

**Is there a direction to history? Answer with reference to at least two theorists.**

Bertolt Brecht's poem *A Worker Reads History* asks "Was it the kings that hauled the craggy blocks of stone?". There is no answer. Indeed there can be no answer, as of course Brecht's implication is that the workers are written out of history – they only exist in it as agents and extensions of the powerful.

But even written out of history, do those workers shape it? Are they the agents of change, or is it only their rulers?

Marx's theory of *Basis und Uberbau* posits that it is the *basis*, the mode and means of production that shapes history.

The *uberbau*, or superstructure, that is the rulers, the culture, and the state, is reduced merely to following this. He writes: "consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production." (Marx 1977, preface).

It is important to note, however, that this did not mean Marx felt that there were not laws that conducted history.

On the contrary, the very fact of the near-universalism of the forces of production meant that Marx saw "historical development as proceeding according to a set of dialectical 'laws', [with] the 'necessary' emergence of different stages of the historical process" (Gardiner 1959, 'Marx').

However to talk of necessary stages it would suggest that all these stages would be passed through by different societies at different times. This has problematic implications when we consider that societies do not operate independently, in a bubble as it were, so the stages that each society passes through would be influenced by others, perhaps at different stages themselves. Marx failed to predict the Russian Revolution. But had he known of it, he would have predicted instead its demise, as it did not follow the laws he wrote of, and had not passed through the necessary stage of capitalism before attempting a socialist economy, so his theory broadly stands this test, if we accept the revolution's inception as an accident of history.

Modernisation theory, often associated with Émile Durkheim, states that this interference is only a positive force that will help accelerate the changes. Part of the problem of Modernisation theory is that like many theories of history, including Marx's, it is guilty of a certain short-sightedness when it comes to countries outside Europe. It states that less advanced societies' evolution will be accelerated by that of the more advanced. But empire, and now globalisation, have stood in the way of this.

The reason I accuse the theory of short-sightedness is that it would become a much more effective theory were it to view the world as a single society, ignoring boundaries of sovereignty. Sovereignty has been violated by empire in the past; now it is violated by globalisation. If we see the populations of the less-advanced societies as a global proletariat, those most exploited, we can see why trickle-down theories of social development have not been effected.

But if we see the world as a single society, perhaps we might agree with Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama famously delivered a lecture in 1989, at the end of the Cold War, proclaiming the 'End of History'. If all the world believed in and followed liberal democracy, he reasoned, we had reached "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama 1992, xi). Although Fukuyama's thought, was similar to Marx's in that it was rooted in Hegel, Derrida argued in *Spectres of Marx* that Fukuyama sought the death of Marx (Derrida 1994). Derrida felt that Fukuyama's declaration of victory was one of denial, to stifle the spectre of Marx by declaring its nonexistence (Ibid.).

Certainly any socialist would argue that even if conflict did not exist between liberal democracies, and even were all states run by liberal democracies, tension is nonetheless inevitable internally. Class conflict is a central feature of the liberal democracy – in fact Marx and Engels stated "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" in *The Communist Manifesto*. This would apparently make Fukuyama's thesis quite irrelevant, suggesting as it does that the international spread of liberal democracy has nothing to do with history – history is class struggle, and Fukuyama does not even address class struggle. Moreover, Fukuyama's idea of a world without conflict has been somewhat undermined by his support for PNAC and the invasion of Iraq.

So how might we criticise Marx's conception of history? Surely the most controversial and most easily examined is his explanation of the rise of capitalism from feudalism. Marx wrote that social change occurs when the relations of production become a 'fetter' on the forces of production (Marx 1977, preface). But at the end of feudalism, peasants were expropriated from their property, and these now landless workers were forced into the factories. This expansion of private property is not the relations of production becoming a fetter to the means – rather it is the relations of production ordering a change in the means. The locus of control is with the *uberbau*, not the *basis*.

If Marx's account of the origins of capitalism according to laws is flawed, perhaps then a thesis of accidents in history is more suitable. One of the best-known is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In it, Weber

argues that the rise of capitalism is a very specific historical occurrence, that owes itself to complex and specific sociological factors – the Protestant work ethic.

Weber's thesis has been criticised on many grounds; perhaps most significantly that Presbyterianism (or any similar Calvinist Protestantism) is a small denomination of Christianity, found most significantly in Scotland, where capitalism was neither first nor strongest. Many of the strongest capitalist economies were found in Catholic areas of Europe.

Criticism of Weber's argument tends to focus however on his positing of the Protestant ethic itself – not on his disavowing of a direction of history, and indeed I believe it is there that it is strongest. Weber is conscious of the one-sidedness of his argument, and that the Protestant ethic is not the only factor. In fact the real strength of the thesis rests on its criticisms, as critique of one social factor implies many – but does not imply direction or dialectical laws. Weber's thesis is brave due to its acceptance of complexity, and refusal of a reductive analysis rooted in universalism. The book could be interpreted as a call for sociology, a call to look more deeply into history, to report it in detail rather than to explain it and suggest a future. Perhaps the biggest problem of directions to history is the arrogance of an idea that claims to understand the past so completely that there are no anomalies – a theory so universal that the future could be predicted.

I do not personally believe in any kind of direction to history. While I reject Weber's thesis of the Protestant ethic, and while I appreciate the strength of Marx's writing on dialectical laws, I believe that history is far too complex to reduce to such laws. I also reject theories of modernisation, not only because they do not explain the lack of modernisation of many societies, but also that their ethnocentric arrogance, their positing of the supremacy of European states, and their dismissal of any other form of society as primitive or underdeveloped is not only offensive to those societies but also to those millions in Europe who find its societies lacking. Most of all I reject Fukuyama and any concept of the "end of history", as the fundamental fact of liberal democracy is class tension and struggle, and until every human on earth is utterly content, we cannot possibly entertain such hubristic notions.

If there is a direction to history, it is enormously more complex than any suggested so far; perhaps it is too complex to ever be explained by a theory.

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