

Debates on the Existence of Historical Laws: Historicism and its Critics

By
Valentin Stoian

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Department of Political Science

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Supervisor: Prof. Janos Kis

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the arguments against historicism brought by three philosophers: Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich von Hayek. In their seminal political writings, the three philosophers argue that historicism, understood as the belief in the existence of historical laws leads to a totalitarian political philosophy. Since then, other writers such as G.D. Snooks have challenged this assumption. This thesis reconstructs the arguments of the anti-historicists and tests them against the writings of Condorcet, Karl Marx and Oswald Spengler. Since the anti-historicists are those who make very strong accusations, their arguments are interpreted as demanding the most. Thus, historicism is understood to imply both strong holism and strong teleological determinism and together to lead to a totalitarian political thinking. The thesis concludes by arguing that Popper, Berlin and Hayek's arguments do not hold, except when compared to a very strong reading of Marx.

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Introduction

Within the history of political thought, authors have sought for the origins of the philosophical doctrines which lay at the basis of the two totalitarian political regimes of the XXth century: Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR. Looking to condemn totalitarianism, scholars have first tried to understand it. While historians have sought for social and political causes, political scientists have explained mechanisms of terror and mobilization, intellectual historians have looked for the origins of the ideas.

This thesis deals with such an attempt and the debates which it raised. After the end of the Second World War, Karl Popper published two books: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *Poverty of Historicism*. Popper argued that the origins of totalitarian political philosophy lay in a type of thinking branded historicism. According to him, a philosophy which seeks to find the inexorable laws of history and to predict its end necessarily leads to a totalitarian political action. This excludes the interests of the wide mass of individuals and justifies the use of unlimited power in order to attain the philosophically-determined historical goal. Popper's thoughts were later echoed by Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich von Hayek.

However, Popper, Berlin and Hayek were severely criticized by other authors. They have been attacked as offering a very strong and mistaken reading of the philosophers under investigation. Moreover, they have been accused of twisting the evidence in the heat of the moment, in order to suit their goal of defending liberal democracy. As their works were written during or shortly after the Second World War, this charge carries certain plausibility. Therefore, an investigation of Popper's, Berlin's and Hayek's argument at a point in time in which the historical events which impressed them are less urgent seems absolutely necessary.

The main question of the thesis is: *Does the belief in the existence of historical laws necessarily lead to a totalitarian political philosophy?* In other words, the thesis will investigate whether there is a necessary connection between a conception of history as governed by laws and a thinking which demands action in the name of the inevitable.

The thesis will argue that belief in historical laws does not directly lead to a totalitarian political philosophy. Popper's rendition of historicism relies heavily on a very strong reading of Karl Marx. Only in such a reading can all the elements of what Popper believes is a totalitarian political philosophy can be found. Rather than totalitarian action, historicism can open up to different attitudes: unbounded optimism, as in Condorcet or melancholic pessimism and resignation, as in the thought of Oswald Spengler. Unless read as demanding immediate action by a self-conscious minority, even Marx's conception can be understood differently than what Popper claims.

In order to argue for this claim, one will have to reconstruct the anti-historicist argument. It must be presented in such a way as to explain its main charges, delineate its key concept and establish the connection between them. The argument of Popper, Berlin and Hayek will be assessed as establishing a necessary association between three key concepts. It will be argued that historicism, understood as the belief in the existence of historical laws, implies determinism and holism. The first concept, determinism, means that history has a pre-determined ending, which is also a supreme goal of mankind. The second, holism, will be understood in its strong form, as the belief in supra-individual organic entities, possessing their own interests. Together, these two are supposed to lead to a totalitarian political philosophy.

Then, against this argument, the political thought of three thinkers will be assessed. Firstly, Marquis de Condorcet pre-historicist thinking will be discussed. The thesis will show

how his use of historical justification represented the prelude to fully-blown historicism. Further, the most important author in the three is Karl Marx. Different interpretations of his thinking will be assessed. Marx plays a crucial role in the argument, because he is the only author discussed also by Popper. Moreover, he is the founder of an influential tradition of thought. Finally, the historicist thought of Oswald Spengler will be discussed. The thesis will show how Spengler's thought, while historicist, holist and deterministic can offer a very different perspective on the future than that blamed by Popper.

From a methodological point of view, the thesis will approach the subject using interpretative methods. The arguments of the anti-historicists will be interpreted in the strongest way possible. This means that they will be understood to demand the most possible from those they accuse. Because they make harsh accusations, it is them who have to bear the burden of proof to the greatest extent possible. Further, the arguments of Condorcet and Spengler will be discussed using their own words in such a way as to most diminish their responsibility. As they stand accused, one needs to imagine what the weakest interpretation of their thinking would be. Marx is a special case and his thinking will be discussed both in what regards his own texts and those of his interpreters. Due to his ambiguities, one weak reading of Marx, offered by John Elster, and a very strong one, by Gyorgy Lukacs will be offered.

Chapter 1. Literature review

1.1. Historicism

Karl Popper introduced the concept of historicism when trying to give a name to the doctrine he intended to attack. His definition still remains the most comprehensive one, which other authors follow in their work. According to Popper, historicism is an approach to the social sciences which assumes that “*historical prediction* is their primary aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history”¹. Popper moves further to define historicism in *The Open society and Its Enemies*, claiming that there exist certain philosophical doctrines which aim at large-scale historical prediction and which argue that democracy is not permanent, but doomed to fail by history.²

Similarly, Isaiah Berlin maintains that certain philosophical doctrines claim to find the sources of historical events in causes largely outside the actions of individuals. According to Berlin, these doctrines affirm that trying to find interpretations in terms of human intentions “rest on a mixture of vanity and stubborn ignorance”.³ Moreover, Berlin upholds the view that this groups of philosophical doctrines rely, for their explanations of historical events, on units larger than the individual, for example, race, class, nation, World Spirit or civilization.⁴ In Berlin’s view, the philosophers which have imagined these larger units, which individuals are merely part of, see them as organically linked. In other words, one cannot escape his belonging, because

¹ Karl Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), 3.

² Karl Popper, *The Open society and Its Enemies*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 3

³ Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability” in *Four Essay on Liberty*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1992), 45.

⁴ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 45.

one's belonging is not an act of choice.⁵ An act against the interests of the larger unit is not an act of individual will, it is a betrayal.

Finally, F.A. Hayek argues that there is a “scientistic” view of history which is looking for a theory of history. In its attempts, it seeks to divide history into stages or phases. Moreover, it relies in its analysis on certain “wholes” (theoretical constructs which are made up of organically linked individuals-armies, governments) which are the actors of these laws.⁶ Hayek argues that such a view of history is essentially anti-individualistic: it does not purport to understand “wholes” by looking at the individuals that make them up and at the relations between them. Conversely, historicism claims to understand individuals by looking at the larger units which they compose.⁷ Finally, Hayek blames philosophers such as Marx or Hegel for not trying to build an empirical science and, through theory, to construct the “wholes” on which human existence is based. Rather, Hayek claims, these philosophers have tried to grasp the laws of history by looking at the actions of the “wholes”, which they believe they can directly apprehend.⁸

1.2. The Popper-Berlin-Hayek argument: concepts and connections

The main controversy which this paper will discuss is the relationship between historicism and totalitarianism. Based on a strong reading of the three philosophers, the paper will operate with an abstraction of their arguments. According to the Popper-Hayek-Berlin argument, as understood in this thesis, there is a logical connection between three distinct concepts: historicism, determinism and holism. The main thrust of the anti-historicist camp is that these elements are necessarily and always interconnected and that they lead to a totalitarian

⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 47.

⁶ Friedrich August Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science : studies on the abuse of reason*, (Indianapolis : Liberty Press, 1979), 128.

⁷ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 129.

⁸ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 130.

political philosophy. While the three authors do not make very clear the way in which the three concepts are associated, a strong reading of their argument will reveal that the relationship between historicism, holism, determinism and totalitarian philosophy is one of implication. In other words, historicism implies both determinism and holism and together these imply a totalitarian political philosophy. Thus, once one becomes a historicist, there is no way not to hold totalitarian political convictions.

Holism will be understood, for the purpose of this paper, in its strong version. On this account, holism represents a belief that supra-individual agents not only exist, but are endowed with their own interests and purposes. These agents, as understood by the strong holists, are directly interested in achieving one goal or another. One version of weak holism is defended, for example, by Ernest Nagel. Nagel blames the excesses of anti-holists and their attempt to reduce all scientific explanation to the behavior of individuals, or “psychological” primitive units. According to Nagel, complex wholes, such as social institutions exist and can be used in explaining social phenomena. For example, when one observes the proceedings of a court of law, one is not observing only individuals but a complex social institution irreducible to its component parts. However, Nagel denies strong holism: the idea that these wholes also possess some kind of teleological destiny.⁹ Moreover, according to this strong reading of holism, the supra-individual agent should be conceived in such a way that it can be embodied by a small minority.

Determinism is the belief that history has a predetermined ending which will occur due to the operation of these laws. Moreover, in the rendition of Popper Hayek and Berlin, determinism is not understood in a weak sense. In other words, history does not only have a pre-determined

⁹ Ernest Nagel, *The structure of science : problems in the logic of scientific explanation*, Indianapolis : Hackett, c1979, 536.

ending which people cannot escape, but this ending also represents the goal of history. This “end of history” is not merely accidental: it is the supreme state of humanity. All the previous stages are not simply inadvertent; they are stepping stones towards reaching that goal. Moreover, this ending is universal: it is supposed to occur for the whole of humanity and forever. In other words, it is similar to a Christian “Kingdom of God”.

Totalitarianism is a debated concept in both historical and political studies. Different definitions of it have been offered, by authors such as Hannah Arendt, Friedrich and Brezisnki and Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. As the two archetypal exemplars of such a political system, the literature uses the Soviet Union under Stalin’s rule (1924-1953), especially after 1929, and Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany after the beginning of the Second World War and up to 1945. Moreover, the concept has been challenged by both historians and political scientists as useless and meaningless. The charges reflect a belief that the two regimes cannot be placed in the same category.

While keeping in mind the two historical exemplars, the thesis will not engage into empirical investigation. However, one has to define what exactly is meant by a totalitarian political philosophy in order to understand what Popper, Berlin and Hayek meant when they wanted to link historicism to the atrocities of the two political regimes. A totalitarian political philosophy is understood a philosophical conception which views the goal of the state as the achievement of a rationally discernible purpose. In other words, a totalitarian political philosophy is one which has an already established blueprint for society and looks to use state power to make that blueprint reality. In order to achieve this purpose, it seeks to eliminate all restrictions on state power and get rid of all its enemies by any means. Moreover, a totalitarian political philosophy aims at the very transformation of human nature. Both Stalinist communism

and Nazism sought to create a “new man”. In this understanding, historicism, which implies determinism and holism, is totalitarian because it subordinates people to a whole and the wholes to historical laws. Thus, the only thing one can do is to help bring about the inevitable regardless of human sacrifices.

