

## ONE

# Marx and Living Traditions

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Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

—Marx

AT THE OUTSET of Marx's analysis of the rise of Louis Bonaparte after the revolutionary tremors of 1848,<sup>1</sup> he famously invokes Hegel's claim that all world historical events and characters repeat themselves, with the ironic twist that they first appear as "high tragedy" and then as "low farce."<sup>2</sup> The enacted historical analogy between Napoleon Bonaparte and Louis Bonaparte clearly exhibits this perverted Hegelian truism, and in so doing shows the way in which all political movements rely upon rhetorical constructions of the past to act in their present. For Marx, such repetitions raise interesting concerns:

And just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language. . . . Likewise a beginner studying a new language always translates it back into this mother tongue; but only when he can use it without referring back, and thus forsake his native language for the new, only then has he entered into the spirit of the new language, and gained the ability to speak it fluently.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are some differences between earlier invocations of the past and what is occurring under the spell of Louis Bonaparte. Before, Marx notes, the past was conjured to "glorify new struggles" and to "recover the

spirit of revolution,” while now it is “only the spectre of the old revolution on the move” in which “[a] whole people, believing itself to have acquired a powerful revolutionary thrust, is suddenly forced back into a defunct era.”<sup>4</sup> While previously revolutions had to draw upon the manifold vagaries of the past to enact its present (and *presence*), the next revolution (a proletarian revolution associated with Marx’s present) will be different:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin til it has stripped off all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realise its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase.<sup>5</sup>

In this discussion, Marx seems to imply two seemingly contradictory claims concerning “tradition”: first, with full Enlightenment bravado Marx notes that tradition represents a “superstition” (not to mention “nightmare”) that must dissipate in the sober morning light of a true revolution; and, second, that while ultimately a barrier to true political action in our contemporaneity, tradition has functioned to at least conjure the “spirit of revolution,” and thereby has acted as an important cultural phrasing for political struggle itself.

Leaving aside Marx’s later interesting analyses of the political dynamics behind the rise of Louis Bonaparte, for contemporary participants within the tradition of Western Marxism, his initial comments in this context raise interesting metatheoretical issues that must be heeded. In what way does Marx’s admonishments to “let the dead bury the dead in order to realise [one’s] own content” question the very authority of Marx’s words for Marxists today? That is, in what way does the attempt to understand and act in the contemporary world (to borrow Marx’s phrase, “to enact new scenes in world history”) demand that we abandon the “native language” of Marx for new language games? More generally, what does it mean to work within a tradition that seemingly disavows the role of tradition itself?

Of course, to take Marx seriously in this respect may lead to two different, though equally problematic, responses. First, to take seriously the claim that one must build one’s political understanding from a “new language” might lead one to abandon Marx to the “dustbin of history.” In this respect, one assumes there is a radical break between Marx’s present and our own. Yet, this assumed “rupture” is seemingly disconfirmed by the very continuing presence—in whatever shape or form—of capitalism itself. That is, if anything, Marx’s thought is supremely focused on the social dynamics of capitalism, and for that very reason is eminently relevant to our contemporary situation. Second, to take seriously Marx’s admonishments concerning tradition may lead

to an overzealous attempt to show the continuities between Marx's historicity and our own, thereby ensuring his continued presence in our political world. Of course, to take such a stance has its attendant dangers—it can easily move one into the particular solipsism associated with orthodoxy, a discursive capture that has all too often plagued the theory and politics of Marxism. Moreover, both of these responses ignore the subtle implications of Marx's understanding of tradition—traditions are at once necessary horizons for a negotiation of the political present, but only in the differential way in which contemporary participants articulate and enact the continuities *and* discontinuities between past and present.

In this chapter, I explore what it means for Marxism to be a “living tradition,” a conceptual discourse that is neither wholly the past nor the present. As such, this chapter sets the metatheoretical parameters for what follows in the rest of the book. As noted in the Introduction, what is necessary is to perform Marx—to constructively render both “obedience” and “disobedience” to his words, ideas, and conceptual strategies—so as to constitute what we mean by a “living tradition.” Yet, how do we conceptualize such a notion of tradition? One of the most prescient analyses of Marxism as a living tradition has come in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose deconstruction of the Marxist tradition—and subsequent critiques of their position from Marxist quarters—has led to self-conscious reflections on the nature of traditionality. While we will focus in greater detail on other, more substantive issues in their theory in later chapters, here we want to focus initially on their metatheoretical discussions. In the first section, then, I look to what guidelines their discussion may offer concerning a conception of a “living tradition.” In the second section, inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's discussion, and drawing on the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin, I lay out three different conceptualizations of tradition—*tradition as legacy*, *tradition as dialogue*, and *tradition as dialectical imagery*—arguing that a “living tradition” of Marxism demands the differential agonistics associated with the last conceptualization of tradition. In the concluding section, I briefly put forward what this articulation of Marxism as a living tradition might imply in terms of translating and enacting Marx today, and thus how we might proceed in our attempt to perform Marx in relevant ways in our contemporary world.

