

**Andrea Cassatella**  
**“Normativity without Telos”**  
**The Messianic in the Thought of Jacques Derrida**

The “messianic” is a central figure of thought in the work of Jacques Derrida. Since its introduction and development in the early 1990s, the “messianic” arguably plays a key role in his later writings. Focusing primarily on *Specters of Marx* (henceforth *Specters*) and more limitedly on “Force of Law” and *Rogues*, this essay aims to clarify the nature of the “messianic” and to underscore its philosophical significance in terms of political philosophy. In particular, it seeks to emphasize the historical specificity of messianic thinking and its resistance to any form of substantive normativity, both of which, as we shall see, are often overlooked aspects in recent Derrida scholarship. I want to suggest that Derrida’s “messianic” can be conceived as a “normativity without telos”, a non-teleological and yet historical type of political philosophy that enables practices of thinking and action that have profound significance for justice. On the one hand, the “messianic” fosters “redemptive” practices of thinking that mobilize the spectral elements involved in political foundations. On the other hand, it enables free decision and action in a manner that is responsive to singularity.

*Messianic temporality*

Derrida articulates the idea of the “messianic” in his *Specters*. Although introducing it through a direct reference to Benjamin,<sup>1</sup> Derrida claims to have inherited the notion of the “messianic”, as he uses it, from Marx’s legacy and presents it in these terms:

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; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianic without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice – which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights – and an idea of democracy – which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today.<sup>2</sup>

There are two central dimensions to Derrida's "messianic": one is temporal, and refers to an experience of time as non-teleological or "without messianism"; the other is ethico-political, and is linked to justice and democracy. Leaving the connection between the "messianic" and democracy for another time, I will here consider the temporal dimension and will explore the issue of justice in the next section.

The promise Derrida mentions in the passage above refers to Marx's promise of emancipation but not to its determined content. It refers to the structure of promising, to the "being-promise of a promise" that exceeds and precedes Marx's and all other promises.<sup>3</sup> Implicit in any promise, this structure institutes a relation that opens itself to a future that cannot be mastered or predicted through the determination of a particular content but only announced as coming in its indetermination and necessity. As Derrida notes, "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. It is what we are nicknaming the messianic without messianism." Derrida's "messianic" designates therefore an emancipatory promise that does not promise any particular future but promises the future, it promises that "it is necessary [that there be] the future" ("*il faut l'avenir*"), which is to say that the law of the future is the "necessarily formal necessity of its possibility."<sup>4</sup>

So conceived, Derrida's "messianic" indicates an experience of time characterized by an irreducible historical openness to the future, and is clearly distinct from messianisms or secular teleologies. The "messianic" does not announce the event of a Messiah or any other types of final end (such as Hegel's secularization of Spirit or Marx's communist society) whose arrival would halt temporality. Nor does it anticipate the coming of events by inscribing them within a predetermined movement of thinking regulated by the finality of a telos (as in teleologies of a Kantian sort). Despite their differences, these kinds of thinking still retain the temporal form of a future present, of a projecting in the future a "modality of the *living present*" that anticipates what comes.<sup>5</sup> Typical of teleological thinking, this modality regulates judgments about experience on the basis of a telos grasped independently from the exposure to what is yet to be encountered. Instead the "messianic" proceeds by preserving an undetermined hope and an open relationship to a future that is not preordained by and from the historical present. This openness occurs by way of "a waiting without horizon of expectation or prophetic prefiguration"<sup>6</sup> that affirms the

“emancipatory promise as promise: *as promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design.”<sup>7</sup>

At issue, here, is not simply the question of time but also of reason. While Derrida distances the “messianic” from a model of reason guided by religious faith, he specifically resists a powerful modern view of teleological reason that is connected to what he calls metaphysics of presence. Understood as the western philosophical approach *par excellence*, the metaphysics of presence considers it possible to grasp a pure referent, a “transcendental signified” grounding an entire philosophical system.<sup>8</sup> In particular, this approach conceives of such a referent as presence, as a founding concept that can be present to consciousness as distinct from the conditions (temporal, political, linguistic, socio-economic etc.) in which it occurs. Although not directly addressed, the metaphysics of presence constitutes the implicit target of Derrida’s discussion of Kant and Husserl in *Rogues*, where he illustrates the limits of teleological reason. For Derrida, since teleological reason is guided by and moves towards the finality of an ideal goal, it sets in advance the terms of what is to be found and thus “finds what it seeks” because it *knows already* what is to come.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, such reason displays a foundational character since it “pretends” to grasp ideal goals in consciousness that are unaffected by the conditions of their occurrence, hence the connection to the metaphysics of presence. Most importantly, teleological reason inhibits, a priori, eventfulness to the extent that what does not fall in a pre-programmed structure of expectation is excluded as irrelevant or “unfitting.”

