

Everything is Tottering

Why Philosophy of History Thrives in Times of Crisis

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The philosophy of history is unlikely to disappear in a world beset by crises. Crises, understood as anomalies in how people conceive of their past-present relationships, serve as impetuses rather than as obstacles to philosophy of history. The more societies wonder whether economic growth is endless, or whether children in the West will ever reach the prosperity levels of their parents or how growing burdens of public debt will affect the 'social contract between the generations', the more likely they are to rethink their inherited past-present relationships. In a sense then, philosophy is a crisis phenomenon: the genre thrives in times of uncertainty. This does not imply that philosophy of history will always be taught in academic history departments: the genre has often, not to say usually, been practiced by non-historians. Historians might want to consider though, how well they serve their societies if they allow the philosophy of history to be practiced without the critical checks and balances of professional historiography.

If periods of happiness are the blank pages of history, as G.W.F. Hegel famously said¹, then philosophy of history languishes especially in times of peace and calm. Philosophy of history, that notorious branch of reflection on how human beings relate to their past, is a crisis phenomenon. At times when history seems to develop in accordance with what people hope or expect, typically it attracts little attention. Yet as soon as newspaper headlines proclaim 'crises' – that is, anomalies in a society's horizons of expectation, or occurrences that do not fit within existing views of past, present and future – philosophy of history grows in importance, often even capturing the attention of non-academic audiences.

Take Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan schoolmaster, or Juan Andrés, the Spanish Jesuit, both of whom are known as early historicist philosophers of history. Their insistence on the distinct historical identity of every European nation was not simply an anticipation of Leopold von Ranke's dictum that

Dollar exchange rate easing credit strains

MARKET JITTERS spending power commodities

mutual fund CREDIT CRUNCH

endorses stimulus package emergency loans

dollar CAPITAL INVESTMENT

slow revival

Financial crisis

dollar weakens STOCK MARKET

analysts Downturn Inflation earnings

slump confidence wobbles Profits down

Economic disaster looming

SHARES WORTHLESS Worldwide

Stocks tumble assets Crash!

anxiety deepens Interest rates

survival in doubt liquidity

risk RECESSION FORECAST

mortgage slump key indices

MONETARY POLICY

currencies Global trends Bust!

fear announces trading loss

risk grows Govt. funds

Pension runs dry up

every period is immediate to God, but a battle cry from the subaltern margins of eighteenth-century Europe, directed against the view that European civilization had travelled northwards and culminated in French classicism. Eighteenth-century historicism was a protest against unilineal theories of cultural evolution that relegated non-French territory to Europe's prehistory.

Another instance is Johann Gustav Droysen, one of the towering figures beside Hegel in nineteenth-century philosophy of history, who wrote his *Grundriss der Historik* in a time that he perceived as one grappling with crises:

Everything is shaken, everything is undergoing immeasurable disruption, agitation, brutalisation. All the old things are worn out, falsified, consumed by worms and irretrievable. And the new is still without form and end, chaotic, merely destructive.²

Droysen's philosophy of history was an extended reflection on the didactic functions of historical thinking in an age when such upheavals as the 1848 revolutions rendered old certainties uncertain.

To what extent experiences of crisis and feelings of loss were animating forces behind the sort of reflection conventionally known as philosophy of history is even more clearly visible in what was arguably the heyday of the genre – the 1920s and 1930s. Apart from Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*, the title of which was on the lips of an entire generation, Ernst Troeltsch's wrestling with the so-called crisis of historicism illustrated that philosophy of history was, in his own words, 'not merely a scholarly problem, but a practical life problem'.³ Legend has it that Troeltsch once left a conference, slamming doors, after having treated his audience to a diagnosis of the times that was as brief as it was alarming: 'Gentlemen, everything is tottering!'⁴ Even if this anecdote is apocryphal, the fact that it circulated widely among Troeltsch's students and commentators suggests that it somehow captured the anxieties associated with Troeltsch's philosophy of history.

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (eds.) (Frankfurt am Main 1970) 42.

2 J.G. Droysen, 'Zur Charakteristik der europäischen Krisis', in: idem, *Politische Schriften*, Felix Gilbert (ed.) (Munich 1933) 328. All translations are mine.

3 Ernst Troeltsch, 'Die Krisis des Historismus', *Die Neue Rundschau* 33 (1922) 586.

4 Trutz Rendtorff, 'Einleitung', in: Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte (1902/1912) mit den Thesen von 1901 und den handschriftlichen Zusätzen*, Trutz Rendtorff (ed.) (Berlin 1998) 10-11, n. 47.

Past-present relationships

There is, admittedly, no lack of counter examples. Henry Thomas Buckle, whose name in late Victorian England was almost synonymous with the philosophy of history, was more self-assured in tracing the laws of historical evolution. Similarly, when Albert Maria Weiss, a now forgotten Swiss philosopher, envied ‘the few rarefied minds whom it has been given to make the most beautiful theme that a human pen can work on, a philosophy of history, the subject of their thought’⁵, he demonstrated that there have been thinkers, blessed with greater tranquillity than Vico, Droysen, and Troeltsch, for whom philosophy of history was not a tormented search for redefinition of problematic past-present relationships but a confirmation of the comforting illusion that history was on their side.