#### NEGOTIATING A LIVING TRADITION: THE METATHEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF POST-MARXISM

We believe that by clearly locating ourselves in a post-Marxist terrain, we not only help to clarify the meaning of contemporary social struggles but also give to Marxism its theoretical dignity, which can only proceed from

recognition of its limitations and of its historicity. Only through such recognition will Marx's work remain present in our tradition and our political culture.

—Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>6</sup>

To many students of Marx, recognizing the “limitations” and “historicity” of this great thinker's insights can do everything but give Marx a sense of “theoretical dignity.” Yet, to enact and perform Marx in this way—in a sense, to use his thought as a contested horizon for a way of thinking about politics in the present—is consistent with the embedded metatheoretical assumptions of Marx's theory itself. As Marx famously argued: “All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”<sup>7</sup> In a real sense, then, Marx actually seems to de-authorize his own ideas, that is, he recognizes their historicity (and thus contingency) and thereby acknowledges their potential discontinuity given transformed conditions.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, one might argue that Laclau and Mouffe are well within the traditional metatheoretical assumptions of Marx's theory, even if most Marxists have a hard time accepting such guidelines themselves. Speaking generally about the Marxist tradition, Alvin Gouldner has noted that “although Marxists would be the first to agree that critique must view theory as a social and historical product,” they are not quick to apply this criteria to their own practices, seeing such “reflexive efforts at historical self-understanding . . . as narcissistic, diverting enquiry from its proper objective of understanding (not to speak of changing) the world.”<sup>9</sup> But, what if such “narcissistic” inquiry is necessary to the “objective” of emancipation itself? What if such an attentiveness to Marx's (and our own) historicity better guards against the development of those conceptual “mysteries which turn [Marx's?] theory into mysticism”?

In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida's much debated discussion of Marx in *Specters of Marx*—for whatever its faults in other registers<sup>10</sup>—clearly notes the importance of Marx's reflections on his own historicity: “Who has ever called for the *transformation* to come of his own theses? Not only in view of some progressive enrichment of knowledge, which would change nothing in the order of a system, but so as to take into account there, another account, the effects of rupture and restructuration?”<sup>11</sup> These insights come in response to the important issue of the role of Marx's thought today, particularly given the theoretical, social, and political transmutations that have occurred in our early twenty first-century capitalist world-system. In response to both dogmatic Marxists (who see only metaphysical timeless truths lying within the texts of Marx) and virulent anti-Marxists (who herald the death of Marx and celebrate the growth of liberal capitalist democracies), Derrida wishes to retrieve the “spectrality” and “hauntology” that inheres within the Marxist tradition itself. That is, he wishes to conjure a “spirit” or “specter” of Marx

that is discursively transformative (indeed performative), and in turn infinitely open to historical and political possibilities.<sup>12</sup> For Derrida, at least, this implies emphasizing the separation of the “spirit of Marxist critique, which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or workers’ International.”<sup>13</sup> Such a deconstructive reading leads Derrida to consistently and thoughtfully reflect on the nature of inheritance itself:

One must assume the inheritance of Marxism, assume its most “living” part, which is to say, paradoxically, that which continues to put back on the drawing board the question of life, spirit, or the spectral, of life-death beyond the opposition between life and death. This inheritance must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary. Such a reaffirmation would be both faithful to something that resonates in Marx’s appeal—let us say once again in the spirit of his injunction—and in conformity with the concept of inheritance in general. Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe (writing earlier, yet seemingly in the spirit of Derrida’s later admonishments) argue that it is precisely the inattentiveness to the historicity of Marx’s (and Marxism’s) conceptual framework—that is, to the way in which Marx, and later Marxists, developed their positions in relation to a specific theoretical heritage and to particular socio-political conditions—that diverts one’s theory away from “understanding (not to speak of changing) the world,” to draw upon Gouldner’s paraphrase of Marx’s famous claim at the end of *Theses on Feuerbach*. Associated with this metatheoretical consideration is what we may call a *radical pragmatist* understanding of theoretical traditions: if an *intellectual tradition* is to be a *living tradition*, it must, ironically, be willing to bracket any form of conceptual “traditionalism” (be it the metaphysical presence of the “author” that captures the totality of a tradition, or the theoretical and strategic considerations proffered in that tradition’s development) that stands in the way of understanding and acting within the contemporary world. This implies two particular discursive operations: first, an elaboration of the contemporary political world, so that we can gauge the context in which the tradition must be enacted; and second, a clear conception of the limits and possibilities of the theoretical horizon one is working within, which Laclau and Mouffe claim can only come in the wake of radically interrogating it from the political present. According to Laclau and Mouffe, one must