Whenever a *telos* or teleology comes to orient, order and make possible a historicity, it annuls that historicity by the same token and neutralizes the unforeseeable and incalculable irruption, the singular and exceptional alterity of *what [ce qui]* comes, or indeed of *who [qui]* comes, that without which, or the one without whom, nothing happens or arrives. It is not only a question of the *telos* that is being posed here that of the horizon and of any horizontal *seeing-come* in general. And it is also a question of the Enlightenment of Reason.<sup>10</sup>

Derrida’s resistance to teleological reason is a matter of the “Enlightenment of Reason,” of throwing light where reason’s own authority as calculative rationality seeks to prevent it. This enlightenment requires responding to arrivals in an incalculable fashion, without *seeing* events as coming. It requires, in other words, thinking events *as* events.

It is this latter event-ness that one must think, but that best resists what is called the concept, if not thinking. And it will not be thought as long as one relies on the simple (ideal, mechanical, or dialectical) opposition of the real presence of the real present or of the living present to its ghostly simulacrum, the opposition of the effective or actual (*wirklich*) to the non-effective, inactual, which is also to say, as long as one relies on a general temporality or a historical temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves.<sup>11</sup>

For Derrida, to think event-ness is to think temporality differently and to move beyond the traditional understanding of time. Since Aristotle, this understanding conceives of time synchronically, as an infinite series of successive moments that connect past, present and future, and that can allegedly be grasped as pure, undivided temporal units. Thinking time differently necessitates distancing oneself from the possibility of clearly distinguishing between presence and absence, identity and difference of self-identical moments contemporaneous with themselves.

To illustrate a different thinking of temporality Derrida discusses the idea of temporal disjuncture in *Hamlet*. Repeatedly in *Specters*, he quotes Hamlet's phrase "the time is out of joint" to account for an experience of present time as spectral. Hamlet's phrase is occasioned by the appearance of his dead father as a ghost coming back (*revenant*) to the living and asking his son to avenge his death and restore justice according to law as vengeance. For Derrida, Hamlet's phrase does not acknowledge the temporal moral decay of a political community, whose historical direction needs rectification through the law as punishment. Rather it interrupts the linear spirit of the inherited law and recognizes that, already in the beginning, in the founding of a law seeking to keep its destination straight, a violent force excluding "deviators" is at work. In other words, Derrida attributes to Hamlet the ability to have recognized in and through the specter of his *revenant* father an "originary wrong [...] a bottomless wound, an irreparable tragedy, the indefinite malediction that marks the history of the law or history as law." Rather than pointing to a pure origin, the term "originary" here suggests a sense of anteriority, the beginning of which cannot be clearly identified. The tragedy of the originary wrong designates in fact the "spectral anteriority of the crime – the crime of the other, a misdeed whose event and reality, whose truth can never present themselves in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized."<sup>12</sup>

For Derrida, the spectral anteriority of the crime refers to an originary trauma that is intimately linked to political foundations. Although the

trauma's actual cause is out of reach, its effects are visible through surviving marks. These are marks of "a living on (*sur-vie*)," a surviving trace of what has been excluded but intervenes in the living present by disjoining its identity and unity.<sup>13</sup> That trace takes the form of specters appearing in the present but not as presence, as something clearly identifiable. Rather they appear as some "thing" that is difficult to name because it exceeds knowledge and the distinction between presence and absence, life and death and thus defies "semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy."<sup>14</sup> By intervening in and interrupting the living present, specters desynchronize temporal moments as they make explicit what Derrida elsewhere calls the *spacing* of temporal succession, namely the contaminated relationship between the no longer and the not yet unsettling any form of presence. In this way, specters indicate the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself," which marks the disjuncture of time informing messianic temporality.<sup>15</sup>

Derrida's appropriation of Hamlet's phrase "the time is out of joint" stands therefore for his response to the traditional view of time and to the metaphysics of presence and teleology undergirding it. Viewed from messianic temporality, the present is always divided by ghosts that puncture horizons and spectralize concepts, thereby impeding the grasping of undivided temporal units or the likelihood of a pure referent or telos. Indeed, the disjuncture of time informing the messianic promise illuminates that, by preventing the closure of future time, messianic temporality impedes also semantic closure.

### *Specters, memory and justice*

The spectral anteriority of the crime refers to the specters of the past but these are not the only ones. For Derrida, the specter is as much a *revenant* coming back from the past as it is an *arrivant* coming from the future. It is a figure that comprises all those who are beyond the "living present," the dead and the unborn, which we have responsibility to acknowledge. Doing so is a matter of justice, of the "messianic" as justice.