1.3. Karl Popper

In one of the seminal parts of *The Poverty of Historicism*, Karl Popper contrasts piecemeal social engineering with utopian social engineering. His view is that, while the first is compatible with liberalism, the second one is associated with historicism and is holist and totalitarian.¹⁰ Piecemeal social engineering looks upon social institutions as amenable to change, but to some extent organically grown. Therefore, one will proceed to their reformation by small adjustments, and re-adjustments which can always be taken back and improved upon.¹¹ Moreover, piecemeal social engineering moves cautiously and is always self-limiting. The piecemeal social engineer is always aware of “how little he knows”.¹² Always, when an adjustment has been made, the piecemeal social engineer will look to see whether the results he has obtained match the desired ones.¹³

In contrast to the piecemeal social engineer, the utopian political engineer looks at society as an empty canvas to be painted upon. Popper claims that utopian political engineering seeks to model the whole of society according to a blueprint.¹⁴ This can be achieved solely by the unrestrained use of state power and its extension to the point that the state becomes synonymous with society. From these positions, the state can direct and mould society according to laws

¹⁰ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 66.

¹¹ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 66.

¹² Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 67.

¹³ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 67.

¹⁴ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 67.

which its leaders have glimpsed.¹⁵ Realizing that such a blueprint does not take into account the many individual wills of the people subject to such an experiment, the holist utopian engineer is then forced to seek for a remodeling of man himself according to the envisioned ideal.¹⁶ Popper argues that, since the ends of the historical development are not a matter of choice, but have been scientifically discovered, and since the only way to act is by utopian social engineering, all that the utopian historicist can do is to adapt to the new society and to help to bring it about.¹⁷

In *The Open society and Its Enemies* Popper also establishes the connection between historicism and determinism in one of the opening chapters, when dealing with the theory of Heraclitus. Popper shows how Heraclitus believed not only that there are certain laws of change in history, but also that they are immutable. In Popper's rendering of Heraclitus, everything is change and all change is inexorable decay.¹⁸ Moving further to detail Plato's writings, Popper upholds the claim that historicism implies determinism. Popper describes Plato as having been aware of the fact that his belief in inexorable laws of change would lead him to supporting the idea that history has a predetermined ending. Plato, however, advocates that by arresting change there is a way to block decay.¹⁹ Finally, in probably one of the most clear chapters of *The Open society and Its Enemies*, Popper argues that historicists are interested in finding out the "true purpose" of an institution, a purpose revealed by its history and to force that institution along what is its unalterable path.²⁰

Moreover, Popper does not mince his words when stating his belief in the connection between totalitarianism and historicism. When referring to Hegel's philosophy and its

¹⁵ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 67.

¹⁶ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 72.

¹⁷ Popper, *The poverty of historicism*, 74.

¹⁸ Karl Popper, *The Open society and Its Enemies*, 16.

¹⁹ Karl Popper, *The Open society and Its Enemies*, 24.

²⁰ Karl Popper, *The Open society and Its Enemies*, 27.

historicism, Popper directly claims that there is a strong connection between Hegelian philosophy and left-wing and right wing extremism. Popper argues that Hegel invented a “historicist scheme” in which nations were the main actors on the stage of history. From this, there is just one step towards totalitarianism and it is taken by both the left and the right. The left wing replaces the nation with class while the right wing replaces it with race, as the main actor in history. Further on, Popper affirms that modern totalitarianism is deeply indebted to Hegel and that Hegel represents the “missing link” between totalitarianism and Plato.²¹

1.4. Isaiah Berlin

Isaiah Berlin also stresses this connection between historicism, fatalism, holism and totalitarianism. He avers that, by supporting an outlook that there are certain discernible patterns in history, one refuses the notion of individual responsibility.²² Berlin charges the historicists with claiming that individuals who do not act according to their predetermined interests are simply blind and cannot see the underlying pattern according to which history proceeds.²³ Therefore, individual freedom is only an illusion caused by lack of knowledge. Thus, on the historicist account, the more we know, the more we realize how un-free our wills truly are.²⁴ In a historicist view of the world, Berlin claims that notions of individual responsibility and guilt are meaningless.²⁵ What is left for the individual, is according to Berlin’s reading of the historicists, nothing more than to submit to the underlying patterns. Otherwise, when the forces of history act, the individual will be on the losing side of history.²⁶ The individuals who are aware of these forces and who can see them most clearly are humanity’s natural leaders.²⁷

²¹ Karl Popper, *The Open society and Its Enemies*, 226.

²² Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 54.

²³ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 55.

²⁴ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 58.

²⁵ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 59.

²⁶ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 62.

²⁷ Berlin, “Historical Inevitability”, 63.

1.5. F.A. Hayek

Similarly to Popper's Hayek's rejection of historicism and holism is based on a metaphor. Hayek contrasts the engineer and the trader, similarly as Popper contrasts piecemeal and utopian political engineering. The engineer is assimilated in Hayek's writing to Popper's utopian. The engineer is concerned with one single end, he controls all the efforts directed to that end and has planned all the steps to be taken towards that end.²⁸ Hayek's engineer thinks holistically: he has been trained in impersonal thinking and knows how to solve typical problems rather than how to adapt to the one that is presented to him.²⁹ Moreover, Hayek's engineer thinks in terms of optimums: he does not take into consideration the specific constraints of the specific problem at hand, but looks only to how he could maximize absolutely the results obtained.³⁰ Finally, Hayek asserts that the use of central planning is the application of such an engineering technique to the whole of society.³¹

Similarly to Popper, who opposed piecemeal engineering to the utopian one, in Hayek's metaphor, the engineer is contrasted to the trader. Unlike the engineer, the trader is never concerned with the final end of the process in which he takes part. He does not know the final end, but knows all the relevant particular "circumstances of time and place". This knowledge of particular circumstances makes the trader adaptable and able to solve any task at hand.³²

Hayek concludes this section by comparing the trader with decentralized decision making in a society. If a society adopts the engineering method, that which includes holism, it will have to try to concentrate all the available resources and knowledge into one single central authority. This is impossible, as there is no such thing as "objective" needs which are to be met and there is

²⁸ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 166.

²⁹ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 169.

³⁰ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 172.

³¹ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 174.

³² Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 174.

no authority which can know everything. If, on the contrary, the society delegates decision making at various levels, its decision mechanisms are much more responsive to the needs that they sense at every single moment.³³

1.6. The opponents

Conversely, on the other side of the debate, authors have dissociated the three elements: historicism, determinism and holism. Carl Hempel and G.D. Snooks argue that laws of history do not necessarily imply determinism or holism. Historicism can exist without any totalitarian implications.

Carl Hempel understands “laws of history” in a much more limited way.³⁴ These are not, in his view, grand explanations based on such metaphors as “the mission in history” or “predestined fate”³⁵. However, these laws are some kind of statements which claim that under conditions X, Y, and Z, event A will take place or event B will not take place. Thus, when explaining an event, one can find the preexistent characteristics and then show by which causal links they have generated the event to happen. These causal links must be general statements which provide the connections between causes and effects. These are then, the “laws”.³⁶ However, what Hempel’s view of “the laws” comes a long way from what Popper, Hayek and Berlin accused as totalitarian. They deal neither with supra-individual wholes nor are deterministic, predicting a certain outcome. Hempel’s laws are more like what Popper proposes as small-scale social science, dealing with predictions of outcomes under certain circumstances

Graeme Donald Snooks claims that Popper, Hayek and Berlin are mistaken. He argues that historicism does not necessarily involve with a totalitarian thinking because it is not

³³ Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 176-177.

³⁴ Carl Hempel “The Function of General Laws in History”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Jan. 15, 1942), pp. 35-48

³⁵ Hempel “The Function of General Laws in History”.

³⁶ Hempel “The Function of General Laws in History”.

necessarily deterministic and holist.³⁷ Snooks maintains that what Popper practices is “guilt by association”: instead of viewing historicism as possibly logically dissociated from holism and determinism, Popper links them and associates them with the countless victims of totalitarianism. Moreover, in Snooks’s argument, Popper was not able to distinguish positivist historicism from the metaphysical one.³⁸ In Snooks’ view, a positivist, inductivist historicism can be freed from the association with the other elements of the totalitarian triplet.

The main fault in Popper’s argument, lies, according to Snooks, in his refusal of the inductive method. Because Popper did not accept induction as a valid method for science, he could not envision anything else than a type of historicism which is based on a deductive method. Or, the only kind of historicism which can be based on a deductive method is the metaphysical one. Metaphysical historicism can have a deterministic and holist bend, Snooks admits. Had Popper been open to induction, Snooks’ argues, he could have seen how historicism can stand apart from determinism and holism.³⁹

Moreover, Snooks claims that Popper makes the incorrect association between historicism and holism because of his belief in “methodological individualism”. Methodological individualism represents a form of scientific investigation which seeks to understand the world by studying the views and actions of individuals. However, according to Snooks, methodological individualism has been overcome by Keynesian theories. Finally, based on Popper’s autobiography, Snooks accuses Popper of constructing historicism as deterministic because of his own disenchantment with Marxism and his modeling of historicism on Marx’s theories.⁴⁰

³⁷ Graeme Donald Snooks *The Laws of History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 166

³⁸ Snooks *The Laws of History*, 167.

³⁹ Snooks *The Laws of History*, 166.

⁴⁰ Snooks *The Laws of History*, 168.

Snooks levels against Berlin the same charges that he used against Popper. Berlin is accused of taking for granted Popper's assumption that inductivist science does not exist and therefore historicism can only be metaphysical. Berlin is blamed for believing that there can be no regular patterns in human affairs and for asserting that trying to see patterns in history is only a metaphysical exercise. Moreover, Berlin is indicted for unnecessarily linking historicism with determinism and therefore claiming that historicism is an enemy of individual liberty. Finally, in a charge even stronger than that against Popper, Snooks argues: "Yet, despite the dogmatic confidence with which these claims are made, Berlin tenders no evidence. None whatsoever."⁴¹

Eventually, Snooks moves to a diatribe against Hayek. Once again, the classical accusations are launched. Hayek is seen as refuting inductivism and accepting only deductive methods as legitimate scientific inquiry. Moreover, Snooks argues that Hayek separates history, which focuses on explaining individual events, and theory, which is generalizing, too neatly. Further, Snooks maintains that Hayek believes that ideas are the springs which drive human society, a view which is supposed to be wrong. Finally, Hayek is charged with looking for evidence of the association between historicism and totalitarianism and pointing out, maybe too unfairly, to Comte's desire to use "social physics" to organize society from above.⁴²

⁴¹ Snooks *The Laws of History*, 170-171.

⁴² Snooks *The Laws of History*, 180.

Chapter 2. Condorcet

2.1. Condorcet's importance

Marquis de Condorcet's philosophy will be discussed in the following chapter. The analysis will comprise discussions of the three elements which are the ingredients of historicist philosophy: the collective agent(s) of history, the laws of history, and the way history will end. Similarly to historicist philosophers, Condorcet chooses an agent whose development through history he will follow: human intellect. Although he does not directly discuss the operation of historical laws, which he does not claim to have discovered, his writings imply underlying regularities. All history is in Condorcet's writing a history of the development and progress of the human mind. Moreover, history is proceeding towards an unavoidable goal: an age of reason where science and politics reach a supreme stage of development and liberty.

