Multicultural Dynamics and the Ends of History

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Published by University of Ottawa Press


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Marx, Productive Forces, and History

The main purpose of this book is to ask the question stated in the introduction: given our increasingly multicultural world, where are we headed? The first part of this book examined Kant's speculative philosophy of history, which provided a telos to history—the full development of our natural capacities within the context of a universal civic society—that could be said to respond to the question: where are we headed? The second part of this book made use of Hegel's speculative philosophy of history principally in order to show how the dynamics of history are especially evident in our increasingly multicultural world through the development of spaces of "reason-ability," characterized by mutual recognition. In this part I would like to combine both elements of the original question once again. In the next chapter I shall look at how Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri take up Marx's basic approach within our more explicitly multicultural context, but first, in this chapter, I shall reconsider the question of where we are headed by considering Marx's speculative philosophy of history.

Marx famously said that he stood Hegel on his head, which of course is a very awkward position for anyone to be put in. I shall not be concerned in what follows with working out that particular move on Marx's part, other than to say that, for Marx (Selected Writings, p. 81), Hegel "found only the abstract, logical, speculative expression of the movement of history, not the actual history of man as a given subject," and that this was insufficient. I agree with Marx here, at least in the sense that our abstract, logical, speculative expressions, which, after all, are pretty much what books in philosophy are meant to comprise, should enable us to grasp better "the actual history of man as a given subject."
hope to have shown that the dynamics of mutual recognition that one finds in Hegel, suitably updated by such writers as John Russon, can actually help us do precisely that, at least to some extent.

However, the forms that such recognition take can end up settling around certain kinds of formality that, if they do not betray the movement of history that gives rise to them, can often become detached from that movement. (I have not discussed it here, but this is one danger of focusing, as Hegel does, on the state as the privileged site for historical development.) As detached from the actual movement of history, such forms of recognition can become either dead weights, shouldered by some but not others, or obstacles that break or disrupt the flow of historical movement, that is, the "actual history of man as a given subject." To put it another way: while it is true that the dynamics of mutual recognition can and do create spaces of "reason-ability" within our passionate engagement with each other and the world, the creation of those spaces is not what best describes the "actual history of man as a given subject."

What, then, does better describe this "actual history"? Marx wants to show us that it is the productive forces that have developed out of our passionate engagements with each other and the world (of nature) that are at the heart of "actual history," and not "reason-ability" itself.

"Reason-ability" remains crucial and important. This book, the fact that you are reading it, and the fact that it discusses the writings of Marx are all functions of the creation and sustenance of spaces of "reason-ability." The point is simply—and it is indeed a simple though fundamental point—that these words, and the effort required to write them, read them, and understand them, depend on the forces that produce them. They cannot sustain themselves. One might put it this way: self-consciousness is not self-sustaining.

Now, the most important point I wish to draw attention to here is that Marx, better than either Kant or Hegel, understands how his own efforts are contributions, not only to the understanding of the dynamics and telos of history, but to those dynamics and that telos themselves. This is evident in the kind of writing Marx engaged in—and my focus remains on the writings and not on the particular engagements that define his own life, his time on the planet, because it is his writings that engage us today. It is particularly evident in the text we are most concerned with, namely the Communist Manifesto, co-written with Friedrich Engels. It is, after all, a "manifesto," and not merely an exposition of ideas or even a proposal of ideas. It is an affirmation of its ideas, as ideas that need to be heard, and an exhortation to others to hear them. What else, after all, are we doing when we write, other than affirming something and exhorting others, however forcefully, to hear them? Are not "proposals" and "expositions" themselves, at bottom, just timid manifestos?
What are Marx’s key affirmations? Given the concerns of this book, which lacks much of Marx’s forcefulness but remains a manifesto nevertheless, we should start with: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Selected Writings, p. 158). What I would like to point to in this affirmation is the use of the notion of “struggles.” This notion contrasts with the notion of “conflict” that was the explicit concern of Kant, and was Hegel’s concern as well. (In terms of speculative philosophy of history Hegel truly finds himself between Kant and Marx, some features of his thought tending towards a Kantian commitment to rationality and universality, while other features tend toward the Marxist commitment to the dynamics of a changing world.) The basic difference between the notion of “conflict” and that of “struggle” is that the former commits to something other than itself, namely, “resolution,” whereas the latter remains committed only to itself, in the sense that it remains ongoing and does not resolve itself into something else. It seems to me that Marx, by focusing on “struggles,” is closer to the actual movement of history, precisely because that movement does not resolve itself in something other than itself. History is an ongoing struggle.