start from this full insertion into the present—in its struggles, its challenges, its dangers—to interrogate the past: to search within it for the genealogy of

the present situation; to recognize within it the presence—at first marginal and blurred—of problems that are ours; and, consequently, to establish with that past a dialogue which is organized around continuities and discontinuities, identifications and ruptures. It is in this way, by making the past a transient and contingent reality rather than an absolute origin, that a *tradition* is given form.<sup>15</sup>

As articulated in this passage, Laclau and Mouffe's conception of a living tradition draws eclectically from the thought of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Michel Foucault,<sup>16</sup> and it has interesting consequences for negotiating the authorial voice of Marx within the Marxist tradition. Indeed, a "genealogy of the present situation" implies the willingness to break free from the tendency to appropriate the words of Marx for legitimation of one's own theoretical and political practices in a radically different world. As may seem apparent, this is a significant issue in a tradition that explicitly follows in the wake of a particular author's own thought and writings. To play upon Harold Bloom's notorious discussion of literary traditions, participants within the Marxist tradition all too often experience a particularly virulent Oedipal panic disorder.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, arguments concerning the current viability of the Marxist tradition have always included not only the application of Marx's concepts to new conditions, but also the concomitant reinterpretation of his writings to locate the premonitions and intimations of these new applications. But, such a practice, as Derrida argues, only misses the true nature of our inheritance of Marx:

We do not have to solicit the agreement of Marx—who died to this even before being dead—in order to inherit it: to inherit this or that, this rather than that which comes to us nevertheless by him, through him if not from him. And we do not have to suppose that Marx was in agreement with himself. "What is certain is that I am not a Marxist," he is supposed to have confided to Engels. Must we still cite Marx as authority in order to say likewise?<sup>18</sup>

For Laclau, at least, the argumentative strategy of creating a new Marx for every new theoretical intervention engenders an intellectual tradition that is "totally unrecognizable," with no "theoretical specificity," thereby "making any kind of dialogue impossible."<sup>19</sup> "It is necessary," Laclau argues, "to put an end to the tendency to transvest our ideas, presenting them as if they belonged to Marx, and proclaiming *urbi et orbi* every ten years that one has discovered the 'true' Marx."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to cling to a supposed revitalized Marx only helps "to distance ourselves from the reality we live and to inhabit a different history, an illusory one to be sure,"<sup>21</sup> and such a discursive capture ultimately can do nothing more than reinforce "theoretical conservatism" not to mention "political conservatism."<sup>22</sup>

Yet, as opposed to the concerns expressed by Marxist critics like Norman Geras,<sup>23</sup> this rethinking does not mean that one should ignore the importance of Marx's theory, particularly for the period in which he was writing. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe see an important position for Marx in the history of the unfolding of what they call "democratic imaginary": he helped to push the issue of democracy into the economic realm, and thereby articulated the character of political struggles associated with economic classes.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Marxism, as part of the general socialist tradition, is still an important discourse that furthers radical democracy today: ". . . every project of radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination; but socialism is one of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa."<sup>25</sup> Yet, as implied in this claim, what Marxism can no longer assume is its status as the only viable theoretical field from which to understand and attack relations of exploitation, oppression, and subordination in our postmodern condition.

Thus, to conceive of Marxism as a living tradition means that one must accept the distance and discontinuities between the past and present, both theoretically and socio-politically. Yet, what specifically are these different conditions with which the Marxist tradition must now contend? First, Laclau and Mouffe argue, we now inhabit a *theoretical* world that is radically different from Marx's, where the nineteenth-century epistemological practices of "objectivism" ("the assumption that society may be understood as an objective and coherent ensemble from foundations or laws of movement that are conceptually graspable"<sup>26</sup>) and "essentialism" (the postulating of an underlying essence or structure from which all other elements within society gain coherence) no longer seem tenable in the wake of their rigorous critique in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and recent postmodern and post-analytic thought. In the Marxist tradition, these theoretical practices have linked up with other conceptual barriers that must now be questioned: "classism," in which the working class is assumed to be the privileged agent of transformation; "statism," the assumption that the extension of the role of the state is ultimately progressive; and "economism," the assumption that economic practices have predetermined political effects.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the historical transformations that have taken place during the twentieth century have consistently raised questions about the relevance of a certain Marx's theory. Thus, second, we now live in a *socio-political* world that does not have the form and character anticipated by classical Marxism. For Laclau and Mouffe, these transformations relate equally to advanced capitalist democracies and the bureaucratic collectivist regimes of so-called communist societies, and they include:

