Learning to Live (with Derrida)

Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally.*

Finally but why?

_To learn to live:_ a strange watchword. Who would learn?

From whom? To teach to live, but to whom? Will we ever know? Will we ever know how to live and first of all what ‘to learn to live’ means? And why finally?

Jacques Derrida has written a book about spectres; those that are neither alive nor dead, but he begins the book with an appeal – he comes forward, perhaps we come forward too, and asks to learn to live finally. Derrida has also written a book about friends. As well as asking to learn to live we could also ask about learning to live _with._ Both you and me should come forward. This is about learning to live with Derrida and about how Derrida should live with us.

But ‘living with’ entails a commitment. ‘To live’ is necessarily ‘to be’ and to ‘live with’ is therefore to ‘be with’ or to ‘be in’ or ‘be of’. To be, to be in, to be of; to learn to live is _finally_ to recognise ontology.

This article is about learning to live with Derrida and about learning from what he can teach us. But it is also about how he too should learn to live; and how he should recognise, finally, that to learn to live requires us to live with ontology.

Living with

We want to live with someone who is prepared to invoke Marx’s spirit in opposition to the irrationalism of the ‘New World Order’ and those who defend it. It is worth living with someone who

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Historical Materialism
criticises both the spectrality of capitalist social relations and those who defend these relations in this particularly 'out of joint' moment. We wish to support our new friend in his stated opposition to the politics of the 'New World Order' – the creation of EU capitalism and the ruthless economic wars with Japan and the US, the unprotected free market, the pauperisation of parts of the world through foreign debt, the spectre of overproduction, the murderous arms industry, the curse of unemployment, the creation of refugees and the homeless, inter-ethnic wars and the activities of capitalist phantom-states. We would also like to applaud his attacks on the postmodernists like Fukuyama who triumphantly defend this state of affairs.

In opposing them, Derrida writes that he wants to defend those who resisted reactionary, conservative, anti-scientific or obscurantist temptations, who did not renounce an ideal of democracy and emancipation, but who have proceeded in a 'deconstructive fashion' in the name of a new Enlightenment to come. This is all very good. However, a doubt creeps in as to who these friends actually are. Are they the Marxists themselves? Despite his kind words for Marx, Derrida does not seem to have too much sympathy for Marx's so-called followers. If not the Marxists, then who are those who act in a 'deconstructive fashion'? But too many words have already been spent in pointing out that most of those who practise 'deconstruction' have not been at all friendly to us. It is just worth making the point that, like it or not, Derrida has a lot of people living with him who, through deconstruction, have done exactly what he criticises and embraced reactionary, conservative, anti-scientific and obscurantist temptations. Rather than being a radicalisation in the spirit of Marxism, deconstruction has more often been the driving spirit behind anti-Marxism. Derrida identifies himself as a 'man of the Left' but can he distance himself from our enemies by proclaiming them unwanted friends?

This, then, is our first point; it seems to be worth living with Derrida if only to listen to his critique of the 'New World Order' and its ideologues. However, we do not particularly want to have to live with some of his friends. But does he want to live with us? In any case, who are we?

So far we have posed this question of 'living with' at a superficial level of friendship (but one that is commonly stated) – that we do not like those who claim to be Derrida's friends. However, it seems

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4 See Ahmad 1999 and Lewis 1999.