
One Time, One History?

Time is a mystery precisely in that the observations that are to be made regarding it cannot be unified.

Paul Ricoeur

In the face of the question 'why totalize history?', three kinds of response stand out as distinctively 'modern', post-theological philosophical forms. One might respond *transcendentally*, one might respond *immanently*, or one might respond in what some would consider a more philosophically fundamental manner, within the terms of some kind of *phenomenological ontology* of temporal experience. Thus, the notion of a collective singular 'history' might be defended as a limit or regulative idea implicit within the claim to objectivity of the historian's craft, as the unstated object unifying historians' activities and providing them with the horizon of their intelligibility. It might be justified as the historically emergent product of deep-seated social processes on a global scale. Or it might be expounded as a part of the existential structure of human being, as revealed by a phenomenological analysis of the constitution of experience in, through, and as time.¹

Each approach has its adherents and its advantages and disadvantages for specific purposes. From the standpoint of a defence of historical totalization *per se*, however, it is the third one, viewed in the perspective of the second, which holds the most promise. For ultimately, if we are to justify the totalization of the historical multiplicity of differential social times into something called 'history', we will need to appeal to an idea of history situated within the terms of a totalization of time itself. After a brief discussion of the limitations of the first two approaches with respect to this task, and an extended excursus on the recently revived theme of the 'end of history', we shall thus concentrate upon the third. Each of the first two approaches places the burden of justification for totalization onto history itself,

either as a form of knowledge or a real process. The third confronts it more directly as a problem in the hermeneutics of historical existence.

Conditions of possibility: the transcendental path

The first alternative – a transcendental deduction of the unity of history as the condition of possibility of historical knowledge – follows the path laid by the tradition which runs from Dilthey's prospective critique of historical reason, via Heidelberg Neo-Kantianism, to Heidegger's early essay 'The Concept of Time in the Science of History'.² This is the tradition through which the problem of historical time was reintroduced into German philosophy in the wake of the reaction against Hegelianism in the second half of the nineteenth century; not, as might be thought, in order to offer theoretical opposition to the positivism of contemporary historicism (Ranke), but rather as its philosophical complement.³ What its adherents had in common, whether their enterprise took the form of a philosophy of life (Dilthey), a philosophy of values (Rickert), or an incipient philosophy of time (the early Heidegger), is a simultaneous recognition of the primacy of positive science in the production of historical knowledge and of the inadequacy of its methods to the task of the systematization of its results – the very problem, in fact, that is raised but never pursued by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* under the heading of the replacement of 'self-sufficient philosophy' by 'a summing-up of the most general results' of historical inquiry.⁴

It was Marx's failure to address the theoretical form and epistemological status of this 'replacement' in any detail that opened the way for Engels's late works, and the subsequent bifurcation of Marxism, philosophically, into competing traditions.⁵ As Jacoby has shown,⁶ this split was at first internal to the Hegelian heritage, rather than, as it would later become, a fissure between Hegelian and anti-Hegelian Marxisms. However, whilst the Hegelian tradition, in both its phenomenological and panlogicist forms, pointed in the direction of a totalizing solution to the problem, it impeded the production of one in anything other than a clearly idealist form. In response to such perceived idealism a number of Western European Marxists turned, in the post-war period, to the anti-Hegelianism of the neo-Kantian tradition, in the then burgeoning form of post-positivist philosophy of science: in Althusser's case, to the conventionalist rationalism of Canguilhem and Bachelard, in that of Della Volpe and Colletti to the hypothetico-deductivism of a quasi-Popperian falsificationism.

