

Hayek's View of History: A Critique and a Proposal

I. Introduction.

Friedrich A. Hayek (1899-1992) was one of the most influential classical liberal thinkers of the last century. His scientific contributions range from pure economic theory—for which he was deservedly awarded the Nobel Prize in 1974—to theoretical psychology, political philosophy and philosophy of law. Nonetheless, it is true that, as John Gray and many others have pointed out, “within the total framework of Hayek’s thought there are unresolved difficulties, tensions and conflicts.”¹ In the present essay I will highlight one of those contradictions, which, despite its importance, many scholars have frequently overlooked, and I will propose a solution to it using Hayek’s own ideas. This contradiction to which I shall refer is the one that exists between Hayek’s criticism of historicism and his theory of social evolution, which largely participates of the historicism he so fiercely criticized.

II. The Evolutionary Theory of Institutions.

For Hayek, social institutions (e.g. morality, language, markets and law), are spon-

taneous orders, i.e., self-generating systems that are not the product of any human design. The development of these spontaneous orders takes place in an evolutionary way, analogous to the biological evolution of organisms and to market competition. Those groups whose standards facilitate a better adaptation to the environment will tend to survive, whereas those whose norms are more inefficient will have to choose between imitating the more efficient ones or disappearing. Thus the most efficient customs (and efficiency is defined in terms of facilitating the community to support a larger population²) will tend to prevail in the long run. “Rules are adopted,” Hayek writes, “not because their specific effects are understood, but because the groups that practice them are successful.”³

²“The main purpose to which man’s physical make-up as well as his traditions are adapted is to the production of other human beings” (F. A. HAYEK, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], p. 133).

³F. A. HAYEK, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 3: *The Political Order of a Free People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 204.

¹J. GRAY, «F. A. Hayek on Liberty and Tradition», *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 4 (2) (1980), p. 119.

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For this reason, we must respect the norms and institutions inherited from our ancestors, even if in certain cases we are not able to fully comprehend their function, since their prevalence over time must make us presume that they are beneficial for the community.

Therefore, contrary to the theorists of “constructivist rationalism,” Hayek argues that law and morality could not have been a human invention, but quite the opposite: they are the unintentional and unforeseen result of a long process of cultural evolution and selection.

III. Hayek’s Criticism of Historicism.

Hayek carefully notes, nonetheless, that evolution is not a teleological process and that, consequently, his theory of social evolution “does not lead to predictions about the future.”⁴ He writes: “... evolutionary theory can never put us in the position of rationally predicting and controlling future evolution. All it can do is to show how complex structures carry within themselves a means of correction that leads to further evolutionary developments which are, however, in accordance with their very nature, themselves unavoidably unpredictable”⁵

As a result, Hayek strongly opposes historicism, which is, in Popper’s words, “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principle aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or

⁴F. A. HAYEK, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1: *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 24.

⁵HAYEK, *The Fatal Conceit*, p. 25.

the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.”⁶

Both Popper and Hayek claim historicism to be, not only superstitious and unscientific, but also highly dangerous, since it often serves as a justification for social engineering and totalitarianism. If we were able to unveil the inexorable laws of historical change and hence the final destination of mankind, as Comte, Hegel⁷ or Marx believed, we would only need a dictator to accelerate that process and lead us to that final destination. And if history is an unstoppable train whose last stop is the progress and happiness of mankind, virtually anything is justified in order to achieve that goal, including the annihilation of those who oppose the “march of history.” History, Hegel says, is “the slaughter-bench upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed ... as the *means* for what we claim is the substantial definition, the absolute end-goal or, equally, the true *result* of world history.”⁸

Due to the fact that the Hayekian theory of social institutions only deals with “complex phenomena,” it can only arrive at “explanations of the principle” or “pattern predictions,”⁹ which will never be

⁶K. POPPER, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

⁷On the historicism of Hegel and Comte, see F. A. HAYEK, “Comte and Hegel,” in *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), pp. 189-206.

⁸G. W. F. HEGEL, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1988), p. 24 (italics added).

⁹See F. A. HAYEK, “The Theory of Complex Phenomena”, in *Studies in Philosophy*,

detailed and cannot suppress the uncertainty of the future. Therefore, history should not be regarded as a necessary and predetermined process. The future is open: “... to pretend to know the desirable direction of progress seems to me to be the extreme of hubris. Guided progress would not be progress.”¹⁰

IV. A Contradiction in Hayek’s Thought: The Historicism Underlying his Evolutionism.

The tension mentioned above becomes patent if we consider that Hayek criticizes those thinkers who try to discover the laws of history and at the same time he himself points out a “law of history,” i.e., a tendency—to which Hayek attributes, albeit implicitly, universal validity—towards more efficient norms, ever greater freedom and liberal institutions. His suggestion that even on the grounds of diverse institutional structures, there could be a “convergent evolution” that would lead different peoples to the same type of market-based social system¹¹ is evidence of this. John Gray and Murray Rothbard have highlighted this important point, which has been frequently overlooked in Hayekian scholarship and that

Politics and Economics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 22-42.

¹⁰HAYEK, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 3, p. 169.

