

Letting the Dead Bury the Dead: Limits of History in Marx and Hegel

SUMMARY: It is common to attribute to Marx the notion that “history repeats itself; the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce”. In fact, when Marx said this, he was (mis)quoting Hegel. It is also the case that there is no shared understanding of what history is and what it does between the two thinkers. On examination, it is clear that Marx is making a very specific point regarding the nature of the consciousness required to make a “bourgeois” revolution, and that required for the “proletarian” one. The latter, he argues, because of its specific character, necessitates a degree of self-consciousness on the part of its agents without equal in human history.

KEYWORDS: Marx, Hegel, Engels, France, revolution

The “assertion that ‘everything is possible in human affairs’ is either meaningless or false.”

—— E H Carr (Carr, 1987, 93.)

The great events of history, Marx tells us in one of his better-known aphorisms, repeat themselves: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The line appears at the opening of the article *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written over December 1851 to March 1852.

In February 1848, the French monarchy—the so-called “July Monarchy”, so named after its issue from the revolution of July 1830, which had brought an end to the reign of the Bourbon Louis XVIII and the accession of Louis Philippe d’Orléan—was itself overthrown in the events that would culminate in the French Second Republic. Then in December of that year, presidential elections, organised under the auspices of the new republican constitution, were held: Charles-Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, better known as Louis Napoleon, a political adventurer and the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, won by a landslide. In December 1851, he dissolved the National Assembly. (The following year, he would declare himself Emperor Bonaparte III.)

Marx's text is a commentary on these events. The title—the *Eighteenth Brumaire*—is an ironic reference to the moment (in 1799) in which Napoleon Bonaparte had organised his own coup, overthrowing the *Directoire* and installing himself *Premier Consul*. (Napoleon would subsequently go on to declare himself Emperor Bonaparte I, establishing the First Empire, in 1804.) The first Bonaparte's coup had unfolded on 9 November 1799: 18 Brumaire of the year VIII according to the revolutionary calendar.

Marx's essay was originally intended for publication in the journal *Die Revolution*, published in New York by Joseph Weydemeyer; but by the time the text reached Weydemeyer, the journal had folded through lack of funds. However, Weydemeyer managed to publish the article anyway, as a special “non-periodic” edition.¹

Marx begins thus: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” (Marx, 1978, 103)

Contextualised by the titular reference to the date of 18 Brumaire, Marx's ironic intent is clear. But what of his reference to Hegel? Did Hegel really say such a thing?

It has been argued (Mazlish, 1972) that what Marx must have had in mind was a remark in the *Philosophy of History* where Hegel discusses the assassination of Julius Caesar, and comments on the irony of the murder of the *dictator perpetuo* in the interest of the defence of the Republic itself bringing Rome to the rule of the Emperors.

[T]he noblest men of Rome suppose[d] Caesar's rule to be a merely adventitious thing, and the entire position of affairs to be dependent on his individuality. [...] They believed that if this one individual were out of the way, the Republic would be *ipso facto* restored. [...] But [once Caesar had been assassinated] it became immediately manifest that only a *single* will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence. (Hegel, 1991, 332.)

For Hegel, rather than being a circumstance of contingency—“a merely adventitious thing”—Caesar's assumption of the position of dictator in perpetuity was a manifestation of that “single will” that “History” had at that moment necessarily demanded. So then, when thwarted by Caesar's untimely removal, History found itself obliged to force its priority through *again*, the manifestation of Historical necessity expressing itself now through *repetition*.

Thus there is no sense in either Hegel or Marx, as a cursory reading might suggest, that what is repeating here is *history*; both Marx and Hegel would have balked in horror at such an idea. In Hegel History is a line (if sometimes a rather wavy one) with a direction: not a series of random squiggles, and most decidedly not a circle. What Hegel wants to emphasise is the futility of resisting the *direction* of History, its *flow*. Hegel's intent is that the actions of “men” in the end count for nothing against the manifestation of Historical imperative, and events will repeat once,

¹ In its originally published form, Weydemeyer gave the article the title “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon”. Marx would substantially revise the text, now under the title of “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, for a second publication in 1869. My comments here are on the latter version of the text, which is the version that appears in the *Collected Works*.

twice, thrice, until this necessity finally asserts itself. So although the *events* through which it manifests itself may indeed, through the imposition of necessary imperative, repeat, History itself absolutely does not: it has a direction of travel, and no individual can resist its force.

Entirely absent in Hegel however is the bathos of Marx: repetition as first “tragedy”, and then “farce”. This is Marx’s apposition:

Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances attending the second edition of the eighteenth Brumaire! (Marx, 1978, 103.)

Inspiration for this figure appears in fact to have come from Engels (Mazlish, 1972, 336). The day after Louis Napoleon’s *autocoup* he had written to Marx like this:

The history of France has entered a stage of utmost comicality. Can one imagine anything funnier than this travesty of the 18th Brumaire, effected in peacetime with the help of discontented soldiers by the most insignificant man in the world without, so far as it has hitherto been possible to judge, any opposition whatsoever? [...]

[I]t really seems as though old Hegel, in the guise of the World Spirit, were directing history from the grave and, with the greatest conscientiousness, causing everything to be re-enacted twice over, once as grand tragedy and the second time as rotten farce, Caussidière for Danton, L. Blanc for Robespierre, Barthélémy for Saint-Just, Flocon for Carnot, and the moon-calf together with the first available dozen debt-encumbered lieutenants for the little corporal and his band of marshals. (Engels, 1982, 505.)

Even though Marx would almost immediately reply to Engels expressing his bafflement at events,² he evidently found the latter’s turn of phrase evocative enough to end up recycling it in his own analysis. But it was not its rhetorical sheen that had attracted, for in Marx’s text it is no mere aphoristic flourish. Marx rather has a serious point to make here. He continues:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx, 1978, 103.)

There are two ideas to take hold of here.

The first is that men (and of course women: Marx’s subject is “*die Menschen*”, not “*die Männer*”) *make* history (or, perhaps, that history *is* what men and women make). This is not a new idea for Marx: already, some six years earlier, in the work that would inaugurate his intellectual collaboration with Engels, he had made the following pronouncement:

History does nothing, it “possesses no immense wealth”, it “wages no battles”. It is man [*“der Mensch”*, again], 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, 1975, 93)

Even though the essence of this denunciation of the ascription of agency to history rings true still in the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, it cannot be here Marx’s main point; he cannot still feel the need to disabuse his readers of what that great Welsh historian (and a Marxist himself,

² “I have kept you waiting for an answer, quite bewildered by the tragi-comic sequence of events in Paris. [...] Will his coup again succeed if the vote goes against him? Will the majority vote at all? The Orléans have left for France. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to make any prognostication in a drama with Krapülinski [i.e. Louis Napoleon] for its hero.” (Marx, 1982, 507.)

although in the fashion of Bordiga) Gwyn Alf Williams called “Hegelian mysticism and infantilism”.³ Rather, his emphasis is on the *second* half of the couplet: what Marx wants to emphasize is not that it is men and women who make their own history—that should now go without saying—but that, when they do, the fruits of that history already realized represent real *limits* to human historical agency.

He continues: “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” (Marx, 1978, 103.) History is indeed made but the freedom with which it is made is circumscribed, and it is circumscribed through the fact that the past (“the tradition of all the dead generations”) weighs so heavy on the consciousness (“brains”) of the present. Thus rather than underscoring the possibility of human agency in history, Marx is here trying to identify the reasons why such momentous events as the 1848 revolution could give issue to a squib so damp as Louis Napoleon. Why, Marx is asking, could history underwhelm so? What has held things back? And—further—what *is* it in the past that so circumscribes, at least in this case, the possibilities for present action?

Could it be that social conditions were not propitious to a leap forward greater than that that actually took place? It is, of course, axiomatic in what has come to be called “historical materialism” that there can be no great advance to a “higher” social order without the prior accumulation of necessary preconditions. Summarising what we might call his “theory” of history, Marx, a few years later, was to write:

No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation. (Marx, 1987, 263.)

But this cannot be what he wants to say in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx is not engaging here in analysis on the scale of historical epochs but on that of the fine-grain of political conjuncture: the anticlimax of 1851 is not the result of the immaturity of *social* preconditions of advance but that of *political* ones.

And just when they [the “men” who make their own history, even if in conditions not of their own choosing] seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (Marx, 1978, 103-4.)

³ Williams was characterising the fact of national existence as “a process of continuous and dialectical historical development, in which human mind and human will interact with objective reality”. But, he went on, “[i]t is not history which does this; it is not traditions which do this; that is Hegelian mysticism and infantilism. History does nothing, said Karl Marx, it is men [*sic*] who do all this. Men make their own history, but in the terms and within the limits imposed on them by the history they inherit; always provided, of course, that they master that history and make a choice. To make history, to win historical autonomy, it is necessary to make a choice in historical awareness.” (Williams, 1979, 23.)

