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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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Introduction

German philosophy of history has many threads (Zammito, 2012), and the Frankfurt School is certainly a descendant of earlier German philosophical trends. Given the School’s diverse membership, it’s difficult to present an overview of ‘the’ Frankfurt School’s philosophy of history without either exceeding the space limitations of this chapter or succumbing to triviality. For this reason, my discussion—after an engagement with Hegel and Marx—revolves chiefly around Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Benjamin is a focus because he is the most obscure but likely also the most significant influence on the Frankfurt School’s most prominent thinkers (Buck-Morss, 1977; Gur-Ze’ev, 1998; Löwy, 1980). Adorno is a focus because his philosophy of history—inspired by Benjamin’s—is the most ambitious and comprehensive, and responds forcefully to German philosophy of history. My approach in what follows will be (1) to discuss conceptions of and objections to constructions of ‘universal history,’ chiefly in Hegel and Marx, in order (2) to propose Adorno’s alternative conception of history, a conception that fundamentally incorporates universal history but melds to it discontinuity, thereby producing a dialectical conception of history driven by an ethical imperative.

Three themes are central to my discussion. First, this tradition, starting especially with Hegel (Franco, 2002; Neuhouser, 2003; Patten, 1999; Yeomans, 2011), but continuing through Marx (O’Rourke, 2012: 11–50) and Adorno (Shuster, 2014), is intimately concerned with human freedom; the construction of history thereby is part of the project of conceptualizing and actualizing human freedom. Second, and intimately related to the first theme, is the importance of elucidating the exact relationship between nature and history. For much of this tradition, the former is fundamentally conceived as the antithesis to the latter (Pippin, 1999, 2000), which is properly the only site of human freedom. Putting things in this way may seem peculiar, since many see the issue of freedom as a metaphysical issue: we either are free or we are not (Ekstrom, 1999; Kane, 1996; O’Connor, 2002). The important issues then fall out around freedom of choice. Beginning with Kant (Brandom, 1979, 2002: 21ff; Korsgaard, 2009), and reaching its fullest culmination in Hegel, the German philosophical tradition sees freedom as a normative achievement (Pippin, 2009), where central to being free is not merely actualizing some natural fact about ourselves (Sellars, 1997: 76), but rather revolves around achieving a sort of self-relation, one that is historically constructed and mediated, and that intimately involves questions of recognition and sociality (Honneth and Joas, 1988; Pippin, 2008). This raises the third theme that animates much of this tradition and my discussion, namely the idea of ‘alienation’ (Entfremdung). If themes like self-relation and mutual
recognition are crucial to a conception of human freedom, then alienation becomes central to the extent that it serves both to prohibit the achievement of freedom and to make conspicuous its absence. Finally, in recent years, Hegel scholarship has produced readings of Hegel (Pinkard, 1996a, 1996b, 2012, 2017; Pippin, 1989, 2008) that likely would have been foreign to Adorno due to their conception of Hegel in largely non-metaphysical terms; it is nonetheless worthwhile to engage with these readings in detail in order to present the most forceful version of Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s conception of history (which also applies to Marx).

Let me situate the discussion that follows by briefly giving a sense of how philosophy of history is approached in German philosophy from Kant onwards. The term “philosophy of history” was coined by Voltaire to apply to what Voltaire hoped to accomplish in his mammoth Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations (Löwith, 2011: 1; Rosenthal, 1955), which was twofold: an examination of the facts of history and an assessment of the ways in which those facts (and others) had been valued by prior generations of humans. In this way, Voltaire’s procedure was related to but distinct from the way in which Rousseau tackled history in the Second Discourse (Rousseau, 1987). According to Rousseau, when one looks at how history has unfolded, both from a systematic perspective (i.e., what is it that drives history to unfold in the way that it does?) and from a moral one (i.e., how do we assess the way in which history has unfolded?), one must conclude that human civilization has been responsible for the general ruination of humanity. Rousseau’s procedure—albeit not formally labeled philosophy of history—is, in fact, more influential than Voltaire’s within the German philosophical tradition. Furthermore, Rousseau’s answer to the Academy of Dijon’s competition on the origins of inequality is one that continued to resonate in this tradition (Jarvis, 1998: 41ff): namely that the origins of human inequality are to be found exactly in human society—although, importantly, for Rousseau, as well as for these later traditions, the emergence of such society is entirely natural (Rousseau, 1987).

Alienation, Freedom, and Universal History: Hegel and Marx

With Rousseau’s suggestion, the distinction between nature and history already looms large. If human society is both the origin of human misery and is also entirely natural, then there is here a question about the proper moral assessment of this fact—indeed, is it a moral fact at all, since it appears unavoidable? The same issue arises with Kant’s notion of an “unsocial sociability” (ungesellige Geselligkeit), where the idea is that every individual is naturally driven to be an egoist, while pursuing interests that can only be actualized in society. For any individual, such a tension “awakens all his [sic] powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness, and propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw” (Kant, 1963a: 15). While for Kant, this picture still implied certain theological commitments (Shuster, 2014: 42–71), the basic idea might be entirely divorced of such requirements and understood simply, as Adam Smith presents it, as an “invisible hand” at work (A. Smith, 1937: 485; C. Smith, 2006), or, later, in Hegel’s words, as the “cunning of history” (Hegel, 1975: 89; S. B. Smith, 2016: 145). With such views, we might speak of “a history with a definite natural plan for creatures who have no plan of their own” (Kant, 1963b: 12).

