

Hoping for a Better Past

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Unless we're planning to travel in a time machine, we don't typically think about hope in terms of the past. Hope seems intrinsically linked not just to the future but to the image of a better future. Without hope for a better future, it seems that widespread resignation must reign. In such a situation, political struggle would disappear. The miserable status quo would rule unchallenged, as no one could imagine an alternative to replace it.

The problem with centering hope on the future is that this position fails to take stock of the relationship between the past and the future. The future necessarily follows from its past. To look to the future for an alternative to the impoverished present is to fall for the fundamental deception of temporality: just because the future has not yet arrived does not mean that its status is open. Once the determinations of the past are in place, there is no opening for the future to transpire outside of these determinations. This is why Hegel places his hope in the past rather than the future.

Hegel has the reputation of being the unapologetic champion of progressive history. According to the doxa on Hegel, all the sacrifices of the past find their justification in the flowering of the bountiful future. The sins that occur throughout the ages are ultimately overshadowed because they work to bring about a better future. History is the march of reason, which operates behind the backs of history's unknowing actors, who sacrifice themselves for their particular goals that end up fulfilling the universal aims that they never consciously consider.¹ This narrative about Hegel's philosophy has the virtue of presenting a mirror image of his actual thinking. It interprets Hegel in a way that jibes with progressive liberalism, while forgetting that he rejects liberalism at every turn. This approach represents a failure to grasp the absolute radicality of his counterintuitive approach to history. For Hegel, we have hope insofar as we have the capacity for having a different past, not an alternative future. Philosophy cannot do anything about the future, so it must intervene in the past, not so as to justify its atrocities but to recognize the potential for hope that holds.

When Hegel interprets history as the unfolding of freedom, he is under no illusions. He understands that people in the past did not have a sense of themselves as freedom fighters. They

might have consciously struggled for power, dignity, and even just survival. But Hegel is able to provide a novel interpretation of their struggle that recognizes the role that freedom plays in it. In his lectures on the *Philosophy of World History*, he states, “World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom—a progress whose necessity we have to recognize.”² In spite of his use of the term *progress*, Hegel does not adopt a progressive view of history here. His emphasis is not on the historical development of freedom but on the act of recognizing such a development. In this act of identifying history as the unfolding of freedom, we do not just avow what was present in the past waiting to be discovered. Instead, through the act of recognizing the movement toward freedom in the struggles of history, we interpret this movement into existence. We discover history backwards, not forwards, which enables us to recognize the precursors of the contemporary scene in the movement of history. The interpretation works backward in order to find the roots of the contemporary struggle for freedom in the past. By doing so, the contemporary struggle gains a solid footing that it otherwise wouldn’t have. We have hope, Hegel implies, not because the future is unwritten but because the past can always be rewritten. When we rewrite it, we transform the political valence of the present.³

Hegel’s approach to history is *nachträglich* or retroactive. Although Hegel never employs the term *Nachträglichkeit* or retroactivity that Sigmund Freud would later popularize, it is nonetheless the basis for his philosophy of history. It signifies a causality that moves against chronology, a retroactive causality. While most commentators credit Hegel with introducing history into philosophy, they fail to mention the specific way that he makes history central.⁴ He doesn’t provide historical explanations that explain the emergence of current phenomena but rather takes current phenomena as the starting point for turning to history. History becomes what it was through the theorist’s act of interpretation that constitutes it after the fact. The past acquires its significance thanks to the current struggle, so that this struggle explains the past rather than the past explains what follows chronologically.

Freud explains this in terms of a sexual assault that a girl he names Emma undergoes. Emma comes to him as an adult who is unable to go into shops alone due to a trauma that she once experienced while shopping. Her conscious memory involves only repulsion at a relatively benign incident that occurred when she was twelve years old. This incident itself is insufficient to explain the paralysis that affects her when it comes to entering into a shop alone. Freud writes, “She went into a shop to buy something, saw the two shop-assistants (one of whom she can

remember) laughing together, and ran away in some kind of *affect of fright*.”⁵ If it were clear that the clerks were laughing at Emma, perhaps this could be the decisive trauma. But this is not what Emma recounts, which leaves the actual trauma unstated.

