

Ghosts at Work: Notes on Workplace Hauntings

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1. Introduction

It's early October 2017 and Halloween is already creeping up on us. The shops are full of decorations and costumes and although I'm over fancy dress parties, I'm excited about the excuse to watch old horror movies and dig out Danzig-era Misfits records. Knowing how much I like white chocolate, my partner has already given me a chocolate ghost. In keeping with the unreliability of specters, this has disappeared into the ether long before 31st October.

I'm not sure how Marx felt about Halloween, but the specters he wrote about in the introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* weren't seasonal or made of candy or ectoplasm. Neither are the ghosts presented in Richard Gilman-Opalsky's *Specters of Revolt* (Repeater, 2017). With a title that echoes Derrida and published by Repeater Books, co-founded by the late Mark Fisher, *Specters* is a work of political philosophy that seeks to understand and learn from revolt in the age of 'capitalist realism'.

Disregarding Gilman-Opalsky's larger argument in honour of the season, this research note draws upon the first chapter of *Specters* to model a materialist vision of ghosts and the connected theoretical practice of *becoming-ghost* in a trade union context. Gilman-Opalsky asks:

What is the social and political history that leaves a place haunted, and what is it exactly that does the haunting? Can we speak of ghosts in materialist language? What do such ghosts tell us, what do they do? (2016, p.21)

The answers to these questions are arguably useful in a Labour Studies context for understanding and developing work place struggle. Focusing momentarily on supernatural ghosts, apparitions present a paradox. Often unable to directly intervene in worldly affairs, they are in this sense, impotent and powerless, unable to physically coerce those who they haunt. Despite this, ghosts frighten and unsettle – and ultimately, to be rid of them, the target of the haunting must typically carry out an act specified by the specter that (at best) they would not chose to do (*ibid*, p.64). Ghosts lurk as uncomfortable beings demanding restitution.

This seems a metaphor for one reading of trade unions in the UK. Numerically in decline (ONS, 2017) and lacking the power in many circumstances to engage in coercive action (e.g. Porter, Blakey et al, 2017 on the Trade Union Act), unions nonetheless remain a delightfully uneasy presence in many workplaces, challenging the purgative of management even if ultimately they cannot stop it. Where consigned to this role, an understanding of the materialist reading of

ghosts may potentially improve the understanding of a weak union position and hint at ways to be more effective.

In this context, part two of this note presents a reading of chapter one of *Specters*, outlining the theory of a materialist ghosts and *becoming-ghost*. This theory is applied to Charles Dickens' classic text *A Christmas Carol* in part three. Taking each ghost in turn, the supernatural is stripped away before the materialist ghost is transposed to the workplace and a praxis for engaging in haunting suggested.

Language

“Manager” indicates an authority figure in the work place hierarchy: a supervisor, manager, CEO etc. “Employer” indicates the body employing the worker, be it public or private sector. “Ghost,” “specter” and “apparition” are used interchangeably. Gilman-Opalsky contests the term “paranormal” so this paper refers to the paranormal as “supernatural.” This is contrasted with the materialist ghost, where materialist is used in a very loose way as “...a set of related theories which hold that all entities and processes are composed of – or are reducible to – matter, material forces or physical processes” (Stack, 2000, p.535). This means of course that the materialist specter cannot be the spirit of the dead.

Finally, the language of ghosts is academic; it is not a call to start producing newsletters calling on union members to haunt their managers. Instead, viewing disputes through this prism of theory may offer insight and understanding that is currently obscured. This insight should be expressed on the shop floor in more prosaic terms.

2. Materialist Ghosts

This section outlines two key concepts from the first chapter of *Specters*: the materialist ghost and *becoming-ghost*. Inspired by Derrida (Gilman-Opalsky, 2016, p.9), Marx (ibid, p.53), Kristeva (ibid, p.48), and Guattari (ibid, p.58) - Gilman-Opalsky outlines philosophical arguments to support his model (e.g. the meaning of *Geist* (ibid, pp.30-32)), but this reading accepts these arguments without contention. The focus is on presenting and expanding these concepts in a manner relevant for developing labour movement praxis.