Nonetheless, in most cases, the philosophy of history has attracted scholarly attention because there was a broadly felt need for rethinking inherited past-present relationships (that is, inherited modes of studying, interpreting, representing or otherwise relating to the past). When in the mid-twentieth century philosophers of history devoted one book after another to ‘the meaning of history’, they did so because the grand historical visions of Buckle and Weiss had been shattered into pieces, leaving societies to wonder in which direction, if any, history was heading. And in our day one of the most hotly-debated issues in philosophy of history is the perceived lack of meaning in what seems the negative defining moment of European identity – the Holocaust.

It is also no coincidence that Hayden White, whose work revolves around a desire to liberate human beings from oppressive traditions⁶, is nowadays most widely read in Eastern Europe, Latin America and China. A leading journal in the field, *History and Theory*, recently declared that these regions display a far greater interest in the philosophy of history than North America and Western Europe (so that the journal now finds itself cooperating with the Chinese Academy of Sciences instead of with the American Historical Association).⁷

In short, it seems that philosophy of history thrives in times of crisis, or more precisely, in spatio-temporal contexts of uncertainty about the plausibility of inherited past-present relationships (i.e., inherited modes of making sense of the past). While there is often no perceived need for philosophy of history as long as conventional past-present relationships suffice, the genre attracts intense interest as soon as history changes from beautiful into sublime (that is, from an answer into a question, or from predictable into adventurous or threatening).

5 Quoted in Emil Spiess, *Die Grundfragen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Schwyz 1937) 5.

6 As I argue in Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge 2011).

7 Ethan Kleinberg and Brian Fay, ‘History and Theory: Expanding the Intellectual Network’, online at <http://vimeo.com/36502249> (accessed 27 September 2012).

Speculative philosophy of history

Is it pertinent however to speak about the philosophy of history as a genre, in the singular? I can imagine that some readers are reminded of Karl Popper and William Walsh, two mid-twentieth-century philosophers who sharply distinguished between two genres – ‘speculative’ and ‘critical’ philosophy of history. As the nomenclature already indicates, speculative philosophy of history, as represented by such system builders as Hegel and Spengler, was considered inappropriate because there seemed to be no scientific means for corroborating or falsifying theories about the goal, meaning or nature of the historical process. This criticism of speculative philosophy of history has been so influential that quite a few of those currently known as philosophers of history still equate their field with what Popper and Walsh identified as the proper, ‘scientific’ realm of critical philosophy of history.

Against this background then, one may object that what I said about philosophy of history as a crisis phenomenon might well apply to the speculative branch – to Karl Marx’s dialectics, to Troeltsch’s historicism or to Francis Fukuyama’s meditations on ‘the end of history’ – but not to what philosophers of history since Popper and Walsh have come to recognise as their true business: philosophical analysis of the language, concepts and methods that historians employ.

However this objection overlooks the extent to which Walsh’s and Popper’s distinction itself was a crisis phenomenon. Popper dedicated *The Poverty of Historicism* to ‘the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny’.⁸ These words leave no doubt that Popper’s aversion to evolutionary laws stemmed, at least in part, from a desire to help prevent a second Third Reich. In a similar vein, nineteenth-century *Historicism* came under attack, not merely because of its perceived epistemological weaknesses but also and often especially because of its supposed anti-liberal leanings.

I am therefore inclined to consider both the gallons of ink spent in the battle against speculative philosophy of history as well as the almost allergic aversion of Popper and his colleagues to all ‘metaphysical thinking’ as further illustrations of my thesis that philosophy of history is a genre (or a set of genres, if you want) fuelled by experiences of crisis. Not the least among the factors that contributed to the rise of critical philosophy of history was a desire to dispel the crisis of ‘historicism’ and ‘historical relativism’.

8 Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London 1957) v.

Economic growth and religious decline

I emphasise all this in order to argue that philosophy of history is unlikely to disappear in a world beset by crises of the sort invoked by the editors in their introductory words. For what the foregoing suggests is that crises – anomalies in how people conceive of the relationships between past, present and future – often serve as impetuses rather than obstacles to philosophy of history. The more societies wonder whether economic growth is endless, or whether children in the West will ever reach the prosperity levels of their parents, or how growing burdens of public debt will affect the ‘social contract between the generations’, or how long North America will remain the world’s leading society, or to what extent secularisation is irreversible, or whether global warming is indeed a sword of Damocles, the more likely they are to rethink their inherited past-present relationships.

It is therefore no coincidence that advocates of sustainable energy such as Herman Wijffels find themselves consulting ‘big history’ books (Jared Diamond’s *Collapse*, for example) in an attempt to understand why the West is so remarkably reluctant to address its over-dependency on natural resources. Neither is it coincidence that Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, draws on Augustinian philosophies of history in trying to counter the pessimistic belief that dropping church attendance in British parishes signals the immanent end of Christianity in the West. Economists and archbishops alike, venture into philosophy of history as soon as they address the limitations of prevailing narratives of economic growth and religious decline.

