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# Haunting Hegemony: A Certain Spirit of Conservative-Liberal-Socialism

Seán Patrick Eudaily

## Introduction

Martin Krygier begins his essay noting Leszek Kolakowski's credo for a "mighty [Conservative-Liberal-Socialist] International that will never exist."<sup>1</sup> Krygier argues for the more limited position of conservative-liberal-social democracy for the post-1989 era, where the conservative temper, liberal discussion, and a concern for social responsibility offer an alternative to neoliberal "End of History" triumphalism. However, merely invoking the spirits of Kolakowski and the anti-totalitarian coalition in Eastern Europe is not sufficient if we wish to claim our full inheritance from those struggles. There are two issues that Krygier leaves underdetermined: First, can the importance of totalitarianism's existence for sustaining the anti-totalitarian coalition of conservatives, liberals, and socialists be so easily dismissed? Second, one must take more seriously Kolakowski's definition of his International as one that will never exist, as well as questioning his flippant remark that Conservative-Liberal-Socialism cannot promise happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Some light can be shed on both of these questions by engaging the work of another who has called for an impossible International—Jacques Derrida. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida calls for a New International in a "certain spirit of Marx" to oppose the reification of current liberal democracy as the end of history and the ultimate expression of freedom. Yet like Kolakowski, Derrida's International can never be a campaign or cause in the sense that Krygier implies. It can scarcely be more than a "link of affinity, suffering, and hope."<sup>3</sup> For Derrida this must be so, in that the New International is our inheritance of a certain spirit of the anti-totalitarian coalition. Thus, Derrida's discussion of the problems of both inheritance and spirits may add an important dimension to the question of conservative-liberal-socialism.

## An Hauntology of Conservative-Liberal-Socialism

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida draws a distinction between an affinity for a certain spirit of Marx (indeed the acknowledgment of spectrality itself) and the adoption of the totality of

Marxist doctrine and practice. Derrida offers us *hauntology*, rather than ontology, for his International.<sup>4</sup> The upshot of this deconstructive twist is to bring to the fore the plurality of "spirits" in any theoretical—political tradition, and thus the imperative of choosing which of these spirits one wishes to inherit.

Krygier is attentive to these two dimensions. Just as Derrida emphasizes that to inherit from any legacy requires interpretation, so too Krygier makes clear that "deliberation, choice, and judgment" are necessary in negotiating the incommensurabilities of conservative-liberal-socialism. In addition, Krygier's insistence that conservative-liberal-social democracy offers no "algorithms for decision" dovetails with the deconstructive position that algorithms, in their finitude, do not leave room for *decision* at all.<sup>5</sup> For Derrida, the Gulag and other "perversions" of Marxism resulted from the rush "headlong towards an ontological content" that removed ethical decision in any real sense.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in order to claim the inheritance of the anti-totalitarian coalition for conservative-liberal-social democracy, we must chose in what spirit we invoke that struggle and it is in this choice that we find our responsibility as the heirs to the dissident resistance to communism. This responsibility could not be farther from a dogmatic commitment to an ontology of conservative-liberal-social democracy, a point driven home by both Krygier and Derrida.

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## Hauntology and Hegemony

Krygier is well aware of the difficulty posed by advocating anti-totalitarianism in a (supposedly) post-totalitarian age. Yet he is insistent that there must have been *reasons* for conservatives, liberals, and socialists to oppose totalitarianism, and those reasons "remain significant in the conduct of ordinary democratic politics." This underestimates the extent to which the dissident struggles in Eastern Europe were conditioned, indeed produced, by totalitarianism. If we approach the spirit of anti-totalitarianism as the "haunting" of the Communist state, can that spirit be so easily disassociated with its target? What made such a coalition possible was the existence of the totalitarian state; the two are intimately linked in that "hegemony still organ-

izes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, in order to accept Krygier’s vision of conservative-liberal-social democracy, do we not need a hegemonic target? The reason that brought together the anti-totalitarian coalition was justice, and as in deconstruction there is justice only if there is injustice, “only if the way is blocked.”<sup>8</sup>

Krygier proceeds on the assumption that some common reasons (despite their vast differences) brought conservatives, liberals, and socialists together in the dissident struggles against state socialism. However, what if that commonality rested in “actually existing Socialism” itself? This can be examined on two levels. Pragmatically, each of the strands of conservative-liberal-socialism could not hope to oppose the regime by itself—not only was

each opposition group too weak to bring about change, but they risked driving each other into the arms of the status quo if any political agenda was too strenuously advanced. Thus the dissolution of the dissident coalition after the fall of communism, lamented by Krygier and others, was driven by the same logic of political opportunism that brought them together in the first instance. Yet, the situation has changed in a less noticeable manner as well. The opposition in Eastern Europe was not, indeed could not have been, a typical social movement as found in the West—open political resistance would have faced the fate of Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968 yet again. The notion of “anti-politics” has been coined to describe the combi-