Habermas's trajectory is more complicated, combining a greater diversity of critically appropriated sources with considerable theoretical originality on specific issues, only to end up with something that is methodologically a fairly orthodox Kantianism.⁷

Such Marxists thereby attached themselves to a tradition the beginnings of which were contemporary with, but antagonistic to the spirit of, Marx's later work. Whether this saved them from 'idealism' is doubtful, although the tradition had by then changed considerably since its inception in the 1860s. What it retained was a sense of the primacy of 'scientific' over 'philosophical' activity, and hence of philosophy as a second-order discipline, albeit one that is no less indispensable for that. What it had lost was any particular concern for history, the discipline of the nineteenth century *par excellence*. This was replaced by an interest in anthropological and sociological theories which tend to abstract from the problem of historical time altogether.⁸ Thus was the ground laid for the various syncretic combinations of Marxism and sociology that have since become the mainstream of a philosophically ambiguous 'social theory'. In the meantime, the pursuit of a better understanding of the idea of history was continued in non-Marxist debates about the methodology of historiography, the essentially transcendental form of which registers their continuity with the project of Dilthey's critique of historical reason.⁹

However, while such discussions can help expose the presuppositions built into various pre-constituted conceptions of historical knowledge to the scrutiny of conceptual analysis, they cannot in themselves provide a standpoint from which to defend the idea of history as a meaningful whole from its philosophical critics, for two main reasons. In the first place, they beg the question of the relationship of time to history. Is history a temporally distinct domain, qualitatively different from the temporality of nature, such that it might be totalized independently? Or is its temporality inextricably bound up with that of nature? If so, how? Are nature and history all there is to time? What, for example, of eternity? Is eternity to be understood as atemporal, or as a temporal infinite? Is there a place in our understanding of history for a post-theological concept of eternity? All these questions affect our understanding of the substance of historical inquiry, and our stance towards them determines what kind of history we believe in. Yet they remain outside the scope of transcendental arguments which set out from descriptions of the state of historical knowledge, since these merely serve, like transcendental arguments everywhere, to expound the presuppositions built into the inevitably contested descriptions in their premises.¹⁰

Different disciplinary practices produce and reflect different ideas about the legitimacy of historical totalization, and vice versa. Those opposed, in principle, to the totalization 'history' will simply deny the requisite practical unity of the field of historical knowledge, supporting their argument with voluminous evidence of its heterogeneity.¹¹ The burden of proof thus regresses from the expository form of transcendental argumentation back onto historical inquiry itself, producing the demand for an immanent demonstration of the unity in question: 'instead of the Kantian formula: "Under what conditions is historical knowledge possible?" we . . . [must] ask: "Is a universally valid science of history possible? To what extent?"'.¹² For if 'the full historical fact, the "integral past", is properly an Idea in the Kantian sense, that is to say, the *never attained limit* of an ever more extensive and complex effort to integrate',¹³ then it is this 'effort to integrate' and its results which must be interrogated.

More fundamental still as an objection to this kind of argument is the lack, within the time-consciousness of historical studies, of an adequate sense of the future. In the constitution of historiography as a discipline, the future appears only negatively, as no more than an empty reservoir of future presents and prospective pasts for still more distant presents, waiting upon history, as the past expands into the future, to fill it with events, and hence with time. The discipline of history may be about more than just the past, insofar as it is the *relations* between past and present with which it is primarily concerned.¹⁴ But it embraces the future only tangentially in past and present forms: *past futures* as part of its object of inquiry, *present futures* as constituents of its horizon of expectation and hence its cognitive interest in the past. It does not confront it as an independent temporal dimension which might block the very possibility of historical totalization. This is the domain of the philosophy of history. The *process* of history, on the other hand, the history that judges,¹⁵ lies as much in the future as it does in the past, and it does so constitutively, not contingently. It is as futural as it is retrospective, and not merely in the phenomenological form of present futures, but 'objectively', in the necessary opacity of future presents. Such presents are in principle outside the scope of historical inquiry, yet they are centrally involved, if only negatively, in debates about historical totalization.