But wait a minute; does not Marx’s conception of history actually resolve itself into the classless society that he calls “communism” through the revolutionary work of the proletariat, which includes a form of dictatorship? This is all true, at least as far as Marx’s “conception” of history abstractly considered is concerned. Such abstract concerns are not mine, however. My concern is with Marx’s speculative philosophy of history, by which I mean the particular way in which his work helps us make better sense of the way in which the dynamics of history are articulated to its telos, such that we can better respond to the question of where we are headed. Such speculative work is called for precisely because we do not, indeed cannot, claim to know. Marx does not “know,” any more than anyone else does, that history will resolve itself into a classless society. However, he does anticipate such a classless society and his writing is devoted to showing how, given his contact with the reality of his present and its particular orientation, and given the knowledge gained from examination of its past organization, his anticipations are well-founded.

Fine, I hear someone (many people) say, but history has proved Marx wrong, by which they mean that his anticipations have turned out not to have been well-founded. Not only have we not moved closer to a classless society, the very idea of creating a classless society has been thoroughly discredited. No one any longer anticipates such a society.

I am certainly prepared to grant that the anticipation of a classless society is not as predominant as it once was. However, what remains interesting about Marx’s response is how forcefully it expresses the anticipatory dimension of speculative philosophy of history, the role that the future plays in the past-
present-future complex. His philosophy tried to respond to the question at the heart of this book: where are we headed? If this is taken into consideration, we might then ask: if not towards a classless society, where are we headed? What can we anticipate, given the way we orient ourselves within our present as organized by its past? It seems to me that Marx remains relevant precisely because he focuses on how we orient ourselves within a world organized in particular ways and addresses the question of what we can anticipate or expect given this particularity. As we have seen, Hegel would also have us focus on the particularity of our present, but with more of a focus on its relation to the universal, rather than the future. What Marx brings to Hegel's account is an appeal to universality that provides a more sustained attention to the anticipatory dimension that consideration of the whole of history as the past-present-future complex demands.

In order to illustrate this, let me return to Marx's affirmation, but this time I will bracket the reference to "class," out of deference to the objection that no one now anticipates the "classless" society that this reference to class is arguably preparing us for. We get the following: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of [ ] struggles." This affirmation sounds somewhat odd. Now that we have taken the notion of "class" away, we are not quite sure what to make of the qualifier "hitherto existing," given that its function was to point to the particularity identified by the notion of class, which suggests that, if we are going to bracket the notion of "class," then we should bracket "hitherto existing" as well. Now what we get is: "The history of all [ ] society is the history of [ ] struggles."

Apart from my guess that many people would be perfectly happy with this pared-down affirmation, two things need to be noted. The first is that this pared-down affirmation is no less speculative than Marx's version. That is, we certainly do not know that this is the case, nor, that is, if we think of history in terms of the past-present-future complex. The second point is that this pared-down affirmation is in itself not very interesting or informative. One immediately wants to ask: why? Why is the history of all society the history of struggles? Note that, if we take this question seriously, we will need to focus on the remaining terms, that is, either "society" or "history." The pared-down version, it seems to me, suggests that we look to the nature of "societies" in order to understand the constancy of the struggles within them. What if one focuses, not on the presumed "nature" of societies, but on their histories, recalling our discussion concerning the distinction between the social and the historical? That, of course, is precisely what Marx was doing, leading him to fill in the brackets.

The point of my little exercise here is to show that, even though Marx is usually discussed in terms of his understanding of the workings of class, as far
as his speculative philosophy of history is concerned, the interesting notion is that of "struggle." It is through the use of this notion that one can discern his attempt both to seize and to join the movement of history by situating himself within its present as structured by its past and pointing to its future.

