



Marx and Teleology

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ABSTRACT: Marx sees history as a progressive development. This account is often criticized for portraying history in a Hegelian fashion as a single teleological process culminating ultimately in a classless communist society. Is this criticism justified? What role — if any — do teleological ideas play in Marx’s philosophy? Marx himself is unclear on these issues. Through a critical discussion of Althusser’s view that history is a process without a subject, it is argued that Marxism is best seen as a theory which involves a naturalistic concept of teleology and which describes the historical emergence of the human subject. This interpretation is supported by comparison of Marx’s theory of history with Darwinian evolutionary theory.

KEYWORDS: Marx, teleology, evolution, end of history

MARX’S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY follows closely in the footsteps of Hegel’s — too closely, it is sometimes said. For Hegel, history is a teleological story of the progressive development of spirit (*Geist*) which unfolds through a dialectical process towards the final end of its full development, the full realization of human consciousness and freedom. Although Marx claims to criticize and reject Hegel’s idealism and to develop a materialist theory of history, there is no doubt that he adopts important aspects of these ideas. He, too, regards history as a progressive and dialectical process;

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and although Marx sees this development primarily as a material rather than a spiritual progress, his theory of history is often criticized for being infected by Hegelian teleological ideas. Are these charges justified? What role — if any — do teleological ideas play in Marx's philosophy of history, and what is problematic about them? These are the topics of this paper.

The Concept of Teleology

Let me first explain briefly what teleology is and why it has been such a problem for Marxism and for philosophy more generally. A teleological process is one that is aimed at an end or goal, though the end may not ultimately be achieved¹; there is no inevitable determinism here.

The ideas of teleology and progress usually go together, and they are often conflated, but they are not the same. Progress occurs when a society grows according to some given measure. The term refers to a pattern of change but, unlike teleology, it carries no necessary implications about why the pattern occurs; it may even occur by accident. A teleological process, by contrast, is governed and determined by its end. There can thus be progress without teleology, and teleology may take other than a progressive form.²

Teleological theories of history can take various forms. It is sometimes said that historical development is determined by a universal human desire for ever greater material wealth. On this view the goal of historical development is set transhistorically and independently of the historical process itself. Some influential writers have attributed this sort of theory to Marx in recent years (Cohen, 1978; Wood, 2004), but there are no good grounds for doing so (Wood, 1995).³ Moreover, this is not the sort of teleological theory that attracts criticism for being too idealistic or Hegelian. I shall not consider it further here.

Hegel's philosophy involves a different sort of teleology in which the end of history is immanent within and internal to the historical process itself. It is this internal sort of teleology that Marx is criticized

1 The end may be a specific and determinate state (for example, the full realization of spirit, or communism), or it may be a tendency or direction of development without a finite or definite end state (for example, economic growth)

2 Dennett (1996, 64–68) makes a related distinction between “order” and “design.”

3 See also Polanyi, 1957, for criticism of this transhistorical theory of human motivation.

for adopting from Hegel, and that is thought to be philosophically problematic. From now on, when I talk of “teleology” it is this internal kind of teleology to which I will be referring.

Teleological ideas have had an important place in the history of philosophy. The view that the whole of creation is governed by ends and purposes was widely held in the ancient world. In Aristotle’s philosophy, ends, purposes and functions are a feature of living organisms, and they are conceived in naturalistic terms without the suggestion that they are the products of intentional activity or of a divine or quasi-human subject. In the middle ages, however, Aquinas and other Christian thinkers, adapting this philosophy, looked upon the world as an artefact created by divine design and following a providential course.⁴

Scientists and philosophers at the beginning of the modern period swept away completely all such teleological talk of ends, purposes or functions in nature. They regarded teleological notions like these as ways of seeing divine purposes in nature, and maintained that a scientific approach must reject them entirely and adopt a purely causal picture. They insisted on a “disenchanted,” purely causal and materialist — even mechanistic — view which comprehends the world without any reference to design, ends or purposes. This approach is still very influential among materialistically minded thinkers, including many Marxists.

However, when scientific investigation began to be extended to the living world and to social phenomena in the 18th century, doubts about the adequacy of a purely causal picture began to grow. Living organisms seem clearly to have ends (such as self-preservation, self-maintenance, reproduction, etc.), and their parts and organs to have functions. Historical development seems to follow a progressive and teleological path.

Hegel credits Kant with being the first modern thinker to insist that teleological ideas are needed to comprehend the world and to reintroduce teleological ideas into modern philosophy (Hegel, 1975, §204, 268). In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that teleological

4 “In the thirteenth century, Aquinas offered the view that natural bodies [such as planets, raindrops, volcanoes] act as if guided toward a definite goal or end ‘so as to obtain the best result.’ This fitting of means to ends implies, argued Aquinas, an intention. But, seeing as natural bodies lack consciousness, they cannot supply that intention themselves. ‘Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and that being we call God’” (Paul Davies, quoted by Dennett, 1996, 64–65).

notions are required in order to comprehend the behavior of living things and human activity (including history), and he tries to allow a place for them and to reconcile them with a causal and scientific world view.