Hegel’s philosophy of history depends on a conception that equally trades on a relationship between the social and the natural (Pippin, 2011; Rand, 2007). As Hegel stresses in the Phenomenology of Spirit, the relevant idea of freedom as an achievement—captured by his notion of spirit—makes its first appearance exactly at the point in his account where two distinct self-consciousnesses confront each other amidst an otherwise ordinary existence in the natural world (Hegel, 1977: 100). Human freedom appears as a concept and
possible achievement with a struggle in the natural world that emerges between these two self-consciousnesses (Pippin, 2011), an account itself importantly influenced by history, in the form of the Haitian revolution (Buck-Morss, 2009); there is here a distinct dialectical intertwtenement between nature and history. According to Hegel, with the emergence of self-consciousness and the encounter—and struggle—between two self-consciousnesses, recognition emerges as the locus around which human freedom is understood and actualized. Hegel describes how through the struggle between the two, one self-consciousness looms as master—enslaver—and the other as a slave, and how the struggle between them engenders concrete historical actualizations and failures of recognition, all dependent initially on the slave and his investment in work and the sort of avenues for recognition that such work opens up (Stewart, 1995: 138ff). These shapes eventually give way to more and more complex historical shapes and configurations, ones that require particular, and often times large and complex institutional structures—from families to courts to police to nation states—for the possibility and actualization of recognition between subjects, and thereby of human freedom (Hegel, 1991a; Neuhouser, 2003). Involved in this process is also the eventual historical emergence of the claim that all humans—because self-conscious—possess a standing within what might be termed a “space of reasons” (Sellars, 1997), and who might thereby appeal to such a standing in cases where they are otherwise denied their freedom and standing as a self-consciousness (Pinkard, 2017: 29).

In Hegel’s words, though, such a “new world is no more a complete actuality than is a newborn child” (Hegel, 1977: 7). Essential to any such normative claim about the universality of human self-consciousness and freedom is also a procedure whereby one must achieve this freedom in what might be termed a ‘thick’ sense, understood chiefly by means of several tasks. First, one must grasp how one came to possess such a notion of freedom; for Hegel, this amounts to being able to construct a history (as he does in the Phenomenology and in his lectures on history) that reveals how self-consciousness has passed “through a series of shapes [in order to] attain to a knowledge of itself” (Hegel, 1977: 265). These shapes might be understood as particular shapes of spirit, i.e., shapes of human society, whether Greek or Roman or whatever, where each is “more basic than an intersubjective unity among different agents,” but rather “includes such intersubjective agreements” in addition to “a conception of the world as something to which those agreements are in tune or not” (Pinkard, 2008: 114–115). They may be understood as ‘forms of life’ (Hegel, 2011: 287; Pinkard, 2008), where that signifies all of the various ‘attunements’ that individuals within a particular form of life share, both by upbringing (Bildung), personal reflection, explicit and implicit normative commitments and saliences, and by the ways in which they share, interpret, and habitually actualize particular basic biological facts (Cavell, 1989: 40–52). Second, and falling directly out of the first general procedure, Hegel takes a particular conception and construction of history to be essential: one must understand and be able to tell a historical story about how one’s present shape of spirit—and thereby one’s present conception of freedom—rests on earlier actualizations and failures of self-conscious activity. It is only out of the failures that there emerge the successes, and it is essential to Hegel’s aims to grasp both, since, as is famously denoted by his use of ‘aufheben,’ each subsequent shape both annuls and maintains elements of the prior shape (Birchall, 1981; Hegel, 2015: 81–82). It is not too much, then, to speak here of alienation, as Hegel himself does in the Preface to the Phenomenology, where he describes how consciousness “becomes alienated (entfremdet) from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation” (Hegel, 1977: 21). Furthermore, it is only through the construction of such an account that one might truly be able to feel at home inside of a particular shape (Hegel, 1991a: 42), achieving thereby the sort of self-relation to oneself and to one’s society—and thereby to one’s possibilities and actions—that is required for human freedom. At the conclusion of one of his lectures on the history of philosophy, with a story about the
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historical movements from one shape to another, Hegel notes, “I have tried to exhibit their necessary procession out of one another, so that each philosophy necessarily presupposes the one preceding it” (Hegel, 1995: 212). Hegel's invocation of “necessity” here raises all of the chief issues for his account, namely what sort of necessity is implied here, and especially whether it commits him to some sort of problematic fatalism or teleology (Heidegger, 1994), or theodicy (Adorno, 1973: 300–361), or even totalitarianism (Kiesewetter, 1974; Popper, 2006). Implied in these tasks is also a third procedure, one that puts stress on the transitions from one shape to another (Hoffmeister, 1952: 1:328–331), asking us to acknowledge how in each of the aforementioned procedures, one’s self-conscious activity is implicated (Bristow, 2007), both in the understanding of one’s past (how prior historical shapes fit together) and in the understanding of one’s present (to what extent one’s current shape reflects its own ideals, i.e., makes sense to one, allows for freedom).

