

Use of History in Revolutionary Philosophy

As the famous Spanish philosopher George Santayana said: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Revolutionary theorists, particularly Marxist and Socialist ones, seem to take this quote to heart, as they all use history as a foundation for their theories, beginning with Karl Marx’s concept of historical materialism. Historical materialism is a foundational concept which supports all of Marx’s work and conclusions. For these revolutionary theorists, it is critical to understand and critique history to find its truths and let those truths guide changes in the present. Marx greatly influenced the revolutionary theorists that came after him, particularly in his use of history. Marx was essentially a philosopher of history who based his views on how he saw the history of the development and transformation of human societies. He did not study history to document it, like a historian, but rather to determine the how human societies grow and transform. It is looking for the dynamic element of history, which will guide the future. For revolutionary theorists, even ones that directly oppose Marx and his ideas, history is absolutely vital to their thought process for four specific reasons. History provides a foundation for their philosophical conclusions, history can be used to guide a reader into agreement as a persuasive tool, history can be used to disprove conflicting ideas, and history can be used to justify actions, such as ones that would otherwise be immoral, like violence. This reflection will look at a series of revolutionary theorists, starting with Marx, to analyze how history is used to achieve in these four ways.

Like all German philosophers of the time, Marx was deeply influenced by Georg Hegel, who used history as a pillar of his philosophy. However, Hegel’s view of history and human progression was an idealistic one, with the belief that human progression is guided by a logical

process towards human freedom, or a realization of “Geist”, the world spirit. Marx’s ideas, however, are in stark contrast to Hegel’s. The first words of Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party* are “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pg. 473). Note the second word is “history” demonstrating its importance. Where Hegel believed that human progress was driven by ideas, Marx’s counterpoint was that the true driving factor for human progress, and the prime motivator of all history, is the accumulation of material, a concept called “Historical Materialism”. History is driven by this desire to acquire and hoard material, and this leads to multiple modes of production as human society advanced. Pre-history, feudal society, and today’s capitalist society are the three modes that Marx identified, where each step significantly increases the total production of material. However, Marx also saw contradictions in how capitalism functioned, and demonstrated that wealth would accumulate in the hands of the bourgeoisie, until the proletariat inevitably overthrow capitalism and institute communism. He believed that the “march of history” makes it inevitable that the bourgeoisie would eventually become incompatible with the rest of society and become their own “grave-diggers”, as he also believed that the rise of the proletariat was inevitable. And, using evidence across history, Karl Marx found proof that his ideas were correct, and thus solidified the concepts that his whole argument rests upon. The primary purpose of history for Karl Marx is that it proves that the rise of the proletariat is inevitable. As Marx evaluates history and identifies the prime motive of change using his concept of historical materialism, which leads to class struggles, which leads to capitalism and, just as naturally, leads to a worker revolt and communism. Marx’s analyses of history of the foundation all his work sits on. Moreover, the historical perspective is what leads to Marx’s conclusion that capitalism will inevitably lead to collapse.

Marx also uses evidence from history to convince others to agree with him on his concept. He does this by not immediately attempting to convince others of the whole concept of communism, but instead beginning with smaller and more basic concepts such as historical materialism and the class struggle that he slowly puts together to finally assemble communism. If the reader agrees with the smaller points he makes all the way to his final point, they have no other logical choice but to also agree with him there as well. This step-by-step approach, like a mathematical proof, is a critical use of history. Marx steps include history that is well-known to the reader and he provides a logical reason for the march of history, so it is an effective persuasive tool.

Marx also uses history and historical evidence to disprove opponents of his ideas. When he argues against Stirner in *The German Ideology*, he uses “Saint Max’s” own historical framework to argue against his points. For instance, he points out that “No truth of the ancient world is stated” in Stirner’s work (Marx, *German Ideology*, 136).

Finally, Marx’s use of history helps rationalize his justification for violent revolution - as written in the *Manifesto*, “only by forcible overthrow...let the ruling class tremble” (Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pg. 500). History makes the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat inevitable, and since material is the prime motive of history, the bourgeois will never give up willingly. Marx, again using history, points out that other classes came into power by “subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation”, which is, of course, violent (Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pg. 482). Overall, in the work of Karl Marx all four uses of history are well-demonstrated.

Frederick Engels, a revolutionary philosopher, collaborator and best friend of Karl Marx, also used history to bolster his arguments in similar ways. In *The Origin of the Family, Private*

Property, and the State, Engels strongly critiques the nuclear family, positioning it as a tool of the bourgeoisie and a mode of oppression, which was a shocking point of view. Moreover, the work is not just a critique of the family, but also an extension of the concepts of historical materialism, class struggle, and the inevitable transition to communism. In order to support his claims, he uses history as the primary means, as suggested in the title itself with the word “origin”. In fact, the preface of Engels’s work states that it was written as a bequest from Marx for Engels to expound upon the work of Lewis Henry Morgan, an American ethnologist/anthropologist who wrote about the evolution and development of society from ancient times to modern day (Engels, *Preface to First Edition*). Morgan wrote a history of society and culture over a long span of time, and Engels’s work is an analysis of this history through the lens of historical materialism, which makes his entire work historical in its foundation. Engels traces the development of the family through four stages that span known history- the Consanguine family, the Punaluan family, the Pairing family, and the Monogamous family. The Monogamous family and pairing marriages were products of economics and capitalism, and parallels the transition to full private property (Engels, *Barbarism and Civilization*). The first three stages are idealized, where women are equal to men, but as the Monogamous family develops, “it is based on the supremacy of man” and a patriarchy emerges (Engels, *The Monogamous Family*). This Monogamous family is tied directly to capitalism and private property, and it is also central to the economic oppression of women, another extension of capitalism’s exploitation of the working class. This Monogamous family develops due to the desires of the bourgeoisie seeking to maintain control over private property. This family type leads to wealth generation, classes, and oppression. Therefore, the only solution is the abolition of the Monogamous family as part of the worker’s revolution. Engels uses history to both be the

foundation for his conclusion on the dissolution of the Monogamous family, and also to persuade readers of the same idea, taking a step-by-step approach to reaching his conclusion as he analyzes much of recorded history.