However, although Kant regards nature in purely causal and mechanistic terms, he takes human intentional activity as the model for teleological action. His understanding of a teleological process is based on his conception of activity in which the idea of a goal and the intension to achieve it are its determining principle. This model underlies his account of natural teleology. He conceives of organic life (and, indeed, of nature as a whole) on the model of an artefact created according to a prior concept or idea. He thus holds that teleological phenomena are intentional processes that cannot be explained in purely naturalistic causal terms. "To say that a thing is possible only as a purpose is to say that the causality that gave rise to it must be sought, not in the mechanism of nature, but in a cause whose ability to act is determined by concepts" (Kant, 1987, 248–49).

The dilemma that then faces Kant and those who have followed him in wanting to defend a role for teleological notions, is that teleological principles thus conceived are not only different from, but incompatible with, the naturalistic and causal picture of nature that is fundamental to modern scientific thought. This continues to be the main basis of philosophical objections to teleological forms of thought in relation to nature and history.

Kant's solution is to argue that teleological judgments are not "constitutive," but merely "reflective." We may validly describe the world in teleological terms, but these refer only to the way we see and think about it, not to the way it objectively is. We can see the world "as if" it is following a teleological course, but we cannot know or validly claim that it is objectively doing so (Kant, 1987).

Hegel's ideas about teleology are a direct response to Kant's. Hegel agrees with Kant on the need for teleological forms of thought in our conception of the world; and like Kant the way he conceives of these clearly has a theological dimension. In contrast to Kant, however, Hegel insists that teleological judgments describe objective processes; they refer to the way things actually are. In particular, Hegel argues that history is a teleological process of the progressive development and realization of spirit (*Geist*), of consciousness and freedom. In the

course of history, spirit develops from being merely potentially present to being actualized, from being merely in-itself to being for-itself, from being implicit to being explicit. Hegel sees historical development as an organic process; he compares it to the growth of a seed into a plant in a way that clearly implies a teleological conception of it.

World history . . . is the exhibition of the Spirit, the working out of the explicit knowledge of what it is potentially. Just as the germ of the plant carries within itself the entire nature of the tree, even the taste and shape of its fruit, so the first traces of Spirit virtually contain all history. (Hegel, 1988, 21.)

Hegel's theory of history is frequently criticized for being theological and premodern. However, it is by no means clear that Hegel sees history as Kant does, on the model of an intentionally guided process. His notion of spirit must not be confused with the idea of mind conceived as distinct from its material realization or with that of a merely individual subjectivity. The interpretation of Hegel's philosophy on these questions is much disputed, as is the question of whether it can be reconciled with a naturalistic and causal account, as Hegel wishes. It would take me too far out of my way to discuss these issues in detail here. However, there is no doubt that Hegel's teleological conception of history is often taken to be idealist and theological in character in ways that are incompatible with a scientific picture — and Marx is frequently accused of inheriting this from him.

These controversies have continued into the present, both within and outside Marxism. Many philosophers and scientists still find it tempting to adopt a simple materialist position and to reject all teleological notions whatever. Others, however, argue that this is too narrow and ultimately untenable. Many Marxists and other social theorists maintain that history has followed a progressive course; and many biologists recognize that living organisms seek to preserve and reproduce themselves. They recognize that such patterns are real and not accidental, and that they cannot easily be comprehended or explained in purely causal or mechanical terms. Rather, they must be recognized to be teleological in character; and yet at the same time they must be comprehended in naturalistic terms without implying that they are guided by intentions or by an intelligent agent. Whether and, if so, how this is possible has been much debated within Marxism. It has also

been much discussed by contemporary philosophers in the context of biology in ways that can contribute usefully to the discussion of these issues within Marxism, as we shall see in due course.

Marx's Views

These arguments constitute the philosophical context within which Marx's ideas must be considered. Marx's own writings are surprisingly ambiguous and unclear on the topic of teleology. On the one hand, he quite explicitly rejects Hegel's philosophy of history for its teleological approach in many places. This is a target of his criticisms from the very beginning. In some of his earliest writings he criticizes Hegel in a "Feuerbachian" fashion for "inverting" subject and predicate (Marx, 1975a). This is, in part, a rejection of the teleological view that material conditions are determined by a pre-existing "idea," rather than vice versa.

Moreover, this sort of criticism is not confined to a supposed early, Feuerbachian phase, as Althusser maintained in his earlier writings (1969).⁵ Similar criticisms are repeated in a number of Marx's later works: for example, in *Poverty of Philosophy* of 1847 (Marx, 1955, 91–96); and in the "Afterword" to Volume I of *Capital* (1867), where Marx claims that he inverts Hegel's philosophy, and where he characterizes Hegel's teleological idea that history is the realization of the Idea as the "mystical" side of Hegel's philosophy (Marx, 1961, 19).⁶

There are also what one might call more robust, materialist responses to the Hegelian teleological approach. For example, in the *German Ideology*, the teleological personification of history is rejected as follows:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations. . . . This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history. . . . Thereby history receives its own special aims and becomes "a person ranking with other

5 Althusser later came to acknowledge that Hegelian influences are present throughout Marx's work (Althusser, 2006, 211, 258).