Essential to Hegel’s account is thereby a sort of ‘two-stage’ process, where the first stage denotes the (self)-movement of the shapes of consciousness—their breakdown and subsequent reformation—and then a subsequent reconstruction of all this at the second stage, where the various breakdowns are arranged and understood through a unified narrative (Förster, 2012: 306–373). The former reveals the process by which a particular historical notion of human freedom was achieved, while the latter actualizes it by means of a distinct historical justification, one that reveals a process of periodization and thereby constructs history as having moved toward such a notion of human freedom (Shuster, 2014: 134–168). Practically, then, in the realm of history,

the failure of a way of life is expressed in the way in which it fails to sustain allegiance to itself, and in the dissolution of such a way of life, those living during its dissolution have to pick up the pieces that still seem to work, discard what is no longer of use or value, and fashion some new whole out of what remains, almost always without any overall plan for what they are doing.

(Pinkard, 2017: 79–80)

Many of the aforementioned controversies surrounding Hegel’s philosophy of history emerge from this process. What is the nature of the whole or totality that emerges here? Does it stand in a problematic relation to the past (the problem of theodicy), and does it suggest a problematic sort of totalization (the problems of teleology, fatalism, or even totalitarianism)? One recent suggestion (Pinkard, 2017: 40–44) is to see this task as a sort of “infinite end” (Rödl, 2010: 147–149), where no one action or even set of actions—in other words, no single or even single set of rational reflections on or construction of history—exhaust the task. Instead, such an assessment of history is rather a “principle” or “generality” (Anscombe, 1981: 48) by means of which one consistently—if one aims to be free—parses one’s situation and its relationship to the past. On such a view, with the emergence of a particular notion of human freedom as based on self-conscious mutual recognition, including importantly self-recognition (feeling “at home with oneself” — “bei sich selbst”), “the conception of what it ultimately means to lead a human life is an infinite end” (Pinkard, 2017: 42), i.e., not something that is accomplished once and for all but that must be performed time and time again, in perpetuity (a similar suggestion is arrived at, albeit quite differently, in Comay, 2011).

It is in this context, in acknowledging that Hegel’s procedure is fundamentally retrograde, that one should take the early Marx’s statement that “philosophers have only interpreted the world … the point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 1978d: 145). Implied in the statement is a sort of political-ethical sentiment—which becomes quite important to Adorno and the Frankfurt School—that any such reconstruction rests on a historical account that suggests that the world ought to be different. Marx thereby accepts elements of Hegel’s procedure.

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He agrees with Hegel that a consistent self-alienation of self-consciousness from a particular shape of spirit drives human history (Forst, 2017; Hyppolite, 1969b: 130–137): it just is the case that particular shapes break down, stop making sense to subjects, and thereby invite reflection on their breakdown (Marx, 1978a). What’s at stake between them, though, is the nature of the alienation: is it the case that it arises from the living and concrete norms (Hegel, 1991b: 115) that animate a particular form of life (Hegel)? Or does it have to do with the material (economic) conditions that allegedly actually give rise to those norms (Marx)? (Later, yet another basis for alienation emerges in Adorno’s work.)

According to Marx (Marx, 1978b: 155), it is exactly because material conditions—modes of production (denoting both the actual forces and the relations of production)—drive conceptual activity (superstructure) that, in Marx’s famous claim, Hegel’s entire account must be stood ‘upon its head’ (Marx, 1978c: xxii). Marx’s inheritance of Hegel’s stress on alienation pushes him to leverage Hegel’s basic procedure—of an inherent, diagnosable crisis within a form of life—to specify four forms of alienation whose origins lie in material conditions: alienation from the products of one’s labor, alienation from the processes of one’s labor, and alienation from one’s own natural and social existence as a human being (Marx, 1978a; Wildt, 1987). And it is these forms of alienation and the ills connected to them—notably the production of a wide range of ideologies, whether religious, social, or political—that prohibit the achievement of human freedom (Ng, 2015; Wolff, 2003). If this is true, and if one can tell a seemingly causal story about the various ways in which material conditions can be arranged and the sorts of forms of alienation they will produce, then Marx, in distinction to Hegel, has allegedly produced a “theory of history”—dialectical materialism—as opposed to a mere “philosophy of history,” where the former implies a scientific account distinct from the allegedly merely “reflective construal” of the latter (Cohen, 2000: 27). There is a lot more that might be said here about both (1) the relationship between Hegel and Marx (Chitty, 2011), and (2) the best formulation of Marx’s theory as well as how and what best to assess when it comes to material conditions—a debate that rages on (Piketty, 2014). What is most conspicuous for the present discussion, however, is the extent to which both Marx and Hegel leverage an experience and understanding of alienation in order to present a “universal history,” i.e., an account that conceives of history as a whole that admits of periods that can be revealed on the world stage, thereby presenting a fundamental continuity to history. The distinctions between them ultimately materialize in what each conceives as the most salient feature of history (idealism vs. materialism), not in what is the proper overarching method for doing so or the proper form of the historical account in question.

