comments that Germany during Marx's life was extremely advanced philosophically yet sadly backward socially and economically. Kain believes this may partly explain the conditions leading Marx to identify a crisis in the separation of philosophy and history: "This gap between philosophy and the real world must be closed, Marx says, by realizing philosophy. Philosophy must turn to practice, so that, to use his earlier formulation, philosophy can become worldly and the world philosophical. All institutions which treat humans merely as means must be transformed in a revolutionary way" (39). The *kairos* effect in praxis is akin to John Roberts' suggestion that "Praxis theory seeks to bridge the gap between 'abstract' and 'concrete' by suggesting that through practical activity humans reproduce the very structures which in turn produce them. 'Reality' can only be meaningful for human actors to the extent that they creatively come to know and understand it" (25).

Not only is *Specters* a *kairotic* moment as "act," but also it exemplifies what I have just outlined concerning the need to bring philosophy and history together. Derrida is careful, however, to delineate in his philosophy exactly which history of Marx should survive and which history "rushed headlong toward an ontological content . . ." (*Specters* 91). He believes that "whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot be its heirs. There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation, which is why we distinguished several spirits" (92). There is much in this short passage that bears upon *kairos* as both an ethical principle and as a historicizing idea. As an ethical principle *kairos* is akin to the idea of selectivity because it filters out those spirits of Marx, those trends within Marxism that have given themselves over to "ontological content." Again, I want to be careful here not to simply make *kairos* into a deconstructive tool. At the same time, the two share much at the level of ethics, given what has already been said concerning "the undeconstructibility of a certain idea of justice" (90). The historicizing function of *kairos* is strikingly similar to what Derrida sees as the need for this constant reaffirmation of a spirit of Marx. Each historical moment requires a specific, contingent response. While I have claimed that *kairos* needs the dialectic to provide a subject/object schema, one that allows for the first recognition of praxis, it must always be grounded in the now-moment. Thus, any claim of stability in a telos-oriented history misses the essential void in that history. The Sophists taught us well in this case. The past and the future are radically unknowable, so we must rely upon *kairos'* contingent, yet ethical nature.

Chantal Mouffe suggests that many practitioners of Marxism lack an "understanding of the nature of ideology and the way in which we are constituted as subjects. The prevailing conception, which manifests the general problematic of class reductionism, has been that all subjects are class subjects . . . [;] there is no space here for a process of transformation

of ideological elements, of differential articulation through which new political subjects are created" (177). Since, from Mouffe's point of view, too much Marxist theory has found itself locked into a "closed" system of struggle with bourgeois ideology, it has missed what I would call the *kairos* moment in ideological critique, or that which opens up the possibility for liberatory political subjectivity. The oppressor/oppressed dialectic too often assumes stable class subjects that end up canceling one another out. A certain rigidity in Marxism has led Peter Sperlich to conclude, "Marx replaced Hegel's spiritual tunnel vision with an equally narrow *economic* one" (114). Sperlich's assumption is indeed reductionist, yet Chantal Mouffe attributes comments such as this one to shortcomings in Marxist theory itself.

Wendy Lee contends, "Just as praxis is a concept central to the proletarian revolution, flourishing is central to a vision of praxis that can sustain a revolution whose mission is to end all forms of oppression and to imagine a utopia whose members can flourish over time" (92). Merleau-Ponty finds in Marxist critique "not a utopian representation of the future, but at least the absolute of a negation, or negation realized, the *classless* society called for by history . . . [:] all societies which tolerate the existence of a proletariat are unjustifiable" (231). The fact that there is disagreement on the centrality of utopia in Marx is less important than the obvious *orientation toward secession of exploitation and the conditions that give rise to it*.