6 In *Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx, 1955, 92) Marx also pours scorn on the Hegelian formula of the "negation of the negation," though he uses it in *Capital* I (Marx, 1961, 753) and, of course, Engels adopts it as one his three "laws" of dialectic (Engels, 1964, 63). I will return to this below.

persons” . . . while what is designated with the words “destiny,” “goal,” “germ,” or “idea” of earlier history is nothing more than an abstraction formed from later history, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history. (Marx and Engels, 1970, 57–58.)⁷

And in the *Grundrisse*, Marx rejects “the so-called historical presentation of development [which] is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself” (Marx, 1973, 105).

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Marx was attracted by aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of history and particularly by some of his forms of expression, and at times his account of history has unmistakably teleological implications. For example, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx is explicitly portraying communism as the teleological end of history when he asserts that it is “the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution” (Marx, 1975b, 348).

Again, explicitly teleological passages of this sort are not confined to Marx’s early works. In 1853 Marx describes Britain as being “the unconscious tool of history” in helping to bring about “mankind’s destiny” by its actions in India.⁸ As Singer says, this idea of “mankind’s destiny” clearly implies that “history moves in a purposive way towards some goal” (Singer, 1980, 42). Other passages with what appear to be explicitly teleological implications are cited from other of Marx’s later writings (Kolakowski, 1978, Vol. I, 346–351; Elster, 1985, 107–118).

More questionable claims are made about the teleological character of some other texts. In *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973, 409) and in *Capital*, Volume III (Marx, 1971a, 819), Marx talks of the “civilizing” influence of capitalism. This is sometimes taken to imply that this is its destined role and purpose in history (Kolakowski, 1978, Vol. I, 348), but this phrase does not necessarily have that implication and there is no good reason for reading it in that way. The phrase implies that

7 Cf. also the following passage, which I will discuss below: “History does *nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth,’ it ‘wages *no* battles.’ It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims” (Marx and Engels, 1956, 125).

8 “England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution” (Marx, 1978a, 658).

there has been a progressive development, but not necessarily that this is a result of a teleological process.

In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx claims that “human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.” This observation is sometimes thought to presuppose a teleological picture, but that is a misunderstanding, as is clear when one sees the remark in its context. I will quote it at length.

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc. (Marx, 1973, 105.)

What Marx is saying is that when we look back at the way these developments have actually occurred, we can understand the significance of certain features in the earlier forms. There is no teleological implication in this (cf. Wood, 1984, 103–104).

In sum, the evidence from Marx’s explicit statements is ambiguous and unclear. He directly rejects the teleological approach in a number of places, but in others he uses language which has or appears to have Hegelian teleological implications.

Marx’s Hegelianism

If Marx’s occasional uses of Hegelian teleological language, such as those I have cited, were the only evidence to convict him of teleological thinking, one could perhaps judge that these are mere rhetorical lapses and that his more considered position is anti-teleological. However, one must go deeper than this. For integral to Marx’s account of history are Hegelian ways of thinking and forms of expression in which teleological assumptions, although not explicit, are argued to be presupposed and implicit.

The idea that Marx holds a teleological theory of history may well seem to be implied in his view that historical development will culminate in communism. The motive force of historical change, according to Marx, is class conflict which drives history forwards; and the view that communism is a society that will be free of class division may thus seem to imply that it will be the teleological end of history. Marx does not say this explicitly, but he does describe communism as the end of “prehistory” (Marx, 1978c), a phrase with an unmistakably Hegelian ring to it that is sometimes taken to have this meaning (mistakenly in my view). I shall discuss this argument later.

Other important criticisms are made by Althusser. He argues that a number of Hegelian formulations used by Marx have inescapably teleological implications. He focuses particularly on what he calls Marx’s “humanism”: the idea that human history has involved a progressive development of human powers and the growth of the human “subject.”

This humanist picture is clearest in Marx’s early writings, where Hegel’s influence on him is most evident. It is clearly present in a passage from the *1844 Manuscripts*, in which Marx acknowledges his debt to Hegel.

The importance of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and its final result — the dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle — lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object [*Entgegenständlichung*], as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; . . . he therefore grasps the nature of labour and conceives objective man — true, because real man — as the result of his own labour. (Marx, 1975b, 385–86.)

Here Marx sees history as the story of human “self-creation,” as a process by which, in Gordon Childe’s (Childe, 1941) words, “man makes himself.”⁹

Moreover, Marx also endorses the Hegelian picture that human historical (“spiritual”) development occurs in a characteristically dialectical fashion through stages of alienation and its overcoming. The

9 Cf. Lichtheim: “What Marx shared with Hegel was . . . the belief that there is an objective meaning in history. For Hegel this is constituted by the progressive evolution of the spirit towards freedom while for Marx it is bound up with man’s mastery over nature, including his own nature. . . . History to [Marx] was the story of man’s self-creation” (Lichtheim, 1961, 37–8).

process starts with a stage of immediate and simple unity, which is then negated in a stage of division and alienation, and then negated again in a concrete fashion to create a higher form of unity that incorporates these differences within it. A dialectical pattern of development of this sort is described as taking the form of the “negation of the negation” (*e.g.*, Hegel, 2007, 13).

These Hegelian dialectical ways of describing historical development make their way into Marx’s work in a number of places.¹⁰ For example, in the account of the “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation” in *Capital* he describes historical development as a dialectical process having the Hegelian form of the “negation of the negation” (Marx, 1961, 753).¹¹ In the *Grundrisse* he describes it as going through the typical Hegelian three-stage pattern of alienation and its overcoming.¹²

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence is the second great form. . . . Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third. (Marx, 1973, 158.)