Let history judge: the immanent road

It is partly in response to this problem, this historiographic lack of futurity, that one might be tempted, following Marx (after Hegel), to

try an immanent demonstration of the emergence of history in the collective singular, as world history, as itself an historical event – in the hope of breaking out of the closed circle of transcendental analysis and projecting a unity forward as part of the dynamic form of an ongoing process of self-totalization. Indeed, this is exactly the kind of argument to which an appeal has already implicitly been made in chapter 1, in our account of the spatial unification of the globe through European colonialism as the geopolitical condition for the development of the concept of modernity: the marker not just of a new historical present, but of a new temporalization of history itself. History is already totalizing itself. ‘World history,’ in Marx’s words, ‘has not always existed; history as world history [is] a result’;¹⁶ and it is a result, primarily, of capitalism. The world market established during the late feudal period in Europe became the medium for the development of capitalism as a global system, once the resolution of the social struggles internal to European feudalism had laid the ground for the development of capitalism in Europe.¹⁷

With capitalism came the homogenization of labour-time: the time of abstract labour (money, the universal equivalent), the time of the clock.¹⁸ And with the rapid development of transport and communications in the course of capitalist development in the nineteenth century (the railways and the telegraph) came the beginnings of a generalized social imposition of a single standard of time.¹⁹ Once world standard-time became established as a medium for the possible synchronization of actions on a planetary scale (and subsequent communications technology made such synchronization a reality), the idea of ‘history as world history’ acquired in actuality what it had previously possessed only in speculative thought: a basis for the totalization of what might otherwise be considered a series of essentially independent, if overlapping, histories.²⁰ Capitalism has ‘universalized’ history, in the sense that it has established systematic relations of social interdependence on a planetary scale (encompassing non-capitalist societies), thereby producing a single global space of temporal co-existence or coevalness, within which actions are quantifiable chronologically in terms of single standard of measurement: world standard-time. However, insofar as this measure remains a mere measure – that is to say, an abstract form of quantification, external and indifferent to the concrete multiplicity of the rhythms of different social practices – capitalism has by no means, in Vilar’s phrase, ‘unified’ history. This, Vilar insists, will be the task of ‘another mode of production’.²¹

Socialism as the unification of history – the idea has frightened a lot of people, for whom totalization and totalitarianism are but different

words for the same thing (although they have worried rather less about the totalizing force holding together the de-totalized forms of capital accumulation). As Spivak has remarked of post-Marxist thought, 'if we dismiss general systemic critical perception as necessarily totalising or centralising, we merely prove once again that the subject of Capital can inhabit its ostensible critique as well.'²² Whether one is persuaded by Vilar's scenario or not, it is clear that the speculative projection of *some* kind of 'end' or goal is going to be required as the horizon of intelligibility for the comprehension of the past as a whole, if the constitutive incompleteness of the present is to be acknowledged, and read as a stage in the development of a broader process. 'All "new" history without totalising ambition will be a history old before its time',²³ and all immanent philosophies of history are of necessity written in the future anterior: from the standpoint of what 'will have been'. As Jameson put it, prior to his turn to postmodernism:

Above and beyond the problem of periodisation and its categories, which are certainly in crisis today, but which would seem to be as indispensable as they are unsatisfactory for any kind of work in cultural study, the larger issue is that of *the representation of History itself*. . . . [since] individual period formulations always secretly imply or project narratives or 'stories' – narrative representations – of the historical sequence in which such periods take their place and from which they derive their significance.²⁴

All such representations ultimately depend for their cognitive redemption upon the future realization of the end in question, although this is rarely understood to be a merely passive process of waiting on history. Rather, ever since the secularization of eschatology in the eighteenth century, such futures have been taken to be served by historical action based upon the very 'knowledge' that this action would, if successful, confirm.²⁵ Such, for example, is the experimental practical ground and fallibilistic philosophical logic of the dialectic of theory and practice in classical Marxism:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his [*sic*] thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.²⁶

Everything depends, firstly, upon the concrete historical content of the specific historiographic claims (imperialism as the 'highest' stage of capitalism, for example); and secondly, upon the prospects for those actions of a world-historical significance with which such claims are

associated. In general, though, from this viewpoint, '[w]hether history has meaning, depends on whether humanity is able to constitute itself as humanity.'²⁷ And this is, as yet, obviously still very much an open question.