While there are important similarities with historicist philosophers, crucial elements of the historicist philosophy are missing from Condorcet's conception. There is no clear description of how the laws of history operate and what they are. Moreover, the analogy between the operation of history and natural sciences is deeply under-developed. However, Condorcet does have a theory of history, although one that is still in its infancy. His theory serves the purpose of Enlightenment philosophers: to justify the fact that human society looks very different than their conception of the nature of man as a rational being would expect it to be. Rather than being a society of rational and autonomous individuals, the world that Enlightenment philosophers saw before their eyes was still deeply governed by religion and absolute monarchy. Therefore, history is woven as a progression of the human mind: it is similar to a human being growing up and only reaching maturity later in life.

Condorcet, therefore, belongs to the pre-history of historicism. However, in order to understand what historicism is and what it brings new, one must study its development from the moment its first traces appeared. This justifies the inclusion of Condorcet among historicist philosophers. His ideas serve as a basis of comparison for the other philosophers included in this thesis. Finally, it is well-known his theories were deeply influential on the following generation of fully-developed historicist philosophers (August Comte and Henry Saint-Simon) and which, in turn, influenced Hegel and Marx.

Condorcet traces the history of the human mind throughout nine historical stages, adding a tenth one in which he discusses the future of mankind. The division of these historical stages is made by the author according to political events and scientific discoveries which he believes radically altered life. The first period is that of uniting into hordes, followed by the pastoral state of mankind, then by the invention of agriculture. The third, agricultural stage concludes with the invention of the art of alphabetical writing. The first three stages take place before the recording of human history and rely on anthropological speculation for empirical evidence. However, for the following divisions, historical examples are used. The fourth stage takes place in ancient Greece and is ended by the division of the sciences between the empirical and the speculative while the fifth represents the decline of science and liberty and the triumph of Christianity. The sixth stage is the complete disaster of both science and liberty during the “dark ages” of Christian dogmatism. The seventh represents a slight revival of learning and reason and culminates in the invention of printing, which permits the dissemination of knowledge to the previously ignorant people. The last two stages see reason and illumination on the march forward. The eighth stage takes place during the great scientific revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century and sees the works of Galilei and Copernicus, as well as the discovery of

the road to Asia, Africa and America. Finally, the ninth stage begins with Descartes, includes Newton and the American Revolution and culminates with the formation of the French Republic. Afterwards, in the tenth stage, science will progress and will break all bounds, instruction will be universal, rights will be granted to slaves and women, constitutions will protect human rights and human life will be healthier and happier.⁴³

2.2. Condorcet's historicism

Condorcet does not necessarily describe the progress of history as the operation of certain laws which are valid throughout the whole history of mankind. However, he insists that human intellect can be understood in a historical manner. The historical method is applicable because the same process operates throughout history. Moreover, the current state of human intellect is the product of the developments it went through the preceding epochs. The development of human intellect is similar to the development of individual capacities, being nothing more than the operation of the same law at the level of humanity. In other words, a law of development exists all throughout human history: it is a law of progress and advancement and it is inexorable: "The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde"⁴⁴

However, Condorcet argues that while progress exists it is not necessarily rectilinear. It is rather a long process of struggle and steps forward sometimes followed by backlashes. Sometimes freedom and progress have the upper hand, sometimes superstition, ignorance and tyranny win temporary battles. Errors which deceive even the most intelligent philosophers are transposed into superstition and then used by the powerful to keep their dominion over the weak.

⁴³ Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind* [1795], http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1669&Itemid=27, Accessed 22.04.2010

⁴⁴ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Introduction

But, in the end, progress and reason triumph over ignorance and superstition. As much as those who want to maintain humanity in a state of wretchedness and misery might try, the laws of progress are inexorable.:

*We shall expose the origin and trace the history of general errors, which have more or less contributed to retard or suspend the advance of reason, and sometimes even, as much as political events, have been the cause of man's taking a retrograde course towards ignorance.[...] These are the three kinds of enemies which reason is continually obliged to encounter, and over which she frequently does not triumph till after a long and painful struggle.*⁴⁵

In certain interpretations, the historical drama set out by Condorcet posits a pre-Hegelian, dialectical relation between truth and error. On the one hand, each new truth or invention gives rise to new errors. For example, the invention of astronomy allowed priests to use their newly acquired skills to deceive the unknowledgeable and lay the bases for their domination. On the other hand, actions born out of fanatical devotion and closed minds sometimes led to a new discovery which contributed to the development of reason. For example, the Crusades, born out of the religious fanaticism of the Middle Ages, put Western civilization in contact with the more enlightened Arabs and returned to Europe Aristotle's works. On the world-historical stage, truth and error, liberty and tyranny, science and superstition are destined to confront each other until the forces of good will triumph.⁴⁶

One of the main historicist ingredients missing in Condorcet's theory is the causal mechanism by which society is deemed to irreversible progress. There is little clear description as to what are the reasons for which society has obtained knowledge and liberty, but at the same time had vanquish many errors and superstitions. In this regard, two possible alternative

⁴⁵ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Introduction

⁴⁶ Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to social mathematics*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1982, 360 and Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian thought in the Western World*, Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press, 1979, 498.

interpretations have been offered. Firstly, Baker argues that Condorcet's theory of man, as a being capable of comparing and combining sensations and ideas precludes the necessity of a detailed theory of historical causation. Man is by his very definition condemned to progress.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Frank E and Fritzie P. Manuel understand Condorcet as having a utilitarian theory of progress: man advances through a process of trial and error in which he discovers different combinations of practices and ideas. Those that create more pleasure and limit pain are kept and perpetuated, while those who do not are dropped.⁴⁸

In conclusion, when analyzing Condorcet's theory of history, one can say that some pre-historicism exists, but in a much weaker form than in Marx and meets Popper's criteria to a far lesser extent. There are laws of history, but these are not clearly articulated. Very little analysis is made of historical causation, which is implied rather than explicitly stated. Moreover, while a grand-historical narrative exists in Condorcet's rendition, progress from one historical stage to another seems rather haphazard and random rather than clearly attributable to the operation of these laws.

2.3. Human intellect-the non-holist agent

The agent whose operation in history Condorcet outlines is the human intellect. Throughout history it manifests itself in two distinct forms: political constitutions and science. Specific of the Enlightenment period to which Condorcet belongs is the opinion that these two are intrinsically connected. Technical progress is generally matched and reinforced by an advance of liberty while a decline or underdeveloped state of science corresponds to the reign of superstition, confusion and tyranny. Politics is seen by Condorcet as a type of science which has as its goal the establishment of rules for furthering human liberty. The clearest examples of this

⁴⁷ Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to social mathematics*, 358

⁴⁸ Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian thought in the Western World*, 495.

association can be seen in his description of ancient Greece, of the beneficial effects of invention of printing and of the combination between liberty and technical progress in the future, tenth stage of humanity.

Condorcet describes ancient Greece as the period which advanced both liberty and science to the greatest extent before the advent of the modern age. In the Greek constitutions citizens, at least those who were allowed to participate, could behave as rational individuals in a *polis*, taking part in the decision-making process. Moreover, the schools of philosophy, founded by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle made free discussion possible. Technical advances also made great strides in the sciences of arithmetic and geometry:

The mathematical sciences had been cultivated with success in the schools of Thales and of Pythagoras. Meanwhile they rose there very little above the point at which they had stopped in the sacerdotal colleges of the eastern nations. But from the birth of Plato's school they soared infinitely above that barrier, which the idea of confining them to an immediate utility and practice had erected[...]

Their [of political sciences] object could not be, as yet, to found upon the basis of reason, upon the rights which all men have equally received from nature, upon the maxims of universal justice, the superstructure of a society of men equal and free; but merely to establish laws by which the hereditary members of a society, already existing, might preserve their liberty, live secure from injustice, and, by exhibiting an imposing appearance to their neighbours, continue in the enjoyment of their independence⁴⁹

In the tenth stage of human progress science will advance above any known bounds. It will bring together with it an improvement of the quality of life of humanity, producing more food, ending poverty and wretchedness, prolonging human life and reducing the birthrate. Slavery will end and the oppression of women will be abolished. The constitution which respects the rights of all will be adopted. Social inequality will be diminished to only the absolutely necessary for maintaining an incentive to work and advance. Finally, nations will stop contending for power and territory:

⁴⁹ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Fourth Epoch. Progress of the Human Mind In Greece, Till the Division of the Sciences About the Age of Alexander.

*Our hopes, as to the future condition of the human species, may be reduced to three points: the destruction of inequality between different nations; the progress of equality in one and the same nation; and lastly, the real improvement of man.*⁵⁰

Ancient Greece and the future tenth epoch represent the advance of both liberty and science. However, the association between the two can also be glimpsed from Condorcet's description of the period in which they declined together: the dark ages following the fall of the Roman Empire. The age saw the dictatorship of kings, popes, priests and monks over an ignorant and superstitious population, which could be tricked and controlled. The commerce with religious forgiveness, the overwhelming control of the church and the closing of the mind against any technological and scientific innovation are represented by the author as the triumph of ignorance and barbarism over liberty and progress:

*In the disastrous epoch at which we are now arrived, we shall see the human mind rapidly descending from the height to which it had raised itself, while Ignorance marches in triumph, carrying with her, in one place, barbarian ferocity; in another, a more refined and accomplished cruelty; every where, corruption and perfidy.[....] Theological reveries, superstitious delusions, are become the sole genius of man, religious intolerance his only morality; and Europe, crushed between sacerdotal tyranny and military despotism, awaits, in blood and in tears, the moment when the revival of light shall restore it to liberty, to humanity, and to virtue.*⁵¹

One of the most important questions when analyzing any historicist philosopher is the way he constructs the agent which is developing throughout history. One must inquire whether the agent is defined in terms of a collectivity, an individual or something else. Moreover, if the agent is a collectivity, it must be assessed against the defining criteria of strong holism. Does Condorcet's agent meet the Popperian demand that it must be possessed by its own historical interests, which subordinate those of the individuals composing it?

⁵⁰ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Tenth Epoch. Future Progress of Mankind.

⁵¹ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Sixth Epoch, Decline of Learning, to its Restoration about the Period of the Crusades.

Firstly, Condorcet does not treat the human intellect as something which progresses from one man of genius to another. Science and the art of politics are not considered to have advanced until their discoveries are spread to the great mass of the population, for whom they are truly destined. If one scientific discovery is made, but kept secret among elite of the knowledgeable, then its value is considered by Condorcet as close to zero. As Baker claims, Condorcet is the one who democratized history.⁵²

Moreover, even more than benefitting the mass of people, human intellect does not advance except throughout historical time and at the level of the whole species. In one of the most quoted passages of the *Outlines*, Condorcet states:

*This progress is subject to the same general laws, observable in the individual development of our faculties; being the result of that very development considered at once in a great number of individuals united in society.*⁵³

In other words, Condorcet's agent is the collective knowledge of mankind. Similarly to the individual, who grows up and develops his reason through education, mankind undergoes a process of reaching maturity. Its collective knowledge goes through different stages, from that of the very undeveloped to that of the tenth stage, in which it is fully mature and free from all errors and superstitions.