The second encounter with *kairos* is what the "heirs" of Marx might call a historicization. If critical theory has revealed anything at all, it has revealed the way reality is mediated by what Kenneth Burke has called the terministic screen. In other words, the very "system" of interpretation employed by philosopher, social critic, politician, etc, will determine the answers. *Specters of Marx* suggests that a "spectrology" of the kind offered by Derrida looks to the ghost of Marx which "has no certain border, but it blinks and sparkles behind the proper names of Marx, Freud, and Heidegger: Heidegger who misjudged Freud who misjudged Marx" (174). For Derrida, it is the very character of the ghost to be misread. This is important, he believes, for the heirs of Marx because they will always already be engaged in the act of historicizing as they engage the ghost. The second *kairos* moment of reconciliation is actually one that collapses in upon itself; its critical import for praxis tells the heirs of Marx that his ghost is yet to be received:

Marx has not yet been received. Marx remains an immigrant *chez nous*, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still a clandestine immigrant, as he was all his life. He belongs to a time of disjunction, to that 'time out of joint' in which is inaugurated, laboriously, painfully, tragically, a new thinking of borders, a new experience of the house, the home, and the economy. Between earth and sky. One should not rush to make of the clandestine immigrant an illegal alien or, what always risks coming down to the same thing, to domesticate him. To neutralize him through naturalization. (*Specters* 169)

The problematic of time is certainly foregrounded in this quote. Derrida is famous for this kind of fragmented, disjointed, "disjunctive" non-teleological stance toward history. There is also the sense that Derrida wants to disrupt a binary that attempts to either dismiss Marx on the grounds that communism has failed in its liberatory promise, or to reify a certain version of Marx. This project is not good enough for Robert Albritton who feels that "Derrida seems less interested in really engaging with Marx than in selectively appropriating those Marxian grains that can be processed to leaven his hauntology, which, as usual is primarily ethical. For example, we need 'to learn to live *with* ghosts' as those who dwell (or that which dwells) between life and death, positivity and negativity, presence and absence" (156). He also says "When deconstructivists make statements or claims about the world, these tend to be dogmatic, and this is because they have no epistemological or theoretical grounds upon which to make such claims" (161).

My use of *kairos* as a momentary reconciliation of void and substance, positivity and negativity, is very akin to deconstruction, but it does attempt an epistemology that goes beyond critique. The *Specters of Marx* is indeed "a typical Derridean wrench to be thrown into the machinery of dialectics such that contradiction remains forever unresolved in any kind of neat synthesis" (Albritton 156). It is crucial to keep this undecidability, but at the same time rhetorical authority is necessary to say anything at all. *Kairos* as a momentary reconciliation, I believe, is in keeping with the best spirit of both Derrida and Hegel because the dialect provides a way of thinking about negativity as a category while at the same time maintaining a stance of openness toward history. It is possible therefore to speak of these moments as ones that carry the "residue" of history, yet lack any stable orientation toward this or that particular end. Keeping Hegel and Derrida in constant tension with one another can allow for these moments of rhetorical authority to arise without the ontologizing or totalizing of one particular vision. The *kairotic* tension between dialectic and deconstruction is thus a type of "rhetorical resistance" that works.

Hegel has been in the backdrop of my discussion of Marx, and this is in large part due to Marx's dependence on the dialectic. Roy Bhaskar's influential work *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* is in part an attempt to reconcile the dialectics of Hegel and Marx through a new movement "dialectical critical realism." This more recent praxis carries in it the "*kairos* effect" of radicalization in that it sees the goal of general liberation emanating from the freedom of the individual:

Hegel sees the transcendental unity of self-consciousness as a social achievement, which is ultimately grounded in a public world of moral order, enshrined in the constitutional structures of his rational state. Let it be said that this is a tremendous advance on Kant. But Marx identifies the real basis of the Hegelian state in civil society (later, modes of production) founded on the alienation and exploitation of labour-power, and in his systematic dialectics shows capitalism as a geohistorical product, destined to make

way for one in which labour becomes 'life's prime want.' Dialectical critical realism argues that the Marxian goal in which 'the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all' can be achieved only by an extension, generalization and radicalization of Marx's dialectic of de-alienation into a dialectic of liberation from the totality of the master-slave relations, and that this moral goal of universal human autonomy is a presupposition of the most elemental desire, the first initiating act of referential detachment, induced by negativity in the guise of absence. (Bhaskar 335)

Bhaskar's reconciliation of individual agency with Marxist thought would include deep recognition of the differences in identity, or "identities in difference, generating a unity- in-diversity engaged in explanatory critical/concrete utopian/transitional prefigurative depth totalizing counter-hegemonic struggle" (335). Earlier I noted where Derrida challenged us to constantly re-think Marx in light of what he termed a misjudgment. Bhaskar asks us to reconsider Marx by returning and radicalizing the master/slave dialectic. Each is engaged in what I would call a process of *kairos* in that what they are attempting to achieve is a re-interpretation that aims at a transformative praxis. Derrida through a deconstruction of ontologized Marx, Bhaskar through a radicalization of the Master/Slave dialectic.