Methodologically, this approach has all the virtues and vices of Hegel's dialectical resolution of the antinomy of the empirical and the transcendental, in the phenomenological ascent of consciousness to the standpoint of reason, from which it derives. Unlike transcendental arguments, the ultimate fallibilism of such constructions would appear to preserve their circularity from critique, but it throws them back upon contingency with a jolt – albeit with nothing like the sharpness involved in Popper's subjection of historical interpretation to the criteria of a falsificationist philosophy of science.²⁸ The methodologist's fear of error may be, as Hegel wrote, 'the error itself', but the alternative, immanent road is nonetheless a 'pathway of doubt, or more precisely . . . of *despair*' on which nothing can be secured in advance.²⁹ Hegel's *Phenomenology* is in this sense a gamble, albeit, as Derrida points out, one taking the paradoxical form of a 'bet against chance'.³⁰ There is an element of Pascal in Hegel's method which all too often goes unrecognized.³¹ What appears at one historical moment to be a great philosophical strength may in another quickly be transformed into a debilitating empirical burden, threatening to undermine the project of totalization *per se*.

For most, that day has long since arrived for all of the prospective ends of history on offer – except, oddly enough, one that claims to have already arrived. If, as Niethammer puts it, the philosophy of history has 'worn itself out in the real world', it is nonetheless preserved in negation in that 'elitist, culturally pessimistic inversion of the optimism of progress', that 'disenchanted postscript to the nineteenth century', which goes by the name of *posthistoire*.³² Indeed, today, when the speculative predetermination of the future as both ground and result of a totalizing hermeneutic of the past is so widely discredited, both politically and methodologically, historical 'endism' as it has come to be known is, paradoxically, on the rise.³³ Consideration of the status of ends within the Hegelian tradition of immanent totalizations of history will serve to highlight the limitations of this approach.

Difference against development

Three main variants of the 'end of history' position can be discerned within the recent literature. Each is associated with a particular

political orientation towards the historical present. Yet all three tend towards a similar *ironization* of the premises from which they set out. There is the orthodox Hegelian conception of the realization of reason within the historical present represented by Fukuyama, especially in his original article.³⁴ There is the pessimistic inversion of this position in the *posthistoire* literature examined by Niethammer, towards which Fukuyama's analysis is seen by some increasingly to be driven (Fukuyama the ironist), where the end of history appears as the annihilation rather than the realization of reason on a world-historical scale.³⁵ And there is the Marxist-Hegelian position, an extension of Left Hegelianism, for which the rationality immanent within the historical present requires the institution of a new form of society in order to be realized, but which nonetheless understands the present as itself furnishing the conditions for the transition to such a society, and hence, like Hegel himself in 1807, as 'a birth-time and a period of transition to a new order'.³⁶ The end of history is thus here still an unachieved goal (*telos*) or future end-state, rather than an achieved historical condition (*finis*), albeit one that is, allegedly, demonstrably immanent to the present. In the fully phenomenological version, it is an immanently produced recognition of the irrationality of the present by an agency of world-historical significance that is to lead *directly* to the transformation of that present and the realization of its rational potential. The central problem for all Marxist Hegelianisms thus becomes that of locating the appropriate agency for a philosophically predetermined historical task.³⁷ Marxist Hegelianism thereby distinguishes itself in principle from all kinds of Hegelian Marxism, which would subject the appropriation of Hegelian forms to the ontological discipline of a historical materialism of social being.

For Hegel, in his important early work from 1801–07, the agency was to be philosophy itself. Later, in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), it was associated with a certain structure and ideology of the modern state. Later still, in a move which returns us in a disabused manner to the strategy of his very earliest writings, it was religion that was to undertake the mass educational task of demonstrating the rationality of the actual; although ultimately, of course, for Hegel religion was always 'the very substance' of the state. More generally, however, the question of agency is finessed by the very structure of Hegelian thought, which unites theoretical and practical reason in speculation in such a way as to restrict the relation of theory to practice to the confines of the problematic of recognition.³⁸

For the early Marx, it was the German proletariat which, for conjunctural historical reasons, represented the hopes for a realization of

philosophy. Later, it was the collective worker, although the Left Hegelian problematic of actualizing an immanent reason had by then, to some extent, been displaced. Furthermore, the realization of the end in question (reason as freedom, or, more strictly speaking, the free appropriation of the historically developed potentialities of the species) was always conceived by Marx as the conclusion of what will at that point become *pre-history*, rather than as the end of history *tout court*. Truly human history, the true realm of freedom ('that development of human energy that is an end in itself'), the realization of new powers and capacities, beyond – but on the basis of – the realm of necessity, the inauguration of a truly 'historical' time, *begins* there.³⁹