Haunting

Gilman-Opalsy strips away the supernatural aspects of ghosts to leave a materialist definition. Asserting that “what is truly ‘paranormal’ is their absence (ibid, p.29)”, the materialist ghost is defined by its principle act, haunting, where “to be haunted is to be troubled by the presence of some invisible thing, some unseen entity that one nonetheless feels or knows to be present.” And who is not haunted by something, in the sense of “...being haunted by personal or

political history, being haunted by the bad things we have done, or have been done to us? (ibid, p.30)”

Although these sensations can be expressed in many ways, the language used to describe the supernatural can be identical to the psychological. This language renders ghosts as a very normal phenomenon, opposing a “paranormal... [that] designates experiences outside of the range of normal human experience (ibid, p.32)”;

therefore, “...every human person with a history of experiences in the world is haunted by some ghost(s) (ibid, p.33).” A subject can be said to be haunted by memories of heartbreak, just as they can be haunted by a specter.

This reading enables the suggestion that some things *should* be haunted - an exploitative institution should be haunted by memories of its victims and a specter here is “...an active moral conscience.” Here “...the haunting is reassuring thing, a thing that afflicts and worries the existing state of affairs (ibid, p.33).” These apparitions can also manifest as a fear of a future event that has yet to occur, such as a manager haunted by a fear of future insubordination inspired by collective memories of past revolt.

This note asserts that many employers *should* be haunted, by memories of discarded employees and decisions that put profit before social justice. Fox Piven and Cloward assert that workers do not experience capitalism but factory foreman, guards etc (1979, p.20-21). Similarly, whilst an employer is more directly experienced than an economic system, arguably for employees this is embodied through regular contact with its representatives. Whilst these managers may ‘simply be doing their job’, it remains individuals not abstractions that implement and live with fateful decisions. Adopting the perspective of organised labour, in this note it is the employer or managers who are haunted. The haunting of individuals echoes Alinsky’s tactic of personalising targets (1971, p.131) and presents a similar ethical dilemma: at what stage in the hierarchy does targeting individuals become morally acceptable? Either way, assuming an adversarial relationship, these apparitions are ‘good ghosts’ (Gilman-Opalsky, 2016, p.36), antagonistic to employers and managers and reminders of what will not quietly go away.

Becoming-ghost

Gilman-Opalsky notes the supernatural ghosts of workers, highlighting “...workers [who] have been fatally exploited, expropriated, or abused... ghosts [that] come from abuses of the unexceptional or banal lives of “regular” unnamed people (ibid, p.43).” But his focus on the construction is misguided, as though injustice only occurs from before or during the erection of “...some grand fortress or bourgeois moment,” and there are no memorable acts of exploitation within these occupied buildings. The indignities inflicted through employment provide ample opportunities for haunting without any need for fatalities, where exploited and restructured, overworked and bullied workers linger on to remind employers of poor choices and past work cultures. Whilst it would be better for these ghosts never to exist, it should be clear that organised

labour shouldn't work to exorcise these ghosts but "...find some small consolation in the haunting of the perpetrators (ibid, p.48)".

It is through the concept of *becoming-ghost* that "...more of what should be haunted will be haunted (ibid, p.62)." *Becoming-ghost* echoes Guattari's concept of *becoming-woman*, a subversive collapsing of a dichotomy (ibid, p.58). Just as *becoming-woman* means becoming more or less feminine as feelings dictate (ibid, p.59), *becoming-ghost* means becoming more or less ghost-like as the situation demands. In clearer terms, it means becoming more or less engaged in what ghosts do:

Haunting is an upheaval in an immediately understandable way: to haunt is to unsettle what was settled, to disrupt the semblance that there is nothing here to see. An active haunting shakes us and wakes us, making us see something that we didn't (or couldn't) see before... Too much is settled too often. *Becoming-ghost* is a way to unsettle things (ibid, p63).

Becoming-ghost is to become an active reminder of what would be preferred forgotten.

Taken to one conclusion, in *becoming-ghost*, a worker may haunt for another. The supernatural ghost is the spirit of someone who has died; by definition however, a materialist ghost cannot engage in *becoming-ghost* if the worker is dead or absent. It is for other workers to remind employers and managers of the colleague who has passed or moved on to other employment. In *becoming-ghost* the workers who remain are not *becoming-ghosts* of themselves but *becoming-ghosts* of their co-worker. Doing so is a form of solidarity.