Furthermore, note also the extent to which Marx’s account conceives of human labor and its organization as that which—and here the details will surely be important—can prohibit individuals from being free of alienation, i.e., of being free. At an eagle’s eye view of things, the central question, then, is how to conceive of labor altogether (Arendt, 1958; Postone, 1993; Weisman, 2013), both conceptually (as in what role does and ought it play human life?) as well as materially (what is the corresponding arrangement of actual society that corresponds to what role labor ought to play in human life?). These questions extend far beyond the scope of this chapter, but they do reveal an important point: namely that whatever story one tells about the evolution of human labor and the modes of production, and thereby of human alienation, it is also a story about the production and possibility of human freedom for it just is the case that “there comes a time when this alienation becomes a living contradiction” (Hyppolite, 1969a: 103).

One way to understand the trajectory of Marxist thought as well as elements of the Frankfurt School is to see them as concerned with the conditions that allow for such critical consciousness, concerned with exactly when such a time materializes when alienation becomes unlivable, practically unsustainable (Jaeggi, 2014). While it did not turn out to be
the proletariat that bore or induced the revolution—indeed, the status or necessity of the revolution out of the history of capitalism is itself a topic of debate (Cohen, 2000: 202ff)—it nonetheless remains true that any critical consciousness “cannot emancipate itself without transcending the conditions of its own life” and “cannot transcend the conditions of its own life without transcending all the inhuman conditions of present society” (Marx, 1997: 368). And Marx’s talk of “transcendence” here brings to the fore all of the issues that opened this chapter: the relationship between nature and history (what is being transcended possibly?), the importance and status of alienation (what potentially moves one toward such transcendence?), and the very construction of history itself (how exactly do we account for the conditions of present society, and especially in what sort of—genealogical or phenomenological—depth?).

The fundamental issue with universal history is not simply that it tells a progressive story about history, but rather that it presents history (and thereby temporality) as the sort of thing that can be divvied up into distinct periods and thereby conjoined into a whole, a totality. This whole is then leveraged to provide a justification for the present. And this is true even if such a history aims to critique it, i.e., all of this is equally true of any regressive universal history. Universal history is essentially linear; of course, it is not linear in a strict sense (Clarke, 1993; Pinkard, 2017): with non-metaphysical readings of Hegel, there may, in fact, be no predetermined telos, and the movement from one shape to another may admit of regressions and failures. Nonetheless, history is linear in the deep sense that the construction of the overall picture of its movement is one where the various pieces are able to fit together into a broader whole. Notably, this whole need not be presupposed in the beginning, as many critics allege, rather it may arise out of the self-movement of the shapes in question, exactly in the way that Hegel suggests in the Phenomenology, where it runs along the “pathway of despair” according to an internal logic, and where it ends only when it arrives “at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien” (Hegel, 1977: 49, 56). But nonetheless, in such a procedure, the construction of such history is not itself made a problem.

What would it mean to make the construction of history itself a problem? It would not be sufficient merely to highlight the fact that, say, Hegel was Eurocentric (Bernasconi, 1998, 2000, 2003), which while true (and equally true of Marx), is irrelevant to the broader point. Even were Hegel “properly” (without racial bias and ignorance) to incorporate all of the elements of world history that he overlooks or gets wrong (Pinkard, 2017), his historical account (and Marx’s) would still see history as a continuous whole, a totality (Jay, 1986; Lukács, 1972).

**Suffering and Dialectical History: Benjamin and Adorno**

Adorno’s alternative, following Benjamin, is that any such construction of history ought to be rejected. On what grounds? Before answering, let me make clearer what Adorno has in mind. In lectures from 1964 to 1965, Adorno puts the significance of Benjamin’s view of history as follows: “His idea is that, contrary to what traditional philosophy believed, facts do not simply disperse in the course of time, unlike immutable, eternal ideas” (Adorno, 2006: 91). Instead, according to Adorno,

while the traditional view inserts facts into the flow of time, they really possess a nucleus of time in themselves, they crystallize time in themselves […] in accordance with this, we might say that history is discontinuous in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted.