Back to the *Manifesto*, then, and this initial basic affirmation that the dynamics of all "hitherto existing societies" have taken the shape of class struggles. I mentioned above that Marx, in using the notion of "struggle," better captures the actual movement of history, its dynamics, than does the use of the notion of "conflict." It does so because it is closer to that movement, as it were, which in fact is the movement of human life itself. Struggling is what being alive is all about. We struggle for air once we emerge from the struggling bodies of our mothers. We struggle to find places for ourselves within our families and in the wider social world. We struggle for what we desire, we struggle with our limitations and the limitations of others, we struggle for peace and justice, for peace and quiet, for happiness and fulfillment, for our lives.

However, to consider life as struggle, or even history as struggle, is too abstract. What shapes do those struggles take? Which ones are protracted? Which ones yield benefits? Think of speech. It is a struggle to speak, at first to speak at all, later to speak well, or before a group of people, or to a person whom one either loves or despises. It is not because we succeed in learning to speak that speaking ceases to be a struggle.

It is in this sense that the notion of "struggle" may be distinguished from the notion of "conflict." The latter, one might say, is a more specialized form of struggle, one that increasingly takes the form of an opposition between fairly well-defined positions, such as, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When faced with a conflict, there are identifiable "sides," and one is called upon either to take sides, to mediate between them, or to stay out of the conflict altogether. This contrasts with the notion of a struggle, which one is called upon to join, or which one can abandon. When the two notions are contrasted in this way, one can see how the notion of struggle lends itself to the notion of movement in a way that the notion of conflict does not. In fact, the notion of conflict lends itself to a kind of stasis or paralysis rather than movement or, in its self-understanding, pretends to point beyond itself to a resolution that appeals, not to what inheres in the conflict itself, but to that which effectively transcends it. We might say that conflicts are struggles that have hardened into oppositions.

Now, Marx affirms that it is within "all hitherto existing societies" that class struggles describe the movement of history, which he also characterizes by saying (*Selected Writings*, p. 168): "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, in the interests of minorities." Today, however, meaning in 1848, Marx and Engels affirm that the historical movements that have generated and
sustained these class struggles have issued into a basic antagonism, indeed, a basic confrontation between two sides, which they famously describe as follows (Selected Writings, p. 159):

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprung from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

What interests me in these passages is their speculative thrust and direction, that is, the way they combine the dynamics of history with its emerging telos. This is a process that we also saw in Hegel and that is required if we are to take history—as historical movement—seriously. Yet the first two paragraphs in the passage quoted above describe what amounts to a standard but nevertheless static conception of history, which merely catalogues the kinds of conflicts generated by different types of unequal social orders. I describe this as a static conception of history, not because nothing is happening—on the contrary, the conflicts generated can be quite spectacular—but because the agitation involved does not issue into a movement away from the inequality of the situation toward something that would eliminate, or at least correct, that inequality. Such agitation can issue into a radically altered social structure, but only to recreate another situation of conflict within a new social order, the re-establishing of, as Marx and Engels themselves put it, "new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones."

Such an anti-teleological conception of history is probably the norm today. It finds powerful expression in an often-quoted passage from Michel Foucault’s essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, which makes this Nietzschean affirmation (p. 378):

Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs
each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.

However, I will point out, once again, the speculative character of such an affirmation—which, I might add, both Foucault and Nietzsche would have acknowledged. It may look like a statement of a more "realistic" approach to history, and it is, inasmuch as its focus is on the past. Yet, as a speculative affirmation, it speaks not only of the past but for the past-present-future complex as a whole. Foucault maintains that such forms of domination structure the past, are revealed in the present, and describe what we can expect from the future. Here it seems to me that the only honest response is to say, at least initially: maybe, maybe not. We certainly do not know.

Further, if we want to delve into these speculative matters a little more systematically, we can say, yes, as far as the past is concerned, it does show how different violences have been installed in systems of rules that have structured different forms of domination. However, if it makes sense to describe these different forms or structures of rule as different forms or structures of domination, then it makes sense to ask what is constantly being dominated in these changing systems. There is no reason to think that what is being dominated is always the same thing. The point is simply that, if we are to speculate about the constancy of domination, we are also committed to speculating about the constancy of being dominated. For the details of what is being dominated, one might follow Marx's suggestion and look at the shape of the struggles that have animated the lives of human beings within past societies. Countless historians across the planet are hard at work at precisely this task. However, given that we ourselves are concerned, not merely with the past, but with the past-present-future complex considered as a whole, we can also look at the struggles that animate the present, in order to see what future can be anticipated, given the particular characteristics of those present struggles.