Through the analysis, Freud and Emma discover a prior incident that she has no conscious memory of. Unlike witnessing the two clerks laughing, this incident is far from benign. It turns out that a shopkeeper sexually assaulted Emma twice at the age of eight. This event, which was unconscious, was the decisive trauma, but it didn't directly prevent Emma from entering alone into a shop. That hindrance occurred only after the experience of the laughing clerks. Even though the encounter with the laughing shop-assistants occurred four years later than this assault, this encounter retroactively caused the trauma of the assault to become psychically operative for Emma. In a psychic sense, the later event comes first, which is why Freud uses the term *Nachträglichkeit* to describe the effect.

This is exactly how Hegel thinks of history. It is why his philosophy is profoundly anti-historicist. History for Hegel is the opposite of what it is for the historicist approach. Historicism looks to the past to understand how the present came about. A historicist might, for instance, examine Greek thinking about sexuality and how this thinking informed the early Christian era. Taking this as a foundation, a historicist could theorize modern conceptions of sexuality as the development of what begins in ancient Greece.

A historicist approach has difficulty theorizing a break in which a radical political event could take place. If the historicist uncovers a historical causality that works effectively, there is no possible opening for an event that would disrupt the line that runs from past to future. This is what Joan Copjec recognizes in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Copjec contends that historicism—she focuses on the sort practiced by Michel Foucault, but her point applies more broadly — “is ultimately *resistant to resistance*, unable to conceive of a discourse that would refuse rather than refuel power.”⁶ Even though many historicists (such as Foucault) see themselves as radical political actors, their approach to history eliminates the space for any radicality. Once we look at history progressively, it becomes difficult to grasp how it might become otherwise. Progressives believe that the future will be better than the present, but they typically conceptualize the future as the outcome of the present, thereby giving short shrift to its possible difference from the present.

Hegel looks to the past not to understand how the present came about but as a domain where he can hope for an alternative to emerge. Even though our future is always determined, we can hope for a different past. Directing hope to the past instead of the future is the key to Hegel's radical philosophical project. It aims at changing the world through interpreting it differently.

When Hegel looks at the past while mapping out the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there is much that he decides to omit. Whole epochs fail to merit a single sentence. Undoubtedly some of these exclusions are the product of Hegel's own personal proclivities and lacunae in his knowledge. But Hegel purposively excludes what doesn't fit within the narrative of freedom's unfolding. The current struggle for freedom dictates the past events that Hegel's philosophy explores. The point of this philosophy is neither providing an exhaustive account of the past nor demonstrating the causes that resulted in his contemporary situation. It is rather finding hope in the past for uncovering freedom today. The struggle for freedom in Hegel's own day demands we look to the past to support this struggle. Seen in this light, writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (and all his other works, since they all share the same structure) becomes an act of hope, especially because Hegel rules out any discussion of the future in his philosophy. For Hegel, there is no hope at all if we look for it in the future, no possibility for progress. We can only hope through the possibility of changing the past.

This is the enduring lesson of Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020). The film depicts a war between the future inhabitants of earth and the contemporary ones. The future attempts to destroy the present to stop the current population from continuing to render the earth uninhabitable through the ongoing ecological devastation that the present inhabitants continue to perpetuate. The politics of this film are ambiguous, since the villains are a future people determined to take drastic measures to stop the current destruction of the planet. The heroes stop the destruction of the planet, but in doing so, they leave in place a system that will lead to the earth's future uninhabitability. Despite this political ambiguity, Nolan's conception of the film's action sequences reveals a political insight the equal of Hegel's philosophical one.

In the action scenes from *Tenet*, the heroes cannot just act moving forward in time, but some of them must move backward. They must resort to working in both temporal directions because this is the only way to defeat those coming from the future. This strategy is what they call a "temporal pincer movement." By utilizing this technique, the heroes show how we should reconceive political action. Rather than intervening to call for a better future, we need to think of

political struggle as the fight for the proper interpretation of the past. Just as the fighters moving only forward in time have no chance against those moving backward, theorists and artists working reinterpreting the past in light of contemporary politics have a decisive advantage over those who would confine themselves to fighting for a better future. It is only through fighting for a better past that we can change the world. This position that Hegel announced first in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and subsequently in his other works had no one to pick it up. Soon after his death, his philosophy took a turn to the future. *Nachträglichkeit* disappeared from his theoretical project as he became the paradigmatic historicist philosopher of history. The transformation of Hegel into a progressive robbed him of his radicality.