In the first of our three cases of historical endism, the onus is on its proponents to fill out the idea of an achieved historical rationality. This requires three things: (1) evidence of a structural logic of simple reproduction, with no immanent tendencies towards new historical forms; (2) exposition and defence of the requisite criterion of rationality; (3) demonstration of the achievement of this criterion in the simple, self-reproducing present. It is the fulfilment of the first two requirements without the third that leads to the second of our three variants: *posthistoire*. Thus, it is the combination of the apparent strength of Fukuyama's arguments regarding the absence of systemic alternatives to the current status quo, with the acknowledged weakness of his claim for the achievement of the required rationality (the satisfaction of the desire for recognition), which has led some on the Left to read his work as ultimately more conducive to a left-wing pessimism about the present than a right-wing triumphalism.⁴⁰ This is perhaps to pay too little attention to his affinities with what must be considered the dominant variant of the *posthistoire* thesis: the deep-rooted cultural pessimism of a naturalistic conservatism. Nevertheless, either way – and Niethammer is surely right to warn against attaching political labels to theoretical positions independently of the national contexts in which they are propounded⁴¹ – there can be no doubt about the tendency of Fukuyama's Hegelianism to turn into its opposite.

Something similar can be detected in the evolution of the last of our three versions of this structure of argument: the Marxist-Hegelian conception of the 'end' which projects it forward beyond historical actuality, into a politically contingent but socially immanent future. For once the credibility of the attribution of world-historical agency to a particular social subject begins to be undermined empirically (the revolutionary character of the European working classes in advanced

capitalism, for example), adherents of the position are soon faced with a *de facto* historical impasse which, while it may not be strictly incompatible with the theoretical terms of their conception of history (since they could presumably claim a temporary blindness of the historical process to itself), does unquestionably erode its plausibility. In fact, the perception of historical impasse tends to translate itself into theoretical terms quite quickly, problematizing the conception of history from which it derives. Such, for example, is a common if superficial (because too narrowly Hegelian) reading of Adorno's work. Recent events have generalized this problem to even Adorno's most orthodox critics. For while the perspective of a Marxist Hegelianism might retain its retrospective explanatory power in relation to events in Eastern Europe (we are all Mensheviks now), even its most forthright apologists acknowledge the impasse of agency. To redeem such failure methodologically, by designating the question as previously 'in principle unanswerable' (because of the state of development of the object – capitalism as a global system), while merely *assuming* it to be answerable today (contingent upon an as-yet-unwritten political economy of the world system),⁴² is to make a wager on communism way beyond anything that could reasonably be thought of as demonstrably immanent to the historical process.

If the Right Hegelian position represented by Fukuyama is sustained only by the thin soup of an absence of systemic alternatives, the Left Hegelian or Marxist-Hegelian position thus currently looks similarly undernourished, since it is reduced to projecting a specific future (communism) solely on the basis of the crisis tendencies of the present system, without a demonstrably immanent principle for the construction of a new order.⁴³ Neither remotely fulfils the strenuous requirements of the fully-blown Hegelianism to which they aspire – hence the ironically Nietzschean conclusion to Fukuyama's attempt at a Hegelian interpretation of the present state of the world: his depiction of the 'last man'.⁴⁴ Historical experience does not just resist interpretation along the lines of any of the currently available Hegelian models; it positively mocks them, and not for the first time.