However, Condorcet does not go further than this. He does not imagine this collective knowledge of mankind as an agent possessing its own interests, as Lukacs does with the proletariat. Mankind's knowledge cannot be embodied by any individual who is to cater for its interests. It does not have an objective existence, which can be grasped by anybody educated enough. It simply exists and increases, but is never separated from its bearers: the community of human beings. Thus, it cannot be said of Condorcet's agent that it fulfills the criteria of strong

⁵² Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to social mathematics*, 353

⁵³ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Introduction

holism as defined by Popper, Berlin and Hayek. Rather, the most it can be said that it represents a form of weak holism. Mankind and its collective knowledge is much more than a collection of individuals. However, it never turns into an entity possessing a will and an interest.

2.4. The Tenth Epoch-Condorcet's weak determinism

While progress, in Condorcet's theory, is inexorable, his description of the end of history is presented as less than a certainty. Rather, Condorcet establishes his vision of the future as the result of speculation and conjecture from the past. He does not purport to raise history to the status of a natural science, which can predict events based on laws. However, he does not paint a completely open future, but offers what he believes is a possible alternative.

Condorcet was aware that his model could be understood as deterministic and teleological. However, he explicitly refused to fall in such a trap, and merely affirmed that history is a repository of knowledge from which social science can draw inspiration. The latter, understood by him as the science of establishing society in according to the principles of liberty and equality, was to take from history the material it needed to select the correct institutions and avoid errors.⁵⁴

Firstly, Condorcet denies that a science of predicting the future exists at the current time: "If there be really such an art as that of foreseeing the future improvement of the human race"⁵⁵ The existence of such a science is postulated with incredulity: it might exist but it probably does not. However, if such a science were to exist, it could only rely on history and its laws of progress as the empirical material from which to draw its inferences:

....the history of the progress it has already made must form the principal basis of this art. Philosophy, no doubt, ought to proscribe the superstitious idea, which supposes no rules of

⁵⁴ Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to social mathematics*, 355.

⁵⁵ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Introduction

*conduct are to be found but in the history of past ages, and no truths but in the study of the opinions of antiquity. But ought it not to include in the proscription, the prejudice that would proudly reject the lessons of experience?*⁵⁶

In the beginning of the outline of the tenth epoch, Condorcet justifies how his study can permit him to offer conjectures on the future. Firstly, he begins with an analogy with the natural sciences, which operate by observation and experiment. These observations and experiments then allow the scientist to formulate general principles of the behavior of nature. In this particular paragraph, Condorcet presents history as a form of science, but less developed than the natural ones. What makes natural sciences so advanced is the fact that their laws are known, are regular and constant. However, history is less developed, because, even if it operates under the empire of laws, these are not known. But, since natural laws are regular and constant, the unknown historical laws must also be the same.⁵⁷

Since in the natural sciences man knows the laws and can offer predictions based on them, if history is also governed by laws it must also be able to offer predictions. But because the laws of history are not known, they cannot form the basis of our prediction. A weaker principle must therefore be employed by the philosopher who attempts to offer a perspective on the future. This principle should be conjecture from experience. Finally, in a word of caution, the historical philosopher must not offer his predictions with law-like certainty. Rather he must “attribute to them no greater certainty than the number, the consistency, and the accuracy of actual observations”⁵⁸

The past, which has afforded a view of constant progress, is taken as an authority when arguing that the future is open and optimistic. In a passage of the final chapter, Condorcet argues

⁵⁶ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Introduction

⁵⁷ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Tenth epoch, Future Progress of Mankind.

⁵⁸ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Tenth epoch, Future Progress of Mankind.

that, since history has offered only a spectacle of progress, the future must also do the same. Not only science, but also the moral faculties and political liberty of mankind have progressed throughout the ages. In this passage, Condorcet adds the final ingredient to his argument: the doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of man. This allows the author to postulate that the future will hold only perpetual progress: if man is indefinitely perfectible and if the historical process is going towards his perfection, then there is no reason for which progress cannot go on forever:

*we shall find the strongest reasons to believe, from past experience, from observation of the progress which the sciences and civilization have hitherto made, and from the analysis of the march of the human understanding, and the developement of its faculties, that nature has fixed no limits to our hopes.*⁵⁹

At first sight, Condorcet's theory seems to include all the ingredients which the anti-historicist philosophers have charged against historicism. It views world history as governed by the operation of historical laws, which exist throughout the ages. History is a battle of good and evil and good is destined to triumph. Moreover, an agent, defined at the level of the collectivity is present in all the ages, it grows and matures and will fulfill its destiny in the future. Finally, man can predict the way the future will look simply by gazing at the past.

However, Condorcet's conception is far removed from the strong criteria established by Popper, Berlin and Hayek. Firstly, the mechanism of historical causation is not clearly described. It does not take on the appearance of an "iron law", which only fools can reject. History is not rectilinear, but marked by constant backlashes and small steps towards progress. The historical agent, the human mind, is not an entity possessing its own will and interests. It cannot be separated from its natural bearer, mankind understood as a whole. It cannot be embodied by a minority. Finally, the future can only be sketched in broad outlines and its certainty is nothing

⁵⁹ Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, Tenth epoch, Future Progress of Mankind.

more than a speculation based on conjecture. Laws predicting the future might exist, but are not, or at least, not yet, discernible to the human mind. There is little to suggest that political action should only be directed towards reaching the only possible pre-established destination. Rather, political action should be a tool to combat superstition, but not necessarily because it is predestined to be so.

In conclusion, Condorcet's philosophy can be accused of very little. The most he can be blamed for is that he popularized historical theories among the intellectual circles of the Enlightenment. After him, writing philosophies of history became a popular exercise among the theorists of progress. Comte and Saint-Simon altered his ideas radically and transformed them into an art of historical prediction which yielded very different results than Condorcet's modest proposals.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to social mathematics*, 371.

Chapter 3. Karl Marx

3.1. *Popper's bete noire*

This chapter will explore Karl Marx's philosophy of history and the interpretation of two central concepts: the proletariat and class consciousness. The first part, the investigation of the philosophy of history, will focus particularly on two interpretations of Marxist thought. Jon Elster maintains that there are two strands in Marxism which have not yet been reconciled: one which gives particular attention to the role of classes and another which focuses on productive forces as the main determinants of historical progress.⁶¹ Both these interpretations will be assessed and their common features drawn out in order to investigate whether Marxist philosophy could be termed historicist and determinist. With regard to determinism, special attention will be paid to Marx's view of the coming communist revolution and its perceived inevitability. The chapter will inquire into the extent to which Marx viewed the communist revolution as pre-determined.

One pivotal concept in Marxist theory is "the proletariat". Understanding how Marx conceived "the proletariat" is of paramount importance to deciphering key Marxist tenets. Firstly, the proletariat is, in the Marxist conception, the key agent in history. It is the one which will carry through the successful communist revolution. It is the group of people to whom the future belongs, who are charged with creating the future communist society. However, as mentioned before, Berlin, Popper and Hayek blame an author like Marx for being a holist. In their reading, Marx understands the proletariat in such a way that it is a *sui generis* collective agent, an entity possessing its own interest and its own capacity for action. The anti-historicists claim that there is a direct connection between Marx's conception and Lenin's assertion that the

⁶¹ Jon Elster, *Making sense of Marx* (Paris : Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1991, c1985), 318.

proletariat should be embodied by its leaders and carried forward to victory under the leadership of its self-appointed representatives. However, one should look well at the textual evidence found in Marx before validating or invalidating such claims. Non-holist interpretations of the proletariat have also been proffered. What exactly Marx meant by the proletariat is still a subject of dispute.

Another crucial concept which this chapter will try to illuminate is “class consciousness”. Without the concept of “class consciousness” any holist reading of Marx’s proletariat would be impossible. Class consciousness is somehow supposed to link the proletariat together. However, what this linking together means can have very different interpretations. Class consciousness is supposed to belong to the proletariat. It is supposed to make it more united and more enlightened. Its development is supposed to bring the proletariat closer and closer to the final revolution. However, even more than the concepts of proletariat, interpretations of the class consciousness vary tremendously. Both holist and non-holist reading of the class consciousness will be offered for assessment.

The chapter will argue that Marx’s conception indeed comprises the three elements which the anti-historicists have condemned. Marx’s historicism is comprised in the way he understood the progress of history and the laws which underlie it. Determinism in Marx refers to the inevitability of the coming proletarian revolution. Finally, after assessing holist and non-holist interpretations of the proletariat and its class consciousness, this research will side with the former.

More than the other two authors discussed in this thesis, Karl Marx has founded a tradition of thinking. His works, rather ambiguous at times, have been interpreted and re-interpreted by both philosophers and politicians. Both before and after the Bolshevik revolution

and Marx's canonization in the communist regimes, Marx's works represented a fertile ground of interpretation. Authors such as Plehanov, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Gyorgy Lukacs, Ralph Dahrendorf, G.A. Cohen and John Elster have offered philosophical renditions of Marx's ideas. Finally, G.D. Snooks names Marx as Popper's *bete noire*. Thus, it is hard to underestimate the importance of Marx's influence and therefore he deserves a special place in the analysis of historicist philosophy.

The chapter will proceed by an interpretation of Marx's texts especially with reference to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *The German Ideology*, the preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*, and the *Capital*. However, the analysis of the primary evidence will not suffice when interpreting the texts. As mentioned earlier, Marx has left an immense legacy and his often ambiguous texts are open to different interpretations. Several possible readings of the concepts mentioned will be assessed against each other and compared to the textual evidence. Explanations offered by authors such as Gyorgy Lukacs, Jon Elster and G.A. Cohen will be discussed.

3.2. Marx-some basic premises

Before proceeding to the Marxist theory of history, one must explain certain basic premises on which the Marxist thought relies. Firstly, in contrast to Hegel, Marx believed that it is not the attitudes towards spiritual matters which are the main characteristics of particular ages. On the contrary, it is the objectively existing economic situation, the state of the process of production of means of subsistence and the economic relations between people which determine the way "real" humans live. Thus, the main struggle which mankind is waging is not one for the self-realization of its spirit, as Hegel claimed, but is one against nature. The goal of mankind is not, as Hegel believed, the coming of age of the world spirit, but the organization of the

production of the means necessary for survival in such a way that everybody obtains enough to live a decent life and to reach a stage of social development where each individual has the freedom to develop “omnilaterally” his/her capabilities by way of internalizing the objective products of culture.⁶²

*The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. [...] Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.*⁶³

After sarcastically lambasting the Young Hegelians for their self-proclaimed “revolution” in the realm of thought, in this passage of *The German Ideology*, Marx sets out the premises of his own philosophy. Rather than focusing on men as producers of abstract conceptions such as religion, Marx believes that the distinguishing feature between men and animals is the fact that the former produce their own means of subsistence. Unlike both the romantics, which distinguished men by their ability to feel emotions and the liberals, who build political theory around the rationality of human being, Marx sees productivity as the key feature of humans and the driving force of human history.