(Adorno, 2006: 91)
What Adorno aims to develop, then, is a dialectical account of history wherein “discontinuity is posited as a feature of history, not as an alternative theory of history” (O’Connor, 2008: 182). Adorno’s point might be broached as follows, flowing from two main insights. First, any construction of history leaves out something. The history in question may be ambitious, and it may even be written from the perspective of the vanquished as opposed to the victors, the low opposed to the high, the ordinary opposed to the extraordinary, but all constructions of history fundamentally—always, irreducibly—leave out something. Yet, and this is the second point, the things left out happened, and thereby “possess a nucleus of time in themselves,” where that means essentially that they each have a self-standing and concrete determinacy that does not exclusively rely on being placed into a context. Nonetheless, particular pieces of history do only appear to and for us in particular contexts; this is what Adorno means when he notes that “what we can legitimately call ideas is this nucleus of time within the individual crystallized phenomena, which can only be decoded (erschließen) by interpretation” (Adorno, 2006: 91). The use of “decode” is important here since it stresses the fact that while these events are perpetually available, in order for them to be something for us, they must be decoded—interpreted. We must do something to and with them, and that is always true, even as they have their own freestanding, concrete existence that makes available and invites such procedures. Benjamin captures this idea in a characteristically natty metaphor when he notes that eternal truth, if such a thing might be said to exist, is more like “the ruffle on a dress than some idea” (Benjamin, 1999: 463). A ruffle on a dress is oddly both everything and nothing: on the one hand, it is inessential to what a dress is (a dress just is something that is worn as such); on the other hand, a ruffle makes the dress, both for better and for worse: it is what makes the dress all the rage at a particular moment, gives it unique standing amidst other fashion, and also what dates it, what makes it ultimately unwearable—because no longer stylish—from the perspective of a later moment. What’s eternal then just is the fact of the radical and freestanding uniqueness of every moment, which possesses a concrete, monadic existence that can nonetheless only be revealed to us by means of the intervention of human subjectivity. Any placement of an event into a particular history ultimately destroys its unique nucleus of time.

One way we might understand the conception of history emerging here is to see history as imbued with a quasi-religious significance. Adorno will sometimes call it ‘metaphysical,’ where for him that always implies ‘more than what is’ (Shuster, 2015a: 107ff), denoting the thought that with any historical account, there appear lines of suggestiveness that point beyond that account, by means of both what has been forgotten or overlooked, and also by what wasn’t actualized or failed to appear but was nonetheless available or suggested. As Adorno notes, in the construction of history, we always detect “something hopeful that stands in precise opposition to what the totality appears to show” (Adorno, 2006: 91). It is for this reason that Adorno speaks of metaphysics arising “at the point where the empirical world is taken seriously” (Adorno, 2000: 18; Shuster, 2015a: 107). Here, an analogy might be drawn to the way in which the concept of a “saturated phenomenon” has emerged in contemporary phenomenology of religion (Marion, 2002a: 202ff, 2002b). One way to think about this notion, especially in this context, is that any particular part of history—any point—might be seen as a sort of “saturated phenomenon,” where its concrete existence (and thereby its possibilities via interpretation) always overflows or exceeds whatever account it is placed into. In this way, the necessity of human intervention in the interpretation of history and the unique “nucleus of time”—the deep materiality—of any particular historical point (node, event, whatever—the proper term itself importantly is open to interpretation) are both affirmed. As Adorno puts it, “what would be beyond, appears only in the materials and categories inside” (Adorno, 1973: 140). The analogy with a ‘saturated phenomenon’ might alternatively be made with reference to Kant’s faculties...
The philosophy of history (Marion, 2002a), especially as Kant develops the notion of reflective judgment in the *Third Critique*. Natural beauty reveals “a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent nature as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding” (Kant, 2000: 129–130). Note that it is natural beauty itself—not merely our subjective faculties—that suggests such a system to us. Natural beauty—any experience of beauty—exceeds our capacities for understanding: in Kantian parlance, the understanding is unable to supply one proper concept for the particular manifold and enters into a free play with our imagination, multiplying the range and possibilities of applicable concepts; our faculties are so vivified that no particular concept exhausts the manifold in question. Our standing with respect to history is analogous: we construct histories, but they do not exhaust the historical record, which always exceeds any of our constructions. Analogous to the way in which natural beauty reveals something about our subjectivity in Kant, we also see the interpenetration of the historical and the natural here: it is a natural fact about history—not about our subjectivity—that history exceeds our constructions, even as such a surplus is only possible or diagnosable in virtue of our subjective capacities.

There is a robust ethical commitment behind such a conception of history, and it is important to bring that to the fore in order to complete this dialectical conception of history. To do that, it is worthwhile to attend to the ways in which similar themes appear in Benjamin. Let me quote a few passages from his paralipomena (notes) to “On the Concept of History”:

The notion of a universal history is bound up with the notion of progress and the notion of civilization (*Kultur*). In order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator—“civilization,” “enlightenment,” “the objective spirit,” or whatever one wishes to call it.

(Benjamin, 1977a: 1:1233, 2002b: 4:403, translation modified)

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is wholly otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, humankind—to activate the emergency brake.


In the idea of a classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was good. The disaster began when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an “ideal.” The ideal was defined … as an “infinite [unendlich] task.” […] Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less placidity.