There is a range of versions of precisely which events in twentieth-century history have been the most destructive of the Hegelian perspective of an achieved, or immanently achievable, historical rationality: from the horrors of the First World War, through fascism, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the emergent prospect of a global nuclear annihilation, the continuing exploitation of the peoples of the 'Third World' after decolonization, and the ecological crisis of the planet, to the end of historical Communism. Most decisive, perhaps, has been the

cumulative impact of these events on a form of historical consciousness (historical totalization) which has been progressively eroded by the power of temporal abstraction at work in the social processes of 'modernity', to which reference was made in the last chapter. In 1946, Kojève could with some plausibility deny that 'history has refuted Hegelianism', arguing that the most one could say was that 'it has still not arbitrated between "left" and "right" interpretations of Hegel's philosophy'.⁴⁵ Today, few would disagree with Ricoeur that:

It now seems as though Hegel, seizing a favourable moment, a *kairos*, which has been revealed for what it was to our perspective and our experience, only totalised a few leading aspects of the spiritual history of Europe and of its geographical and historical environment, ones that, since that time, have come undone. . . . What has come undone is the very substance of what Hegel sought to make into a concept. Difference has turned against development, conceived as a *Stufengang* [succession of stages].⁴⁶

Difference has turned against development conceived at the level of world history as a succession of stages. The European spirit (*Geist*) can no longer find itself in the 'absolute dismemberment' of which Hegel writes in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, however hard it may continue to try. 'Contemplating the negative face to face', it can dwell there no longer.⁴⁷ But does this experience rule out the very possibility of historical totalization? Or does it rather, more taxingly, demand a change in our conception of its status and form? One might reverse the question: what would it mean to forego the perspective of historical totalization altogether? Is it even conceivable? To begin to get a grip on these issues, we need to look beyond the dispiriting experiences of twentieth-century history to what is implied by their reading as a 'refutation' of historical totalization and, in particular, to the structure of historical time that this involves.

Hegel's failure: end of history, end of time

One reason for the continuing importance of Hegelianism, for all its failures, is that our relation to it is considerably more than merely 'philosophical'. If Hegel failed, we may agree with Bataille that 'one cannot say that it was the result of an error.' Rather, 'it is as an authentic movement, weighty with sense, that one must speak of [such] "failure"'.⁴⁸ Ricoeur writes for a generation of European intellectuals when he explains that:

for us, the loss of credibility the Hegelian philosophy of history has undergone has the significance of an event in thinking, concerning which we may say neither that we brought it about nor that it simply happened, and concerning which we do not know if it is indicative of a catastrophe that still is crippling us or a deliverance whose glory we dare not celebrate.⁴⁹

Such a loss carries the weight of an historical experience in which, paradoxically, it is the very idea of such an experience (an experience of 'history') that is in question. There is something in 'the experience of the West' in the twentieth century – that grandiose intellectual project through which European culture traditionally constitutes itself as a reflection upon its own historical results and prospects – which generates 'incredulity' at the very thought that, as Hegel put it, 'reason governs the world' and 'history is therefore a rational process.'⁵⁰ Yet this very experience remains inseparable from such thoughts. As a result, despite 'more than a century of ruptures, and of "surpassings" with or without "overturnings"',⁵¹ our relation to Hegel remains as problematic as ever.

But if this relation is always more than merely philosophical, there is nonetheless a philosophical side to this 'more'. There is a methodological dimension to the persistence of Hegelianism, and it concerns the question of fallibilism, or, more precisely, that peculiar combination of fallibilism and absolutism that is the dialectic of spirit as 'absolute method'. The problem, as Foucault describes it, is that:

any real escape from Hegel presupposes that we have an accurate understanding of what it will cost us to detach ourselves from him; it presupposes that we know the extent to which Hegel, perhaps insidiously, has approached us; it presupposes that we know what is still Hegelian in that which allows us to think against Hegel; and that we can assess the extent to which our appeal against him is perhaps one more of the ruses he uses against us and at the end of which he is waiting for us, immobile and elsewhere.⁵²

If the fallibilism of Hegel's phenomenological method opens up all specific Hegelianisms – all specific totalizations of history – to the test of historical experience, it also *protects* Hegelianism itself, Hegelianism as 'method', from philosophical critique. Indeed, the interpretive critique of any particular Hegelianism, any particular totalization, can always be read as a demonstration rather than a refutation of the method. But how many such demonstrations do we need before the ironizing process of so paradoxical a confirmation of rectitude begins to erode our belief in the project? Or is there no difference here from