According to Althusser, these Hegelian formulae and Marx’s humanism are unavoidably teleological. They are cases of what Althusser calls the philosophy of “origin and end,” for they presume the notion of a “subject” present at the outset and continuing throughout, which embodies the end. The process of development is then the realization of an end that has been operative in the subject from the beginning.¹³ Even though there is supposed to be a process of alienation and its overcoming, negation and negation of the negation, an identical simple subject remains throughout. The end is present from the beginning and the final stage simply reaffirms the original unity,

10 Although Marx also seems to repudiate them at times (Marx, 1955, 92; Marx and Engels, 1970, 56).

11 Althusser was aware of this passage, but he simply dismisses it as an aberrant exception (Althusser, 1969, 200).

12 Cf. Gould (1978), who demonstrates at length the Hegelian and dialectical character of this passage and similar passages.

13 As in Hegel’s comparison of historical development with the growth of a seed, quoted above.

albeit in a more differentiated form. In Choat's words, such accounts posit "an Origin and an End to history and the world: they promise a destiny, a telos, which is simultaneously the recovery of some lost origin, the liberation of some natural given which has been repressed or alienated" (Choat, 2007).

Initially, Althusser (1969) maintained that it is only in his early period that Marx sees historical development in this Hegelian way. Later, Althusser came to accept that such Hegelian views are evident throughout Marx's work (Althusser, 2006, 211, 258). In any case, according to Althusser, Marx's humanism is inescapably teleological (and "idealist," in Althusser's idiosyncratic sense of the term). We must reject the very idea of the subject as a metaphysical myth. Althusser concludes that history is a process without an origin or end and "without a subject," such as Man or human productive development (Althusser, 1971, 116–17). There is no simple unity or subject of history, he insists, either at the beginning or throughout. History begins from a "complex unity" and develops in an "uneven" and discontinuous fashion (Althusser, 1969).

There is some validity in Althusser's criticisms, as we shall see, but at the same time we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. For Althusser's position leads to a rejection not only of questionable teleological views, but also of any idea that history involves a regular pattern of development (let alone progress) — an idea that is absolutely essential to Marx's theory of history or, indeed, to any theory of history whatever.

In order for notions such as these to have application, there must be some unity to the historical process. It must constitute the development or progress of something determinate — that is to say, it must involve a subject that changes and yet retains its identity. This is an inescapable logical requirement.

In Hegel's philosophy of history the subject that develops is spirit (*Geist*). Althusser is right to question this notion. However, he rejects the very notion of a subject. This has the effect of dissolving history into series of discrete and separate particular states in which there can be no unity at all — only change and difference. This excludes any ideas of historical development or progress — indeed, it rules out any overall philosophy of history, such as historical materialism seeks to provide.

The British Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley puts this point very clearly:

“Evolution,” “development,” “progress,” all imply something identical throughout, a subject of the evolution, which is one and the same. If what is there at the beginning is not there at the end, and the same as what was there at the beginning, then evolution is a word with no meaning.

And he describes the philosophical problems here with force and clarity when he goes on to say:

And further, unless what is at the end is different from that which was at the beginning, there is no evolution. That which develops, or evolves itself, both is and is not. It is, or it could not be it which develops, and which at the end has developed. It is not, or else it could not become. It becomes what it is; and, if this is nonsense, then evolution is nonsense. Evolution is a contradiction; and, when the contradiction ceases, the evolution ceases. (Bradley, 1927, 191n.)

The Problem of the Subject

What, then, is the subject of historical development and progress for Marx?¹⁴ This is not an easy question to answer. Various candidates have been proposed. Charles Taylor interprets Marxism as holding a teleological picture of history, and this is the context in which he raises the question of the subject of historical development.

Marxism seems to see history as following, as it were, a plan. History has a goal, the classless society, and the various periods in history represent stages to that goal which, incomplete as they are, represent the highest point attainable at the time. But to say that history follows a plan is to posit some subject of history, some directing mind. And yet Marxism excludes any extra-human subject from consideration.

Taylor answers as follows:

The solution to the riddle in Marxist terms seems to be this: the subject of history is the human race as a whole, not just at this moment of time but over history. It is the human species in the general sense of whom one can say that they direct history to its goal; and this in a sense analogous to that in which we might say, for instance, that England fought the last war against Germany. (Taylor, 1966, 237–238.)

¹⁴ I will postpone for a moment further discussion of whether such a philosophy is necessarily teleological.

The problem with Taylor's position is evident. The "human race as whole" has not operated as a unified subject in the course of history in any way comparable to a nation-state like Germany or England.¹⁵

In a similar vein Singer writes as follows:

Like Hegel, Marx thought that history is a necessary process heading towards a discoverable goal. . . . Marx's idea of the goal of world history was, of course, different from Hegel's. He replaced the liberation of Mind [*i.e.*, *Geist*] by the liberation of real human beings. The development of Mind through various forms of consciousness to final self-knowledge was replaced by the development of human productive forces, by which human beings free themselves from the tyranny of nature and fashion the world after their own plans. (Singer, 1980, 42–43.)