It also misses an important element in the process of hegemony that begins within capitalism. For now, it is possible to look at Roger Simon's suggestion that "a class advancing towards hegemony does not need to make a clean sweep of the opposing ideological systems; rather, it is a matter of transforming existing ideologies by preserving and rearranging some of the most durable elements in a new system" (64). The Gramscian theory of hegemony is a good example of a *kairos* moment where theory/philosophy becomes wedded to history/practice. But hegemony is often reduced or oversimplified as the imposition of one ideology over another, or the act of "symbolic violence" done by a dominant class, or still, forces that legitimize the social hierarchy. Mouffe believes that these kinds of interpretations of hegemony not only fail to see the "radical novelty" of Gramsci, but neglect to follow him to his logical conclusion, which saw a beyond to the economic structure of society:

For Gramsci, hegemony is the imposition of an articulating principle upon an ensemble of social relations and practices, which do not, in themselves, have a necessary class belonging prior to their articulation to the 'hegemonic principle' of a fundamental class. Such a concept puts into question the reductionist view, which postulates that all ideological and political elements have a class character. I think that we have here the reason why the concept of hegemony has been so misunderstood by the Marxists. It has been 'unthinkable' within a dominant problematic which remains strongly reductionist. (173)

There is so much tension between theoretical, "philosophical" Marxism and so-called vulgar Marxism. Understanding the role of praxis can help distinguish between the former, which maintains the ambiguity of the dialectic, and the latter, which asserts its truth through realism (Merleau-Ponty 73).

This coming-to-be of philosophical Marxism, of a liberatory promise yet to be realized, is the idea that Derrida most generally picks up for his *Specters of Marx*. Indeed, the very idea of multiple spirits suggests that there is more than one legacy of Marx. Derrida has noted that it is our job (and by "our" I assume he means those interested in maintaining a posture of critique of capital) to sort through these spirits: "The responsibility, once again, would be that of an heir. Whether they wish it or know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism" (*Specters* 91).

The spirit of Marx that I am developing in this paper is one that contains a messianic promise. What exactly this promise consists of is a philosophical and religious question, but Marx had in mind a dialectical materialism that would eventually lead to the disappearance of the state. " 'Messianic' is not a religious concept for Derrida. It is 'the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*' " (Albritton 160). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reading of Marx's project is a good indication that the latter understood history as *kairotic*: "When one says that Marxism finds a meaning in history, it should not be understood by this that there is an irresistible orientation toward certain ends but rather that there is, immanent in history, a problem or a question in relation to which what happens at each moment can be classified, situated, understood as progress or regression . . ." (38). I understand this "problem" in Marx as the fundamentally exploitative character of capitalism, or the crisis in the "now-time" that Marxism attends to.

Weak Messianism and *Kairos*: Marx with Kierkegaard

To all appearances such a marriage would seem to give rise to conflict based on the elevation of the individual by Kierkegaard, and the primacy of the collective in Marx. Yet, as Marsh suggests, Kierkegaard's critique of society places the individual in the position to develop "a critical distance enabling him to see through the myths of such a society: consumerism, militarism, rugged individualism, imperialism, 'the new world order,' technocracy, sexism, and hedonism" (212). Marsh also comments on the possibility of a complementary relationship between Marx and Kierkegaard: "existential inwardness complements the public and communicative, and vice versa, and individual, religious, and ethically motivated resistance can complement a Marxist emphasis on public mass action" (213).