Hegel's reputation as a progressive philosopher of history who hopes for a better future derives in large part from Karl Marx's translation of his thought into the basis for conceptualizing a revolutionary future organized the actions of the proletariat. When encountering Hegel, Marx claims that he must correct the former's idealism with a healthy dose of materialism. This involves setting Hegel aright, since with him dialectic is standing on its head. But Marx's theory of history doesn't set Hegel right side up, as he claims, but turns him around, facing him in the opposite direction.⁷ He turns Hegel into a chronological historian and thereby subtracts the rational kernel out of his thought rather than preserving it in the way that he imagines.

Marx was the key player in centering hope on the future. Whereas the French and Haitian Revolutions look to the past for their inspiration, Marx insists that the coming proletarian revolution must fix its regard solely on the future. In his view, the future can be the site of the genuinely novel, not just the repetition of a past failure. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he writes, "The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off all its superstitious regard for the past. Earlier revolutions have needed world-historical reminiscences to deaden their awareness of their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead."⁸ Although Marx rejects utopian thinking, he does integrate the hope for a better future into his thought as a necessary component. The proletarian revolution, he imagines, will derive its poetry from the future because its entire psychic investment lies in the future that it hopes to bring about. Future revolutionaries will not be chained down by the past but will write their own future, he imagines.

Without the image of an alternative future to give us hope, we would be unable to constitute ourselves as political beings. This is why Marx views the image of a different future as politically exigent.

Hegel represents another vision for radical politics. He doesn't give up on hopefulness, but he does give up on the image of a better future. We can hope not because the future is unwritten but because the past can always be rewritten. To rewrite it as the unfolding of freedom is to give the lie to conservatives such as Thomas Hobbes and Edmund Burke, as well as liberals such as Adam Smith and Milton Friedman. We must reinterpret the past to show how they missed what was actually going on. History doesn't justify the oppressive present. It holds the key to repressed possibilities that provide a reason to hope.

We do not need a time machine to return to the past. It is the office of philosophy and art to look to the past for possibilities that would become occluded in the dismal future that is presently unfolding. The narrative of progress that Marx and Marxism invested themselves in is dead. But we have the ability to look backward to discover a different history. Even if we can't envision a livable future, we can still hope for a better past.

Notes

¹ The most extreme expression of this interpretation of Hegel occurs in Peter Singer's introduction to his philosophy. Singer sees Hegel as an extreme progressive, one who believes that the end point of history is perfection. Describing Hegel's view of history, he writes, "It is a vision that places immense weight on the necessity of progress: for the onward movement of history is the path God must take to achieve perfection." Peter Singer, *Hegel* in Roger Scruton, Peter Singer, Christopher Janaway, and Michael Tanner, *German Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1983]), 202. For Singer, there is no question that Hegel invests all his hope in the future.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume I: Manuscripts of the Introduction and Lectures of 1822-3*. eds. and trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 88.

³ Rebecca Comay argues that when Hegel historicizes an event, he doesn't place it within a chain of historical causality that explains it. Instead, the event has the ability to change the past through the act of historicizing it. As she puts it in *Mourning Sickness*, "The event is historicized: instead of determining the future, the past is freed to receive a new meaning from the future." Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 133. Historicizing changes the past rather than allowing us to recognize the causes that determine the present.

⁴ Tom Rockmore, for instance, correctly claims that “Hegel is ... perhaps the first great philosopher to perceive an indissociable link between philosophy and history, to impart a fundamentally historical dimension to his theory.” Tom Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel’s Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 47. For Rockmore as for the others who make this observation, including history in one’s philosophy implies just conceptualizing philosophy as developing through the forward movement of time. My conception of Hegel’s relationship to history runs in the opposite direction.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1966), 353.

⁶ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 18.

⁷ In the postface to the second edition of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx makes a famous statement comparing his dialectical method to Hegel’s. He writes, “The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.” Karl Marx, Preface to the Second Edition, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976 [1873]), 103.

⁸ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Political Writings, Volume 2: Surveys from Exile* (London: Verso, 2010 [1852]), 149.