Regardless, both supernatural and materialist ghosts typically require a resolution of their grievances in order to put an end to their haunting (ibid, p.64); thus *becoming-ghost* can be seen as the act of unsettling of an employer or manager that persists until some form of restitution is made.

3. A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol* (1915)¹ provides a fictional account of a haunting of a manager, Ebenezer Scrooge. Infamous as a miser – the noun "scrooge" is a well understood label for "...a person who is mean with money (OED, 2009, p.1294)" – the protagonist is also the exploitative master of Bob Cratchit (Dickens, p.7).

In understanding materialist ghosts, the attraction of the text is three-fold:

¹ The text quoted is the 1915 edition, available as a PDF: www.archive.org/details/christmascaroodick

- It provides examples of specters that, once stripped of their supernatural elements, can be drawn upon to discuss possible praxis of *becoming-ghosts* in the hypothetical.
- These ghosts not only haunt from the past but also the present and the future meaning that Scrooge is haunted by possibilities as well as what has already occurred.
- Of Dickens' four specters, only Jacob Marley fits the model of someone who has passed. Problematic given the other specters function like angels offering prophetic visions, this nonetheless is useful in breaking the link between ghosts and death outlined above.

To conclude the research note, this section sketches the supernatural meaning of each ghost in turn, before suggesting a materialist comparison, noting on the implications for workers *becoming-ghost* and haunting their managers through official or infra-political acts. This can be understood as a methodology – identifying the meaning of the haunting, theorising how this message could be conveyed without the supernatural and then transposing the result to the modern workplace.

It is worth noting that Dickens does not advocate systemic structural change but rather charity (e.g. *ibid*, p.11-14). When Scrooge gives Cratchit a pay increase, there is no structural adjustment implemented that will protect Cratchit should Scrooge later rescind his kindness (*ibid*, p.146). The Conservative MP Jacob Reece-Mogg's views on food banks serve as a reminder that charity can uphold the worst of the status-quo:

[The state] provides a basic level of welfare ... but on some occasions that will not work and to have charitable support given by people voluntarily to support their fellow citizens I think is rather uplifting and shows what a good compassionate country we are. (Peck, 2017)

Whilst it may be that ghosts haunting on the managerial scale are drawn towards solutions that mirror the logic of charity, the likelihood is that this issue is grounded in the types of demands made by ghosts as the conditions of their exorcism just as demands made of employers in other ways do not always consider necessary structural changes to build meaningful power in the workplace.

Jacob Marley

Marley is Scrooge's first visitor, a former business partner, 7 years dead (Dickens, 1915, p.11) with a chain "... of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel (*ibid*, p.23)". This chain was self-forged

through the acts he prioritised in life. Marley's message is that man's nature is to travel and keep company with others in life - because his "...spirit never walked beyond our counting house (ibid, p.27)", he is doomed to wonder the earth as a witness who cannot intervene to alter the course of events (ibid, p.26).

Conceivably Marley does not have to be dead in order to impart his messages of regret at mis-prioritising his life (ibid, p.30) and call upon Scrooge to change the course of his (ibid, p.31); a materialist reading might find a long forgotten friend visiting who having come to the conclusion too late to alter his own life, begs Scrooge to do what he cannot. For the workplace, Marley's assertion that "the common welfare was my business (ibid, p.30)" implies a call to improve the conditions of employees that might manifest as a respected mentor appearing to point out the folly of his former apprentice's neglect of the workforce - *becoming-ghost* might mean facilitating and amplifying this psychologically haunting intervention or ensuring its memory is sustained.

Ghost of Christmas past

This specter, "...like a child... [but also] like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium... from the crown of its head there sprang a bright clear jet of light..." (ibid, p.40)," reminds Scrooge of the ramifications of the past, both his own acts and those of others, such as the joy brought by his former master Fezziwig's (ibid, p.52) Christmas eve celebrations.