Immediately, note the extent to which Benjamin also attacks any version of universal history, whether progressive or regressive. According to Benjamin, the problem with such history is twofold. First, Benjamin takes it that such a conception, by conceptualizing temporality as homogeneous time, gets the history fundamentally wrong (a point that animates Benjamin’s thinking from his earliest days—see Fenves, 2011). Second, such a conception of history serves the practical function of pacifying subjects and obfuscating the origins and nature of their suffering, all while suggesting that the ideal toward which history moves is something measurable, and merely currently absent (Dobbs-Weinstein, 2015: 129ff). Either of these points is a book-length topic in its own right, but a focus on
the motive or impulse that animates Benjamin's thinking is a manageable topic that I
address in the remainder of this chapter, since an analogous motive animates Adorno and
the Frankfurt School.

One can see this ethical stance already in Adorno's 1932 lecture, "The Idea of Natural-
History" (Hullot-Kentor, 2006b), a lecture that he presented to the Frankfurt Kant society,
and which continued to influence Adorno's thinking until his death (Buck-Morss, 1977: 52).
While a general consensus around the text has not yet emerged (Whyman, 2016: 452),
and while there are many issues and interlocutors for Adorno in the text (Hullot-Kentor,
2006a), a convincing reconstruction has recently been proposed (Whyman, 2016). Historically,
Adorno was likely responding to a debate over historicism, spurned by the work of
Ernst Troeltsch (Buck-Morss, 1977: 53), specifically Troeltsch's 1922 book (Buck-Morss, 1977:
53, Note 70), Der Historismus und seine Probleme—Historicism and Its Problems (Troeltsch,
1922). One of Troeltsch's chief claims is that the periodization of history can be viewed from
the perspective of an ideal—here also fundamentally religious—integration of the periods
from the perspective of the present. In response, Adorno agrees with a historicist rejection
of such an idealization. Thus, he notes that Heidegger's ontological project does arrive at a
plausible rejoinder to such a philosophy of history, by "eliminating the pure antithesis of his-
tory and being," since "history itself … has become the basic ontological structure" (Hullot-
Kentor, 1984: 256). For Heidegger, humans are fundamentally "historical" in their "own
existence," where their "possibilities of access and modes of interpretation" are always "diverse,
varying in different historical circumstances" (Heidegger, 1988: 21–22). The term Heidegger
introduces to capture this is 'historicity' (Geschichtlichkeit), a fundamental existential struc-
ture common to all human beings. The fact that every human is thrown into a particular
locus of concern, a particular horizon and world of interpretation and possibility, means that
one's projects for and possibilities in history are set by such a particular being-in-the-world,
a particular historical horizon. The fact that one's world is so constituted, however, is, ac-
cording to Heidegger, itself an ontological fact of being human, a fact that thereby admits of
authentic and inauthentic modes of relation, i.e., modes that do or do not acknowledge this
Heidegger that it just is the case that particular circumstances determine one's access to his-
tory and one's possibilities for historical conceptualization, and that there are serious issues
with the sort of account Troeltsch offers. What Adorno alleges as a problem for Heidegger's
account is the fact that with any view of history, we need to be able to understand elements
of it as necessary and other elements as contingent. Yet exactly such a view is impossible on
all of history is of a kind: contingent. We might ask at this point whether this is a con-
vincing reading of Heidegger (Macdonald, 2008), since what Heidegger is driving at is that
there just are ontological, formal qualities inherent to being human, i.e., to being a creature
who possesses a past, present, and future, and who thereby (potentially) relates to them in
affectively and value-laden ways that ultimately disclose temporal possibilities and realities
in particular, nonhomogeneous experiences of time. It just is the case that such a creature
is confronted with the possibility of nothingness, of death (Heidegger, 1996: §58). On one
hand, this certainly seems to undermine Adorno's charge that Heidegger's ontology some-
how prohibits us from understanding history in its specificity, that it makes mysterious actual
history, with its necessities and contingencies. On the other hand, Adorno's critique appears
to diagnose a real problem when we realize that Adorno is really stressing the conception of
history presented earlier, as modeled on a sort of 'saturated phenomenon.' The point might
be developed as follows. Adorno's charge is not merely or solely, say, the historical-critical
point that breakdowns of agency are just fundamentally not understandable by means of
formal qualities about being and nonbeing—i.e., an attack on the Heideggerian claim that
such breakdowns are really variations in the fact that at the core of every human existence, there is the nullity of death (Pippin, 1997: 385; 2005: 77).

Instead, Adorno’s point, without denying the aforementioned historical-critical point, is the ethical charge that such a view of history—with its formalism—minimizes concrete sources of human suffering. The suffering undergone by others throughout history can never be located fundamentally in any formal ontology (Pensky, 2017), or in my experience of death, rather only in someone else’s death. Adorno’s point is that to locate an explanation of concrete cases of suffering where Heidegger aims to locate it is to miss an important dimension of what it means to be human, of what it means to value other humans. Emmanuel Levinas puts this same point as the idea that being truly human “consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being preoccupied with his or her death” (Levinas, 1999: 157–158). Although more detail is needed here (Cohen, 2006), a shared sense of such a critique of Heidegger brings Adorno close to someone like Levinas (Alford, 2002; de Vries, 2005; Horowitz, 2002; Sachs, 2011), and the overall critique is plausibly bolstered by Heidegger’s own stunning suggestion, after the Nazi genocide, that “agriculture” as “a mechanized food industry” is “in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps” (Heidegger, 2012: 27).