Gayatri Spivak traces a certain movement in Derrida's thought from Kierkegaard through Marx, though she never mentions the founder of Existentialism explicitly. It is clear that the radicalization of Marx is made possible through recourse to Kierkegaard's reading of the Abraham and Isaac story: "Indeed, the ghost of Marx that Derrida is most haunted

by returns to the bosom of Abraham, shorn of all specificity, mark of a messianism without content, carrier of merely the structure of a promise which cancels out the difference between democracy and Marxism" (Spivak 66). *Kairos* appears as the term that adequately represents what Derrida refers to as this absolute newness, a rupture that brings with it the potential for an arrival of the messianic without content into the temporal moment. The reconciling principle in *kairos* is also at work in Spivak's reading of Derrida. The structure of promise, what Derrida has referred to as irreducible to deconstruction, is operative in democracy and Marxism. But I am attempting to be careful enough to locate the Marx of *kairos*. The job is made doubly hard by the fact that Marxism *qua* philosophy is only performative in the abstract. What is needed is a philosophy that carries with it the possibility of praxis. I will try to illuminate some of these praxes.

Derrida develops a term found in Walter Benjamin's work, "weak messianism" or "messianism without messiah," to account for the structure of the event as "promise," while, at the same time, circumventing the problem of saying once and for all what such a structure would look like. What we end up with then is something like "community without community." Here we find something fundamental to the condition of postmodernism in general: how to think the relationship between community *qua* utopia without falling into the trap of totalizing such a relationship to the point of excluding certain "others." In the sense that poststructuralists as a group represent a time "since Marx," as Derrida says, his heirs must begin the problem of sorting through the voices, or "specters" of Marx, in order to address the problem of community in an age that seems far too willing to write Marx's ideas off. Megill criticizes Marx for his denial that freedom is more than a material issue; in a "redeemed," socialist future, happiness would become a general state. But Megill is quick to point out that "Rather than dismiss[ing] Marx—the dominant tendency now—we ought to hew to his hopes, and follow the example he gave us of the critical application of thinking to precisely such dominant tendencies. At the same time we need to discern where his analyses went wrong, and to consider how we might do better in the future" (269).

Perry selects a passage from Marx's most refined analysis of capital in order to demonstrate the weight of his approach. While living in England, Marx did a staggering amount of research into the development of capitalism in that country. He concluded:

The spoliation of the church's property, the fraudulent alienation of the State domains, the robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of reckless terrorism, were just so many idyllic methods of private accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, made the soil part and parcel of capital, and created for the town industries the necessary supply of 'free' and outlawed proletariat. (qtd. in Perry 59)

What this passage illustrates is the entry of something new into the history of political thought, that of radical critique. Derrida says that "This critique belongs to the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminant, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to waiting for the other and for the event. . . . A messianic promise, even if it rushed headlong toward an ontological content, will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history" (*Specters* 91). Obviously Derrida's deconstructive reading of Marx is a radicalization, but as Derrida suggests, "radicalization is always indebted to the very thing it radicalizes" (92).

Ernesto Laclau says of the messianic in Derrida "we should not understand anything directly related to actual messianic movements, of the present or past, but, instead, something belonging to the general structure of experience. It is linked to the idea of 'promise.' This does not mean this or that particular promise, but the promise implicit in an originary opening to the 'other,' to the unforeseeable, to the pure *event*, which cannot be mastered by any aprioristic discourse" (90). The idea of "event" or "promise" is certainly visible in Benjamin and Levinas. But Derrida's conception of "weak messianism" as "messianism without messiah" is also traceable to Kierkegaard's *mysterium tremendum*, or the experience of ecstasy in the absolute love for the other. For Kierkegaard, the individual's relationship to the social world is rendered problematic by the very fact of the paradoxical nature of this "opening" onto the other that Laclau speaks of.

The paradox causes a rupture between the ethical and the religious orders, which make contradictory demands on the individual. The two orders struggle for ascendancy in Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham from the Old Testament. The problem might be stated as follows: to murder Isaac is to follow god's will; to follow god's will is to transgress the ethical which says that infanticide will not be tolerated by society. "I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham's life, I am constantly repelled, and, despite all its passion, my thoughts cannot penetrate it, cannot get ahead by a hairsbreadth. I stretch every muscle to get a perspective, and at the very same instant I become paralyzed" (Kierkegaard 33). Why has Derrida spent so much time dealing with the ethical problematic outlined in *Fear and Trembling*? Quite possibly because Kierkegaard's paradox resists the potentially totalizing discourses of ethics, morality, politics, and religion. What is more, the *mysterium tremendum* is not recognizable in any appeals to watered-down versions of "faith" in god's "purpose." It is ultimately the recognition of the radical alterity of "what is coming." The former to a messianism in Marx links the spirit Derrida finds in Kierkegaard.