[S]tructural transformations of capitalism that have led to the decline of the classical working class in the post-industrial countries; the increasingly

profound penetration of capitalist relations of production in areas of social life, whose dislocatory effects—concurrent with those deriving from the forms of bureaucratization which have characterized the Welfare State—have generated new forms of social protest; the emergence of mass mobilizations in the Third World countries which do not follow the classical pattern of class struggle; the crisis and discrediting of the model of society put into effect in the countries of so-called “actually existing socialism,” including the exposure of new forms of domination established in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of advanced capitalist democracies, the contemporary political world is not articulated solely around the political frontier of economic classes: the dislocatory effects of the commodified life-world and the welfare state have engendered a diversity of social struggles whose political subjects cannot be reduced to class, and whose projects reflect an increased awareness of “difference” and “particularisms.”<sup>29</sup> In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe are positioning their theory within the practices of “new social movements,” those multifarious projects associated with such practices as anti-racist struggles, second wave feminism, gay and lesbian subjects, the peace movement, and radical ecology. The task for contemporary emancipatory theorists is not only to be “fully conscious of the changes” that have happened, but to also “persist in the effort of extracting all their consequences at the level of theory.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, emancipatory theory must abandon those aspects of its political imaginary that do not promote a “political practice fully located in the field of the democratic revolution and conscious of the depth and variety of the hegemonic articulations which the present conjuncture requires.”<sup>31</sup> For post-Marxism, this theoretical effort entails rethinking the character of political struggles (which will be characterized in terms of “hegemonic articulation”) and society (as a failed attempt at objectivity), in the process adequately conceptualizing these new social movements, in all their specificity and particularity, as part of the general project of “radical democracy.”

What is implied in this call for a theoretical reorientation—the shifting of categories, notions, and logics toward the specificity of new democratic struggles—is an attempt to ensure that the Marxist tradition abides by the oft-noted metatheoretical insistence that it live up to (and thus be “living” within) new historical transformations. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, this pragmatic attunement necessarily demands that the Marxist tradition “accept, in all their radical novelty, the transformations of the world—that is to say, neither to ignore them nor to distort them in order to make them compatible with outdated schemas so that we may continue inhabiting forms of thought which repeat the old formulae.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Laclau and Mouffe’s claim to revitalize theory rests on the verisimilitude of their concepts with the concrete particularities of the political world. More specifically, given their argu-



ment concerning the importance of “new social movements,” their attempt to renegotiate the Marxist tradition presupposes that their theory adequately renders the discursive practices and strategies of these diverse democratic struggles. While recognizing that it is not the only tradition from which this genealogy may proceed, Laclau and Mouffe find Marxism an important entry point for the elaboration of their conception of politics.<sup>33</sup>

ENACTING TRADITION(S):  
FROM LEGACY TO DIALECTICAL IMAGERY

The enshrinement or apologia [of heritage] is meant to cover up the revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history. At heart, it seeks the establishment of continuity. It sets store only by those elements of a work that have already emerged and played a part in its reception. The places where tradition breaks off—hence its peaks and crags, which offer footing to one who would cross over them—it misses.

—Walter Benjamin<sup>34</sup>

How, then, are we to understand a notion of tradition that is at once a marker of continuity while at the same time a platform for the articulation and enactment of the radically new? As Laclau and Mouffe seem to suggest, a “living tradition” can only be articulated from within the horizon of the present. Of course, such a “present” is neither fully pristine nor originary, for its very discursive character is elicited from a “dialogue” initiated within a “tradition” itself. We might characterize Laclau and Mouffe’s particular negotiation of the Marxist tradition in the following way. Coming from a theoretical and political present (defined respectively by postmodern theory and new social movements), they begin to construct a genealogy of the concept of “hegemony” from within Marxist tradition after the Second International. This genealogy is then enacted by the concepts and theoretical relays associated with the internecine debates beginning with Rosa Luxemburg leading to Gramsci. For Laclau and Mouffe, then, “hegemony” is both a part of the legacy of the Marxist tradition (its character and specificity as a concept only appears in the context of this intellectual horizon) while also its constitutive outside, that is, a concept whose implications question the normalized renderings of the tradition. The concept of hegemony that they finally reach—which signifies for them the continual process of contingent political articulation and the consequent (re)production of political subjects—is given form only by its differential presence within the tradition itself.<sup>35</sup>