A rejection of the sort of conception of history present in Heidegger’s ontology requires one to propose a philosophy of history that acknowledges the deeply historical nature of human agency, while rejecting Heidegger’s recourse to ontology. Adorno finds such a conception of history in Lukács’s notion of second nature, and quotes him extensively in his lecture (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 261ff). Lukács writes that such second nature is “a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a charnel house of rotted interiorities” (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262; Lukács, 1971: 64). Lukács’s suggestion throughout Theory of the Novel is the by now familiar claim that capitalism forms individuals whose natural comportment toward and within the world—indeed whose world, in a deep phenomenological sense—is already always shot through with conventions that reify people and things, alienate humans from each other and their activities, and that fundamentally fail to offer a meaningful human existence. The reference to a “charnel house” should thereby not be minimized—on this point, Adorno and Lukács share a common ethical sensibility. Where Adorno parts company with Lukács is in how meaning might be actualized in response to such a state of affairs. For Lukács, meaning can only reappear by means of a “theological resurrection … an eschatological context” (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). Adorno’s suggestion is that, in thinking that history can only be vivified by something beyond history, Lukács is in fact betraying his own ethical estimation of history as a sort of charnel house, instead of understanding that history only symbolically, and seeing “death and destruction … [as] idealized” (Benjamin, 1977b: 166; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 263, translation modified). In other words, Lukács somehow fails to acknowledge the concrete nature of historical suffering. How? Here, Adorno invokes Benjamin’s conception of allegory, which while exceedingly complex (Caygill, 2010; Cowan, 1981), allegedly aims above all to present history as a site where “the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history, a petrified primordial landscape” (Benjamin, 1977b: 166; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). And here, Benjamin means ‘Hippocratic face’ quite literally and clinically: it is the face that is produced by impending death. For Benjamin, nature can only be understood as perpetually bound up with its destruction; thus, the fundamental category for any construction of history is “transience” or “decay” (Adorno, 1973: 360; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). What I take Benjamin to be after with this claim, and Adorno as well, is the idea that while we perpetually write history—that is, place its unique and individual points into a context, even though the most fundamental truth about all such points is that they are all entirely unique, all possessed of “a nucleus of time in themselves”—the only historical truth is that “history is discontinuous
in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted” (Adorno, 2006: 91). Every moment, even when placed into a historical account that makes it into some sense-making context, also fundamentally carries its own opposition to that context, potentially resists it: every moment is unique and equally presents its uniqueness potentially in opposition to every context. The only truth about history is that it “constantly repeats this process of disruption” (Adorno, 2006: 91). For this reason, the fundamental category of history is transience or decay. Or as Adorno puts it, we ought to say, “history is highly continuous in discontinuity” (Adorno, 2006: 92). And the reason Benjamin’s notion of allegory is central to this point is the simple fact that allegory—unlike symbolism, which merely invokes one thing to really mean something else—affirms the historical uniqueness and concreteness of (1) the things that it allegorizes and (2) the moment that allows any such allegory to work. This is why Benjamin calls for a “Copernican revolution in historical perception” (Benjamin, 1999: 388; Hanssen, 1998). Benjamin notes that

formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been in ‘what had been,’ and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness … the facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory.

(Benjamin, 1999: 388–389, emphasis added)

All constructions of history—like allegories—always fail to exhaust the present context, always pointing beyond it, even as they also depend on that context, requiring it for any construction of history and meaning. Here again the process of decay emerges as an entirely natural fact about history—it just is the case that every historical event carries with it possibilities unrealized and that every historical view ignores or overlooks or hides them. Any such natural fact of decay, however, can only be revealed through human intervention, through an understanding of exactly what is decaying and how, or what failed to be actualized and how. This is the context in which we ought to read Adorno’s pronouncement in Negative Dialectics that “where Hegelian metaphysics transfigures the absolute by equating it with the total passing of all finite things, it simultaneously looks a little beyond the mythical spell it captures and reinforces” (Adorno, 1973: 360). It looks “a little beyond” it because Hegel’s avowed impulse—to capture “the total passing of all finite things”—is, in fact, exactly right, but Hegel fails—turns into mythology—exactly when he thinks that he can do it, even in a text as ambitious and powerful as the Phenomenology. True progress in this realm would bring to a halt all constructions of history that stress continuity and progress, and instead apply the “emergency brake” that Benjamin suggests, re-orienting our view of the entire historical record and its relationship to us—something that remains a possibility at every moment (Adorno, 2005b, 2006).