nation of indirect but severe condemnation heaped upon the Communist regime by Solidarity, Charter 77, and other dissident groups. However, Havel’s clarion calls for “living in truth” or “authentic human solidarity” or Solidarity’s practice of working class opposition to the “working class state” in Poland should not be reduced to the cost-benefit analysis of those facing repression. Resistance to the regime in Eastern Europe was no less a product of, or better yet the heir to, a certain spirit of Marx than state socialism itself. Thus as Slavoj Žižek has recently argued, although the positive content of Communism was a “dismal failure,” the space opened by communism was indispensable to the critique produced by Havel, Solidarity, and many others in the conservative-liberal-socialism coalition.<sup>9</sup> This line of thinking also recommends itself in an explanation of the disappointment of former dissidents (like Havel) with “actually existing capitalism” and the flight of many into the arms of Communist or (post) communist political parties in the last decade. So, if the conservative-liberal-socialism coalition depended on communism for

its very existence, is there anything left to inherit in a post-communist world? Yes, but in a manner much different than Krygier suggests.

If we return to the picture of conservative-liberal-socialism as a spirit haunting the hegemony of communism, we can choose as our inheritance two spirits of that struggle: first, the necessity of putting differences aside in order to find commonality in a common enemy; second, the space opened by any hegemony can be used to mobilize opposition to the positive content of that hegemony. Although “actual existing totalitarianism” may have passed, the experience of hegemony has intensified. Indeed, the very notion of totalitarianism (in its equation of fascism, which socialists abhorred, and communism, against which rightists

struggled) has served to hide its double—the hegemony of liberal capitalism. On this account, maybe the most important “heirs” of the conservative-liberal-socialism coalition are the diverse groups that have come together in opposition to that hegemony in its global articulations—the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. Does not a certain spirit of conservative-liberal-socialism animate the anti-globalization protests seen in Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Prague? Environmental and indigenous peoples’ groups fight to conserve the natural world and their cultures respectively. The calls for transparency, accountability, and representation in these new international institutions are

in the grand tradition of liberalism. And finally, one cannot help to notice that these protests have been the site of the most vigorous activity of the labor movement in a generation. What greater inheritance could one choose from the struggles against communism than a coalition of diverse interests, pitted against a common hegemonic foe, and mobilized in the spirit of hegemony’s own values of development, democracy, and liberty?

### Justice and Responsibility

If hegemony enables its own haunting by the spirits of opposition, how is hegemony ever overcome? Were the dissidents of Eastern Europe only engaged in an imminent critique of state socialism? While this may be plausible for the socialist leg of the conservative-liberal-socialism triad, it is demonstrably false when applied to conservatives and liberals. In the end, every haunting is undertaken “in the name of something.”<sup>10</sup> I think it is this “something” that Krygier hopes to find in the “reasons” conservatives, liberals, and socialists shared in opposing com-

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munism. Yet, when approached in the manner of traditional political theory, we end up time and again left with Isaiah Berlin's "clash of incommensurate goods" between the three traditions. By engaging Derrida, an alternative approach is suggested. The conservative-liberal-socialism coalition under communism (just as the anti-WTO coalition under neoliberalism) acted in the name of justice. To expect this justice to have positive content—in either the form of a future present utopia, or a past present arcadia—leads us right back into the dead end of reconciling conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. This critique applies both to treating CLS as some kind of Hegelian synthesis (a "Third Way") or as a blueprint for a mixed or hybrid constitutional regime. However, if we take justice as the undeconstructable future (undeconstructable because it has no positive content), the practice of conservative-liberal-social-democracy is understood as taking place in the space opened between the content of an "actually existing hegemony" and such a notion of justice.<sup>11</sup> Such practice remains hauntological, as Derridian justice operates explicitly without ontology. The choice to step into that gap (like the choice in selecting an inheritance) is made in *aporia* and thus it constitutes a genuine decision, not merely a calculation. The result of this decision is responsibility, not to a philosophical system but to the decision to act itself. This is the ethical position of deconstruction and thus of Derrida's New International.<sup>12</sup> It is attuning ourselves to this responsibility to act in

the name of justice that makes us heirs to a certain (albeit crucial) spirit of Kolakowski's conservative-liberal-socialist credo.

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### Endnotes

1. Kolakowski, Leszek, "How to be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist: *A Credo*," in *Modernity on Endless Trial* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 225.
2. Kolakowski, "How to be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist: *A Credo*," p. 227.
3. Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge Press, 1994, 85.
4. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 88.
5. Caputo, John D., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 137.
6. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 91.
7. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 37.
8. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 135.
9. Žižek, Slavoj, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. London: Verso, 2001, p. 131.
10. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 128.
11. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 132.
12. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 92.