It is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost* and *with it*, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or

for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice – let us say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws – seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoin the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kind of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kind of exterminations, victims of the oppression of capitalist imperialism or any other forms of totalitarianism.<sup>16</sup>

The “messianic” as justice is a discourse about ghosts and their interminable mourning. It is a discourse necessarily placed within a specific archive since it requires inheriting the past through a memory of ghosts. Above all, the “messianic” as justice is a discourse marked by what Derrida calls a “politico-logic of trauma,” namely a politico-philosophical receptivity to originary politicization, that is, to the politics of founding and its predicament. This receptivity always also refers to the trauma and ghosts produced by the structural exclusions, murders, and exterminations that very often characterize founding moments, which inaugurate a new law “always [...] in violence.”<sup>17</sup> Without such receptivity, without the memory of an originary loss, it seems impossible to critically account for what has enabled the law in the first place and thus also for the temporal rupture that founding moments mark. As Derrida claims, the violence of the “originary performativity,” whose “force of rupture produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself,” “interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: “out of joint.”<sup>18</sup> In short, without a “politico-logic of trauma” and memory it appears impossible to account for the empirical conditions (read historical violence) that allow for any ethics and politics to *be* at all. This account is instrumental to avoid the naïve confidence of redeeming past injustice through the promise of a future to be fulfilled or approximated.

But what seems also unlikely without such receptivity and memory is the possibility of keeping the messianic promise hospitable and of *thinking* justice. On the one hand, the oblivion of originary politicization impedes the recognition of temporal disjuncture, it obscures the possibility of re-politicization and therefore locks the future to the close destiny of a present telos, which cannot but predetermine the conditions for inclusion. For Derrida, this is what various messianisms and teleologies do by instituting all sorts of checkpoints at their borders “in order to screen the *arrivant*.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, a lack of receptivity to specters jeopardizes the possibility of *thinking* justice, which is not simply a question of and for the living, of life

as presence, but something due to the non-living, to the dead as memory and the unborn as promise. *Thinking* justice, therefore, cannot seem any longer possible within transcendent or transcendental perspectives; that is, within perspectives seeking to identify the most fundamental principle representing either the ultimate content of justice, as in the tradition of political philosophy since Plato, or the ground for articulating procedures leading to justice, as in the Neo-Kantian political thought of contemporary thinkers like Habermas and Rawls. These perspectives still aim at identifying pure ideas that exclude by default the possibility of excess, and thus of specters. Nor does it seem possible to think justice by way of joining or bringing-together (*Versammlung*) as Derrida sees Heidegger doing in his reflection on justice as *Dikē*, precisely for the same reasons. Rather *thinking* justice is possible “on the basis of a movement of some disjoining, disjunction, or disproportion” between past and future, presence and absence. Sensitive to past and future generations and to the reactivation of their ghosts, this movement prevents the closure of future time as the expression “*il faut l’avenir*” pointedly suggests.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Derrida’s insistence on the openness of future time, his notion of the “messianic” as justice is often criticized for putting into effect the closure it claims to prevent. The claims, as in the first quote of this essay, that the “messianic” as justice “is not deconstructible” and that “the undeconstructibility of justice also makes deconstruction possible” as it appears in “Force of Law,” provoke this reaction.<sup>21</sup> In these claims, the objection goes, Derrida seems to be positing a full blown exteriority, the “messianic” as a transcendent ground that is removed from the passing of time and is posited in view giving motion to the wheels of deconstruction. Although the objection forcefully strikes to the core of Derrida’s notion of the “messianic,” it can be neutralized. That justice never arrives but remains always only “to come” means that it can never be exhausted by some substantial or regulative telos. This possibility, as seen, would halt both the flaw of time and the ghostliness contaminating the alleged purity of ideals, which could be grasped as pure only by suspending that flaw from outside time, as it were. Precisely because the “messianic” as justice accounts for a disjointed experience of time and acknowledges ghosts, justice is always semantically elusive, it can never be grasped as a pure telos and therefore, for structural reasons, can never arrive in time or arrest it. Thus, rather than pointing to a radical transcendence, or even less to an apocalyptic event, the undeconstructibility of the “messianic”

as justice suggests instead a horizontal type of transcendence. Conceived as that which has not yet come, this transcendence is, *stricto sensu*, no transcendence at all.

Returning to our discussion on receptivity and memory, the philosophical significance of reactivating ghosts must be emphasized. This reactivation plays a central role in Derrida's notion of the "messianic" as it pertains to "redemptive" practices of thinking that mobilize, in view of freedom, the spectral elements involved in political foundations. This point can be appreciated by focusing on the connection Derrida establishes between inheritance, responsiveness to ghosts and emancipatory thinking. Recalling Marx's ideas that "men make their own history" under circumstances transmitted from the past and that "the tradition of all the dead generations [*aller toten Geschlechter*] weighs [*lastet*] like a nightmare on the brain of the living," Derrida reminds us that inheritance always involves a response to ghosts in the form of "conjuring (*beschwören*)" them.<sup>22</sup> The urge for conjuring does not stem from moral principles but from thinking itself.