Conclusion

Finally, we can give greater weight to Adorno’s entire conception of history by marshaling more of its basis in Benjamin's thought. In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin notes that it is a truth that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:390). Benjamin continues, noting that only for a “redeemed mankind [sic] has its past become citable in all its moments” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:390). I take this just to be the point about history as a sort of ‘saturated phenomenon.’ On one hand, Benjamin's point is then the now relatively common point that history must be de-colonialized (Mignolo,
2011); on the other hand, Benjamin is making an even deeper point: every history, of whatever sort, will leave something out—indeed, more accurately—will leave someone out, a great deal many ‘someones.’ The impetus to seeing history as a sort of ‘saturated phenomenon’ is not merely, say, ontological, about the qualitative nature of history, but rather also ethical. This is the context in which we should read Benjamin’s claim that “the only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:391). And, as Benjamin points out, “this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:391).

What might it mean to write history from this different perspective? In part, we have to be honest: there is a reason that Benjamin’s Arcades Project was never finished—it is an almost impossible task that requires seeking out all of the refuse, everything that’s been discarded, avoided, and lost. Writing such history is impossible. Nonetheless, it must be noted that what’s at stake is not its completion, but an understanding of what it might mean to be inspired and animated by such a task. It would require rejecting all constructions of universal history. At the same time, it paradoxically also requires the construction of a limited sort of universal history: in order to acknowledge the suffering of prior generations—and here we must speak of generations upon generations—we must construct a minimal regressive universal history. As Adorno famously notes, “no universal history leads from savagery to humanism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (Adorno, 1973: 320). Such a history is constantly and increasingly more regressive (so, there is no nostalgia implied here). And Adorno implores us to acknowledge that history has largely been a series of catastrophes, and that one can trace this sequence from our earliest days mastering nature (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). We might say that

the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men’s inner nature … it ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity.

(Adorno, 1973: 320)

At the same time, because of the same aforementioned ethical impulse and the view of nature it stakes, even such a regressive universal history must be denied. As Adorno puts it, “universal history must be constructed and repudiated” (Adorno, 1973: 320, translation modified). ‘Constructed’ because to fail to do so is to fail to acknowledge the suffering of past generations, which rests on the quasi-religious understanding of every moment of history as unquantifiably full, and every unique human life as sacred; and ‘repudiated’ because to fail to do so is both (1) to fail to be ethically sensitive to the historical fact that history has reached a moment where its end “has become a real possibility” (Sommer, 2016: 325), and (2) to fail to acknowledge the irreducible singularity of every moment and every life. This is what Adorno suggests when he writes that “philosophy interprets such [historical] coding, the always new Mene Tekel, in that which is smallest, the fragments struck loose through decay, but which carry objective meaning” (Adorno, 1973: 360, translation modified; 1984: 6:353). The reference to “Mene Tekel” here invokes the Biblical Book of Daniel (Chapter 5), where these words appear as prophecy, signifying ‘mene’ (מְנֵא) and ‘tekel’ (טֶכֶל). The former Near Eastern root signifies measurement (equally, discernment), while the latter signifies weighing (equally, finding insufficient, wanting). In Daniel, the idea is that God finds the days of the kingdom under discussion numbered and wanting; in Adorno’s invocation, the “always new Mene Tekel” denotes both the fundamental saturated nature of history (something that might only be grasped in the moment of complete redemption), and the fundamental
inadequacy of every moment, which perpetually disappears, and which is thereby transient, decaying.

One might argue that the aims of such a view are to offer us a bit of therapy (Whyman, 2016), to allow us to counter a particular view of the philosophy of history, one that imputes some sort of greater meaning to the whole beyond the present moment. That is not incorrect, but it seems to me to miss the manifestly ethical—and thereby political—import behind the project, an ethical import that animates all of the members of the Frankfurt School, and which fundamentally opposes any procedure that minimizes or overlooks any human life, with its particular experiences of suffering, as well as its particular expectations of happiness (Benjamin, 2002a: 4389–390). The nature and scope of this impulse requires elaboration (Bernstein, 2001; Freyenhagen, 2013; Shuster, 2014, 2015b) but note that it shares structural features with certain non-metaphysical readings of Hegel (where the suggestion was that the construction of history is a sort of ‘infinite end’ bequeathed to us by our self-conscious natures). Adorno parts company from these Hegelians exactly in the way in which he, in virtue of this impulse, rejects the desire to ‘be at home,’ even as a general aim. To do so is to betray an ethical imperative imposed on us by contemporary experience; as Adorno puts it, “today [...] it is part of morality not to be home” (Adorno, 2005a: 39). The alienation that’s animated this tradition from Hegel onwards thereby appears again. Thus, we construct a universal history that reveals suffering, but we reject it because every moment—and especially every moment of suffering—always already shows its passing and thereby points to possibilities unrealized or ignored or missed—as Adorno puts it, “Woe speaks: ‘Go’” (Adorno, 1973: 203). And the recognition of suffering across these modalities is exactly the “objective meaning” that every moment carries.

Note

1 I am grateful to Henry Pickford for reading earlier versions of this chapter and for his generous and incisive comments—Brätwurst indeed!

References

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Further Reading

Hanssen, B. (1998). Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels. Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press. (Excellent overview of Benjamin’s entire project, as well as his relationship to Adorno.)