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida links Abraham's situation to one of responsibility: "In order to assume his absolute responsibility with respect to absolute duty, to put his faith in God to work, or to the test, he must also in reality remain a hateful murderer, for he consents to put to death" (66). The story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* illustrates

the exact problem that poststructuralism attends to: how to make absolute decisions about the future without absolute knowledge. John Caputo comments, "Derrida thus wants to make a paradigm of this paradox, an exemplar of this knight of the extraordinary, to universalize this exception, to say that we are always already caught up in exceptionality, caught up in a singular secret that we cannot communicate to others" (226).

Derrida's reading of Marx highlights the function of time as a liberatory moment highlighted by a "structural messianism." A deconstruction of Marx of the type offered by Derrida, reveals what the latter refers to as "what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise . . . an idea of justice . . . and an idea of democracy" (*Specters* 59). Important here is that neither the communist regimes nor the world's democracies have achieved anything like the emancipatory promise in Marx. Ben Agger wants us to look to postmodern theorizing on Marx for a utopian orientation: "postmodernism, conceived within the framework of critical theory, does not betray Marxism but extends Marxism into the early twenty-first century, reformulating critical theory as the first narrative to pose a possible utopian future not as a determinate outcome of natural social laws but rather as one conceivable discursive accomplishment among many" (189). Reading Marx as radical critique thus demands a constant critical stance toward the human political condition: "The insistence on openness does suggest an enduringly critical attitude inasmuch as democracy, justice, communism are always to come (*a-venir*), not in the future but as the specters that haunt every present by preventing its closure" (Coole 111). Pierre Macherey analyzes radical critique from the perspective of a responsibility to an inheritance: "For an inheritance is not transmitted automatically but is reappropriated. To follow the spirit of Marx, to obey its injunctions, is not to repeat its formula mechanically, as if it were already finished; rather it is actively to reaffirm its significance, for the latter must be produced or reproduced anew from the perspective of an interpretation that reveals what remains living in it" (20).

Given that an emancipatory promise unites Marxism and deconstruction, the shape of *kairos* temporarily reconciles metaphysics and anti-foundational philosophy. This reconciliation is akin to Derrida's "messianism without messiah." Derrida argues that much of Althusser's interpretation of Marx was designed to dissociate Marx from any ontological or messianic eschatology. The deconstructive approach to Marx's legacy, however, finds "the undeconstructibility of a certain idea of justice (dissociated from law). . . . This critique belongs to the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to waiting for the other and for the event" (*Specters* 90).

Though difficult to isolate the time dimension of *kairos*, apart from its ethical and rhetorical dimensions, I believe it is most revealing to discuss the relevance of the term for contemporary theory in this way. It would

seem semi-ironic then, to discuss the term's temporal elements in quite a divergent way. That is, to speak of *kairotic* "time," from a postmodern point of view, is to speak of time as a contingency, first and foremost. In other words, *kairotic* time is neither teleology nor chronology; it is fragmentary and shifting.

Given the scope of this paper, it makes little sense to try to speak of a singular postmodern notion of time. My purpose here is to offer a position that opens a space for a postmodern conception of time that is better understood by the insertion of *kairos* into our thinking *about this very time*. I have chosen to focus on poststructuralism because it appears the most radical of the positions within postmodernism with regard to time. We know that with Hegel, the relationship between metaphysics and time reaches its apex; it is with Nietzsche that this height is cut low again, marking the possibility of non-linear time. Eternal recurrence, one proto-model of time offered by Nietzsche, is important because it opened the door for many non-linear notions of time. Time is today even theorized by Baudrillard to move in reverse, as forms and fashions repeat themselves endlessly. But non-linear time is hardly suitable grounds for supporting an anti-foundational conception of time. Yet, a quite strange notion of time grabs our attention here: the possibility of a time that haunts us as a specter or spirit, hence the main book for my frame of study, Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Much has already been said about this book in terms of its being a "return" or "entry" into the political by what some have called an a-political position. I am not as much interested in defending deconstruction against these attacks as I am in looking at how Derrida's conception of time in *Specters of Marx* is better understood by adding *kairos* to the mix.