To accept this understanding of tradition obviously means that one must move beyond a particular rendering of traditionality that assumes *the terrorism of continuity*. This latter phrase signifies a particular relationship to the past in which it indeed “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,”

to quote Marx again. The darling of conservatives and the devil of Enlightenment thinkers, such a conceptualization of tradition assumes the form of *legacy*—a heritage whose parameters, general character, let alone specifics, are not negotiated by contemporary participants, but rather appropriated *in toto*. It is from within this figure of tradition that one initiates the binarisms orthodoxy/revisionism and originary intent/contemporary use, a discursive operation that always privileges the first term in these couplets. Or rather, such a position, in its zeal to establish differences and hierarchies, initiates a particular terror of compliance and a constant push toward rectification. Indeed, later articulations within a tradition conceived as legacy are immediately suspect in their “newness,” and, in turn, give rise to scholastic quarreling between supposed followers attempting to render the “correct” usage and enactment of the tradition’s discourses.

For a tradition specifically based upon the writings of a particular author, performing tradition as legacy leads to the avid attempt to establish the intentions behind, and originary meanings associated with, the author’s claims, in the process allowing the contemporary participant a clear sense of how to apply such intentions and meanings in the contemporary world. Given this intentionalist (or, more broadly, contextualist) anchoring of meaning, there is then the possibility of clearly determining the boundary line between valid appropriations and invalid distortions. Thus, “Marx” (as the constellation of intentions and meanings that coalesce into the metaphysical presence of an “author”) becomes a transcendental signified that establishes the boundaries of what can be said and articulated. Moreover, within this figure of tradition at least, the contemporary participant is no more than a reiteration of this dominant metaphysical presence associated with the author himself. Of course, for this position to truly be consistent there must be an assumption of “unitary” meaning associated with the author in mind, an assumption that is rather problematic in terms of Marx.<sup>36</sup>

As we already noted, there is evidence within Marx’s writings that such a position is not necessarily true to what he perceived as the nature of the theoretical enterprise he was enacting. We are thus left with something of a quandary: we can establish ample evidence that Marx did not intend for his position to be reiterated without revision, particularly if there are clear historical transformations that have occurred that then demand a revision of theoretical concepts. That is, we can establish an intentionalist explanation for the very decentering of Marx’s ideas themselves within the tradition he initiates. Moreover, what Marx’s metatheoretical concerns represent is the intrusion of contingency and performativity into the very core of the materialist method itself, a conceptual burrowing that decenters and destabilizes any attempt (by Marx or by later Marxists) to establish rigid essentialist claims to which later generations are beholden. Of course, to enact this intentionalist justification in order to differentially perform Marx in our con-

temporary world is to strangely fall prey to the very notion of legacy we have just discussed. Indeed, echoing Derrida's poignant (yet troubling) query, do we still have to ask Marx for permission to articulate him differently? Yet, can we really avoid doing this if we are to be contemporary heirs of Marx? And, moreover, do we need to conceive of a tradition in such restrictive ways? Getting to the issue raised by this last question, we can see another figure of tradition that seems to come forth (and is indeed behind Laclau and Mouffe's conception itself)—*tradition as dialogue*. Such a conception has been most fully developed within the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer,<sup>37</sup> and it will thus be important to briefly characterize how he perceives the character of tradition in this way.

Following Martin Heidegger, Gadamer argues that hermeneutics is not a methodological position per se, but rather an examination of the nature of understanding itself. Moreover, understanding is conceived as primarily related to what Heidegger had argued is the "thrownness" exhibited in the nature of *Dasein*—that is, it is expressive of the temporal nature of human beings in which past, present, and future are mutually articulated. What this signifies in terms of interpreting the past (be it an aesthetic text or Marx's text) is that inevitably one is always already part of a tradition that constitutes the very presuppositions of one's interpretation itself. In this respect, one can never approach the past without the very concerns of the present; indeed, the past only appears because of the one's present "horizon of meaning." But, as may seem apparent, one is never not part of the past experienced as "tradition." In this way, as Gadamer notes,

[e]very age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole of the tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of the text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, Gadamer is concerned with the ontological condition in which the interpretation of a text is situated between the text's character as a "separate object," engendered within a particular historicity that is not our own, and its enduring embeddedness (as a cultural and linguistic artifact) within a "tradition" that is part of our present. Moreover, as opposed to the Enlightenment conception that there is an antipathy between reason and tradition (the latter supposedly representing the authority of the past that is prejudicial to the conditions and consequences of human reason), Gadamer argues that there is "no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason."<sup>39</sup> To make such a claim, Gadamer argues that we need to rethink our notion of tradition (not to mention reason):