Here Singer claims that for Marx "human beings" have the historical goal of freeing themselves through the development of "human productive forces"; but just as with Taylor, it is unclear whether this account succeeds in giving a satisfactory specification of a unified historical subject.

Allen Wood agrees with Taylor and Singer that Marxism involves a progressive theory of history, but he criticizes the humanist sort of account that they give. Marx, he insists, rejects

the idealist conclusion that history must be "directed to its goal" by a "subject" or "directing mind." He explicitly denies the young Hegelian claim that "man" or "the human species" is the "subject of history" in this sense. (Wood, 2004, 297.)

Nevertheless, Wood recognizes that the notion of development requires a subject in a logical sense. He identifies this as "society's powers of production" when he writes: "History's basic tendency is rather the open-ended expansion of society's powers of production" (Wood, 2004, 297).

This is unacceptably vague. What does the term "society" refer to here? Does it mean separate and different societies (or states)? Don't these have diverse and different levels of production? Shouldn't Wood then talk of the "goals" of history in the plural? Or is "society" here

15 Taylor probably means the United Kingdom rather than England; and Germany, it should be noted, is a relatively recent creation which was actually divided in 1966 when Taylor was writing.

somehow a universal subject? In that case, perhaps we should interpret “society’s productive forces” in this general sense to mean something like “human productive forces.” That sounds suspiciously like Taylor’s and Singer’s sort of account that Wood claims to reject as “idealist.”

The problems of identifying the subject of historical development are real and evident. One can well understand why philosophers like Althusser are sceptical of the very idea. Plamenatz expresses such doubts as follows:

Comte and Marx (and others of their kind), when they speak of a course of social change, are not speaking of changes of which anything easily identifiable is the enduring subject. . . . There is nothing which retains its identity as it changes in the ways they describe; there is only a course of events. There are men who are born and live and die, and among whom certain modes of action, thought and feeling endure for a time and then give way to others. (Plamenatz, 1963, Vol. 2, 429–30.)

For much of history, different societies have existed in relative isolation from each other and there have been only limited relations among them. Even within those societies, moreover, different communities and households have been largely self-sufficient and have lived and worked relatively separately from each other. Productive powers have developed in them independently and separately, and unevenly. They are brought into economic relation, both at a national and international level, through trade and commerce. Until the modern era, however, this occurred on only a limited scale, and played only a small role in determining the development of production. The levels of development of production in different communities have been aligned and unified only with the creation of regional and national markets, and eventually a world market, under capitalism. It remains unclear what sense can be made of the idea of a single “human” or “historical” subject of the process prior to that; and it is not clear, therefore, as Plamenatz says, whether the notions of historical development or progress are legitimate.

Human Self-Creation

Some of these problems are evident in Marx’s idea of human “self-creation” and Childe’s idea that “man makes himself.” Althusser’s

insistence that history is a process without a subject is aimed particularly at such humanist ideas. The idea that “man makes himself” is paradoxical and problematic. If man makes himself, was man already present at the outset as a creative agent?

It is not clear that Marx thinks so. According to Marx (at least in his clearer and more explicit accounts of the matter), in an important sense, neither “man” (Childe), nor “humanity” (Taylor, Singer), nor “society” (Wood) exist or operate as a concrete and unified entity or subject at the outset. The human subject as such is not present from the beginnings of historical development; it comes into being only in the course of the process. Nor is there any intentional or subjective activity of creation at work at the outset. Indeed, Marx seems to reject entirely the idea that there is any creative agency at work in historical development.

History does nothing, it “possesses *no* immense wealth,” it “wages *no* battles.” It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; “history” is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims. (Marx and Engels, 1956, 125.)

Clearly, neither “history” nor “man” is functioning as an originating or creative subject here. For what Marx means by “man,” he says, is “real living men” — that is, people (individuals and households) in different communities, initially producing in relative independence from each other and coming into contact with each other only occasionally.

Moreover, as Marx warns, we must not project a subject back into the beginning and imagine that it is the driving force of the development. Marx and Engels warn against this in a passage from the *German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1970, 57–58) quoted above (42–3).

In short, for Marx there is no subject that is present from the start, even as something which exists only in-itself or implicitly, or as a seed, germ, or idea, principle, goal, etc. None of these teleological notions are applicable.

And yet it would be a mistake to reject the very idea of a subject, as Althusser and Plamenatz wish to do; for with them go all ideas of development and progress, as Bradley argues. We should not simply reject and discard the notions of self-creation and self-development. They describe real patterns of change and emergence to which such

mere denials of the idea of a subject are blind. For what there is here is not a mere process without a subject. Rather it is a process in which the subject emerges and takes concrete form in the course of historical development and as a result of it.

A real pattern of emergence and development occurs in the course of history which the ideas of development and progress describe. However, the subject develops *as* a subject, as a unified and concrete entity, only in the course of the process. In other words, man, humanity, a unified historical process, etc., do develop historically, but they are not the driving forces of the development. Rather they are its result, and they emerge only towards its end. As Marx says, making a similar point, “world history has not always existed, history as world history is a result” (Marx, 1973, 109).

Similar observations apply to the Hegelian idea that historical development takes place through a process of alienation and its overcoming, and to the idea of a dialectical pattern of development that takes the form of the negation of the negation. Here, too, the Hegelian idea of an original subject or seed must be questioned, but nevertheless these notions describe real patterns of development through which a historical and social subject emerges and takes concrete form.