Thinking never has done with the conjuring impulse. It would instead be born of that impulse. To swear or to conjure, is that not the chance of thinking and its destiny, no less than its limit? The gift of its finitude? Does it ever have any other choice except among several conjurations? [...] Problematisation itself is careful to disavow and thus to conjure away [...] Critical problematization continues to do battle against ghosts. It fears them as it does itself.<sup>23</sup>

Although thinking is never done with the conjuring impulse, the conjuration of ghosts can take a negative form as in the case of teleological modes of thinking. Caught by anxiety and motivated by a fear of ghosts, these modes of thinking seek to safeguard the unity and stability of political identity and can lead, in extreme cases, to political disaster. For Derrida, this is what happened with the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, fascism and communism, which were "equally terrorized by the ghost of the other, and its own ghost as the ghost of the other" and thus can be read *also* as repressive reactions "of panic-ridden fear before the ghost in general."<sup>24</sup> Less extreme but nevertheless problematic are also the closures typical of the liberal tradition, which Derrida sees as displaying strong amnesic and inhospitable features towards ghosts and alterity. Following Marx's reflection on "bourgeois" thinking, Derrida highlights how, for Marx, that thinking is contented to forget specters so that history can continue towards a universal emancipatory telos. By valuing only life as presence,



liberal (“bourgeois”) thinking values “life as forgetting itself” and thus forgets ghosts and what they signify.<sup>25</sup> As such, it also forgets historical violence and the constitutive limits its own particular foundations put to the universality of the discourse it champions.

In contrast to repressive or forgetful conjurations, Derrida points to a possible alternative. Although he recognizes that conjuration is never free from the anxiety to repress or forget ghosts, he insists that the latter can take the form of “a positive conjuration” if it considers anxiety as a chance for calling forth the dead.

The conjuration is anxiety from the moment it calls upon death to invent the quick and to enliven the new, to summon the presence of what is not yet there (*noch nicht Dagewesenes*). This anxiety is properly revolutionary.<sup>26</sup>

By calling upon death to enliven the present, a “positive conjuration” of ghosts can release the emancipatory potential of “what is not yet,” thereby pointing to new possibilities by “redeeming” unrealized ones. It is in this sense that calling forth the dead marks a revolutionary moment, the moment of rupture messianic temporality exemplifies. Yet, it also signals how much weight the “messianic” accords to historical injustice and to practices of thinking seeking to throw new light on the present by reactivating its ghosts.

Emphasizing the “redemptive” practices of thinking fostered by the “messianic” does not imply condemning unconditionally the forgetting of past violence and of its ghosts. Nor does it suggest blaming the somehow oblivious moving forward of a new political community. As Derrida reckons, *some* forgetting of what has been inherited is necessary to that movement. The point is rather to highlight the significance of remembering not “what one inherits but the pre-inheritance on the basis of which one inherits”; that is, remembering the empirical conditions of founding moments, which often involve exterminations and exclusion of human, philosophical, and political alternatives leaving behind ghostly traces.<sup>27</sup> The remembering of such conditions and of their specters is distinctive of the messianic promise, which, for that reason, *can* acknowledge its own initial politicization and provisionality, and thus *can* limit, as much as possible, closure and totalization while unlocking the power of unrealized possibilities.

### *Historical Not Formal*

As we have seen, Derrida establishes an intimate link between the acknowledging of originary politicization and the non-forgetting of ghosts on the one hand, and the possibility of accounting for the out-of-joint structure of time, on the other. This connection illuminates the distinctively historical and non-idealistic character of the "messianic" as political thought. Instead of merely inscribing the "messianic" as justice within ideal conditions of possibility that abstract from life as presence, Derrida seeks to highlight the historical (empirical) conditions of possibility enabling any process of idealization in the first place. These are conditions in which the stakes of which ghosts are symptoms (political, philosophical but especially human) are so significant that cannot be philosophically forgotten by a political thinking seeking to be critical beyond transcendental concerns; that is, by a type of thinking seeking *also* to historically investigate its past.

The significance of this point cannot be overlooked since Derrida's insistence on the historicity of thinking clearly appears throughout his writings. In *Specters*, for example, the historical character of the "messianic" emerges, implicitly, from his hesitation to reduce the "messianic" to a type of transcendental enquiry alone. Reflecting on the relation between the "messianic" and messianism, Derrida rejects their mutual exclusion and refuses to confine the "messianic" to a mere reflection on the conditions of possibility of historical messianism.<sup>28</sup> He reiterates this position in several other places.<sup>29</sup> A more explicit endorsement of the historical inflection of the "messianic" can be noticed where he remarks that, "open, waiting for the event as justice" the hospitality of the "messianic" "is absolute only if it keeps watch over its *own* universality (my emphasis)."<sup>30</sup> But how are we to interpret this claim? What does it mean to say that the "messianic" is *really* open if it "keeps watch over its own universality"? To clarify this matter, we can proceed hypothetically by keeping in focus Derrida's attention for questions of foundings – political, linguistic and philosophical – and the role these play in illuminating the historicity of the "messianic." Without deviating too much from our trajectory here we can make two brief digressions concerning the institution of language and of the archive.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida rejects the possibility of metalanguage by pointing to an originary linguistic predicament of the human condition, which is characterized by always already being-with-others in translation, to use a Heideggerian terminology. For Derrida, the critical