The second basic premise of Marx relies on a highly quoted passage of the 1859 preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*. This second tenet directly comes out of the first. Since the process of production is the crucial activity of men, it also determines their understanding of life and the world. In other words, men’s view of the world is not similar for everyone, as liberals would like to claim. Rather, it is highly contingent on the position each individual has in the

⁶² G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1991, c1978), 23.

⁶³ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm> , Retrieved 22.02.2010

procedure by which goods are generated. Moreover, everything else in the world also depends on the way relations of production are organized. The latter are the base, while all legal and moral concepts are nothing more than a “superstructure” which simply mirrors the economic organization:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

*The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.*⁶⁴

These premises are crucial to understanding Marx’s theory of history, in both its class version and its mode of production version. Classes are groups of people with the same position in the process of production: thus only people of the same class can have a similar outlook on the world. Secondly, if modes of production determine history, then they also determine the consciousness of the actors.

3.3. Karl Marx’s theory(es) of history-classes and productive forces

At least two contending interpretations of how Marx views the proceeding of history have been offered. The first is based on the struggle of classes. The second gives center stage development and the fettering of the productive forces. Both of them are supported by textual evidence and both of them have been developed and explicated by other authors. However, what both of these interpretations have in common is the fact that the transition from one historical

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm>, Retrieved 22.02.2010

stage to another is governed by laws which make these transitions inevitable once certain conditions have been reached.

Karl Marx begins his most famous and simplest work with the following unequivocal statement: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”⁶⁵ As simple as it might seem, this opening statement of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* embodies behind it a whole theory of classes and their position in society.

While heavily relying on the concept of class, Marx never explained what he intended to mean by it. Two attempts to elaborate on the notion will be discussed below. Firstly, G.A. Cohen constructs the meaning of class to be a “set of men bound by similar production relations”⁶⁶ Against Thompson, Cohen argues that a person’s class position is given only by the person’s “objective placement in the network of property relations”⁶⁷. In other words, Cohen defines classes by taking as reference the relations of production and people’s placement within them. This position is what determines a person’s behavior in the market: some will have to sell labor power to survive; others will be able to buy, while some will neither buy nor sell.⁶⁸

Jon Elster improves upon Cohen’s interpretation of Marx and comes with a more elaborate vision. In Elster’s view, class position is “endowment-necessitated behavior”.⁶⁹ Elster gives a coherent explanation to what Cohen had already hinted at before: a class is a group of people who have to behave in a similar fashion in the process of obtaining the necessary means of survival. People who compose a class possess goods or means of production which place them in a similar position in the market.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#a2>, Retrieved 22.02.2010.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*, 76.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history : a defence*, 73

⁶⁸ Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history : a defence*, 72

⁶⁹ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 324.

Elster's rendition of the classes avoids two main problems in the interpretation of Marx. Firstly, if classes are defined according to the simple ownership of means of production, then some absurd results might come out. For example, one might own a sewing machine, which can be a means of production, while another may own a ring made of gold of the same value as the sewing machine. However, this golden ring is not a means of production, as it cannot be used in creating new products. Thus, according to an interpretation of the concept of class relying on the ownership of means of production, the two owners would belong to different classes. However, since neither the sewing machine can sustain a small business or the golden ring provide enough resources for starting one, both owners are in a situation to sell their labor power.⁷⁰

The second interpretation of the concept of class which Elster manages to avoid is that of basing class definitions on the value of the possessions which one owns.⁷¹ It is irrelevant for the argument if within the same class there are differences in endowments, as long as these endowments impose the same behavior on individuals. While in the previous example, the owner of the sewing machine and that of the golden ring possessed things of similar value, another example would be illustrative for the second argument. Let us imagine a comparison between the owner of two golden rings and one who possesses none. One could arbitrarily decide that there is some kind of difference between those that own property of certain value and those who don't. For example, if one golden ring cost \$ 1000 and the limit between petty bourgeois and proletariat was set at \$ 1500, then the owner of the two golden rings would pass the threshold while the other would not. However, this makes little difference considering that the value of the two golden rings would not allow their owner to start a business in which to employ labor. As much

⁷⁰ For the example on which this argument is based see, Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history : a defence*, 71

⁷¹ Elster, *Making sense of Marx* , 322

as the one who does not own anything, the owner of the two gold rings has to sell labor on the market.

The first strand in Marxist theory of history is its class-centered form. Its textual base can mostly be found in the *Communist Manifesto*. This work gives the most detailed account of how classes evolve through history. The first part of the first chapter of the *Communist Manifesto* is dedicated to the detailed description of the rise of the bourgeoisie. Still during Medieval times, the bourgeoisie emerged from the free dwellers of cities, which were able to maintain their privileges in front of the feudal relations of production. Finally, when the bourgeoisie burst into the world, it transformed the world as it was known:

The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part.

*The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.*⁷²

The quoted passage sketches the development from feudalism to capitalism. In contrast to the theory of productive forces which will be outlined below, the class-centered form of the theory gives central place to two main contenders: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The transition from feudalism to capitalism is, as the passage shows, less of a transition from manufacture to industry but more a change of power between nobility and bourgeoisie. Each of these two classes has its own culture, which it imposes upon the world when conquering power. While the feudal nobility based its rule on “religious fervor” and “chivalrous enthusiasm”, the ideology of the free market legitimates the rule of the bourgeoisie.

⁷² Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

However, the free market, while being the instrument which allows the bourgeoisie to dominate the world is also its undoing:

*The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself. But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons — the modern working class — the proletarians.*⁷³

The constant development of the industrial capacity of society creates more and more the conditions under which a large part of the population loses all its possessions. These men and women have nothing to live on without selling their labor power. Because of the competition with large scale industry, those who had formerly owned some kind of means of production are forced to sell them and live by becoming employed in the large factories. However, while the economic development creates more and more proletarians, it makes them more and more alienated from the product of their work. Moreover, it also makes them poorer and poorer, a process known as the “immiseration of the proletariat”⁷⁴

On the other hand, the development of modern industry creates the conditions for the forging of proletarian unity:

*Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes.*⁷⁵

According to Marx, the phase before the revolution is characterized by two facts: more and more cooperation and communication between workers and a greater development of the

⁷³ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁷⁴ Terence Ball, “History: critique and irony” in Terrell Carver ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1992, c1991), 137.

⁷⁵ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

awareness of the proletariat. Together, proletarians put up a struggle against the bourgeoisie. Moreover, they realize the even if they work hard, as the rhetoric of the bourgeoisie claims, they will never end up as bourgeois themselves. With this realization, the proletarian become accustomed to the idea that their own situation is not their own fault, but is a consequence of class relations. Therefore, these have to be abolished completely.⁷⁶

Eventually, these pressures come to the boiling point:

In depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.⁷⁷

The revolution takes place and the state is seized by the proletarians. However, rather than ruling as a new bourgeoisie, the proletariat abolishes all class distinctions known before. The proletariat, because it is the “universal” class, is more interested in simply abolishing the difference between the few and the many. Thus, according to the interpreters of Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat is meant only as a temporary form of rule to be held only until the revolution is secure. Finally, once the power of the proletariat is secure, the state with its courts, police and army has no reason to exist. The state withers away and the proletariat abolishes itself as a class.⁷⁸

The second and more elaborate strand of Marxism which Elster identifies looks at the development of the productive forces as the key to historical transition. Rather than viewing history as a transition from one ruling class to another, the productive-forces theory focuses on economic developments from one age to another. A new age is not determined by the class position of its rulers, but rather by the organization of the process of production. Transition

⁷⁶ Ball, “History: critique and irony”, 138.

⁷⁷ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁷⁸ Ball, “History: critique and irony”, 139.

between ages occurs when a certain type of relations of production fetter the development of the productive forces and a new organization is needed in order for these to continue developing.

Since the concept of productive forces is vague, its definition had to be elaborated by the exegetes of Marx. Cohen explicates the term of productive forces by arguing that something is a productive force if control over it contributes to establishing the position of the controller in the “economic structure of the society.” Furthermore, in order to be a productive force, something must be able to develop throughout history, be in a condition to be fettered and explain, together with similar things, the economic structure of society.⁷⁹ Finally, Cohen includes in his catalogue of productive forces such exemplars as means of production, raw materials, spaces and labor power.⁸⁰ However, Elster refuses this simple definition and argues that Marx’s theory is not coherent when it comes to defining what productive forces actually are. He uses the cases of science, an uncontroversial productive force according to Marx, but not easily fitting Cohen’s criteria and the case of population to attack Cohen’s classification. Elster looks at Marx’s ambiguous statements of population, which sometimes is classified as a productive force and sometimes not. This is done in order to show the impossibility to define productive forces as neatly as Cohen desires⁸¹

However, while the concept of productive forces is difficult to explain, what makes productive forces so crucial is the fact that they determine relations of production. Both Cohen and Elster take pains to explain this second concept and to differentiate it from the productive forces. While productive forces are material, relations of productions occur between other entities. Thus, each relation of production needs at least two terms: either two persons or one person and a productive force. Therefore, relations of production include such situations as

⁷⁹ Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*, 41.

⁸⁰ Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*, 55.

⁸¹ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 253

ownership or control, slavery, mastery, hiring and being employed.⁸² Moreover, in an improvement of Cohen's criteria of definition of relations of production, Elster also introduces the nature of the non-productive owners as a principle of differentiation. This is done in order to differentiate between serfdom and the Asiatic mode of production, two exemplars of modes of production mentioned by Marx. While in serfdom the non-productive owners of means of production are the nobility, in the Asiatic mode of production, these are the state bureaucracy.⁸³

Finally, in the productive forces-centered interpretation of Marx, the key determinant of the change between historical periods is the interaction between productive forces and relations of production:

*At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.*⁸⁴

Thus, at the same time, productive forces determine the relations of production, and their development is somehow affected by the existing relations. In the beginning of a new age, the newly developed relations of production permit the development of the productive forces. However, there comes a time when the maximum rate of development of productive forces possible under a certain arrangement of relations of production is reached. From now on, relations of production are fetters to further development. Once the crisis point is reached, a revolution occurs and new relations of production are established.

The most popular interpretation of this process is the one shared by Cohen and other commentators on Marx. In this view, the interaction between productive forces and the relations

⁸² Cohen, *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*, 35.

⁸³ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 258

⁸⁴ Marx, Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*

of production is a circular one. On the one hand, productive forces determine the way the economic process is organized. In Marx's words: "the windmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist."⁸⁵ Technological innovation forces society to set up new institutions which best allow the use of these inventions. As an example, the free market would be pointless in a society in which there was no industry and no production for surplus.