At the outset there are only a series of distinct and largely separate groups (households and communities) operating relatively separately and coming into contact occasionally. This is the situation described by Plamenatz and by Marx in the passage just quoted from *The Holy Family* (“*History does nothing. . . . It is man, real, living man who does all that . . . ,*” etc). However, it is wrong to think that all we have here is mere diversity and difference. There is communality too. These agents share a common humanity. Bonds of recognition can and do form between them, they enter into relation with each other. This unites them.

At first this unity exist only as a possibility, it exists only as the potentiality for relating together as fellow beings.¹⁶ However, as these different groups come into contact with one another, more concrete and developed forms of relation begin to grow and to acquire an increasingly determinate form. In this way, a unified social subject

16 This is reminiscent of Marx’s observation (about the category of labor) that “even the most abstract categories, despite their validity — precisely because of their abstractness — for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historical relations, and possess their full validity only for and within those relations” (Marx, 1973, 105).

begins to emerge and take shape. This potentiality begins to be actualized. This is the “seed” that Hegel talks about, but that image is misleading in that a seed is a concrete entity with its own concrete and specific nature, whereas the subject here is, at first, only a possibility, something merely abstract.

Emergence

According to this picture, the progressive development of the productive forces and of human capabilities, and hence the creation of the human subject, is not a teleological process of development of a single subject; it is not a process governed by an intended goal from the outset. It is not the outcome of the activity of a pre-existing subject, for there is no such subject. It arises as an unforeseen and unintended consequence through the coming together of numerous separate and independent activities. However, that is not to say that it is a mere chance outcome, a merely arbitrary, accidental, or contingent result. On the contrary, a regular pattern of development emerges from the myriad social interactions of different agents — households and individuals — each separately and independently pursuing their own ends.

The idea that social and economic patterns and historical regularities can emerge as an unintended outcome of a situation in which separate agents are independently pursuing their own limited and particular ends was not invented by Marx. It is a striking feature of social and economic life that was noted by a number of political economists and social theorists in the 18th century who laid the foundations for the social sciences. These thinkers realized that the separate actions of many individuals acting independently can result in law-like economic and social regularities. Mandeville (1970) talks of the way in which the pursuit of the “private vices” of self-interest can lead to the “public virtue” of social prosperity. Similarly, Adam Smith describes the way the market operates when individuals pursue their own interests. The individual “intends only his own gain” but he is

led by an *invisible hand* to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (Smith, 1900, 345.)

These ideas were subsequently taken up by Kant, Hegel and others, including Marx.¹⁷ Kant notes how the separate actions of individuals in society can result in social regularities which operate like “constant natural laws.”

Individual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature. (Kant, 1970, 41.)¹⁸

Hegel expresses a similar view with his notion of the “cunning of reason.”

God lets men do as they please with their particular passions and interests; but the result is the accomplishment of — not their plans, but His, and these differ decidedly from the ends primarily sought by those whom He employs. (Hegel, 1975, §209Z, 350.)

And Hegel applies this thought to history as follows:

In world history the outcome of human action is something other than what the agents aim at . . . something other than what they immediately know and will. They fulfill their own interests, but something further is thereby brought into being, something which is inwardly involved in what they do but which was not in their consciousness or part of their intention. (Hegel, 1988, 30.)

Hegel’s account is ambiguous (McCarney, 2000). At times, he implies that individuals simply pursue their own purposes in society and the influence of reason (or God) exists only in the final outcome. At other times, however, there is clearly a teleological dimension to his account, and he claims that a teleological goal is at work from the outset.

World history does not begin with any conscious goal, such as we find in the particular spheres of human life. . . . World history begins with its universal

17 Marx (1971b) was struck by the fact that the social incidence of murder is relatively constant, despite the fact that motives for it are usually very individual and personal. Durkheim (1897) makes a more extended argument along similar lines in relation to the incidence of suicide, and argues at length for the existence of such “social facts” (Durkheim, 1950).

18 “Nature” here has a theological meaning for Kant.

goal: the fulfilment of the concept of Spirit — still only *implicit (an sich)*, *i.e.*, as its nature. That goal is the inner, indeed the innermost, unconscious drive; and the entire business of world history is . . . the work of bringing it to consciousness. (Hegel, 1988, 27.)

A theological and teleological picture is implicit here in the notion of an “innermost . . . drive.” Hegel is claiming that there is a goal to history which is at work from the outset and throughout, albeit only “unconsciously” at first. A similar theological view is also evident in Kant’s account. Likewise a teleological picture is implied by Adam Smith’s image of the “invisible hand” which, it seems, he also intended to have theological implications (Denis, 2005).

Smith’s image is still frequently repeated, but contemporary economists usually drop the associations that originally attached to it, and it is now treated as an empty metaphor, without theological implications, and with no suggestion that the market is guided by a hidden agent or that there is an intentional teleological process at work in it. New economic patterns and regularities, on this view, are simply emergent phenomena: they develop as the outcome of the innumerable interactions of economic life alone. Moreover, these patterns are not reducible to the sum of individual actions. They arise only when there is a certain level of complexity. At that point, new social patterns emerge and a new level of economic and social theory is needed to study and comprehend them (cf. Sayers, 1996).