awareness of that predicament requires acknowledging the colonial aspect of natural language, the contingency of its institution and thus its always historical occupation of the medium we call “language.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of context in *Limited Inc*, Derrida shows that philosophical language and its objects of investigation (especially truth and reference) are always constituted from within a specific historical context, the fixing of which is never philosophically neutral but can be traced back to an event of political foundation.<sup>32</sup> Thus, taken together, the colonial aspect of natural language and the politically conditioned character of philosophy point to the fact that philosophical reflection is always already historically situated, and it remains so in spite of the general forgetting of this very predicament.

The connection between the historicity of the “messianic” and the topic of foundations can also be appreciated by considering the institution of the archive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida conceives of the archive as, among other things, the historical site where political identity and membership are framed in the aftermath of a founding event.<sup>33</sup> The archive constitutes the place that stands before but “contains” the originary crime, which is excluded from visibility because it has allowed the archive to be there in the first place. As seen, the out-of-joint structure of messianic temporality is intimately connected to the originary crime and its specters, a connection that places the “messianic” within a historically inherited archive. As a result, messianic thinking is always tied to historical contexts and traditions and, even as a mode of transcendental inquiry, can never depart absolutely from the empirical (read historical) domain. This point is also confirmed several times by Derrida in *Specters*: first, when he declares that “haunting is historical” thereby indicating that messianic thinking cannot fully be removed from historical situatedness; second, when he praises Marx’s and Engels’ ability to indicate the “intrinsically irreducible historicity” or “aging” of their own theories; third, when discussing the notion of inheritance as the reaffirming and going beyond a tradition, he emphasizes that “the being of who what we are is first of all inheritance”; and finally, when he places deconstruction in the French intellectual scene of the 1950s that, on the one hand, was influenced by the continental “classics of the end” – including Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger all filtered by Kojève – and, on the other hand, witnessed the totalitarian terror of Stalinism in Eastern Europe.<sup>34</sup>

These brief digressions help us to further our understanding of the historical character of the “messianic,” which always points to a specific context.

The "messianic" is articulated in a language, idiomatic and philosophical, that draws from sources contingently grounded on political determinations, which, in the aftermath of a founding event, have authorized and made available some philosophical categories but not others. Such determinations have also established the archive within which the "messianic" operates. Therefore, viewed from the angle of political foundings, the transcendental aspect of the "messianic" always contingently depends upon its empirical and historical conditions. Philosophically speaking, this view reconfigures the relationship between the transcendental and the empirical, which are conceived of as correlated but irreducible. While the "messianic" elucidates the conditions of possibility of historical messianism, the latter provides the conditioning of the historical context in which such conditions are articulated. Thus, by illustrating the always impure character of formalization, the correlation at issue disallows a universalism that "does not watch over" itself; that is, a universalism which forgets its own irreducibly conditional character, and slips instead into an unconditional discourse which, blind to its own particularity, becomes exclusionary.

Highlighting the correlation between the transcendental and the empirical in Derrida's "messianic" is not a novel move. However, the angle of the analysis proposed here gives to it a distinct political character since it emphasizes the role originary politicization plays in Derrida's thinking and the historico-political bent this gives to the "messianic." My point is that his philosophical interest and acknowledgement of political foundings, together with his insistence on the memory of ghosts, illuminate the extent to which a powerful politico-philosophical and historical sensibility informs Derrida's "messianic" and, more generally, his philosophical intervention. This seems confirmed by Derrida himself on two occasions: first, in *Specters* when he notes the importance of political philosophy for philosophical reflection in general since the former "structures implicitly all philosophy or all thought on the subject of philosophy";<sup>35</sup> and second, in his reflections after 9/11 when he affirms the need to awaken philosophy from a dogmatic slumber through a new reflection "on political philosophy and its *heritage*" (my emphasis).<sup>36</sup>

If the emphasis on the historicity of "messianic" thinking helps us clarify the nature of the "messianic", it can also help us redress recent interpretations of his thought that overlook this central feature. In *Radical Atheism*, for example, Martin Hägglund argues that a radical atheism informs Derrida's entire corpus, an atheism that questions the desirability of

immortality, including God's, as a condition beyond temporal finitude. He supports this thesis through a rigorous analysis of Derrida's engagements with several of his key interlocutors including Kant, Husserl, Levinas and Laclau. Hägglund grounds his whole argument on Derrida's view of temporality to show that the *spacing* or trace-structure constituting time does not simply illuminate human finitude or mortality, but also displays an unconditional affirmation of life as survival or "living on." For Hägglund, whatever one can experience and desire requires the affirmation of a finite time of survival without which there would be no experiencing and desiring in the first place. As a condition of life in general, the finite time of survival affects God himself who can only be made intelligible and desirable as mortal, hence Hägglund's thesis of Derrida's radical atheism.