What can *kairos* offer in the way of better understanding Derrida's notion of time? First and foremost, what *Specters of Marx* is about is the now-time. Indeed, the book was composed at a time of what he calls "mourning," that is, the work of mourning associated with a jubilation over the fall of the Soviet Union. He says it consists of "attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead. . . ." (*Specters* 9). What Derrida asks of us (by us I suppose he means those who are still interested in the problems posed by Marx) is to understand that Marx's ideas are especially valid now, when Western capitalist countries have seemed to triumph over the communists.

The title *Specters of Marx* suggests, Derrida says, that there is more than one legacy left by Marx. He believes it is especially important now (the *kairotic* moment) to sift through the ghosts or spirits of Marx, deciding which ones will be useful and which ones will be discarded:

When the dogma machine and the Marxist ideological apparatuses (States, parties, cells, unions, and other places of doctrinal production) are in the process of disappearing, we no longer have any excuse, only alibis, for turning away from this responsibility. There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx,

without the memory and inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits. For this will be our hypothesis or rather our bias: *there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them.* (*Specters* 13)

The question is whether or not Derrida's suggestion that there is more than one spirit of Marx makes any kind of reconciliation possible among the spirits. But ultimately I think this is less important than the act of continued engagement with Marx. I believe the issue at hand here is historicity itself, or the idea that history is malleable and deconstructible. Jameson has weighed in on this point on numerous occasions, reminding us that the study of history says less about History itself than about the theories of the present day. Gibson-Graham notes that "If Marx's messianic spirit speaks to and through Derrida, reminding us of a future possibility (and of the future *as* possibility), Derrida also talks back to Marx from his own temporal and philosophical location" (26). Yet, while poststructural interpretations of Marx (like the one offered by Derrida) deconstruct the ontological Marx of the past, they also maintain the possibility of a renewed critique, one that has now been radicalized. What this means is that "Marxism" itself is open to its own deconstruction. A new frontier containing moments of reconciliation among the different spirits of Marx is possible once the practitioners of Marxism accept incongruity and contradiction. To study or talk about *kairos* from the standpoint of poststructuralism is to assume that history is certainly filled with revolutionary possibilities.

Deeply intertwined with the issue of historicity is the legacy of Marx that Derrida would have us continue to engage with. This legacy is the possibility of radical critique. Radical critique might be said to undermine the foundations of "systemized" thinking. Of course, Derrida has been accused of replacing his own system, deconstruction, with the foundational ideologies of the past and present. In the case of Marx, Derrida has admitted that deconstruction owes a debt to the former for the revolutionary spirit of poststructuralism.

At the level of linguistics, deconstruction caused uproar in American universities, particularly in the Humanities. However, in retrospect the deconstruction of linguistic foundations seems much tamer in the sense that any waves made were essentially in intellectual circles. Whether or not Derrida's decision to address Marx stemmed from a need to answer his critics is less important than what he has to say about deconstruction's relationship to the political. Clearly he is in fact dedicated to social justice, though his take on the subject is complex. I believe *Specters* is at heart his attempt to explain his affinity for certain Marxist principles. Of course, it is clear that he wishes to sidestep the totalizing tendencies of Marx. This is especially true of the ways it has found "expression" in the state. As I mentioned before, Derrida acknowledges the fact Marx's work calls for a constant rethinking. He tells us that Marx himself understood this fact quite well. The base/superstructure theory expresses the need for historicity at a most basic level. For example, one fundamental idea Marx has left us is the notion that base, or the modes of production, can change

without a corresponding change in superstructure, or ideology. In other words, the man or woman in the cubicle is just as alienated from his or her labor as the factory worker of the late nineteenth century.