The circularity of the argument is caused by the fact that, at the same time, relations of productions also determine the development of the productive forces. Elster takes pains to explain clearly what exactly is meant by this. If in the first case, it is the *overall level* of productive forces which determine relations of production, in the second case, relations of production determine the *rate of change* of productive forces.⁸⁶ When the rate of change of productive forces cannot be maintained anymore, then the relations of production have turned from nurturers to fetters. Eventually, they have to be overthrown and new relations of production established.

One of the crucial problems of this account has been pointed out by Elster. He argues that relations of productions might actually not fetter the rate of technological innovation at all. They may rather block the increase of surplus that could be achieved under a different social organization. In order to argue for his point, Elster makes a distinction between an improvement in the use of certain productive forces, improvement which permits economies of scale and a greater surplus, and a change in the productive forces themselves. Elster argues that capitalist relations of production began in agriculture even before industrial innovation. Thus, the need for surplus led to the movement for enclosures in England, a movement which gave full property

⁸⁵ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sciabarra/essays/ieesmarx.htm>, Retrieved 23.02.2010

⁸⁶ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 258.

rights to the former aristocrats. This occurred at the moment when it was understood that large scale agriculture could improve production by realizing economies of scale. Moreover, this move separated the small peasants from their landholdings and turned them into a rural proletariat which could be employed on a salaried basis. While industrial innovation and the introduction of new machines in factories and agriculture would have constituted a change in the productive forces, the movement for enclosures simply represented a better use of the same productive forces, land and labor, than it was possible under late feudalism.⁸⁷

Regardless of what relations of productions actually fetter, it is clear that at a certain point they become antiquated. The following passage describes the transition from capitalism to communism:

*The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.*⁸⁸

Thus, as the text suggests, there comes a point in which the rate of expansion of productive forces is not anymore permissible by the current economic organization. At that point, the mode of production has to be overthrown. The most important part of the argument, the way the text describes the overthrowing, is that it is a violent process. There is no gradual transition from the capitalist mode of production to communism. The passage's apocalyptic tone and especially the last two sentences make it clear that expropriation has to occur. Moreover, the metaphor of a bursting integument leaves little to be expected when it comes to the methods by which this will be done.

⁸⁷ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 282-284.

⁸⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital I*, <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpA32.html>, Retrieved 23.02.2010.

Marx's belief in the inevitability of the communist revolution and his unilinear view of history can also be glimpsed from the view that historical questions can only be raised when the answer is also within reach. Inquiries into overcoming capitalism can only emerge when a way of doing is already in sight. Thus, his own theory could not have emerged if the social organization under which he lives cannot be terminated. An end of capitalist society is visible and inevitable.

As Elster points out, in order for the transition to happen, there must be an adequate development of the productive forces under capitalism. The capitalist relations of production will not simply go away when some desire. There has to be a building pressure on them and sufficient development such as after the transition to communism, the way that the productive forces will be put to use will be more efficient than under capitalism. If the revolution is premature (the question of ending capitalism is raised before the means for it are available) several unpleasant and unforeseen circumstances might arise. The new communist society might never overtake capitalism in the development of its productive forces and might perpetually lag behind. Or, alternatively, even if the new communist society will eventually overtake capitalism, it might not do it immediately.⁸⁹

The analysis of the two accounts of the historical process described by Marx has to take into account two main factors: the *dramatis personae*, or the agents who do the actions and the processes by which these agents interact. At a close inspection of the two versions of the Marxist philosophy of history, it can be seen that while the agents are different, the processes are extremely similar. The main agents of the class-centered theory are groups of people while the agent of the productive-forces interpretation is technology. While the first is easier to comprehend because the concept of class can be easily expounded, the second needs much more

⁸⁹ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 290-291

articulation. However, after serious investigation, it comes out that technological development can provide as good a basis for historical progress as the struggle between poor and rich.

The most important finding which one notices by the comparison of the two theories is their striking similarities. In both, history proceeds according to what could be termed, to use Marx's own metaphor, a "birth-pang" model. In both of them, history is structured in several stages, according to the social or economic organization of the time. In the beginning, one social and economic system emerges. However, from the very start, this system carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. For example, feudalism, because of serfdom, makes people run away from villages into towns. Gradually, towns develop and obtain protection against lords. The bourgeoisie is thus born. However, from the very moment of the bourgeois take over of power, its organization of the economy has the seeds of its own destruction planted inside. The bourgeoisie brings with it its "grave-diggers." Alternatively, the process has a similar development in the productive forces-centered interpretation. Inside capitalism, there is a constant increase of surplus and technological innovation. However, this rate of technological innovation eventually cannot be maintained by capitalism. Other relations of productions are needed.

While each historical period develops, inside it, a future one also grows. In the beginning, the present period is strong and its successor is weak. However, one's growth also triggers the growth of the other. In the early stages, this is not a problem, because the present mode of production can ensure prosperity and peace. But, there comes a certain moment in which growth stops, while the structural conditions for the transition to the next stage take a more clear shape. The disappearance of the present form of social organization becomes more and more obvious. Towards the end, the situation reaches a crisis point, in which social and/or economic problems

lead to enough human suffering that there are strong demands for radical change. Then, in a process similar to birth, the new historical period bursts into the scene by the violent overthrow of the previous form of social organization. The “birth-pangs” of history represent the upheaval by which one period succeeds its predecessor. The predecessor is consumed and exits the historical scene. Eventually, the process repeats itself until the last stage, communism, is reached.

It can be concluded that Marx’s conception of history is both historicist and determinist. He begins with the assertion that the important facts about human life can be found in the economic organization. The organization of the economy develops according to law-like regularities. Productive forces change, and with them do change the relations of production. Relations of production determine the organization of society. When the productive forces have changed enough, relations of production also have to change, taking the legal and moral framework along with them. Alternatively, classes develop and the exploited classes take over power from their exploiters. These are, according to Marx, the laws of progress which govern the entire human history.

Eventually, all these transformations have to end somehow. This is the reason why Marx’s theory can be said to be determinist. In both of its accounts, the end is settled, derivable from the observation of the natural laws of historical progress. A final revolution will take place which will end all historical transformations and alter society for good. There is no way in which this revolution is avoidable.

3.4. *The proletariat and its class consciousness*

The concepts of the proletariat and of class consciousness deserve special attention in the interpretation of Marx. While the historicist and determinist character of Marx's theory is in itself not necessarily harmful, the examination of these two concepts sheds light on the charge of holism, which Marx's critics have leveled against him. Holism, understood here as the belief in supra-individual entities possessing their own consciousness and intentions, is critical in a totalitarian philosophy. Even if there are laws in history, and even if history is pre-determined, this might not mean much for political action. However, if the drama of history is played out by entities which transcend the individual, then the interests of these entities always come first. Thus, investigating the way Marx understood the proletariat, the key agent in history, is crucial to deciphering the whole Marxist philosophy.

The texts of Marx himself and of another Marxist philosopher, Gyorgy Lukacs, will be used in order to illuminate the two concepts. As usual, Marx does not offer a clear definition of what the proletariat is, but rather sketches a historical account of its emergence on the historical scene:

*Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers.[...] Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself.[...] But with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labor, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level.*⁹⁰

In Marx's interpretation, the development of industry leads to the pauperization of all non-industrial laborers and their transformation into factory workers. As industry proceeds with

⁹⁰ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

its expansion, it needs more and more people to work for the owners of the means of production. Since industrial work has to be organized on a large scale and requires coordination between workers performing different tasks, a large number of people have to be subjected to the discipline of work. Moreover, due to the nature of the work, all these people now are in close proximity to each other, have similar schedules and work habits. In other words, a group of people with similar a similar lifestyle is born.

The definition of the proletariat contains several other crucial elements. Firstly, proletarians are commodified: they have nothing but their labor power to sell and they are forced to do so in order to survive: “These laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity”.⁹¹ In Elster’s words, the endowment-structure of a proletarian forces him to sell his labor on the market. Secondly, the proletarians are alienated from their work, their products are taken away and their work is mechanic and unrewarding:

*“Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine...”*⁹²

Finally, the emergence of the proletariat occurs through the gradual dispossession of all other elements of the population. During the advance of capitalism, a process of concentration of property has taken place. Small individual producers have lost whatever possessions they had had due to the competition with capitalists:

*Its annihilation, the transformation of the individualized and scattered means of production into socially concentrated ones, of the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few, the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labor, this fearful and painful expropriation of the mass of the people forms the prelude to the history of capital.*⁹³

⁹¹ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁹² Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁹³ Marx, *Capital I*

The early 20th century Marxist philosopher, Gyorgy Lukacs offers a similar account of the development of the proletariat. He combines all the processes which Marx discussed into a single concept: reification. In his words, reification represents the universal commodification of human relations. All human relations that had existed before the age of capitalism, have been transformed and have begun to be measured in money-terms. The activity of working is central to this process: work which was until then undertaken as work for itself, or for the satisfaction obtained through the enjoyment of the final product, now has become work for money. The final product of work is not enjoyed anymore for itself, its only value is that of being sold. Finally, reification penetrates to the very consciousness of the worker himself: he does not perceive himself as a human being but only as a commodity. The only valuable thing about him is the amount of money he can procure on the market by selling his labor:

Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of all 'natural' production units, etc., and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations⁹⁴

Summing it up, both Lukacs and Marx fail to offer concrete definitions of the proletariat. What they provide is historical accounts of the process which led to its emergence. In itself, this account does not lead to a holist reading of the concept of proletariat. By the gradual evolution of capitalism a group of people have been dispossessed and are now forced to survive by obtaining jobs in industry. These people are poor and do not enjoy neither their work nor the final product of it. However, these people only form a class in the non-holist way which is described by Elster and Cohen: they are a group of people whose similar structure of

⁹⁴ Gyorgy Lukacs, "Reification and the Consciousness of the proletariat, Ch I The Phenomenon of Reification" in *History and Class Consciousness*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc05.htm> , Retrieved 24.02.2010

endowments forces them to undertake similar actions in the process of providing their means of survival.

Throughout *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx changes his tone. In the beginning, the text provides the historical sketch discussed above. The use of language is not accidental. Throughout the historical description, Marx refers to men and women who work as “workers” and “proletarians”. Otherwise said, Marx identifies them as a group of distinct individuals, which, even if in the same situation, are still separate. However, at a certain point along the text, Marx begins to refer to the “proletariat”: “The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie.”⁹⁵ From now on, proletariat and bourgeoisie are distinct separate actors, which confront each other in a life-or-death struggle. “Proletarians” are born out of the development of capitalism, but the birth of the “proletariat” is placed by Marx at a different moment than the emergence of “proletarians”. Thus, one pivotal question must be asked: what turns “proletarians” into “the proletariat”? On the answer to this question lies the answer to the charge of holism leveled against Marx.