Although illuminating and logically impeccable, Hägglund analysis of temporality in Derrida retains, ironically, an atemporal flavor. By insisting that Derrida's view of time exposes the law of finitude which is "not something that one can accept or refuse, since it precedes every decision and exceeds all mastery," Hägglund seems to find a ground in Derrida's thinking that is safe from unsettlement because it stands before and beyond human agency and thus also interpretation.<sup>37</sup> In this way, he locks Derrida's thinking into the fixity of a formal, atemporal outlook, a reconstructed universalism of sort, which is not subject to the interpretative constraints of its historical context. Hägglund's interpretation remains therefore deeply problematic since it overlooks the clear emphasis Derrida puts on the historicity of the "messianic" and of thinking more generally. That messianic thinking always points to historical specificity implies that it is subject to the historical constraints of the context in which it operates. And this means that the "messianic," *pace* Hägglund, is never free from historical conditioning to the point of escaping *all* decision and mastery. Although, in some sense it structurally "precedes" history but never purely so, the "messianic" is always already affected by the decisions of those from whom the past is inherited.

### *The Messianic as "Normativity Without Telos"*

We have illustrated that Derrida's "messianic" refers to a type of thinking that radicalizes human finitude and historicizes time by disallowing any

recourse to an ultimate extra-temporal instance, which would close the formal promise structuring the future. According to messianic temporality, this future is open to the "event" conceived as a radical interruption of temporal flow and narrative unity giving coherence to human experience. Unlike religious messianisms and secular teleologies, Derrida's "messianic" is "a waiting without horizon of expectation," a waiting that keeps deferring "not what it affirms but deferring just so as to affirm"<sup>38</sup> the emancipatory promise that there is some future. It is a waiting that exceeds the foreclosing linearity of teleological thinking and instead of doing away with horizons altogether – an option that would imply the impossibility of meaning – actively punctures them thereby revealing their constitutive provisionality and the impossibility of closure.

Now, to say that the "messianic" is a type of waiting is not to imply passivity, the paralysis of agency or that justice is infinitely deferred. Throughout the whole of *Specters*, Derrida's reflections on the disjuncture of time and the event to come are characterized by a strong sense of urgency and action. This sense refers both to Marx's political injunction<sup>39</sup> and the notion of *différance* and retains, as we shall shortly see, a normative character.

In the incoercible *différance* the here and now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because deferring, precisely [*justement*], and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and urgency*: even if it moves towards what remains to come, there is the *pledge* [*gage*] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth). The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.<sup>40</sup>

For Derrida, Marx's political injunction, his pledge for emancipation, is urgent and imminent. It cannot wait for a deferral since justice demands making a decision in the present, "here and now," one that does not imply its happening as presence, and that is why deferral and difference or *différance*, affects its happening. The challenge posed by justice here is how to respond to singularity without renouncing universality or, as Derrida puts it in "Faith and Knowledge," how to conceive of "a universalizable culture of singularities, a culture in which the abstract possibility of the impossible translation could nevertheless be announced."<sup>41</sup> This challenge demands to envision a culture that retains a concern for what is universally

shared in each singularity while respecting the latter *as* singularity. This respect implies considering singularity first, as unrepeatable and thus not susceptible to be subsumed under a universal as an exchangeable commodity; and second, as untranslatable on the basis of a univocal, unitary, and regulative ideal.

I want to suggest that Derrida's "messianic" can be conceived as a "normativity without telos," a type of non-teleological political thinking that enables free and responsible action in a manner that attends the demands of justice. The "messianic" is normative insofar as it imperatively and urgently affirms *that* one is to act and decide in the present, and thus in opposition to awaiting a future to be actualized or approximated. Yet, thought "without telos," the "messianic" resists idealizing final goals and thus is non-normative in the "traditional" sense. That is, it is not informed by the force of the metaphysics of presence and its epistemological mastery but is a thinking that leaves open the interpretations and applications of the content informing decision and action, the determination of which varies according to contexts.