The history used by Marxist and Socialist revolutionaries does not have to be ancient history, but can be modern history as well. Eduard Bernstein, in his work *The Preconditions of Socialism*, uses modern, economic, and political history as the foundation of his revisionist Marxist theories. Bernstein uses the economic output, economic activities and political action to show that capitalism is not destined to collapse, as Marx theorized. Using recent history, he shows that conditions for workers have improved, that capitalism is adaptable, and that suffrage is expanding political power to the proletariat. This modern history is the foundation of his point of view that reformation is possible in a democratic society, and his conclusion that “today, we use ballot paper, demonstration, and similar means of exerting pressure to accomplish reforms which a hundred years ago would have required bloody revolutions” is supported by his use of history (Bernstein, pg. 7). In his work, Bernstein is using history to disprove the Marxist idea that the fall of capitalism is inevitable.

Marxist theorists who were living in the time of actual revolutions increasingly relied on history to justify the actions of the revolutionaries, as Leon Trotsky did in his work, *Terrorism and Communism*. In response to Karl Kautsky’s deep concern over the terrorism, violence and repression committed by the Communist government during and after the Russian Revolution, Trotsky states that, although revolution does not “logically” require terrorism, it almost always must occur (Trotsky, Chapter 4). In order to demonstrate this, he uses the two revolutions in England during the Reformation, the French revolution, the American civil war, and the Paris Commune of 1871. Trotsky points out the importance of all of these revolutions, and how their

goals were not tainted by the fact that violence and terrorism were used extensively in attaining these goals. He also points out that Kautsky is not ignorant of these facts, but rather is able to disregard the violence committed during these revolutions, such as the Paris Commune, while not being able to do so regarding the Russian Revolution, which is disingenuous. Overall, Trotsky uses history to both justify the violence and oppression of the Russian Revolution, and as a tool to demonstrate the flaws in Kautsky's arguments.

Importantly, the use of history is not only the purview of Marxist and Socialist revolutionaries, but fascist revolutionaries as well. In Adolph Hitler's first radio address in 1933, he references both ancient and modern history to those who were listening, to build support for his political plans and fight against Bolshevism. He wants those to remember that they are heirs to a "2000-year-old inheritance of the highest works of human culture and civilization" that they must fight to preserve (Hitler, 1933). In addition, a large part of his radio address reminds listeners of the recent history of Germany, where German people entered World War One to defend Germany, but were victims of the "appalling fate" brought on by the armistice and the Treaty of Versailles - A fate where they have become a nation of paupers. By using history, Hitler is trying to convince people that his plans are right. He is also setting the stage to justify his attacks on communists, Marxists and Social Democrats who demoralized Germany and left it in ruins. Benito Mussolini also used a historical perspective in *The Doctrine of Fascism*, to support his arguments for fascism, against liberalism, and to convince others. He portrays fascism as the natural next step in the (idealized) rich history of Italy, while using detailed history to claim that "Socialism...was already dead" and that "Liberalism really flourished for fifteen years only" (Mussolini, pg. 3 & 6). Mussolini uses history to bolster his arguments and uses an idealized history of Italy to convince others.

Mao Tse-Tung, following in the tradition of Marx, uses history as the foundation for his call for a particular revolution in China and for the support of the Chinese Communist Party, in *The Chinese Revolution and the Communist Party*. Mao begins by recounting a 3,000-year history of China, going through feudal and colonial stages, with a strong emphasis on the Marxist elements of historical materialism and class struggle. In feudal China, while peasants and workers created wealth and culture, they were exploited by the landlord class. He then documents the emergence and development of the Chinese bourgeoisie and proletariat classes and the resulting struggle and exploitation. Mao also describes revolutionary movements over the last 100 years, which naturally leads to the forthcoming two-fold, bourgeois-democratic revolution and proletarian-socialist revolution, which will be led by the Chinese Communist Party. History provides the foundation of Mao's argument for revolution, and the step-by-step analysis makes it seem pre-ordained. He also uses history to support the Chinese Communist Party as the only entity that can manage "China's two great revolutions" (Mao, *The Chinese Revolution and the Communist Party*).

As philosophical descendants of Karl Marx, revolutionary theorists, even anti-communist ones, used history in important ways to support their point of view. History formed the foundation of their theories and beliefs, such as Marx's use of historical materialism as a bedrock. History is often used to enhance the appeal of their conclusions and to persuade, by using a step-by-step approach, like a mathematical proof, going from the past, which is familiar, to the present. If a reader agrees with each step, the conclusion becomes self-evident. For instance, Mao used 3,000 years of Chinese history to reach the conclusion that the Chinese Communist Party is the only entity to lead the twin revolutions in China. History, both ancient and recent, is extremely important for challenging established ideas, such as Bernstein and his

challenging of the notion that communism requires revolution. Finally, and perhaps most often, history is used to justify the actions that are taken during revolutions, particularly the violent ones that prompt others to demand justification for. For example, Trotsky's defense of the violent acts committed in the Russian Revolution was primarily based on other revolutions throughout history, and their extensive use of violence to achieve their goals. History is a vital tool for any revolutionary philosopher to both form their ideas and to convince others of them, and ironically, all we need to do to prove this is to examine our own philosophical history.

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