The transition from the scattered “proletarians” to “the proletariat” is described by Marx as a process of increasing unification. Unification occurs both at the level of the physical world, when the communications between proletarians increase and at the level of conscience, as proletarians realize their common position and interests. In the beginning, “laborers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country.”⁹⁶ Communication, organization and coordination lead to the “organization of the proletarians into a class.”⁹⁷

For this “organization of proletarians into a class” to occur, the development of class consciousness is crucial. Only class consciousness gives proletarians a sense of being “the

⁹⁵ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁹⁶ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

⁹⁷ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

proletariat”. What is clear from Marx is that class consciousness unifies proletarians and makes them act together. It makes them realize that they are in the same situation and that they have to stick together. However, from now on, interpretations diverge of exactly what class consciousness is supposed to do for the proletarians and what exactly the “proletariat” which possesses this class consciousness is supposed to be. Both holist and non-holist interpretations have been offered.

The most authoritative non-holist interpretation of the concept of class consciousness comes from Jon Elster. He argues that class consciousness is merely a form of solidarity between people in a similarly difficult situation. In his words, class consciousness is “the ability to overcome the free-rider problem in realizing class interests”.⁹⁸ Using Mancur Olson’s theory of collective action, Elster argues that a group of people have attained class consciousness when none of them is willing to take advantage of the collective action of his peers. Instead of and waiting to enjoy the public good obtained through the said collective action, each is willing to do his or her part. In other words, such a type of class consciousness involves participation in strikes or other forms of collective actions despite the possible risks of retaliation and against the incentives to not participate. Moreover, this understanding of class consciousness gives only a limited role to the leadership of the working class movement. Leadership is only supposed to diffuse information and make it clear to all the would-be participants in collective action that others will also take part.⁹⁹ Alternatively, the leadership might offer selective incentives and determine those who are more inclined to free-ride to take part in collective action.¹⁰⁰

Elster’s reading presents Marx’s conception of class consciousness in the best possible light still compatible with its basic tenets. But it is unclear whether Marx himself was

⁹⁸ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 347.

⁹⁹ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 351.

¹⁰⁰ Elster, *Making sense of Marx*, 367.

committed to this reading, or he was something like a holist on the proletariat and its collective consciousness. In any case, his early followers tended towards the holistic reading.

Lukacs, for one, comes with a completely different interpretation of what class consciousness is supposed to mean:

Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ [zugerechnet] to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual – and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.¹⁰¹

On this interpretation, class consciousness is not just an attitude of solidarity that binds individuals to individuals. It is correct behavior given specific circumstances. In other words, one cannot transcend what one is. There is only a single possible “rational” behavior given the position which one has in the productive process. Moreover, Lukacs even denies that what the individual thinks actually matters. Class consciousness is not reducible to the shared mentality of the members of the class; rather, its bearer is the class as a collective agent. On this reading, class consciousness involves understanding the historical role which each class has to play on the scene of history and having the appropriate behavior. Thus, one cannot truly be a proletarian without understanding the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. Moreover, Lukacs emphasizes in *History and Class Consciousness* that the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, for example, cannot be but incomplete. Because history condemns the bourgeoisie to oblivion, it cannot develop a full class consciousness which would make it realize its tragic fate. Only the proletariat can achieve full class consciousness because only the proletariat is destined to carry

¹⁰¹ Lukacs, “Class Consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness*

out the final revolution. When the final revolution is complete, the proletariat will also abolish itself, not in the same way as the bourgeoisie, but in a more peaceful, transformative way.¹⁰²

By contrasting the two interpretations, one can see that they belong to very different understandings of Marx. In Elster's reading, class consciousness transforms "proletarians" into "the proletariat" in a way in which individuals maintain their own autonomous agency, but are willing to participate in collective actions furthering their interests. "The proletariat" is nothing more than a group of people which have to sell their labor to survive and which can mobilize when their interests require it. Moreover proletarian class consciousness is something which pertains to the individual proletarian. It is part of his system of beliefs. Proletarian class consciousness cannot exist without actually being felt by the proletarians. Moreover, no one else except the proletarian can possess proletarian class consciousness

However, in Lukacs's Leninist reading of the concept, class consciousness is something objective. It comes to the individual proletarian from outside. It has an objective existence and it can be perceived not only by proletarians but also by bourgeois intellectuals or enlightened individual members of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, because of its complexity, there are actually more chances of being perceived by these latter groups, than by the proletarians themselves. Since proletarian class consciousness does not necessarily belong to the individual proletarians, then "the proletariat" is not necessarily an entity made up of these individuals. Rather, "the proletariat" has to be created from individual proletarians by bourgeois intellectuals who must illuminate the working men and women of the factories. The movements of the workers themselves are pointless since, in V.I. Lenin's words: "The history of all countries shows that

¹⁰² Lukacs, "Class Consciousness" in *History and Class Consciousness*

the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness”¹⁰³

While the analysis of the whole range of Marxist texts is beyond the scope of this paper, evidence directly from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* can be brought to support an interpretation that Marx himself favored the second understanding of class consciousness:

*Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the progress of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.*¹⁰⁴

In accordance with the holist interpretation of class consciousness, it can be possessed also by those who do not share the class position of the proletariat. In this passage, Marx affirms exactly such a possibility. Bourgeois intellectuals realize that the struggle of the proletariat has a historical meaning and join it. They acquire the class consciousness of the proletariat themselves. There is in this text a reference to the “historical movement as a whole”, which the revolutionary bourgeois intellectuals are supposed to comprehend. In order for a “historical movement” to be comprehended, it must exist independently of the will or belief of the proletarians themselves. It must be comprehensible by anybody, but must have an independent existence from what is comprehended. However, there is no such thing in the way Elster understands class consciousness. The “historical movement” plays no role in achieving the ability to transcend the free-rider problem.

¹⁰³ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be Done*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>, Retrieved 24.02.2010.

¹⁰⁴ Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Concluding, this chapter has found some textual evidence that Marx's philosophy has the characteristics by which anti-historicists charged it. According to the evidence examined, Marxist philosophy is determinist because it expects a violent revolution to happen because of the operation of the natural laws of history. Moreover, it gives detailed descriptions, though contending ones, of what these laws rely on and which are supposed to be the *dramatis personae* in history. Finally, Marxist philosophy can be charged with holism. It imagines actors made up of individuals who might not even be aware or agree of being considered part of such an actor. Moreover, these actors are supposed to have objective beliefs, very different from the beliefs of people who are supposed to make them up. In this reading of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marxism relies not only on individual beliefs and individual psychology, but on what the author expects individuals to accept as true.

However, Marx's work is wide and the *Communist Manifesto* is only a part of it. Non-holist and non-deterministic readings of Marx can be offered by a wider examination of the textual evidence. Rendering class consciousness as essentially a type of worker solidarity, as Elster does, is a possible interpretation of not just *The Eighteenth of Brumaire*, Elster's textual basis, but also of the *Manifesto* itself. It might even be that the *Manifesto*, more a political pamphlet and indication, was written in a more forceful tone than other works. What is clear that within the *Manifesto*, Marx lets the reader guess about what class consciousness exactly means. But both a holist and a non-holist reading are equally possible.

Chapter 4. Oswald Spengler

4.1. Spengler's importance

Oswald Spengler deserves a special place among historicist philosophers. Firstly, his theories were presented at the end of World War I, just before the advent of totalitarian political regimes. While his relationship with the Nazi regime is ambiguous and his books were banned by the Nazis, it is known that they were influenced by him. Secondly, he was a well-known opponent of the democratic Weimar Republic, an opposition which was also justified through his philosophy. Moreover, unlike Marx and Condorcet, his theory of history is more refined: rather than a rectilinear progress, history, in Spengler's view, works cyclically. Finally, while Condorcet is an Enlightenment liberal and Marx is the founder of socialism, Spengler uses historicism to justify conservative political doctrines.

Most of the elements of historicism are present in the thought of Oswald Spengler. He conceives history as a cyclical process of rise and decline of "cultures". This process takes place naturally, because of the operation of historical laws which man cannot alter. However, Spengler, similarly to Condorcet, does not explain which the laws are exactly. They are simply a part of nature and do not need explanation. The course of civilization is irreversible by any known procedure. Moreover, each agent, each so-called culture, is characterized by a "symbol", which manifests itself in their arts and architecture. These symbols allow the author to categorize each culture into "Faustian", "Apollinic" and "Magian". Finally, the only part truly missing from Spengler's philosophy is a clear description of how history will end. Each culture declines and this can be predicted for sure, but a new culture will rise in its place. No end is clearly determined for the whole of humanity.

4.2. Rise and decline (of the West) - Spengler's theory of history

Spengler outlines his cyclical theory of history in direct contrast to what he sees is the prevailing orthodoxy in the Western world: a rectilinear view culminating in the triumph of Western Civilization. Firstly, he argues that all views of history are culturally contingent, and that only Western man sees himself as the apogee of historical development.¹⁰⁵ Further, he rejects the causal type of explanation presented in Darwinist science and argues for a metaphysical methodology for investigating history. This methodology is based on the “prime phenomenon”, a type of Platonic Form, which manifests itself in the real world through different exemplars. Only this methodology allows the philosopher to grasp the way history fulfills itself, to understand the units which compose the march of history and to see the true goal of events.¹⁰⁶ However, after describing the methodology, Spengler moves directly to present his findings: these are merely affirmed and the link between the methodology and how the results of the investigation are reached is not made.

This metaphysical methodology allows for the rejection of the uni-linear view of history, one culturally contingent on the “Faustian” character of the Western civilization. Spengler uses metaphors to explain how his view is contrasted to its opposite. On the one hand, the Western-Faustian world conceives history as a river flowing downstream, with a clear direction. On the other hand, he conceives history as a series of waves on the surface of the water. These first emerge, rise and then fall again in place from which they came:

*But over this surface, too, the great Cultures, accomplish their majestic wave-cycles. They appear suddenly, swell in splendid lines, flatten again and vanish, and the face of the waters is once more a sleeping waste.*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The decline of the West*, an abridged ed. by Helmut Werner ; English abridged ed. prepared by Arthur Helps ; from the translation by Charles Francis Atkinson ; [with a new introduction by H. Stuart Hughes] New York : Oxford University Press, 1991, 22

¹⁰⁶ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 73.

Other metaphors are further employed to describe this transition. The comparison with a human being is, in Spengler's view, the most appropriate one. Each person, similar to each culture, passes through a moment of childhood, one of maturity and one of decline. Moreover, Spengler also employs a distinction between the "becoming" and the "become". The culture, in its young age is in the process of "becoming". It is still young, still a "culture". However, at a certain point in time, this "culture" turns into a "civilization": its inner forces die out and they become congealed for a time. It turns into the "become", it becomes static and eventually dies.¹⁰⁸ Spengler describes the Roman "civilization", which he sees as the end of the "Greek culture" as: "Unspiritual, unphilosophical, devoid of art, clannish to the point of brutality, aiming relentlessly at tangible successes".¹⁰⁹

Another metaphor, which Spengler did not conceive of, but which probably suits his theory best is that of a star. It forms out of stellar dust and elements, drawn together by gravity. During its peak, it consumes hydrogen turns it into helium, and offers heat and light. Finally, at a certain point in time, when the hydrogen is extinguished, it expands in an explosion (corresponding to the moment of becoming a "civilization" and resorting to imperialism which Spengler describes). Finally, the star dies out, turning to a white dwarf.