On this reading, there is no messianic action in Derrida, one carried out in the name of some messianic end to be implemented. Rather there is only action *out* of the "messianic," which, because disentangled from teleology, remains free. This freedom lies in the action's undecidability, in its impossibility of enacting or implementing a rule, and in its originality. As Derrida notes in his discussion of just decision in "Force of Law," undecidability is an experience of what, heterogeneous to the calculable and the rule, remains still dutiful but not solvable.<sup>42</sup> It is the experience of exposure to singular situations, which, because of their uniqueness, do not fall into the scope of established rules and yet demand a decision to be taken. Once a decision is taken a new rule is established, one that settles the undecidable impasse in one direction or another but does not dissolve undecidability as such. For Derrida, passing through the ordeal of undecidability without being able to extinguish it represents a condition for freedom. As he argues, an action or decision that would not pass the test of undecidability would not be free but "would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process."<sup>43</sup> The suspension of the rule and not its enactment, as in Kant's moral law, is the condition for freedom. Thus, because the ordeal of undecidability can never be conclusively overcome, action *out* of the "messianic" is always a failure insofar as it always falls short of any ideal or rule guiding action.

However, for the same reasons, it is also always original, unprecedented, and singular because it takes place in the present as if it were every time the first. It is, in sum, a free action.

This is therefore where the philosophical significance of the "messianic" lies. By resisting normative predeterminations, the "messianic" enables free action in a manner that can be responsive to the specificity of predicaments and individuals, and thus ultimately to the demands of justice. Indeed, for Derrida, normative judgments informing action or evaluating current institutions and practices are to be assessed on their ability to respond as appropriately as possible to the singularity of subjects and situations. As a result, these judgments cannot be regulated in pre-eminently ideal terms or before being exposed to experience and the negotiating process it demands. Negotiation, here, does not stand for an ideal goal or for mere compromise but names a predicament in which reason proceeds imaginatively, without a priori guidance or guarantees, every time anew; free in fact. In the attempt to save its honour and universal value, reason seeks, Derrida argues in *Rogues*, to go beyond its calculative mode and proceeds in a creative fashion by "inventing the maxims of transactions" for deciding between its own exigencies, between conditional calculability and unconditional incalculability.<sup>44</sup> Undoubtedly, the openness inherent to the "messianic" and to the model of reason it supports, implies a certain degree of risk in political life. Derrida recognizes this danger when he observes that "to be out of joint" can not only "do harm and do evil" but "it is no doubt the very possibility of evil."<sup>45</sup> However, that risk constitutes also a chance to keep human freedom as an ongoing concrete possibility, which is not the same as equating freedom with the absence of moral limits.

Reading Derrida's perspective as normative but not in a "traditional" sense differs from other recent interpretations of his work, including those of Simon Critchley, John Caputo, Drucilla Cornell, Richard Beardsworth and Matthias Fritsch, who all argue for the presence of a normative dimension in his thought.<sup>46</sup> Despite their differences, these authors consider Derrida's view as informed by some normative ideal—conceived respectively as the ethical priority of the other, peace, utopia of non-violence, or simply the goal of "lesser violence"—and thus leaves his perspectives within too traditional an understanding of normativity. While sharing with these perspectives the emphasis on some kind of normativity in Derrida's thought, my view differs significantly on the nature of that normativity. According to my reading, Derrida's "messianic" can be viewed as a



“normativity without telos,” a non-normative normativity that dismisses the force the metaphysics of presence exercises by positing foundational ideals, especially if this positing bypasses a priori the process of negotiation demanded by the historical and temporal specificity of contexts. The opposition to the metaphysics of presence stems from the emphasis Derrida puts on the dwelling with specters and on the messianic affirmation of openness. While specters disallow the possibility of thinking to rely upon the guidance of untainted ideals, the affirmation of openness impedes preordaining normative guidelines about how to act since it does not by itself constitute, as Fritsch has argued, a normative commitment to be always open.<sup>47</sup>

Ruling out the presence of substantive normative ideals in Derrida does not suggest that there is no normative commitment in his thought, that action and decision remain normatively unsupported, or even less that his normative sources are arbitrary. As it emerges especially from his later writings, Derrida does in fact manifest a commitment to democracy over other regimes and, in particular, to a certain understanding of democracy that emphasizes values such as openness to criticism, perfectibility and free speech, all of which carry a normative weight.<sup>48</sup> Such commitment, far from being arbitrary, is instead inherited from the tradition his thinking has received and bespeaks for the historical character of his reflections. Ruling out substantive normativity but not normative support only implies that such support does not by itself translate into an ethico-political program but remains open to articulation and re-articulation according to the specificity of situations. My suggestion is that Derrida commits to the imperative to act “here and now,” and thus to engage with situations, contexts and people in the present. His commitment is normative as it is imperatively affirmed, and yet, it is non-normative (as traditionally conceived) as it rules out the viability of pre-established guidelines about how to approach and act in the present.

