Multicultural Dynamics and the Ends of History

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Published by University of Ottawa Press


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The primary purpose of this book is to show the relevance of speculative philosophy of history, in both classical and contemporary forms, as a framework for thinking about the following broad question: given the various developments taking place throughout the world, with specific reference to its increasingly multicultural character, where are we headed?

Responding to such a question requires that we rearticulate a sense of the movement of history as a developmental whole. This has been the traditional concern of speculative philosophy of history. By exploring the classical figures of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx, and particular ways in which these figures are taken up today, I show how we can discern in our increasingly multicultural world both what I call the dynamics of history (what moves history forward) and the telos of history (its end or goal). More specifically, I argue that examining the speculative philosophies of history of Kant, Hegel, and Marx helps us better understand the relation between the dynamics and the telos of history.

This is a somewhat risky move on my part, given that the speculative philosophy of history is no longer very well-regarded within the philosophical community, largely because of our contemporary preoccupation with specialized knowledge. This term "speculative" is usually used to distinguish those philosophical accounts whose concern is with the whole of history and the questions that arise from considering history as a whole, such as: does history have a meaning? Does it move progressively? Or cyclically? Does it determine the fate of human beings? Or can human beings direct its course by their actions? It is usually contrasted with what has come to be called "analytic" philosophy.
of history (sometimes also called “critical” philosophy of history). This latter approach eschews such speculative efforts, considers them unfounded (and, well, speculative), and prefers instead to examine questions that relate more specifically to the issue of the kind of knowledge that historical investigations can be said to yield. The questions that such a philosophical approach considers concern whether or not historical knowledge can be considered “objective” (given that the object, the past, no longer exists); whether or not historians can be impartial in their treatment of the facts (given that they themselves are implicated in the thing they are attempting to describe); and whether or not history needs to be written as a narrative or should express its findings in other formats.

The rejection by analytic philosophers of history of speculative philosophy of history is an interesting story that I cannot engage in here (at least not directly, though questions relative to that story will be raised along the way), but that rejection has been quite widespread, given the relative scarcity of speculative philosophers of history. Indeed, the speculative philosophies of history that I shall be discussing were written in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One of the reasons that there are fewer speculative philosophies of history is that our knowledge of the past, the knowledge generated by the work of countless historians, has grown exponentially, leading to a certain wariness towards any claim pretending to encapsulate the whole of history. I certainly share in that wariness. However, the point of a speculative philosophy of history, as I understand it, is not to encapsulate the whole of history, but to attempt to think it as a whole. This I think is reasonable and doable, and it is precisely such attempts to find the conceptual means to think history as a whole that one finds in the speculative efforts that I shall be considering.

I recognize that many readers may remain sceptical of the pertinence of such a project, especially given that I have announced that I shall be discussing the philosophy of history of, among others, Karl Marx. Conventional wisdom would have it that, if anything has been thoroughly discredited today, given the course of twentieth-century history, it is the conception of history that animated Marxism. Without engaging in polemics, I would like then to consider briefly what the speculative philosophy of history is not, or can no longer be (if it ever was).

Maurice Lagueux has argued, in his recent book *Actualité de la philosophie de l'histoire*, that speculative philosophy of history, far from being irrelevant, is in fact a privileged locus for making sense of the events that occur in history. When sociologists, political theorists, and other social commentators try to make sense of current events, they are effectively engaged in a very similar activity and are motivated by the same concerns as speculative philosophers of history. Lagueux’s work is interesting in that he shows how those who wish to
distinguish their attempts to make sense of current events from the speculative efforts of philosophers of history can be seen to have a very specific view of what speculative philosophy of history is. Lagieux identifies this view in terms of five characteristics that are said to mar the speculative efforts of philosophers of history (Lagueux pp. 171-181):

(1) a disdain for facts;
(2) a presumed knowledge of the future;
(3) dogmatism;
(4) an insistence on teleology; and
(5) the presumption to give the meaning of history understood as a whole.

I would like to examine briefly these five characteristics. I do not want to evaluate whether they adequately reflect the actual works of speculative philosophers of history, though I do not believe that they do, and they certainly do not capture the force and significance of the works of Kant, Hegel or Marx. Here I want merely to distinguish my concern with speculative philosophy of history from these presumed drawbacks.

First, then, I address the presumed disdain for facts exhibited by speculative philosophy of history. Certainly, one should never disdain facts. However, facts themselves are always articulated within an overall understanding that frames them and gives them their relevance as the facts of a given situation. With regard to the use of facts, speculative philosophy of history is often accused of selecting only those facts that accord with a predetermined understanding of what is actually happening in the world. For example, if what I mean to say when I say that the world is “becoming increasingly multicultural” is that the world is increasingly recognizing the equal status and worth of the various cultures that are increasingly in contact, and in support of this assertion I select only those facts that in effect support this view, while purposely ignoring other facts that demonstrate the opposite, such as increased conflict and intolerance, then I would be engaging in the kind of speculative thinking that is, rightly, criticized.

Of course, the problem is not with the selection of facts itself. Selection is inevitable and necessary, and the relevance of what one is saying depends on it. The problem arises when the selection ignores what, given that selection, it should consider, such as the fact that cultural contact takes on many forms, not all of which will be compatible. Yet this is not a problem particular to the philosophy of history. It inheres in any attempt to make sense of complex realities.

What is perhaps more interesting and more pertinent to the philosophy of history are the kinds of facts that get selected. Paul Veyne, an important historian of Roman antiquity who has written about the epistemology of history and historiography in his book *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology,*
calls historical facts, the facts that historians deal with, “sublunar” facts, in order
to distinguish them from the facts that are framed within the natural sciences, and are meant to provide support for the formulation of laws in terms of constancy and necessity. Veyne’s point, of course, is that the human historical world, the “sublunar” world, does not display the kind of constancy and regularity that the starry heavens display, and that appealing to its “facts” must reflect this if such appeals are to be reflective of that world. The appeal to facts in scientific explanation becomes, in historical investigations of the human world, the explication of factors that contribute to our ability to make sense of human affairs. We move, then, from “facts” to “factors,” which, according to Veyne, can be distinguished into three different kinds. Explicating any human situation will need to take into consideration, certainly, the material conditions within which it takes place, but consideration must also be given to human deliberations, and to the ways in which they modulate those conditions, which themselves are subject to chance and happenstance. All of these factors are to be found within the establishment of the “facts” of the human historical world, and it is these “facts” that speculative philosophy of history should be careful not to disdain when it considers history as a whole.

The challenge that recognition of our “sublunar” condition poses for speculative philosophy of history is that, when we think of history as a whole, we must remember how these different factors play off one another. That is, when we consider history as a whole, what I shall be calling the past-present-future complex, we are not to consider it as governed by overarching laws, for this would be to overlook human deliberation, as well as chance and happenstance. Nor are we to consider it as the senseless product of mere chance, for this would be to overlook the ends devised by human deliberation in response to material conditions. Nor are we to think of history as necessarily directed towards a deliberatively constituted end, for this would be to overlook the force of material conditions, as well as chance and happenstance. Rather, speculative philosophy of history must be respectful of those facts that help us explicate our involvement in the world as it unfolds.

The second characteristic identified by Lagueux is the presumed knowledge of the future that it is often thought speculative philosophies of history proclaim. If speculative philosophies of history include the future in their consideration, it is because the future forms a part of the human historical world, or, as I shall call it, of the past-present-future complex. In particular, as we shall see, consideration of the future will most often get expressed through consideration of how the ideal relates to the real. Such considerations of the future are, of course, implicit in the basic question motivating this investigation: where are we headed, given the increasingly multicultural character of the world? No knowledge of the future is presumed here, only concern for it.
The third and fourth characteristics identified by Laguerre, namely the presumed dogmatism and teleological insistences of speculative philosophies of history, need to be dealt with together because the criticism of speculative philosophies of history results from their combination: an end of history, towards which history is ineluctably moving, is dogmatically affirmed. A dogmatic affirmation of what the end or telos of history is cannot be compatible with any philosophical attempt to make sense of history. Philosophy is essentially a questioning activity and does not typically result in dogmatic pronouncements.

This is not to say that the articulation of the end or telos of history is without merit. On the contrary, much of this work is devoted to considering the relevance of such articulations insofar as they help us respond to our question. When a telos is ascribed to history, it is usually because there is an attempt to think history as a whole, that is, to consider the past, the present, and the future as a single process. To think of the past, the present, and the future as a process is to assume or presume that the past, the present, and the future cohere in an intelligible way or in certain discernible ways. A particular way of describing that coherence is to say that this process is directed, that it can, as a process, be seen to be moving in a particular direction, or in a particular directed fashion. When this kind of speculative move is made, two questions might be said to arise.

The first question concerns what the direction is, which often gets specified by asking what is the endpoint or destination that (ultimately) governs the direction. This is the teleological question: it asks what is the end or telos of this process called history. A second question concerns what drives the process such that it is directed in the way that it is. One might be tempted to call this question the “causal” one, but that might lead one to think that the process of history needs to be understood as deriving from something outside history, whereas part of the point of these speculative efforts is to account for this process from within history. It would be more accurate to call this question the question of the dynamics of history: what, if anything, can be said to move history, to be the motor of history? The different approaches to both the telos and the dynamics of history, as these get articulated in the classical speculative philosophies of history, will be the primary focus of this book.

Kant sets the stage in Part I by identifying the telos of history as the full development of our natural capacities, something that is, paradoxically, achieved through the conflictual dynamics of the “unsocial sociability” of human beings. While important for identifying how history can be seen as a developmental whole, Kant’s “cosmopolitan” understanding of the dynamics of history will ultimately be shown to be too abstract to help us respond concretely to the question of where we are headed. Indeed, much of the subsequent story of the
development of speculative philosophy of history can be read, particularly if one focuses on Hegel and Marx as I propose to, as the attempt to give Kant’s telos historical form and content, an attempt to concretize the abstract ideal that it articulates.

Part II explores how the theme of recognition inspired by Hegel’s understanding of the dynamics of history shows more concretely how such an ideal is realized. Such a theme is especially relevant to a world that is increasingly becoming multicultural. However, the dynamics of mutual recognition that move history forward are able to create only limited spaces of what I call “reason-ability.” Although they are crucial to social life, such spaces leave too much human suffering outside the scope of the historical “realization of reason.”

Part III argues that Marx’s identification of the basic struggle within history as between those exploited in the interests of a few versus those whose interests are realized in common is the most promising account of how to understand the link between the dynamics of history and its telos or goal, which, for Marx, is the free development of the productive and creative capacities of all, especially if we consider the increasingly multicultural dimension of our living and working together.

Thus my basic claim is that, if the discussion of the telos and its articulation to the dynamics of history is what best characterizes classical speculative philosophy of history, and that this distinguishes it from those other non-philosophical characteristics that Lagueux identified, which we can sum up as the dogmatic assertion of knowledge of the future that disdains consideration of the facts of human history, then a case can be made for the relevance of speculative philosophy of history for helping us respond to the speculative question of where we are headed.

This brings me to Lagueux’s final characteristic of speculative philosophy of history, namely, providing the meaning or significance of history considered as a whole. Lagueux is quite right to point out that the interrogation of the sense or significance of historical events is something that engages the intellectual effort of countless people, from social scientists to social activists and, of course, historians, and that it hardly makes sense to fault philosophers of history for engaging in it as well. The objection, therefore, cannot be directed at the investigation of the sense or meaning of history, but must rather be aimed at the claim of speculative philosophers of history to be investigating the sense or meaning of history as a whole. It seems to me that the proper response to such an objection is to point out that, while it is true that our specialized knowledges, by their very nature and structures, cannot yield answers to these preoccupations with the overall unfolding of our world, this does not mean that such preoccupations are unreasonable: where, indeed, are we headed? Because such preoccupations are not unreasonable, we should not be surprised
when something other than such knowledges responds to them. Speculative philosophies, as I shall attempt to show, are very respectful of our specialized knowledges, and indeed have contributed to them, and in that sense they are important allies in our general attempt to make better sense of our lives and our world. They do not oppose our specialized knowledges. What they supply, I shall be arguing, is the basic hopefulness that undergirds and maintains our combined efforts to make better sense of the world. Even though such hopefulness animates on a daily basis most of the activities we undertake (why else do we go on?), we are only intermittently conscious of it and appreciative of its necessity in sustaining the conditions for the living of truly human lives. The following speculative effort is an attempt to respond to that intermittence by shoring up this essential hopefulness, a hopefulness that can become clouded by the feelings of senselessness that often surface and spread when such speculations either fade or fail.
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