It is against the backdrop of these kinds of concerns that we need to read the final paragraph in the quotation given above, Marx's (and Engels's) affirmation that "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps." Marx and Engels are writing a "manifesto" and thereby engaging themselves to do battle with one of the camps in question. That is, they are joining what they see as the basic or most general struggle going on in their present. Few today accept this basic dichotomous division of social life, in the name of pluralistic conditions of complexity (although, as we shall see in the next chapter, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri seek to revitalize this Marxist way of characterizing the dynamics of social life without rejecting our pluralistic, complex, multicultural present). Nevertheless, the speculative dimension of this claim merits renewed consideration.
Marx and Engels are pointing to a movement within social life: society is more and more splitting into two. This is the vantage-point of the present. Within the struggles that human beings are “presently” engaged in one can see, not only the various conflicts that have been generated in the past when different interests confront each other, but an orientation that increasingly defines itself as overcoming a basic opposition. What makes this opposition basic is that, instead of the confrontation between different minority interests, which had been the source of countless conflicts in the past, what Marx and Engels were witnessing in their day was a radically new situation, one of opposition, not among various minority interests, but between minority interests themselves and the majority interest of all those who struggle to make a living. As I quoted earlier: “All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.” This is what the capitalist mode of organizing social life is achieving in its pursuit of ever greater riches and wealth: the creation of a class of the immense majority, whose interests lie, not in the exploitation of another class, but in the elimination of class interests per se. Thus, for Marx and Engels, the dynamics of the productive forces as organized under capitalist exploitation take on a very distinctive shape and direction (Selected Writings, p. 176):

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

Thus, close attention to the actual dynamics of historical movement—the pitting of bourgeois class interests in increasing profits and wealth against the emerging class(less) interests of a self-associating productive proletariat—reveals the telos of history itself:

In the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.
This intimate link between the dynamics of history and its telos is also neatly captured in another famous passage from Marx, from his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Selected Writings, p. 321):

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all of the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!"

While this is often taken to be a "utopian" passage, describing a hoped-for but unlikely future, it should be read more simply as an anticipatory description of the processes at work in the present, given our capitalistically organized past. It anticipates the end of enslavement and an imposed division of labour, a conception of work linked to one's desires, a commitment to an "all-round" development of individuals, and the sharing of the wealth collectively produced. (We shall see in the next chapter how those anticipations continue to be ours, that is, how they continue to structure the past-present-future complex as it is lived.)

Of course, someone is sure to point out here that neither the passage from the *Manifesto* nor the one from the *Critique* captures what happened. The dynamics of history did not polarize society into two antagonistic classes, issuing into a revolutionary movement that transformed society into a classless society. There have been revolutions, of course, but they did not pit minority interests against a supposed interest of the "immense majority" in the way Marx hoped and envisioned.

Marx and Engels provide the appropriate response to this observation in the very *Manifesto* we are here considering as a piece of speculative philosophy of history (Selected Writings, p. 171): "In bourgeois society . . . the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past." Indeed, the objections raised to Marxian speculative philosophy of history and to speculative philosophy of history generally, are often objections that appeal to what has happened in the past. While it is crucial not to ignore what has happened in the past, we need to remind ourselves that the past forms only one component in the past-present-future complex. We need also to consider our present contact with reality and our anticipations with regard to the future. We need to ask whether or not, in our objections, we are projecting our pasts onto the future. When we do so we are in fact failing our present. Or, to put it in
terms of the modal square within which our lives unfold, we should not confuse
the necessities exhibited by the past with the possibilities (and impossibilities)
that structure our relation to the future.

It is true that we cannot say a great deal about the future, because we do not
know what it holds, but we do not say nothing at all. We include statements
about the future in our anticipatory understanding of the movements that carry
us out of the past, through the present, and into the future. Marx had a fairly
good appreciation of this overall dynamic. Indeed, as he and Engels put it in
another co-written text, The German Ideology, the notion of "communism" is
meant to capture, both in theory and in practice—that is, in a social-practical
sense—the anticipatory dimension of the unfolding of our social lives. They
write (Selected Writings, p. 120):

Communism is not for us a state of affairs still to be established, nor an ideal to which
reality [will] have to adjust. We call communism the real movement which abolishes
the present state of affairs.

This reference to "the real movement" is what we should focus on. Communism
as real movement challenges our tendency to view the present, or the present
state of affairs, in abstraction from the past-present-future complex, as though
it were self-contained and self-explanatory strictly on its own terms, the familiar
terms it uses in order to understand itself.

Consider, for example, the distribution of wealth all around one. On a street
corner, at a stop-light, one may find cars whose cost rivals the prices of small
houses, public transit buses, taxis, bicycles, and people on foot, including some
pushing grocery carts filled with their "worldly" belongings. One might think
that these things, these people, merely bear witness in a particular way to a world
that perennially divides the rich and the poor, and that contact with them in the
"present" captures something essential and permanent about human existence.
While the desire to find in one's existence evidence of what is essential and
permanent about human existence itself is perfectly understandable, and the
source of much philosophical speculation, one needs only a minimal sense of
history, of things changing because of the different ways in which people have
responded to the conditions that confronted them, to suggest that what has
been deemed permanent and essential is in fact the product of the particular
way in which historical circumstances have been dealt with.

If we go back to our street corner and wonder, not about the variations in
the wealth of the individuals one encounters there, but about what they are all
doing and where they are going, then the specifically historical circumstances
that engage them cannot be ignored. We are at a stop-light that regulates the
flow of traffic, produced by the concentration of people within a city or town,
formed or coalesced around various economic activities, productive of particular goods and services that are distributed in highly specific ways. Although the people sitting in the cars and buses, standing, walking, or huddled in a doorway may physically resemble human beings across the world and through time, the way in which they relate to each other in what they are doing has the specificity of history, rather than the (presumed) permanence of nature. As Marx puts it, in the first volume of *Capital* (Selected Writings, p. 266):

> nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities, and on the other hand men possessing nothing other than their own labour-power. This relation has no basis in natural history, nor does it have a social basis common to all periods of human history. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production.

Thus, on Marx's account, communism should not be understood as a future abstracted from the present, but as an anticipatory understanding of the most significant developmental movement *within* the present, as that present has been structured by the discernable movements of the past. For Marx, the most significant developmental movement is a mode of organization that has created not only the conditions of its own suppression as rule based on private property, but also the possibility of a form of association of the productive forces of society that will not rely on a form of rule alien to those productive forces. In the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels describe the developmental situation in the following way (Selected Writings, p. 169):

> The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

We need to recall that this passage is taken from a “manifesto,” one which ends famously with the cry: “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” It is in such a context that we need to make sense of the claim that the fall of bourgeois rule and the victory of the proletariat are equally “inevitable.”
One cannot dismiss such a phrase as mere rhetorical flourish, especially if we consider other famous passages in Marx's writings, such as in his Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Selected Writings, p. 211):

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. . . . No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present, or at least in the course of formation.

It has often been noted that there seems to be a tension in Marx's thought, between such assertions about the "inevitability" of a transformation of social relations, so that the productive forces they embody are organized in a way that benefits all producers and not merely those who control the means of production, and his critical, practical engagement in arguing for the proletariat's historical role in that transformation. If the transformation is "inevitable," and involves the unification of the workers as a function of the real, material process of historical development, why the exhortation to workers to "unite"? In other words, is there not a determinism in Marx's thought, which by now has been thoroughly discredited?

Rather than worry about determinism, I think it would be more worthwhile to examine more closely what it might mean to consider what is "inevitable" within the historical process understood as the past-present-future complex. Technically, of course, something is "inevitable" when one cannot avoid it. It is difficult to make claims about what is "inevitable" when one is thinking about the future, given the present and its particular past, but it is not impossible, or, at least, not unintelligible.

For example, it is inevitable that each of us will one day die. Death is not something we can avoid. That does not mean that we need to welcome it or embrace or hasten it. Indeed, we may even take steps to avoid it, for the time being, even though we know that we will not avoid it in the long run. Note also that we do not know how we will die (leaving questions as they pertain to taking one's own life aside), even though we know that it is inevitable.
If we keep this in mind, then the suggestion is that the victory of the proletariat and the reorganization of productive forces around an associational model is "inevitable" in the sense that, given the way our present has been structured by its past, it cannot be avoided. Now, one can well imagine that, as with death, all kinds of steps will be taken to avoid it for the time being, most notably by the bourgeoisie, whose fall is being announced. One can even imagine how members of the proletariat may avoid victory by failing to recognize themselves as part of the solution to a problem that they do not cast in appropriately historical terms. One can imagine any number of "avoidance strategies" that defer our encounter with the "inevitable," in much the same way that, even as adults, we avoid responsibilities, engagements or promises that we should otherwise recognize, or, indeed, often do recognize, but incompletely, or opaquely, or uncourageously. The "inevitable" in our developing human lives is unknowable because it lies in the future, and yet it demands a response from us.

What is interesting and important about Marx's response is that it is meant to include us all, understood as all of us who struggle for the conditions of the realization of all, and this in contrast to those who focus on the interests of only some of us. That is, Marx's response concerns an historically specific, historically defined universality, based on the actual productive forces that actually drive social life forward, and not an abstract universality that somehow transcends the actual struggle of historical movement. It is not even the universality of those whom Marx and Engels called the "critical-utopian socialists," who (Selected Writings, p. 183) "consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms" and "want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured." It is the universality that emerges from that historical struggle that Marx deems "inevitable" and that can no longer be avoided if one takes history seriously. Indeed, recognition of this inevitability is largely avoided precisely by efforts not to take history seriously enough.

At the heart of Marx's attempt to make sense of his world was his commitment to taking history, understood as the past-present-future complex considered as a whole, seriously. To take history seriously is, in my view, to recognize, as Marx did, that, as he put it in another famous passage, this from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Selected Writings, p. 188):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

Those "circumstances directly encountered" describe the present-in-contact as this has been shaped by the past and as it is, directed to the future in the
anticipations that such a present allows us to envisage. To call such anticipations “inevitable” is to point resolutely to that future, as it outlines itself in the labouring and productive forces of human lives, struggling with the fetters imposed on them by those who would control them through the regulation of their activities, through the imposition of a form on those activities that does not issue forth from the activities themselves, as history itself does. Thus the human activities that are literally the very subject of history—the motor, the dynamics of historical movement—point beyond their particular given forms to a mode of interaction that Marx identifies as self-activity (Selected Writings, p. 152): “The transformation of labour into self-activity corresponds to the transformation of the previous restricted interaction into the interaction of individuals as such.” It is this transformation that Marx deems to be “inevitable,” that is, unavoidable.

The speculative force of Marx’s reading of history considered as a whole remains powerful, as I will attempt to show in the next chapter. Before doing that, however, I want to address one last consideration on the “inevitability” of the telos of history as identified by Marx. If Marx meant to describe the “inevitable” realization of the free development of each and therefore of all as in some sense a necessary process, then he was modally confused. As we saw in the Introduction to this book, necessity is not a modal category that applies to the future, considered as a component of the past-present-future complex. What we confront when we confront the future are not necessities, but possibilities, against the backdrop of impossibilities. Of course, we need to deal with the necessities of the past, which we cannot change, but we do so in a contingent present, in the sense that things could have been otherwise if human beings had taken different courses of action, within circumstances that could have presented themselves otherwise than they in fact did. Of course, human beings did take the actions they did within the circumstances as they did present themselves, and therefore, from the perspective of a contingent present, things in the past are of necessity the way that they are. However, the past issues into a present that itself could be otherwise and therefore presents itself as contingently what it is.

It is with these considerations in mind that one must read Marx’s famous Eleventh Thesis, in his Theses on Feuerbach (Selected Writings, p. 101): “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” If philosophers have restricted themselves to interpreting the world, it is because they have focused their attention on the world as it was, abstracted from their present engagement, and construed as an object independent of the philosophers themselves and their contemplative stances. However, the world as it is, as it presents itself to our engaged activity, is not independent of our efforts to make our way within it. It is an historical world structured as a past-present-future complex, to which we bear a contingent relationship.
Now, interestingly, this contingent relation to the world as it unfolds is one that we all share, and in that sense it is "inevitable." Indeed, one might go further and insist that proper attention to the historical context within which we live out our lives points to the "inevitably" contingent demands and features of this shared world. It is this odd conjunction of the "inevitable" and the "contingent" that best illustrates what it means to live in an historical world, that is, a world that has taken on a particular shape that, though it could have been otherwise, is in fact what it is, and that, because it is what it is, and not what it could otherwise have been, raises the question of what it might become in the continuing course of time. This question is not an abstract one, though of course it is a speculative one. It is a question about how this present world will develop and unfold, given our contingent relation to it. It is the anticipatory question that forms part of a full appreciation of the past-present-future complex that is history considered as a whole.

This emphasis on the contingent is fundamental to much contemporary postmodern political theorizing which, though appreciative of Marx's commitment to not merely interpret the world but to change it, generally rejects his overall speculative framework. I think that this is a mistake or, rather, I think that it is a mistake to read the effort to provide a speculative philosophy of history, in order to help us make sense of where we are headed, as insisting on the unfolding necessity of the historical process. The point of speculative philosophy of history is to help us articulate our anticipations of the actual structures and movements of history, as we encounter them contingently in the present. The postmodern insistence and emphasis on presenting the social and political configurations of the world as contingently constituted is, then, appropriate, given the modal context of an historical world. It is a mistake to think that the way things are in the present is the way they have to be.

William E. Connolly, for example, seems to me to be quite right to insist on seeing, in any given present conjunction or "conglomeration" of events, the many contingent elements that are at play. This is how he describes the different contingent elements that circumscribe the situation of what are called "illegal aliens" in the Southwestern United States, bordering on Mexico, in a passage in his book *Neuropolitics* (pp. 151-152):

... the geographic border between Mexico and the United States created by past wars, the asymmetrical development of the two economies, the structure of the fast-food and agricultural economy in the American Southwest, the organization of illegal entry strategies, the entanglement of the border in the drug trade and an American war on drugs inside and outside the country, the tax and welfare systems of the United States, and the racialization and territorialization of ethnic divisions within and around the working class...
Following a certain reading of Foucault, Connolly refuses to see in this conjunction of factors an overarching or underlying intelligibility. He wants us instead to focus on what "emerges" from this conjunction, which he identifies as "a powerful contrivance of economic discipline and political separation." His point, again following a certain reading of Foucault, is the following:

No central power intended it, even though it is bound together by the diverse intentions of agents at multiple sites with differential power. And yet, once it emerges as a contingent constellation, a variety of constituencies caught in its face powerful pressures to adjust their goals, strategies, and interests to its limits and possibilities.

The point of insisting on the constellation as contingent, even as it is constraining, is to enable us to conceive of these constraints as fluid, allowing for the possibility of free movement within them and, of course, against them (this is also something stressed by Foucault). Connolly opposes the contingent to the necessary. He calls such a constellated situation a "contraption," which he defines as "a loosely structured modus vivendi crafted out of complex relays," built out of disparate intentionalities that are affect-laden and which, as relays, connect the "conglomeration" or "contrivance" through (and note how he tracks the description above):

...the pain of refugees, armed border patrols, the market power of corporate elites, the ideological stratification of market forces, the demands of consumers, the difficulties traditional blue-collar workers have in making ends meet, the mobilization of layered identity anxieties, the identification of drugs crossing the border with the decline of public morality, widespread frustration with a tax system that does not serve the needs of ordinary people and interventions by the state ...

Connolly insistently refuses to see in this "contraption," this political "contrivance," a whole understood as a totality working itself out, principally because, like Foucault, he wishes to situate himself within the struggles that constitute key features of elements of this "contraption." Generally, I would agree. It would certainly be a mistake to pass over the various elements that Connolly so ably identifies in his reconstruction of this "contraption." It is also important to see in them, not a necessary process, but the contingent result of events and actions that certainly could have gone on otherwise.

Having said that, if we are attempting to understand a situation, or "contraption," like that of "illegal aliens" in the Southwestern United States, then we cannot merely rest content with noting its contingent features. Connolly refuses to see any underlying intelligible process working itself out, but, as his careful description shows, he does not eschew intelligibility per se.
His descriptions still attempt to make sense of the situation. Indeed, to call the situation a “contraption” is precisely to give it a certain sense or meaning, which allows us to ask: how exactly does this contraption work?

Connolly’s strategy is to track the “relays” he identifies, in the hope of producing a clearer picture of the salient features of the situation that may enable us to better understand and deal with it. Yet this is exactly what speculative philosophy of history means to contribute to. What it seeks to do is put the “contraptions” that Connolly identifies into a wider historical context, speculatively reconstructed as a past-present-future complex. If one looks at his characterization of the “relays” connecting the disparate elements, one can discern without too much ideological spin a fairly basic and straightforward struggle over the way in which vested interests control “the terms of political discourse” (itself the title of an earlier book by Connolly) in order to make use of those “forces of production and reproduction” without which those interests would no longer be “vested.” (The Marxian phrase “forces of production and reproduction” seems to me to be perfectly appropriate here and, as we shall see, elsewhere too.) To put it another way, the complex layerings and relays that Connolly helpfully and importantly traces and tracks should not replace attention to what can also be helpfully and importantly identified as an underlying basic struggle. We should at least be able to see such basic features, without being charged with reductionism and/or ideological posturing. That basic struggle is the struggle to live through the concrete possibilities that current modes of living together promote and prevent and prepare. After all, Connolly’s topic here is “illegal aliens,” a term that refers to labouring human beings. Reference to that activity in characterizing the functioning of the constellated situation is, surely, the focus around which the other contingent elements coalesce. It seems to me important to be able to identify focal and peripheral points in discussions of this kind, in order to evaluate and weigh different responses to and within the “contraption” under examination.

In other words, there seems to be a kind of ahistoricism in Connolly’s account, which does not sit well with his otherwise valiant and, I believe, penetrating attempt to be timely. It seems to me that the desire to be timely would be best served by speculative considerations of historical time, in terms of both the dynamics of its unfolding and the telos that it identifies. Indeed, one might argue that Connolly’s characterization of the “contraption” within which “illegal aliens” are caught itself presumes the telos that Marx identifies as the free development of each and therefore of all. If the focus of Connolly’s concern, within the complex relays that he identifies, is the plight of the illegal aliens, in the sense that it is they who face the most powerful pressures to “adjust their goals, strategies, and interests,” it is because it is the illegal aliens themselves who, through their struggle, most powerfully resist those pressures.
They resist in the name, not of their particular interests, but of what Étienne Balibar, in his “Ambiguous Universality” (p. 64), calls the “ideal universality” of the insurgent, by which he means “those who collectively rebel against domination in the name of freedom and equality.” Such an “ideal” universality contrasts with the “real” universality discussed in Part I in connection with Kant and with the way in which history has overtaken the cosmopolitan ideal by rendering its “regulative status” questionable. However, it also contrasts with the form of universality discussed in connection with the spaces of “reason-ability” that Hegel’s account of mutual recognition sought to emphasize.

What Balibar means by “ideal” universality is a universality that has emerged out of the historical movement that emphasizes and affirms, continuously and repeatedly, the “equality” and “freedom” of all human beings to live out their lives as best they can. Balibar insists on the fact that both “equality” and “freedom” are proclaimed for all, that both notions stand or fall together, in what he terms the “equaliberty” of human beings. This is the telos issuing from the dynamics of historical movement. It echoes Marx’s telos of free development, inasmuch as, according to Balibar (p. 66), it needs to be considered as “trans-individual,” in the following sense:

Rights of equality and liberties are indeed individual: only individuals can claim and support them. But the combined suppression of coercion and discrimination (which we may call emancipation) is always clearly a collective process, which can be achieved only if many individuals (virtually all of them) unite and join efforts against oppression and social hierarchies.

Balibar’s telos can be further likened to Marx’s in its “inevitability.” That is, even though Balibar calls the form of universality that it describes “ideal,” he makes it clear (pp. 66–67) that this

is not to say that it does not play an active role (or that there are no processes of emancipation). What we observe is rather that the ideal of non-discrimination and non-coercion is “immortal” or irrepressible, that it is revived again and again in different situations, but also that it is continuously displaced in history.

I think it is possible to understand this “irrepressible” demand for “equaliberty” as being akin to Marx’s sense of the “inevitable” victory of the proletariat as the standard-bearers of such “equaliberty.” As we shall see in the next chapter, a similar case is put forward in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.