The political shape of *kairos* belongs to a particular "version" or "vision" of Marx that contains the structure of promise. This is a most general category that I have attempted to refine throughout this article. I began with a definition of *kairos* as a form of response to crisis. Again, since this is a most general statement, it needed to be refined through an analysis of praxis. I hope I have problematized the easy interpretation of praxis as simply the intersection of theory and practice. What separates real praxis from its approximation is the *kairos* effect. This effect temporarily reconciles, for example, the polarized existence of class-based societies. Thinking of praxis as a momentary reconciliation is a way of historicizing political thought and action in such a way as to sustain contingency. In other words, while the structure of promise underlies everything we say about praxis, a stance of openness toward any "program" for social organization needs to be maintained. Marx's economic praxis must undergo deconstruction and renewal on a continuing basis. Thus, a major reconciliation that I argue for here is between Hegel and Derrida. It is possible to view such a reconciliation as the energy of *kairos*.

Coda

I have tried to analyze the structure of *kairos* in terms of its reconciling function. This has been my intention, though other undercurrents appear. Is it possible, for instance, to separate praxis and *kairos* in any concrete way? Or are these movements that resist planning, given only to random intersections of history and ideology? I have attempted to identify *Specters of Marx* as an example of *kairos*, a particularly fitting ideological response to a perceived crisis in a now- moment.

How might we use such a model as the one I have outlined here to think about *kairotic* reconciliations along disciplinary lines? It seems that some of these reconciliations between Rhetoric and Composition have already produced much positive scholarship, particularly in process models of writing. Yet, I think each discipline is distinct in purpose.

Works Cited

Agger, Ben. *Postponing the Postmodern: Sociological Practices, Selves, and Theories*. New York: Littlefield, 2002.

Albritton, Robert. *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996.

Bhasker, Roy. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. New York: Verso, 1993.

Cooile, Diane. "The Dialectics of the Real." *Ideology After Poststructuralism*. Eds. Sinista Malesevic and Ian M. Mackenzie. London: Pluto, 2002. 98-114.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. Davis Wills. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1995.

- - - . *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Gibson-Graham, J. K. "Haunting Capitalism . . . in the Spirit of Marx and Derrida." *Rethinking Marxism* 8.4 (1995): 25-39.

Hill, Carolyn Eriksen. "Changing Times in Composition Class: *Kairos*, Resonance, and the Pythagorean Connection." *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin. Albany: State U of New York P, 2002. 210-228.

Kain, Philip J. *Marx and Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*. Eds. and Trans. Howard and Edna Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

Kinneavy, James L. "*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric." *Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Invention in Writing*. Eds. Richard E. Young and Yameng Liu. Davis: Hermagoras, 1994.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. "Recasting Marxism: Hegemony and New Political Movements." *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments*. Ed. James Martin. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Lee, Wendy Lynne. *On Marx*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002.

Marsh, James L. "Kierkegaard and Critical Theory." *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*. Eds. Martin Matustik and Merold Westphal. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 199-215.

Matustik, Martin J. "Kierkegaard's Radical Existential Praxis, or Why the Individual Defies Liberal, Communitarian, and Postmodern Categories." *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*. Eds. Martin Matustik and Merold Westphal. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 239-264.

McLellan, D. *Karl Marx: Early Texts*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.

Megill, Allan. *Karl Marx: The Burden of Reason (Why Marx Rejected Politics and the Market)*. Oxford: Roman and Littlefield, 2002.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Trans. Joseph Bien. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci." *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London: Routledge, 1979. 168-204.

Oishi, Takahisa. *The Unknown Marx: Reconstructing a Unified Perspective*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Perry, Matt. *Marxism and History*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Sperlich, Peter W. *Rotten Foundations: The Conceptual basis of the Marxist- Leninist Regimes of East Germany and Other Countries of the Soviet Bloc*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Ghostwriting." *Diacritics* 25.2 (1995): 65-84.

Untersteiner, Mario. *The Sophists*. Trans. Kathleen Freeman. Oxford: Alden Press, 1954.

White, Eric Charles. *Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987.

Citation Format:

Casey, Paul. "The Political Shape of *Kairos*." *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_2/casey.html

Contact Information:

Paul Casey, Occidental College

Email:

Home Page: