Multicultural Dynamics and the Ends of History

Fillion, Réal

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CONCLUSION

The Dynamic Telos of History: A Shared Democratic World

I have sought in this book to make the case that speculative philosophy of history can help us better respond to the question of where we are headed. The case needs to be made, in my view, because we all have a sense that we are headed somewhere, although we tend, today, to be unacceptably inarticulate about where that is. I say “unacceptably inarticulate” because more and more of us live the kinds of lives that include the ability, the time, and the inclination to think about this question. Of course, it is to such people that this book is addressed, given that you are the ones likely to read it.

Besides, many of us do have a sense of where we are headed that, if pressed, we might express in one of the following ways. Some of us would say that we are headed toward disaster, or, more generally and less dramatically, towards a future that is worse than the present. Others would say that we are headed, or can be headed if we try to coordinate more of our efforts, towards a better world, or towards a future that is better than the present, with less injustice, less poverty, less conflict or, at least, better mechanisms for resolving conflicts. Still others would say that we are headed, as we always have been and always will be, toward more of the same, a mixture of good and bad, pain and pleasure, happiness and despair.

I think that we can do better. One of the points I would like to insist on in this conclusion is that the more we think and talk about the question of where we are headed, the better sense we will have, not only of where we are headed, but of the fact that we are headed there together.

The sense of where we are headed and the realization that we are headed there together are linked to what I have called throughout this book the telos
of history and the dynamics of history, notions that are primary concerns for speculative philosophy of history. Such a philosophy is “speculative” because it is dealing with a whole of which it cannot claim any knowledge, for the simple reason that the philosophical attempt to make sense of the whole forms part of that developing whole itself. We do not experience the whole as such, we participate in it. Our sense of it is a participatory one. It includes knowledge of parts of it, but it also includes hopes and expectations, and an openness to what it has yet to reveal.

There are different ways to characterize the whole within which we participate. The way that I have been privileging is treating it as history, because it seems to me that, if we are to try to respond seriously to this question of where we are headed, then we need to think about how the future—where we are headed—links to its logically dependent notions of the present and the past. This, of course, is why I have called history “the past-present-future complex.”

The logical interdependence of these three notions—the past, the present, and the future—is not as easy to put into words as one might think, even though we live that interdependence every day of our lives. For every today there is a yesterday and a tomorrow. Indeed, any attempt, my own included, to put it into words needs to be tested against the everyday living out of our lives. What I would like to do in this conclusion is run my own test of what I have written and argued here against the living out of the life that I live and share with the reader. I shall do so by summing up how the telos and the dynamics of history work within the frameworks proposed by our three speculative philosophers of history—Kant, Hegel, Marx—with specific reference to my understanding of how we are currently living out our lives.

Kant, like most of us, thinks that we do the best we can with what we have and try to make the most of it. However, Kant the philosopher does not restrict himself to considering things from this individual perspective. If we move up from the individual level to the social level, the best that we can do individually is certainly not very good, precisely because the individual interests of each of us tend to conflict with those of others. Social life becomes the scene of generalized conflict between conflicting interests. Those conflicts can be destructive, especially when they escalate into warfare. Kant argues, however, that, if we take a longer, historical view of social life, other factors become apparent, namely, human rationality and ingenuity. From the perspective of the longer, historical view, the incessant conflict displayed at the social level has over time come to manifest itself in more productive ways, including the development of institutions designed to mediate those social conflicts. Thus, for Kant, from the perspective of history, or as he himself puts it, from the perspective of a
"universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view," what appears at the social level to be incessant conflict can be seen as a kind of "unsocial sociability," which promotes the development of our natural capacities as human beings.

For Kant, then, the dynamics of history stem from our own particular striving. Such striving lands us into conflicts with others, where, of course, there are winners and losers, but these conflicts themselves have been occasions for the development of our natural faculties, which, if they had not been stimulated by such conflictual situations, would have remained undeveloped.

We are all familiar with the idea that competitive situations tend to demand of people greater efforts than they might otherwise devote to a given activity. These greater efforts produce greater results, results that themselves may not have been intended but from which we benefit—"we" being understood here as human beings generally. I see no point in denying that this is true in many different kinds of cases and situations. Conflict and competition are indeed productive. I will even grant Kant the notion that such productive conflict and competition drive the development of our social lives, and structure a good portion of our individual lives, especially that portion that is devoted to making a living.

So far, Kant's speculative considerations concerning the dynamics of the historical process pass the test of relating in a concrete way to our lived experience. Large parts of our lives are indeed built around a kind of "unsocial sociability," focused on self-interest but mitigated by a more or less grudging respect for the self-interest that belongs to others.

From consideration of these dynamics within the context of historical development, which of course means a context that extends beyond the bounds of explicit and restricted self-interest, Kant speculates about the telos or direction of the "unsocial sociability" of our interactions. The long-term, historical development of human conflict reveals a perfecting of human capacities that allows one to imagine, that is, to speculate about, an end or telos of fully developed human capacities. This, too, can be said to reflect itself in our lives, insofar as we commit to developing our natural capacities, both in ourselves considered individually and in others considered socially. We build schools—public and private, professional, vocational, occasional, specialized—and we develop sporting venues and health clubs, indeed clubs of all kinds catering to different abilities and capacities that we discover ourselves to possess or desire to possess. When considering all of this activity, especially with regard to its focused nature—all these activities aim at something—it makes sense to consider whether or not all of it might be contributing to an identifiable overall end. Kant's merit is to have us think about that end as an ideal, which, even if it is not, and indeed, for Kant, cannot, be fully realized within our particular lives, can nevertheless serve as a guide to how best to pursue those
activities. It provides an ultimate framework within which those activities can be evaluated. It allows us to ask to what extent the activities and institutions that we participate in actually structure and promote the full development of our natural faculties and abilities.

However, as I have already argued in this book, the problem with Kant's account is that his conception of the conflictual dynamics that animate social life is in fact too disconnected from the telos of the full development of our natural capacities. That is, there does not seem to be a sufficiently clear historical connection between the dynamics that animate social life and the ideal that provides its ultimate direction. Kant thinks that the ultimate direction is provided by "Nature," with history being merely the unfolding of Nature's "secret plan," but where does that leave our own concrete efforts to realize our natural faculties? It leaves them precisely where Kant locates them, in a conflictual social situation of competing self-interests. From the perspective that places itself within that conflictual social situation, the telos seems very far off indeed. In fact, it is infinitely far off, because it describes an asymptotic ideal.

Yet is it really so very far off? Or rather, is the full development of our "natural" faculties and abilities equally far off for everyone, or does our actual conflictual social situation not provide for the development of some at the expense of others? Do not the institutions and other social structures that have developed, in order to mitigate the destructive effects of social conflict and to promote its productive potentials, favour the development of some at the expense of others? In other words, does not consideration of Kant's particular conception of history reveal that it is not so much self-interest that animates our conflictual social situation as the consolidation and promotion of some interests at the expense of others, as, for example, in the creation of wealth for some at the expense of health of those who actually produce it? The dynamics of our particular conflictual social situation are not the result of some abstract conception of self-interest, but rather the result of the promotion of the self-interest of some at the expense of the self-interest of others. Concretely, this translates into particular opportunities and the conditions of their availability within the social situation that we find ourselves in, such as entrance requirements for different schools, including fees and various qualifications. It appears that the telos of the full development of our natural capacities is not equally "infinitely" far off, after all, which renders its asymptotic status highly questionable.

In other words, a closer look at the historically specific dimensions of the dynamics of conflict shows, not an abstract picture of competing self-interests, but specific conflicts generated by the particular (historically specific) structures of the social situation, structures that are maintained by some and contested by others, as in disputes, for example, over the funding and administration of
education or health care. To put it more simply, the dynamics of historical social life are not best described by "conflict" in the singular, but by "conflicts" in the plural, insofar as these describe the unequal conditions maintained by particular social structures.

This simple putting of "conflict" into the plural requires that we radically revise our conception of the connection between the dynamics of history and the telos of history. If the dynamics that animate history are particular conflicts, that means that they are to be understood, not in terms of some general principle such as self-interest, but in terms of their own specific characteristics.

The question we need to ask is: what makes a particular conflict particular? The answer is interesting: the particularity of a conflict is largely defined by the particular way in which it includes the terms of its own resolution. Conflicts in this sense differ from one another in terms of the resolutions that they call for. That is, it is the resolutions that define the conflicts as the particular conflicts that they are. Let us take, as an example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the possible resolution of which is described by Todd May, in an interview with Jason Adams in April 2005, in the following way:

Israel needs to remove itself to the 1967 borders, that is to say, to end the occupation. In addition, some negotiated recognition of the right of return must be established. To those who say that Israeli settlement activity has gone too far to allow such a return, I say that the solution then would be a single state where Jews and Palestinians enjoy equal political status.

The conflict continues because the actions required to effect a resolution are not being taken by those in a position to take them, for any number of reasons (the examination of which is beyond the scope of the present discussion). Meanwhile, other actions are being taken in response to the very failure to take those actions, but those other actions serve only to exacerbate the conflict, without changing the terms of its possible resolution. Therefore the conflict endures. Nevertheless, such conflicts, when viewed historically, do not endure indefinitely, which is another way of saying that they are particular.

Interestingly, from the historical point of view, conflicts do not end because they are finally resolved within the terms that define them, but because they are transformed by unexpected circumstances and give way to new circumstances. Thus we have historical change. Hegel's speculative philosophy of history attempts to grasp the direction of this change by examining the unfolding of these transformations. The fact that Hegel reads these historical changes as transformations allows him to speculate about the aim or goal of history itself as a transformative process. That aim or goal, according to Hegel, is the
transformative realization of reason within the world, effected through the
particular conflicts that are generated in social life through our passionate
engagements with and against each other.

If we set Hegel against Kant, we find that the dynamics of social life are
animated, not by an abstract “unsocial sociability,” but by the various struggles
for mutual recognition that underlie our passionate engagements. It is through
the mutuality of recognition that defines social life, including its dysfunctional
forms of misrecognition and non-recognition, that our passionate engagements
are transformed into spaces of “reason-ability,” which increasingly mediate our
interactions.

Again in contrast with Kant, Hegel allows us to understand more clearly the
dynamics of social life, which are not merely conflicts generated by self-interest,
but particular conflicts that have their own ways of structuring the relations
that we establish with each other through our passionate engagements. These
dynamics can also be seen to yield precisely those spaces of “reason-ability” that
allow us to develop our capacities and abilities in ways we would have been
unable to develop independently of them.

I think that Hegel’s speculative considerations throw interesting light on our
increasingly multicultural world. Our world is increasingly “multicultural” in
the sense that a variety of people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly
live in contact with one another, thus creating a particular kind of social space.
A key feature of this social space, I have argued, is the recognition by those
who live within it, not only that it is structured by both the familiar and
unfamiliar—the familiar developed within one’s family contact, the unfamiliar
resulting from also being in contact with an extra-familial world—but that it
comprises unfamiliar familiarities, different ways of making sense of the world.
Recognition of these unfamiliar familiarities as forming part of a shared social
space cannot but modulate the passionate engagement of each of us with others.
Indeed, this modulation through the dynamics of mutual recognition speaks to
the fact, or rather the movement expressed by the fact, that our world is indeed
becoming increasingly multicultural. Our passionate engagements increasingly
demand that we recognize each other in and through our engagements, that is,
within the spaces of “reason-ability” created by the attempt to establish relations
based on mutuality.

In the multicultural spaces of most Western democracies these demands for
mutual recognition usually get expressed in terms of the recognition of rights,
sometimes constitutionally guaranteed within given state structures, sometimes
appealed to from a moral point of view. Thus, through Hegel, we see how from
the dynamics of history—the struggle for mutual recognition creating a shared
social space of “reason-ability”—a telos of universality arises or emerges. The
universal arises or emerges out of the struggle for mutuality because the latter
requires of us, as John Russon might put it, a self-transcending critique of our supposed self-interest. This is reflected in the sense that most of us have that, despite our differences, and indeed because of those differences, our world is increasingly one that we are called upon to share.

However, as Marx has helped us notice, this universality of mutual recognition, and the spaces of “reason-ability” that it creates and sustains, are hardly equally distributed across the various populations of the planet. In fact, more often than not, they seem to be the privilege only of the privileged. Too many people inhabit, not spaces of “reason-ability,” but spaces of bodily exploitation that leave little room for mutuality. It seems that, on Hegel’s view of history, ultimately, as long as spaces of “reason-ability” are created and sustained, then that is sufficient to enable us to say that the telos is realizing itself, even if many people, not to say most, do not live out their lives within those spaces, and their lives are summed up as passions spent rather than reason realized.

For Marx, it is not the “idea of freedom” that needs to prevail in history, but the free development of each and therefore of all. The dynamics of history for Marx are not first and foremost a struggle for recognition. Rather, history is fuelled by the living labour of all of us, our combined productive forces. We are unfree insofar as the productive forces, to which we each contribute most of our waking lives, are exploited in the interests of some rather than in the interests of the productive forces themselves, our lives being given over to the enrichment of some in exchange for a (standard of) living. Although, like Hegel, Marx sees in mutuality the true movement of history, the direction that it sets itself as it struggles with those consolidated powers of vested interest; the telos of history for Marx is a world other than one controlled in the interests of a few, a world that reflects the interests of all as these express themselves in our passionately mutual engagements with one another, understood now not principally as conflictual but as associative, within which conflicts will no doubt arise but need not overwhelm.

This world is our actual world, not a dream world. It is the world that arises out of our daily interactions, governed by an everyday “social sociability,” wherever we are called to engage with one another, at work, in our families and neighbourhoods, in our travels and projects. It is a world greatly enriched by the differences that many cultures, many singularities, can provide in, as Hardt and Negri put it, “communication, collaboration, and cooperation,” and that can provide for the continued development and creation of our individual and combined capacities.

In the end the best way to evaluate these speculative attempts to make sense of history, through an understanding of its dynamics and its telos, might be to see which one best fits the modal square within which our lives unfold.
Which attempt allows us to assume our contingent presence on Earth, through acknowledgement of the necessities that have contributed to the present structures of the world, but with a strong sense of its possibilities, limited only by the impossible? In my view Marx's insistence on a dynamics of living labour, devoted to a telos of the free development of each and therefore of all, is the most successful. It conceives the necessities of past exploitation as structuring a contingent relation to the present that can be transformed by focusing on the real possibility of living and working together in ways that not only develop our natural capacities as productive and creative forces, but make it impossible for us to ignore the freedom and equality that attention to the struggles of history shows belong to us all.