Approaching our conclusion, let us anticipate and respond to a potential objection: reading Derrida’s project as being animated by whatever form of normativity does not save it from the charge of relapsing into some kind of teleology. We can concede that Derrida does not try to dispense with any form of teleology whatsoever since the imperative to act in the present can be also seen as a sort of teleology. However, this would be a teleology that, deprived of a horizon of expectation, is dynamic in spirit given its openness to inform the injunction to act on a basis that can be

constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Thus, even if one were to agree with Caputo that Derrida's is a messianism or teleology with a deconstructive bent, it would nevertheless be a novel one.<sup>49</sup> It would be a teleology that rejects fixing horizons of expectations on the basis of transcendently or transcendently derived ideals since the staticity involved in such a non-revisable determination neutralizes the very notion of the present and of negotiating norms, their interpretations and applications. It would be, otherwise put, a dynamic teleology that, aware of its own "aging," would be *able* to acknowledge the constitutive and constant possibility of its own failure and avoid, as much as possible, locking the future to a future present.

Perhaps, there is little chance to avoid some form of teleology in political philosophy, especially with regard to issues of emancipation and action. Yet the question remains whether freedom and justice are furthered rather than restricted by a teleology that is dynamic, sensible to a diachronic view of time and to the ghosts of unrealized possibilities. On my reading, the significance of Derrida's "messianic" in terms of political philosophy lies especially on its refusal to articulate a normative theory, a deconstructive politics or a reconstructed universalism. This refusal shows why political theory and practice might benefit from resisting teleological aspirations for there to be free thinking, decision and action in political life at all. My point is that Derrida's "messianic" represents an attempt to articulate a politico-philosophical thinking that enables new possibilities for thinking and action precisely because it does not foreclose the very *possibility* of possibilities.

### Notes

- 1 See Jacques DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debts, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, New York: Routledge, 1994, 69 n. 2.
- 2 *Ibid*, 74.
- 3 *Ibid*, *Specters*, 131.
- 4 *Ibid*, *Specters*, 92.
- 5 *Ibid*, *Specters*, 80.
- 6 Jacques DERRIDA, "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, New York: Routledge, 2002, 47.
- 7 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 94.

- 8 Jacques DERRIDA, "Semiology and Grammatology," in *Positions*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981, 29.
- 9 Jacques DERRIDA, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 128.
- 10 Ibid, 128.
- 11 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 87.
- 12 Ibid, 24.
- 13 Ibid, xx.
- 14 Ibid, 5.
- 15 Ibid, 29.
- 16 Ibid, xviii.
- 17 Jacques DERRIDA, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Acts of Religion*, 269.
- 18 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 37.
- 19 Ibid, 90.
- 20 Ibid, 33.
- 21 DERRIDA, "Force of Law," 243.
- 22 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 134.
- 23 Ibid, 207.
- 24 Ibid, 130.
- 25 Ibid, 136.
- 26 Ibid, 135.
- 27 Ibid, 137.
- 28 Ibid, 211.
- 29 In "Faith and Knowledge" Derrida considers the possibility that the "messianic" and messianism "overlap in an infinite mirroring [*en abyme*]." See his "Faith and Knowledge," 48. Intervening in a roundtable on the same topic, he adds that the relationship between the "messianic" and messianism "is really a problem [...] an enigma" and confesses that he "hesitates" and "oscillates" between these two possibilities. See "The Villanova Roundtable. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," in John CAPUTO (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 23.
- 30 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 211.
- 31 Jacques DERRIDA, *Monolingualism of the Other; or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- 32 Jacques DERRIDA, *Limited Inc*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- 33 Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- 34 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 2, 14, 68, 16.
- 35 Ibid, 151.
- 36 Jacques DERRIDA, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicide," in Giovanna BORRADORI, *Philosophy in Time of Terror; Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 100.
- 37 MARTIN HÄGGLUND, *Radical Atheism. Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford,

- CA: Stanford University Press, 2008, 166.
- 38 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 211, 19.
- 39 "If there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance [...] It is even more a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination and from *messianism*." *Specters*, 111.
- 40 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 37.
- 41 DERRIDA, "Faith and Knowledge," 56.
- 42 DERRIDA, "Force of Law," 252.
- 43 Ibid, 252.
- 44 DERRIDA, *Rogues*, 158.
- 45 DERRIDA, *Specters*, 34.
- 46 See Richard BEARDSWORTH, *Derrida and The Political*, London: Routledge, 1996; John CAPUTO, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997; Simon CRITCHLEY, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999; Drucilla CORNELL, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, New York: Routledge, 1992; and Matthias FRITSCH, "Derrida's Democracy to Come," *Constellations* 9:4 (2002), 574–597.
- 47 See Mathias FRITSCH, *The Promise of Memory. History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin and Derrida*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, 190.
- 48 Jacques DERRIDA, *The Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso, 1997; *Rogues*; "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicide." For an analysis and discussion of this point, see Matthias FRITSCH, "Derrida's Democracy to Come."
- 49 See John CAPUTO, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 142.