This, the conjuring up of the spirits of the past, what in the text he calls “world-historical necromancy”, is in turn in the *nature* of the events that Marx here describes. For what we are dealing with are what Marx calls “*bourgeois* revolutions”, revolutions which “creat[e] [...] the conditions under which free competition [can] [...] first be developed, parcelled landed property exploited and the unchained industrial productive forces of the nation employed; and [...] everywhere [sweep] [...] the feudal institutions away”. (Marx, 1978, 104.) These are revolutions whose effect is the freeing of the social terrain for the unfettered spread and development of capitalist relations of production: revolutions such as that of France of 1789 to 1794 (of which that which issued in Louis Napoleon was a local aftershock), that of Cromwell, a century earlier (“at another stage of development”). Such revolutions cloak themselves in the “poetry of the past” *out of necessity*. The first French revolutionaries “performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases”; Cromwell’s revolution “borrowed speech, passions and illusions from the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution”. However, passed the revolutionary moment, its French incarnation begot “its true interpreters and mouthpieces in the Sais, Cousins, Royer-Collards, Benjamin Constants and Guizots”; while in England, “Locke supplanted Habakkuk”. (Marx, 1978, 104-5.)

Why is this, Marx wants to ask? Why do the revolutions of the bourgeoisie, the revolutions that clear away the feudal undergrowth so that capitalist society may take root and bloom, why do these revolutions announce their credentials in the form of “the resurrection of the dead”, recent or otherwise? The answer is this: the bourgeois revolution—like the revolutions of the epochs that precede them—talks the language of the past because it is *ignorant of the language of the present*: it does not understand *itself*, and it is insensible to its own essence. It is in this that the tragedy (and, yes, sometimes farce) of the bourgeois revolution lies.

[U]nheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of peoples to bring it into being. [...] [I]ts gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to maintain their passion on the high plane of great historical tragedy. (Marx, 1978, 104-5.)

What Marx is saying is that the bourgeois revolution cannot announce the claim of future freedom for future freedom is *not* its claim. When Hegel noted in the *Philosophy of Right* that the owl of Minerva only flew at dusk he appeared to be making a general claim about the limits to knowledge, but the context of the remark is instructive.

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering. (Hegel, 2001, 20.)

Hegel is not arguing that it is in the *nature* of philosophy (i.e. social knowledge) only to apprehend human practice after the fact, he is saying that social knowledge is formed in this way—after the fact—if and only if the human practice it seeks to apprehend has itself not *already* arrived at a full consciousness of its own nature.⁴ Only when “philosophy paints its grey in grey”, only when “one form of life has become old”, and only when, by way of consequence, “by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known”, does the owl of Minerva take its flight only “when the shades of night are gathering”. The corollary is that if human action *is* self-consciously realised, then this

⁴ I.e., and in Hegel’s scheme, but of course not in Marx’s, before the attainment of “Absolute Knowledge”.

proscription of Hegel's of *ex ante* knowledge—pertinent to epochs up to and including that of the bourgeois revolution—*no longer applies*. It is therefore not *in general* the fate of humankind to be ignorant of the nature of practice; it is the specific fate of *bourgeois* revolutionary practice to be ignorant of its own nature.

Hence, if it is in the nature of the *bourgeois* revolution to “draw its poetry from the past”, then in the case of the *proletarian* revolution its verse must precisely come from the *present*, for the proletarian revolution

cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition [...]. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. (Marx, 1978, 106.)

This is because the order of the day of the proletarian revolution is different to that of the bourgeois antecedent. The proletarian revolution, whose mission is to presage the passage from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom”, such that the conditions for the “development of human powers as an end in itself” are created,⁵ requires not just the *will* to change society but the *consciousness* of the point and purpose of that change.

Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other, men and things seem set in sparkling brilliants, ecstasy is the everyday spirit, but they are short-lived [...] On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible [...]. (Marx, 1978, 106-7.)

Only by sloughing off the nightmare of the past will the brain of the living be adequate to the mission of the proletarian revolution. This requires true consciousness, not of the past, but of the *present*, and the future that needs to be willed to be.

⁵ “The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis.” (Marx, 1981, 958-9.)

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