The ghost reminds Scrooge of a lost love - a "...fair girl in a mourning dress: in whose eyes there were tears.... (ibid, p.57)." His betrothed reproaches the younger-Scrooge for being taken over by "...the master passion, Gain..." that has "displaced" her in his affection (ibid, p.58). Here Scrooge turns to the ghost, distraught, asking: "Why do you delight to torture me? (ibid, p.61)" - the specter then of course shows him the painful vision of the girl older, with family (ibid, pp.61-64).

Stripped of the supernatural, other stimuli could prompt the recollection of the relationships dissolution - stumbling across old paperwork/photos for example. Transposed to the workplace, the soured romantic relationship is analogous with a soured professional relationship, such as a valued and respected member of staff broken by the manager's pursuit of profit. Here, *becoming-ghost* would mean engineering the stimuli that keep this mistake visible as a haunting reminder of past malpractice.

Ghost of Christmas present

The ghost of Christmas present is a "...jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in a shape not unlike plenty's horn...". This ghost illuminates Christmas Eve in the present, shining a light upon what Scrooge cannot see because of the perspective offered by his own structural position.

Dickens describes at length the Christmas 'feast' Bob Cratchit:

[They]...were not a handsome family... but they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another and contented with the time... (ibid, p.92).

It is when Cratchit toasts his manager that the scene briefly turns bitter, with Mrs Cratchit articulating the family's feelings for Scrooge:

"It should be Christmas Day, I am sure... on which one drinks the health of such an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man... I'll drink his health for your sake and Day's... not for his. Long life to him!" (ibid, p.91).

Into this heady mix can also be factored the impending death of the youngest child, Tiny Tim (ibid, p.89).

A materialist version would involve uncovering true feelings via non-supernatural means, with Scrooge stumbling across these scenes through error. Transposed to the workplace, there are two elements to the vision presented to Scrooge - his employee's true feelings for him and the implications of his greed upon their family. This could be revealed via a conversation 'accidentally' engineered within ear shot or a 'miss-sent' email, where a manager's confidant is 'accidentally' CC'd. Minor acts of infra-political dissent also reveal true feelings behind a professional veneer – such as continually missing managers out of tea rounds. Engineering these haunting exchanges might also be understood as *becoming-ghost*.

Ghost of Christmas yet to come

This ghost "...was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. (ibid, p.111)." Showing Scrooge a vision of the future, this specter demonstrates the notion of being haunted by a potential future.

This section focuses on the vision of the death of Scrooge - the paupers with such little regard for him that they stole his bed curtains and blankets from around his corpse (ibid, pp.121-122) and the lack of emotion from his contemporaries regarding his death and the corresponding lack of enthusiasm for attending his funeral (ibid, p.113-115). Removing the supernatural, a materialist version could hear Scrooge discover correspondence that reveals the lack of respect for him - or in perhaps a heated exchange, a confidant might exclaim prophetically that "if you continue to behave like this, no one will mourn your passing!"

Transposed to the workplace, retirement is a symbolic death from the position of the employer: the employee ceases to exist in terms of the labour that can be

extracted from them. Thus, forewarning an unmourned passing is mirrored in a warning that a career will not be celebrated. *Becoming-ghost* might mean curating haunting evidence of this - at the more creative (albeit largely impractical) end, a 'rehearsal for retirement party' that no one turns up to except a photographer in order to show exactly how well regarded the manager is.

Conclusion

Like so many papers, this research note poses many new questions. Can a certain type of workplace struggle, pursued doggedly with little hope of real success, be understood as haunting? What does this reveal? What does it mean to haunt with without knowing that you are haunting, to engage in *becoming-ghost* without consciously doing so? What relationship do trade union ghosts have with the unofficial acts of specters engaged in infra-politics?

Shifting focus, the example of provided by Dickens shows how ghost stories could inspire acts of protest and resistance in the workplace. What would it mean though to consciously approach real-existing workplace issue in this way? What could a campaign run with a view to haunting an employer look like? What tactics to *becoming-ghost* would develop through struggle?

Answering these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but since we are up at night anyhow trying to work out how to make rent, it doesn't hurt to think about why our employers might have sleepless nights too... happy haunting.

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About the author

Bert Lewis is a pseudonym of the colleague who smiles insincerely and you suspect has hidden your favourite work mug. You can contact them via *Interface*.