Within the life of a culture, several moments can be discerned. At the beginning, during the moment of the rise, authority is vested in a small minority who "represents the world-historical tendency of a State".¹¹⁰ This minority, as exemplified by the English gentry or the

¹⁰⁸ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 74-75.

¹⁰⁹ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 33.

¹¹⁰ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 361.

merchants of Venice, truly embody the people in an organic unity. The stronger this unity is, the stronger the state acts in unison, the more powerful the state becomes in its beginning.¹¹¹

However, at a certain point in time, the bourgeoisie takes over power under the guise of liberal ideals. In order to contrast the bourgeoisie, which is merely a group of people, with the organic unity of the aristocracy, Spengler derides it as “men merely trained in commerce” and the “non-Estate”.¹¹² Once the bourgeoisie takes power, the road to decline becomes unavoidable: the “culture” now turns into a “civilization”. In the history of the Western world this is clearly marked as the battle of Valmy, during the French Revolutionary Wars. The revolution shatters the organic unity of the state and makes it lose its world- historical sense: “deprived thus of the exaltation of a form that is essentially symbolical and works metaphysically, the national life loses the power of keeping its heads up in the being-streams of history.”¹¹³ Under the guise of the “Enlightenment” and “Rationalism”, the bourgeoisie introduces democracy, free speech, a cult of reason, which completely shatters the old-established traditions and unity.¹¹⁴

However, what truly lies under, according to Spengler, the democratic forms, is nothing more than the rule of money. Money controls elections, money controls the press. Further, Spengler remarks how England constituted the place where intellectual freedom was first associated with freedom of trade. This process concluded in an absolute domination of the capital and the complete demoralization of the people. However, fearful of the continuation of its power, the bourgeoisie resorts to dictatorship to defend it. This is the case when people such as Napoleon appear on the stage of history.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 361.

¹¹² Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 362.

¹¹³ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 363.

¹¹⁴ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 367.

¹¹⁵ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 370.

In the last stages of a civilization, massive wars shatter the world. Nations contend on the international field, using large armies based on compulsory military service. Between the wars, there are periods of peace and calls for reconciliation. But wars are simply unavoidable during these times.¹¹⁶ Finally, at the very end, a period entitled by Spengler “Caesarism” emerges. It is dominated by the Cosmopolis: “the great petrifact, a symbol of the formless-vast, splendid, spreading in insolence”.¹¹⁷ The large cosmopolitan city, multi-cultural and based on rationalism is the complete opposite of the organic unity of the countryside. It is artificial and uprooted from its surrounding nature. This age is dominated by “Caesar-men”, before who money and intellect collapse and who seize absolute power. Politics, as politics, disappears and all that remains is the private conflicts of the Caesars. Finally, civilization collapses back to nothingness.¹¹⁸

4.3. Culture and Civilization-the organic agents

Regarding Spengler’s conception of the historical agent, there are strong arguments to label his conception as strong holism. Several times Spengler describes the units of his analysis as living organisms, bound together by an organic unity and characterized by one defining symbol. The existence of the “prime symbol” for each culture, which determines its fate from the very beginning, is a clear argument in favor of strong holism. This “prime symbol” is manifested throughout all the architecture and art of the culture, until the moment it blooms into a “civilization”. Another argument for cataloging Spengler’s conception as strong holist is the fact that he believes that this spirit of the culture can be embodied by a small minority, the aristocracy of the early age.

¹¹⁶ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 377.

¹¹⁷ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 379.

¹¹⁸ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 380-381.

However, what is missing from the Spengler's conception is a clear description as to how each culture possesses a will and interests of its own. This is intimately related to his conception of history as a decline, described in the previous section. Because there is no grand future for the civilization, it cannot have any interests for it. All it can hope is to achieve temporary glory, at its early stage. History poses no duty on the aristocracy, as it might do on the Communist Party.

Based on the metaphysical methodology described above, Spengler defines the agents of history as cultures. These are "the organic units through and in which history fulfills itself"¹¹⁹. Very little description and explanation is given as to what these cultures are made of, what do they represent and how they can be determined, except a brief comparison with organisms. However, Spengler abundantly describes the characteristics of cultures, both in the first stage, when they are "cultures" and in the later, when they are "civilizations".

Firstly, cultures are organic unities, characterized by a symbol. This symbol manifests itself throughout all the time-span of the culture. It is actualized in the poetry, architecture, morals, science, music, history-writing and art of the culture. All of these, including mathematics and world-knowledge are therefore culturally contingent. The symbols allow for the characterization of cultures. For example, the Classical Culture made up of ancient Greece and succeeded by the Roman "civilization" had as its prime symbol the human body. Therefore, relying on Nietzsche, Spengler characterizes the classical culture as "Apollinian". The second culture, the Western one, is characterized by infinite space as its prime symbol. Therefore, in an allusion to Goethe's Faust and his infinite ambitions, Spengler denotes it as "Faustian". Finally, the Islamic and Jewish culture, epitomized by the dome of a Mosque is defined as Magian.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 72.

¹²⁰ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 97-99.

Further, Spengler's organicist conception of the people can be glimpsed by his description of the concept of "race". Spengler does not use the term in the biological way understood by some of his contemporaries, but rather in a cultural sense. Firstly, Spengler refuses both the biological and the language-based understanding of race. He argues that people migrate and they can change their race, as well as their language. Languages are not rooted anywhere and do not constitute the basis of the unity of a people. However, there is an intimate relationship between a people and the soil on which it lives. The soil is what gives the unity of the race. Therefore, as in many other romantic and conservative writers, those closest to the spirit of the race are the peasants. These are more intimately connected to the soil than any other category of the people. However, those who truly realize the destiny of the race are the aristocrats, who are endowed with a "cosmic beat or pulse".¹²¹ The society composed of true aristocrats and healthy peasants is therefore the best society.

At the other extreme of the spectrum, opposite to the organic unity of the people, lies the cosmopolis:

*The world-city means cosmopolitanism in place of "home" . . . To the world-city belongs not a folk but a mob. Its uncomprehending hostility to all the traditions representative of the culture (nobility, church, privileges, dynasties, convention in art and limits of knowledge in science), the keen and cold intelligence that confounds the wisdom of the peasant, the new-fashioned naturalism that in relation to all matters of sex and society goes back far to quite primitive instincts and conditions, the reappearance of the panem et circenses in the form of wage-disputes and sports stadia--all these things betoken the definite closing down of the Culture and the opening of a quite new phase of human existence--anti-provincial, late, futureless, but quite inevitable.*¹²²

Rather than an organic unity, the cosmopolis is nothing more than a collection of people, who have no feeling of belonging. Individuals, rather than a true group inhabit this place. They are kept in check by entertainment and food. They are completely separated from the

¹²¹ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 359.

¹²² Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 40.

surrounding nature and from traditional morality. Everything that is natural is destroyed in these large cities.

4.4. Spengler's determinism

Several differences between Spengler, on the one hand, and Condorcet and Marx, on the other hand, can be discerned. Firstly, similar to Marx, but differently from Condorcet, Spengler views the end as inexorable. It is not merely conjecture and speculation, but is the direct outcome of natural laws. However, unlike both Marx and Condorcet, Spengler does offer a definite ending for the human race, but solely for each culture, including his own. For Spengler there is no final goal for humanity, no teleology. History is cyclical and is bound to repeat itself over and over again. The only certainty is that a culture will inexorably decline and vanish. No political action is able to prevent it, but no action is necessary to bring it about.

Spengler is quite ambiguous about what exactly this decline means and into what a culture declines. Once the Caesar-men have overcome the power of money, a period of barbarism follows. These times are history-less. Within them, wars take place and battles are fought, but no culture is created, no architecture, no music worth remembering. The “Waking-Being”, which is culture, is merely submerged in the history-less “Being”. Power and might, as opposed to law and culture rule over the earth.¹²³ Probably the best historical example of such a period is the period between the fall of the Roman Empire, which ended the classical culture and the birth of the Western civilization. The latter is bound to end up similarly very soon.

Finally, Spengler ends his book by a statement outlining a clearly deterministic view, even if one circumscribed to his particular culture:

¹²³ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 414.

*For us, however, whom a Destiny has placed in this culture and at this moment of its development--the moment when money is celebrating its last victories, and the Caesarism that is to succeed approaches with quiet, firm step--our direction, willed and obligatory at once, is set for us within narrow limits, and on any other terms life is not worth the living. We have not the freedom to reach to this or to that, but the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing. And a task that historic necessity has set will be accomplished with the individual or against him.*¹²⁴

The passage clearly outlines the feeling of inevitability. The individual cannot control his own faith but merely submit to historical destiny. However, Spengler's mood, unlike that of Marx is not one of action but of resignation. No political action should be undertaken in order to bring about the pre-destined society, but only acceptance is required.

¹²⁴ Spengler, *The decline of the West*, 415.

Conclusion

The thesis has shown that the Popper-Berlin-Hayek argument is a very strong one and that, out of the authors reviewed, only the Leninist reading of Marx conforms to their accusations. Firstly, in Condorcet, whose thinking influenced historicism, but is not a full-blown historicist, the future is open and bright. It is inexorable, but political action is not supposed to “ease the birth-pangs”. Secondly, in Spengler the future is dark, as cultures are bound to decay. However, even if he is an organicist holist, Spengler does not envision the subjection of the majority to the will of the self-conscious minority. He praises such a perspective, but places it only at the beginning of each civilization. This healthy society, made up of aristocrats and peasants, is part of the past, in Spengler’s view. All that one can do now is to accept its demise, because, unlike in other Romantic thinkers, return is not possible. Finally, Popper’s *bête noire*, Karl Marx is an ambiguous thinker whose works can definitely be given a non-holistic and non-totalitarian understanding. In the end, only the thought of Lukacs resembles to a great extent what Popper had accused.

One can therefore say that, although historicism is not absent in the thinking of Lukacs or Lenin, it does not directly imply totalitarianism. Either other elements have to be found, or the relationship of causality between the same elements of historicism, determinism and holism should be redrawn. However, historicism, even in the cases in which it is associated with a holist methodology and a determinist outlook, does not necessarily demand a political action focused on achieving a desired goal by force.

The main limitation of this thesis is the impossibility of reviewing more authors. All of the anti-historicists, except Berlin, put their arguments forward in book-long works. They dissect

not just one work of an author, but many works from many authors. Popper refers to Hegel and Plato in addition to Marx. Hayek discussed the work of Henri Saint-Simon and August Comte. Moreover, after Spengler, the work of Arnold Toynbee appeared, also steeped in historicist thought. Therefore, a thorough investigation of their work would lend more empirical strength to the thesis.

The investigation of historicism can be best placed in the intellectual quest for the origins of totalitarianism. Seeking to defend liberalism, Popper, Berlin and Hayek looked to construct its very opposite and find it in the works of several philosophers. This quest should not be abandoned. However, the relationship between the elements of totalitarian thought should be differently understood.

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