The fact is that tradition is constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, such as is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only what is new, or what is planned, appears as the result of reason. But this is an illusion. Even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and combines with the new to create a new value.<sup>40</sup>

As with Marx's analysis of the political context associated with Louis Bonaparte, Gadamer is clear that even under the most revolutionary of periods one's actions are always inscribed within tradition itself. For this to be the case, it must be assumed that tradition is not merely the weight of the past but the constant dialogue between the past and present. Moreover, the past of an intellectual tradition is captured neither by the originary intentions of the author nor the social contingencies associated with its production—traditions, by their very historical nature, transcend authorial intentions and have an inherent multivocality: "Our historical consciousness," Gadamer argues, "is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. It is present only in the multifariousness of such voices: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part."<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, Gadamer's conceptualization of tradition takes us beyond the binary oppositions associated with tradition as legacy: there is no longer the objectivist assurance of a fully pristine authorial presence that can anchor a sense of metaphysical closure for contemporary participants. Rather, contemporary engagements within a tradition are premised upon the contemporary horizon of meaning which opens up a dialogue with the past. In this respect, the oppositions between orthodoxy/revisionism and original intent/contemporary use (or, to put it in Gadamer's terms, between understanding and application) dissolve irrevocably.<sup>42</sup>

Now, this conception of tradition has the obvious advantage of taking seriously the way that traditions are never experienced mimetically but always productively: as Gadamer puts it, they are part history (as necessity) and part freedom (as contingency). But, there is still an ontological assumption about the necessity of continuity that inheres within this conception, an assumption which ultimately limits the articulation of the radically new. Underlying Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is the goal of a "fusion of horizons" (between the past and present) that allows for the ultimate disclosure of meaning, a process that is only possible because of the way in which the past and the present are undergirded by tradition itself.<sup>43</sup> In this way, as Terry Eagleton has presciently pointed out, one's present engagement is always premised upon

the structuring continuity of tradition, to such an extent that all the supposed “dialogue” between past and present “amounts to . . . tradition . . . having an endless conversation with itself.”<sup>44</sup> Like a game (a metaphor that Gadamer draws extensively upon<sup>45</sup>), making a “move” within tradition is an “open” practice within an infinitely expandable continuity in which the contemporary participant is always already within tradition. Thus, as Eagleton continues concerning Gadamer’s position: “The point of the tradition, then, is to get us back to where we were, only more radically so.”<sup>46</sup>

Eagleton’s critique of Gadamer comes in the wake of discussing the interesting, yet idiosyncratic, conception of history found in the work of Walter Benjamin. And, following Eagleton’s lead, it is with Benjamin’s remarks on materialist historiography that we can find a figure of tradition that allows us to perceive the sense in which tradition is always enacted as a discontinuous “new language” (to quote Marx again). Following Benjamin, we can call this figure *tradition as dialectical imagery*.

It is definitely an understatement to note that Benjamin’s theory of history elides easy articulation. As a peculiar constellation of his unique understanding of both Jewish messianism and historical materialism, Benjamin’s theory of history oscillates between an unerring attention to the material image (and its implication within economic conditions) and a continual, seemingly mystical, call for redemption. While elements of Benjamin’s conception of history can be found in his early work—particularly, in his discussion of “origin” in *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928), and in his many published literary essays—they most clearly surface in the notes and aphorisms of his sprawling, uncompleted work, *Passagen-Werk* (translated recently as *The Arcades Project*<sup>47</sup>), and in his last completed essay before his suicide, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”<sup>48</sup> For our purposes what is most important is Benjamin’s discussion of the task of the true materialist historian. It is here that we find the interesting concept of the “dialectical image,” which speaks to a notion of tradition (and of how the past weighs on the present) in the way that Marx seemed to intimate at the beginning of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

For Benjamin, history must be seen neither in terms of progress (for, as he notes, the continual presence of suffering belies this supposed betterment) nor in terms of a Nietzschean “eternal return” of the same: both conceptions—while getting at something that inheres within historical experience—assume all of history to be constituted as “empty, homogenous time.”<sup>49</sup> Drawing equally upon Surrealism’s use of montage (as a way to create what Benjamin calls the “profane illumination” of everyday life), Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effect” within his notion of epic theater, and Marcel Proust’s famous evocation of *mémoire involontaire*,<sup>50</sup> Benjamin argues that a true historical materialist must engender a “dialectical image” in which the past and the present collide to engender a revolutionary “now-time.” In his usage of the term, a “dialectical image” is an attempt to apply the aesthetic practice of