A rich array of resources

Perhaps the most interesting question then, is not whether philosophy of history has a future (which it certainly has), but to what extent those professionally employed as philosophers of history will be able to respond to a societal demand for rethinking inherited past-present relationships. Especially in such countries as the Netherlands, where philosophy of history in the past half a century has been institutionalised in academic history programmes to a degree unheard of in the rest of the world, the most urgent question might be to what extent philosophers of history will be prepared to help societies reflect on, for example, grand historical narratives that are no longer deemed convincing.

As far as I can see, the successes of critical philosophy of history in the past sixty years both enable and hinder philosophers of history to assume this responsibility. On the one hand, critical philosophy of history has been so anxious to avoid everything vaguely resembling Marx, Hegel or Spengler that it has almost exclusively applied itself to the study of how historians (in the West) investigate the past. The catalogue of quasi-canonical problems in

contemporary philosophy of history does not include the meaning of history or the dangers of historical relativism; it consists rather of such historians' problems as explanation, inference, intention, context, comparison and model-building. Indeed, increasingly philosophy of history has become a philosophy of professional historiography, that is, a 'philosophical meta-disciplinary' subfield not unlike philosophy of science or philosophy of economics.⁹

While this narrow disciplinary focus might not seem particularly advantageous, the flip side is that decades of relative isolation have allowed philosophers of history to engage in fairly specialist debates over causation, explanation, narrative and experience (think, for example, of the controversies provoked by Carl Hempel's covering law model or William Dray's analytical hermeneutics). These exchanges have contributed to a considerable refinement of how philosophers of history understand historical interpretation, explanation and story-telling.

That this investment can yield substantial profit is illustrated by philosophers of history who try to intervene in public debates over history education, cultural heritage, national identity, tradition or secularisation. Mark Salber Phillips, for example, draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer and Thomas Kuhn in advocating alternatives to 'the simple binary of tradition and modernity which for so long has distracted those who have tried to come to grips' with tradition, heritage and innovation in politics and art.¹⁰ David Gross analyses how contemporary Western societies remember and forget their (idealised, traumatised) pasts with help of insights developed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Reinhart Koselleck.¹¹ Thomas Albert Howard more specifically draws on Hayden White in examining the plot structures of such secularisation narratives as told in Charles Taylor's *The Secular Age*.¹² Closer to hand, Rik Peters's 'learning history' projects, carried out at Philips and in other corporate environments, rely on Koselleck, Quentin Skinner and Frank Ankersmit, among others, in elucidating the nature and effects of organisational management change.¹³

9 Aviezer Tucker, 'Introduction', in: idem (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Malden, MA 2009) 4.

10 Mark Salber Phillips, 'What is Tradition When It is Not "Invented"?: A Historiographical Introduction', in: Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (eds.), *Questions of Tradition* (Toronto 2004) 25.

11 David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst 2000).

12 Thomas Albert Howard, 'The Modern Comedy: Still Pondering Charles Taylor's *Secular Age*', *The Cresset* 72:3 (2009) 13-17; see also Martin Jay, 'Faith-Based History', *History and Theory* 48 (2009) 76-84.

13 Luchien Karsten et al., 'Leadership Style and Entrepreneurial Change: The Centurion Operation at Philips Electronics', *Journal of Organizational Management Change* 22 (2009) 73-91.



▲
Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), one of the most influential twentieth-century philosophers of history.

Although not all the inspirational sources just mentioned can be neatly classified as critical philosophers of history, I think each of the examples illustrates that technical insights developed in highly specialised areas of philosophy of history can sometimes be fruitfully applied to non-academic debates about (changing) past-present relationships. The insights that Phillips, Gross, Howard and Peters bring to the table stem from thorough familiarity with discourse analysis, speech-act theory, philosophy of narrative and hermeneutics of action. Their examples therefore illustrate that the legacy of critical philosophy of history is not necessarily a negative one. Thanks to Hempel, Dray and others, philosophers of history now have a rich array of resources for helping such people as Wijffels and Williams address the strengths and limitations of our inherited past-present relationships.


Academic historical studies

Whether such philosophers of history will (continue to) be employed by academic history departments, of course, is an open question. Perhaps they will not: philosophy of history has often, not to say usually, been practiced by non-historians. Historians may want to consider though, how well they serve their societies if they allow philosophy of history to be practiced without the critical checks and balances of professional historiography.

Remember William Walsh, whose dislike of speculative philosophy of history did not prevent him from engaging with Arnold Toynbee's work. Although historians are right to criticise Toynbee, said Walsh, they themselves are to blame for creating a vacuum in which such philosophies as Toynbee's could emerge.¹⁴ Analogously, one could argue that historians are best advised not to leave philosophy of history to economists, climate experts and other citizens who feel themselves trapped in crises of various kinds – particularly not if these historians care about the adequacy and reliability of what is being said in the public domain.

Particularly in times of crisis, historians might want to invest in philosophy of history and try to make the expertise that has been developed under the aegis of critical philosophy of history available to societies reorienting themselves in time and rethinking their inherited relations to the past. ◀

14 W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (revision edition; New York 1967) 164-165.



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