For the most part at least, it seems that Marx’s theory of history presupposes such a non-intentional idea of emergence, and is best interpreted in this way. It sees history as following a course in which there is a development of human material powers, ultimately including the ability to become conscious of them and to control them. Through this process the human subject emerges and is created, but this result is not the intended teleological goal of the process. It is rather the emergent outcome of blind forces, the unintended result of human productive activity.

These ideas are echoed by Engels. Like Marx, Engels maintains that history develops in a law-like fashion: “The course of history is governed by inner general laws.” However, it is not a teleological process; it is rather the unintended result of the interactions and conflicts of the separate actions of many individuals.

Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions, and of their manifold effects upon the outer world, that constitutes history. (Engels, 1976, 46.)

Engels reiterates this point in a letter to Bloch of 1890 (Engels, 1978). He uses an analogy with the parallelogram of forces in simple mechanics to explain the idea that history is the unintended outcome of the actions of many individuals interacting and clashing. Engels' analogy is not a particularly happy one, and Althusser criticizes him for the confused use he makes of it. However, Althusser then goes on to castigate Engels for trying to explain historical events in terms of individual actions (Althusser, 1969, 124–126). This is a complete misunderstanding. In fact, Engels is doing the precise opposite. Like Hegel and Marx, he believes that historical laws are emergent. They constitute a new level of phenomena which precisely cannot be reduced to the sum of individual activities (Sayers, 1996).

The Debate in the Natural Sciences

Similar issues arise in the study of the natural world as well, where the validity and role of teleological concepts has also been a contentious topic. The Marxist debate about these questions can learn a great deal from these discussions. Indeed, these issues were central to some of the most important advances in the natural sciences in Marx's time, and the influence of these on his thought is evident in his writings.

However, it is not clear what lessons Marx wants to draw from them. In some passages he suggests that historical development, initially at least, is a non-teleological product of blind causal forces, as I have just been describing. This is what is implied by a comparison Marx makes between development in history and the phenomena of geological evolution which were beginning to be studied and understood scientifically at the beginning of the 19th century (Gillispie, 1959): "Bourgeois industry and commerce create [the] material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth" (Marx, 1978b, 664).

The implication is that these historical events were not teleological in nature. What Marx is saying is that historical development — up to the present, at least — has been driven by blind causal forces.

However, it is leading in a progressive direction, he argues, towards a situation in which human beings will be able to exercise increasing self-consciousness, control, and freedom.

In other words, history has been a process without a subject, but — contrary to what Althusser implies — it will not forever remain so. A conscious human historical subject is being created, in an unintended way, through the action of purely causal processes. The formation of the subject will be the end of the process: not in the sense of a teleological or final end, but rather as an emergent and actual end or result. This process — of the development of the human powers of consciousness and freedom — is not complete. Through it human beings will eventually be able to control their own historical development. Then, for the first time they will be able to *make* history into an intentional and teleological process, consciously governed by an idea and deliberately aimed at an end. Here, it should be noted — in contrast to Althusser (and Nietzsche, and Foucault and many other recent philosophers) — Marx maintains that there is a progressive pattern to historical development which must be acknowledged and which needs to be explained.

Evolutionary theory was attempting to do this in the field of biology. Marx enthusiastically welcomed its development. In a letter to Lassalle of January 16, 1861 he wrote: “Darwin’s work is most important and suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history. . . . Despite all deficiencies, not only is the death-blow dealt here for the first time to ‘teleology’ in the natural sciences but its rational meaning is empirically explained” (Marx, n.d.).

At first sight Marx appears to be endorsing Darwin for rejecting teleology, but a closer reading suggests that his response is less clear cut than that. It is evident that Darwin rejects the idea that the natural world is a product of design by God or mind, and Marx agrees; but whether either he or Darwin are hostile to teleology in other senses is more debatable.

The issues involved have been much discussed by evolutionary biologists.

Opinions are divided over whether Darwin’s theory of evolution provides a means of eliminating teleology from biology, or whether it provides a naturalistic account of the role of teleological notions in the science. Many contemporary biologists and philosophers of biology believe that teleological

notions are a distinctive and ineliminable feature of biological explanations but that it is possible to provide a naturalistic account of their role. (Allen, 2009; cf. Allen and Bekoff, 1995.)¹⁹

What Marx writes is ambiguous along precisely these lines as well. At first he says that Darwin's work deals the "death blow" to teleology, which seems to imply that teleological ideas must be eliminated altogether; but then he says that Darwin provides a "rational" account of it, which suggests the opposite.

Dennett notices this ambiguity too. He argues that Marx equivocates between two views:

- 1) that "we should banish all teleological formulations from the natural sciences"; and
- 2) that, "now that we can 'empirically explain' the 'rational meaning' of natural phenomena without ancient ideology (of entelechies, Intelligent Creators and the like), we can replace old-fashioned, capital T 'Teleology' with new, post-Darwinian teleology." (Dennett, 2014, 47.)