the montage to historical practice, yet to do so without assuming a subjectivist discourse in which the materialist historian constructs in thought divergent trajectories of historical objects. For Benjamin, then, a dialectical image inheres within the very object of history, at least to one who is attentive. “Materialist historiography,” Benjamin avers, “does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession.”<sup>51</sup> Sharing Gadamer’s concern for the objectivist pitfalls of historicism, Benjamin argues forcefully that history only has meaning in relation to its relevance for the present participant: “For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”<sup>52</sup> In promoting an eternal history of continuous causal connections, historicism does not necessarily obfuscate the particular temporal quality associated with *Dasein*, as Gadamer would have us believe; rather, it intimately serves the interests of history’s victors and rulers. That is, history becomes a tale of progress, moving inexorably toward better ends, and thus its many oppressions and denials of humanity will be ignored in the name of that supposed “progress.” The dialectical image arrests such narrative schemas, showing the true tension between “fore-history” (the utopian impulses within the past toward a better society) and “after-history” (the ruin engendered in the name of that past utopian impulse).<sup>53</sup> “To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts,” Benjamin notes. He continues:

Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It’s the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process.<sup>54</sup>

It is for this reason, as Benjamin famously avers, that a true materialist position must “brush history against the grain.”<sup>55</sup> To do so means that one must establish a radical discontinuity with the past (conceived as mythological origins for a supposed progressive future) and in turn grasp the past in terms of its (and ours) revolutionary possibilities. Yet, such a discontinuity is in the name of redeeming the utopian impulses of the “past.” As Benjamin notes:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its

receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.<sup>56</sup>

The “danger” to which Benjamin speaks is the continual presence of class struggle and class oppression, not to mention the revolutionary possibilities that inhere in each historical moment. As he seems to suggest, it is current political possibilities and struggles that will inevitably affect “both the content of the tradition and its receivers,” and such contemporary configurations will ensure that the past is never a tool of “a conformism” tied ultimately to “barbarism.”<sup>57</sup> “A historian who takes this as his point of departure,” Benjamin argues, “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ [*Jetztzeit*] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.”<sup>58</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss has poignantly noted, Benjamin’s acceptance of the political thrust of Jewish mysticism, which emphasized the potentiality for redemption at particular historical junctures, allowed him to see two simultaneous historical registers: “Messianic Time” and “Empirical History.”<sup>59</sup> While the former articulates the utopian impulse toward happiness that inheres throughout history, the latter represents the actual course of history in which that utopian impulse has been thwarted and diverted. The point for Benjamin was to find the messianic within empirical history. Thus, to create a revolutionary present (moreover, to take hold of the radically new) does not just demand a distinct rupture with the past (experienced as universal and homogeneous history); it also demands its appraisal as a “monad,” a political image of “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”<sup>60</sup> Such a monadic enactment of the past dynamites “a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled. . . .”<sup>61</sup> Of course, Benjamin’s claim that historical materialism must encounter the historical object as a monad via the construction of “dialectical images” has important ramifications for how we look at the appropriation of Marx’s ideas. In blasting Marx’s work from its social context and subsequent inscription within the “Marxist tradition,” a materialist tradition frees those ideas to become a living presence in the revolutionary struggles of the contemporary world.

From Benjamin’s somewhat cryptic and elliptical remarks, we can see that tradition is conceived neither as the weight of a fully articulated past nor as the dialogic character of Dasein; rather, it is by nature riven with differential tensions and discursive absences, a character supposedly based upon the ever-recurring political potentialities that each new generation must confront. As Eagleton notes about Benjamin’s conception: “It is not that we constantly

reevaluate a tradition; tradition is the practice of ceaselessly excavating, safeguarding, violating, discarding and reinscribing the past. There is no tradition other than this, no set of ideal landmarks that then suffer modification.<sup>62</sup> Thus, from Benjamin's position at least, a true tradition never weighs upon "brains of the living" as Marx had said, for tradition is always differentially enacted by contemporary participants and thereby takes shape in response to their unique political juncture, and in line with struggles against oppression in the past.

### PERFORMING MARX TODAY

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and the new interpenetrate. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. . . . In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history <Urgeschichte>—that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.

—Walter Benjamin<sup>63</sup>

Utilizing Benjamin's notion of dialectical imagery, we are offered a tantalizing way of conceiving of the Marxist tradition: we are asked to blast Marx out of the continuum of history in which he has settled, to rupture our common-sense understandings of his work in order to find the way in which his theory represents a contemporary enactment of "now-time." Without getting caught in the thicket of theological assumptions associated with such a messianic conception, Benjamin is calling for us to retrieve the "political actuality" associated with Marx's work, yet in a radically different context, in relation to unique issues associated with oppression, subordination, and domination. It's not that Marx is "dead" to us today. Or, rather, he is "dead" only if we keep him alive as a reified object that must be either rejected or accepted *in toto*. Thus, he lives only if we can put to rest all those aspects—the ruins and debris—of his theory that no longer speak to us. Thus, Marx's utopian impulse must be retrieved through dialectical images in which his theory and life collide with our present context (both theoretically and politically). Such a conceptual montage will offer contemporary participants important ways in which to rethink Marx, but also play to real current issues and dilemmas they confront.



