A number of intellectuals on the political left treat poststructuralist or postmodern thinkers as neoconservatives. But their conclusion is too hasty. Whether we speak of postmodernism and political progressive forms of modernism or of their forebears, Nietzsche and Marx respectively, the two movements have a symbiotic relationship: Marxism and kindred philosophies need Nietzsche and an emphasis on “difference” in order to avoid constrictive or “Stalinist” totalizations, and postmodernism requires Marx and an appreciation of political direction in order to remember that challenges to logocentrism or phallocentrism involve unified social movements as well as the irony or deconstruction. Rather than choosing one of these currents of radical thought at the exclusion of the other, political philosophy must operate in the intellectual space set up by the creative tension between them.

In *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), Martin J. Beck Matuštík occupies the space produced by this tension. More specifically, he attempts to show how “existential critical theory” can constitute a position that is both informed by and mediates between modern and postmodern thought. His presentation of this theory involves intervening in a number of issues that are characteristic of both modern and contemporary philosophy, for example, communitarian versus procedural ethics. It also involves placing his intellectual labor within a setting of real-world “great refusals” – Václav Havel and the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia, Marcos and the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Greenpeace and the trespassing of the French nuclear test site at Atol Mururoa in the Pacific, African-Americans and the Los Angeles uprising of April 1992, and a number of other “specters of liberation.” Matuštík’s descriptions of these refusals or specters serve both to illustrate his theoretical claims and to remind us that philosophy takes place in and is relevant to “existentially concrete situations.” Matuštík’s own life reflects his involvement in such situations: Before coming to the U.S. as a political refugee, he was a student signatory of Charta 77, the 1977 Czechoslovak manifesto for
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human rights, and spent eight months in an Austrian refugee camp. His political commitment is also reflected in the number and importance of the dialogue partners he addresses in order to ensure that his own conclusions will be the result of dialectic exchange rather than dogma. Besides the leading thinkers of modern philosophy, for example, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, Derrida, and Kristeva, these thinkers include a plethora of philosophers recently come into prominence: West, Young, Cornell, Butler, Outlaw, Lugones, Gordon, and Willett among others.

Matuštík’s achievement is laudatory. He converts the opposition between modernist and postmodernist into an alliance for a progressive form of existential political philosophy. By employing concrete political events to illustrate the character of the refusals at the heart of his social philosophy, he prevents us from forgetting that what we do in our academic tower is influenced by and can be effective within the world that we share with other citizens – that our own writings can and should be “specters of liberation.” But this comprehensiveness also introduces what some may find a difficulty in Specters of Liberation. His arguments for his theoretical claims are sometimes obscured by the sheer number of partners and issues he addresses. Furthermore, a clear understanding of his central ideas about existentialism – particularly about Kierkegaard and “existential self-choice” – may force the reader back to Matuštík’s earlier, highly praised book, Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993). Indeed, Specters of Liberation may be viewed as an extension or sequel to this earlier book.

Because of the wealth of material introduced in and perhaps presupposed by Specters, I will limit my review to an outline of what I feel are its most interesting themes and introduce some concerns of my own. The argument that runs the course of Matuštík’s book is straightforward: Refusals in relation to the “New World Order” — to either globalized neo-liberalism or to exclusionary forms of nationalism — must be based on a commitment to “radical multicultural and existential democracy.” Otherwise, these refusals will be ineffective or even reactionary gestures rather than “specters of liberation” (p. 192, passim). In order to arrive at – and clarify – this conclusion dialogically, Matuštík begins with a discussion of Taylor’s communitarian and Habermas’s procedural views of justice. Matuštík agrees with a thesis that these two positions share: one’s relation to oneself, one’s self-recognition, is inseparable from one’s communicative competence or dialogic relations with others (pp. 2–3). But he also claims that neither of these other positions provides sufficient safeguards against “racist, patriarchal, and homophobic attitudes” that affect “existing lifeworlds and liberal procedures (e.g.,