Dennett and others argue for the latter approach, and there are good reasons to do so. The work of biologists is full of references to function and purpose. "Even a cursory scan of the theoretical literature reveals that biologists have found it difficult and even undesirable to eliminate teleological notions from their discussions of biological phenomena" (Allen and Bekoff, 1995, 610). As Dennett (1996, 49) puts it, "The biosphere is utterly saturated with design, with purpose, with reasons." Teleological patterns are an unmistakable aspect of biological processes, and teleological concepts are needed to describe and explain them. It is very doubtful whether such notions can be eliminated from our understanding of organic life. The attempt to describe even simple biological processes in purely physical and causal terms would be impossibly lengthy and complex. Moreover, there are no good reasons for trying to eliminate teleological concepts so long as they do not involve what Dennett calls "old-fashioned capital T 'Teleology'" — and so long as they can be replaced with a "post-Darwinian" or "naturalistic" conception of teleology (Okrent, 2007).

19 "The key to understanding Darwin's contribution is granting the premise of the Argument from Design" (Dennett, 1996, 68). Cf. Dawkins' idea (Dawkins, 1986) that nature operates as a "blind watchmaker."

Arguably, the emergent patterns of social and historical development that I have been discussing are teleological phenomena of this sort as well. Darwin's great achievement was to understand and to begin to explain the patterns of evolutionary change through the naturalistic and causal mechanisms of mutation and natural selection. Similarly, Marxism comprehends the progressive patterns of historical development as the outcome of class conflict and of a conflict between the forces and relations of production.²⁰ In this way, therefore, Marx — like Darwin — is best understood, not as repudiating teleology notions, but rather as describing and understanding them in naturalistic terms that are consonant with modern natural science.

The End of History?

As I mentioned earlier, at times Hegel appears to hold that history has a specific and finite teleological end point, an “end of history.”²¹ He speaks, for example, of “the final goal of world history,” which he describes as “Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that freedom” (Hegel, 1988, 22). Does Marx also hold that history is tending towards a final end? What he says on this topic appears to be ambiguous. On the one hand, he sometimes seems to suggest that our productive powers can go on increasing indefinitely

20 His account of this remains relatively schematic and sketchy in comparison with evolutionary theory. Moreover, there are also significant differences between Marxism and evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory posits a drive for survival at the level of the organism and/or species to account for evolutionary development. It is not clear how Marxism accounts for the fact that there is a progressive growth of the productive forces. The mere conflict of the forces and relations of production is not sufficient to explain this.

According to Cohen (1978, 134), Marx maintains that the development of the productive forces is functional for the satisfaction of certain universal features of human nature: namely, that human beings have “compelling needs”; that “the historical situation of men is one of scarcity”; and that people “possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation” (Cohen, 1978, 152).

These are the Hobbesian assumptions that underlie much mainstream economics. They have nothing to do with Marx's views: he criticizes such views at every turn. Cohen thus explains the Marxist belief in historical progress in a way that may rescue Marxism from the charge of intentional teleology, but at the price of misrepresenting and distorting it. The idea that the expansion of needs is a universal feature of human nature is questionable, both as an account of Marx's thought and as a view of human nature (Wood, 1995). This supposed universal may rather be the effect of social relations based on private acquisition and money, as Rousseau and many others have argued (Rousseau, 1984, Gorz, 1989). Unfortunately, I do not have the space to go into these issues in more detail here, but for some further discussion, see Sayers, 1998; Sayers, 1990.

21 This is how Engels (1976) interprets his philosophy. However, this is also disputed (Stewart, 1996; Dale, 2014).

and without end. As Wood sees it, for Marx the tendency of history “is not to attain some determinate social form, such as the classless society. . . . History’s basic tendency is rather the open-ended expansion of society’s powers of production” (Wood, 2004, 297). On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, the idea that class divisions will finally be overcome in a future communist society can be interpreted to imply that there is a finite end to history. Moreover, the dialectical schema of alienation and its overcoming may appear to suggest this too, as Althusser (1969) maintains.

Marx himself does not talk of an end to history, nor are there good grounds for thinking his philosophy is committed to such an idea. He describes communist society of the future not as the end of “history,” but rather as the end of “*prehistory*” (Marx, 1978c). With this phrase he is clearly alluding to the Hegelian picture of history, but it should not be interpreted as expressing a teleological thought. For what Marx is referring to is the end only of this present, blind, stage of historical development — the end of the era of development governed by the clash of blind forces. He is not saying that communism will be the final, teleological, end of history. Rather, it will mark the beginning of a new era which will be made possible “when a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to . . . common control” (Marx, 1978b, 664).²²

This is the thought that is also embodied in the idea of the overcoming of alienation (Sayers, 2011). It certainly implies a conception of historical progress and, as I have been arguing, Marx’s picture can also be interpreted as implying a purely naturalistic teleological pattern of development, but not one that culminates in a final end. Engels expresses this idea as follows:

Man’s own social organization, which has hitherto confronted him as a process dictated by nature and history, now becomes a process resulting from his own voluntary action. The objective extraneous forces which have hitherto dominated history now pass under the control of man himself. It is only from this point that man will himself make his own history fully consciously, it is only from this point that the social causes he sets in motion will preponderantly and ever increasingly have the effects he wills. It is humanity’s leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. (Engels, 1962, 388–389.)

22 Mészáros (2011) gives an excellent account of these ideas.

What is envisaged here is not the final end of history but the beginning of a new — conscious and free — stage of historical development in which, at last, the pursuit of consciously chosen historical ends will become a possibility for mankind.

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