When Marx argues in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that one must throw off the shackles of tradition—that is, create one’s revolutionary “poetry” not “from the past but only the future”—he had indeed perceived the dilemmas facing political action associated with the radically new that must ultimately perform from the script of tradition. How is it possible to truly create something new in the guise of the old? Moreover, how is it possible to rely upon Marx’s own words (whatever they may mean) in the process of confronting radically different conditions and possibilities associated with the late twentieth-century world capitalist system? Of course, if we were to literally apply Marx’s comments in this respect to our own relationship to his writings we might feel compelled to disown our inheritance altogether. But, in such an act of infidelity we actually only reiterate the strength of this tradition, only now as that which negatively undergirds our position. Moreover, given our previous discussion of the different conceptualizations of tradition, such a reaction only makes sense in the context of the figure of “tradition as legacy.” When Marx argued that “tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” he had rightfully focused on the limitations a particular experience of tradition has on contemporary participants who are attempting to engender “new scenes in world history.” But, in the same context he also saw how the use of the past helped to raise the “spirit of revolution” and “glorify new struggles.” This latter articulation of the role of tradition is more closely aligned with the other two figures of tradition we have discussed. To varying degrees, both “tradition as dialogue” and “tradition as dialectical imagery” decenter the metaphysical presence of the originary author, break through a potentially reified conformism associated with universal history, and recognize the role of the present in one’s enactment of tradition itself. Yet, it is particularly Benjamin’s position that moves us into the specter of discontinuity that seems to shadow Marx’s very words on tradition: in understanding tradition as the constant, necessarily disruptive, reinscription of cultural artifacts and discourses from the hindsight of the radically new, we can begin to see how Marx’s admonishments to strip “off all superstition from the past” and “let the dead bury the dead in order to realise [one’s contemporary] content” may be a supreme form of the art of traditionality itself.

How, then, should we perform Marx today? I think there are two general strategies that we can take as contemporary participants in the tradition of Western Marxism. First, we can fetishistically hold on to past interpretative schemas and political proscriptions that are “Marxist,” and do so with the retrospective assurances we gain from locating their premonitory origin in Marx’s oeuvre itself. In this way, the present seems to become comprehensible to us and Marx continues to speak from the grave. But performing Marx in this way also ensures its resistance to the radically new language games and practices that continue to appear before us. To draw upon Marx’s words in the

*Eighteenth Brumaire*, we are still relying upon the “native language” of our tradition and have not fully entered the “spirit of the new language.”

Second, we can take to heart Benjamin’s suggestion in the quotation with which we began this concluding section. We can retrieve the “wish image” (dialectical image) that appears when Marx’s work is apprehended by the new context in which we sit. Such an enactment ensures his continued presence within our political tradition and also guarantees that we do not cling to his proper name merely because his “presence” seems comfortable and safe. What such a differential relationship to Marx would imply is at least two critical operations. First, on an *intertextual* level, one would enact a critical approach to Marx’s oeuvre itself, in which one reappraises the importance of particular works that have been considered the crowning statement of Marx’s thought. Of course, such a reappraisal has been a recurring practice within the tradition (e.g., in relation to the binary opposition between the early and late Marx), but it has conventionally been enacted with the attempt to anchor the “true Marx” (be it the humanist/critical Marx or the structuralist/scientific Marx), not to perform theoretical relays that have some practical relevance in our contemporaneity. Thus, there may be the need for an analysis of writings that may have been ignored, particularly if they represent entry points for making Marx relevant to contemporary political struggles.<sup>64</sup> Second, on an *intratextual* level, there is the need to reassess the components, theoretical tools, and narrative strategies that surface within each of Marx’s texts. From this more micrological position, each text potentially represents an agonistic arena for diverse theoretical and political constitutions, in that the contemporary participant sifts through the multiple theoretical currents circulating within Marx’s texts and siphons off the residue that coheres with our contemporary constellations of discourses.

With these conceptual strategies in mind, I want to turn in the next chapter to uncovering a notion of desire and pleasure from within Marx’s writings, an excavation that I hope will show how we can perform Marx in an increasingly important theoretical and political issue.