

Martin, Derrida, and “Ethical Marxism”

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Abstract: Bill Martin believes that orthodox Marxism has omitted ethics in capturing social reality. He remedies this deficit by constructing an “Ethical Marxism” that appeals to Derrida’s “materialization” of Kant’s categorical imperative. He adds that the historical and ethical dimensions involved in this effort would each be an “empty formalism” without the other. Thus his ultimate goal is to save us from formalism by joining “vision” to “viability,” transcendence to immanence. But some aspects of Martin’s Ethical Marxism suggest that he may be further from Derrida than he thinks. I will explore this possibility and draw its implications for the viability of Martin’s Ethical Marxism.

In October of 1992, Bill Martin flew to Lima, Peru. The flight was not the first leg of a trip to Cuzco and then on to the heights of Machu Picchu. Rather, the university professor traveled to Lima as part of the International Emergency Committee to Defend the Life of Abimael Guzmán. Guzmán was and still is the incarcerated leader of the Maoist insurgents known as the *Sendero Luminoso* or Shining Path. Although Martin’s trip to Peru happened almost twenty years ago, he is still committed to supporting the movement that Guzmán and his militants represent. Indeed, the title of a chapter in one of Martin’s eight books plays on the name of a popular Paul Simon tune: “Still Maoist after all These Years.”¹ Martin’s participation in the Committee’s defense of Guzmán took courage: the Peruvian police had no intention of giving Maoists the welcome reserved for tourists. But Martin was also an oddity within his own group: he went to Lima “both as a Maoist and as a deconstructionist.”²

1. Chapter 10 of Bill Martin, *Politics in the Impasse: Explorations in Postsecular Social Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, 163; my italics.

Martin's reference to deconstruction and thus to Jacques Derrida is not a secondary matter in his work. In his project to construct a theory of "Ethical Marxism," he relies heavily on Derrida's philosophy. More specifically, Martin believes that orthodox Marxism has omitted ethics in its systematic and scientific efforts to capture social reality.³ He attempts to fill in this missing dimension by appealing to Kant's categorical imperative and ultimately to Derrida's "materialization" of the German thinker's idealist theory of ethics (22).⁴ He adds that each of these dimensions, the ethical and the historical, would be an "empty formalism" without the other (169, 173, 178, 179, 379, 391). Thus the ultimate goal of his Ethical Marxism is to save us from formalism by joining "vision" to "viability," transcendence to immanence (241–42).

Martin's academic background and political activism suit him well for constructing a theory of ethical Marxism and its dual allegiance to fact and value. However, I want to raise some questions about the relation of his Ethical Marxism to Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, particularly to Derrida's ethico-political ideas of "democracy to come" and "unconditional hospitality." There are many affinities between the ideas of the two philosophers. But some aspects of Martin's Ethical Marxism suggest that he may be further from Derrida than he thinks, at least in the letter if not the spirit of the French deconstructionist. I will explore this possibility and draw its implications for the viability of Martin's Ethical Marxism as well as for the efforts of the rest of us concerned to develop theory that supports social action.

The Call of the Future

Both Martin and Derrida abhor contemporary globalization. To express his condemnation of this economic and political order, Martin adopts a language

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3. Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 26–27. Martin attributes this need for an ethical dimension in Marxism to his belief that Marx took mechanistic dialectical materialism to have priority over the more humanistic historical materialism. Some would contend that this claim is debatable, that Marx's Marxism is an ethical as well as an economic theory, but that is not the focus of the present paper. Hereafter, all page numbers between parentheses in the main text will be from *Ethical Marxism* unless indicated otherwise.
 4. Martin points out that Derrida himself says "deconstruction is a radicalization of Marxism" (ibid., 105). Martin adds that "communists" should "take the time to study deconstruction" and ask "how they might learn from it" (ibid., 357). He also dedicates *Ethical Marxism* to Derrida as his "teacher and friend." Moreover, his first book, *Matrix and Line* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), carries the subtitle, "Derrida and the Possibilities of Postmodern Social Theory," and addresses Derrida's thought affirmatively and extensively.

reminiscent of the Old Testament. He declares that the global system and the class controlling it are “evil” and in some cases “radically” or “irredeemably evil” (43, 57, 63 and *passim*). Indeed, he feels that it is impossible to love the oppressed and “redeem” our “fallen world” without also “hating” the system and the ruling class responsible for this fall (157, 372, 472). Derrida’s language is less Biblical but equally strident. He proclaims that “discourse on human rights and on democracy remains little more than an obscene alibi so long as it tolerates the terrible plight of so many millions of human beings suffering from malnutrition, disease, and humiliation, grossly deprived not only of bread and water but of equality and freedom, disposed of the rights of all, of everyone, of anyone.”⁵

Besides disdaining the current form of globalization, the two thinkers feel that a “call of the future” enjoins them, and us, to resist this economic-political system in the name of a redemptive polity to come. Thus Martin declares that “[t]he ethical demand, ‘the call of the future’ . . . is the ground of the ‘science,’ of the systematic theory” provided by historical materialism and the social sciences (27), and of our “hermeneutical relation” to social reality (151). Moreover, he says that we should follow Derrida and understand this call “as a force that intervenes in history ‘from a certain outside,’” a “future that is at least as much a matter of ethical commitment . . . as it is a matter of systematic analysis of capitalism and its contradictions” (180).⁶ This intervening call also produces a diverse community. More specifically, Martin says that the call is similar to Derrida’s idea of “alterity” for two reasons: it “summons us to interpretive praxis” and, as “an effect of the undecidability of contexts,” constitutes the communal “we” as a “*plurality of movements*.”⁷

Derrida himself appeals frequently to the idea of a call. For example, he says that “a call” is “necessary for deconstruction to get off the ground,” though he does not know “where this call comes from, from whom,” and

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5. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 86. See also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 85.
 6. Earlier in *Ethical Marxism*, Martin says that his use of “intervention” is meant “to coincide with Derrida’s arguments in *Specters of Marx* about ‘the eschatological’ and a ‘weak messianic force’” (49). He does not cite a page number in *Specters of Marx* for this reference to “eschatological” and a “weak messianic force,” but he presumably means Derrida’s comment in that text about “an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming,” a “necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert like experience” (*Specters of Marx*, 90), which Derrida states in relation to what he calls “messianic eschatology” and distinguishes from the teleology often associated with at least Hegelian forms of Marxism.
 7. Martin, *Matrix and Line*, 29; my italics.