¹¹F. A. HAYEK, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2: *The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 40. However, in *The Fatal Conceit* he wrote: “Cultural evolution is determined neither genetically nor otherwise, and its results are diversity, not uniformity” (p. 26).

constitutes an incongruity of no small importance in the thought of the author.¹²

The reason for this contradiction lies in the fact that Hayek assumes the Whig Interpretation of History, as exposed in the work of historians such as Thomas Macaulay and Adam Ferguson, according to whom the history of humanity is a continuous and inevitable advance towards liberal institutions.¹³ This theory is not very different indeed from the historicism of authors such as Hegel or, more recently, Francis Fukuyama, who regard history as the unfolding of the idea of human freedom, and the constitutional state as the end of history.¹⁴ It is true that, as has been previously observed, Hayek takes great care to note that the tendencies he claims to have discovered in history do not allow the future to be predicted nor do they imply that it is predetermined. However, the truth is that he never satisfactorily resolved this tension between his criticism of historicism and his unmistakably historicist interpretation of history. In this respect, I cannot but share John Gray’s opinion when he states that “yet, like Comte, *Hayek turned to science to*

¹²See also P. de la NUEZ, *La política de la libertad: Estudio del pensamiento político de F. A. Hayek* (Madrid: Unión Editorial, 1994), p. 199: “... it could be interpreted that Hayek’s evolutionism—perhaps just as every other evolutionism—has a historicist character.”

¹³See H. BUTTERFIELD, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965). The Whig Interpretation of History, as Butterfield named it, is nothing else but a form of the faith in progress shared by most Enlightenment thinkers.

¹⁴“It is this final goal—freedom—toward which all history of humanity has been working” (HEGEL, *op.cit.*, p. 22).

validate a providentialist view of human development. Though they differed radically about its structure, both believed that a universal system was the end-point of history.”¹⁵

The work of Francis Fukuyama, perhaps the most relevant contemporary Hegelian and historicist author, is in this sense highly illustrative. In one of his works he proposes a Darwinian explanation of social evolution which very much resembles Hayek’s who, interestingly enough, is quoted on several occasions.¹⁶ This evinces that, as Gray insightfully points out, Hayek’s theory of evolution and Hegel’s historicism, which Hayek himself rejected as mystical and unscientific, may not be as different as they seem. This proximity, in Rothbard’s opinion, is attributable to the fact that Hegel himself had read Ferguson and had been profoundly influenced by his Whig view of history.¹⁷

¹⁵J. GRAY, *Black Mass, Apocalyptic Religion and the End of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 92.

¹⁶F. FUKUYAMA, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 446. As Gray correctly explains, Fukuyama falls in the very same contradiction as Hayek but in a more obvious way. The notion that History had reached its end (as expounded by Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*) is not consistent with a Darwinistic interpretation of history, since Darwinistic evolution is, by its very nature, a non-teleological process (J. GRAY, “Destination Unknown”, *Literary Review*, [Edinburgh], May 2011, p. 4).

¹⁷“In short: Hayek returns, with a burst, to the Whig theory of history and to a conservatism that justifies all institutions as ‘evolved,’ as part of some presumably beneficent pattern, even though God has now dropped out of the

Gabriel Zanotti offers an opposite interpretation of Hayek’s “historicism.” This author argues that Hayek never falls into historicism, precisely because he explicitly claims that the notion of finality cannot be applied to spontaneous orders and because he emphasizes the impossibility of predicting—at least in detail—the course of their evolution. Contrary to Gray’s and Rothbard’s contentions, Zanotti argues that “Hayek absolutely abstains from any ideological attitude that proposes a perfect social system as the final stage of history.”¹⁸ And it must be conceded that, unlike Hegelian or Marxian historicism, Hayek’s is a non-deterministic and, hence, a less radical one. However, it still seems undeniable to me that if we follow Popper’s definition, Hayekian evolutionism has a distinct historicist character.

V. Conclusion: A Proposal.

My own personal opinion in this respect is that in the very work of Hayek we can glimpse a solution to this inner tension. Hayek, following Popper again, explains that scientific laws—the theory of evolution among them—consist mainly of pro-

picture. Not only Hayek was influenced deeply by Ferguson; so too was a young graduate philosophy student at the University of Tübingen, G. W. F. Hegel, and his colleagues. Hegel systematized the Ferguson insight into his ‘dialectic,’ by which history, through its ‘cunning of reason,’ moves inexorably according to its divine plan *always* bringing good, and a higher stage, out of apparent evil and conflict” (M. N. ROTHBARD, *Economic Controversies* [Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2011], p. 200).

¹⁸G. ZANOTTI, *Introducción filosófica al pensamiento de F. A. Hayek* (Madrid: Unión Editorial, 2008), p. 94.

hibitions¹⁹, of propositions whose empirical content lies in what they exclude rather than in what they positively affirm. The theory of evolution, according to this view of science, would not allow us to predict the future development of organisms, but *would* allow us to rule out certain events as impossible. We can predict that a mare will not give birth to winged foals and we may also predict that declawing successive generations of dogs will not result in the birth of clawless dogs.²⁰ Hayek's explanatory model could play the same role in making negative predictions. Hence it would not allow us to predict the advent of the liberal state or capitalism, nor to assert its universal validity, but it *would* allow us to dismiss as unfeasible certain institutional systems, namely socialism. According to this exegesis, spontaneous social development will never lead to socialism, but we cannot predict that it will necessarily lead to liberalism.

With this new approach we avoid falling into historicism, and the internal tension in Hayek's thought that we have pointed out is satisfactorily resolved.

¹⁹“Sir Karl Popper has systematically developed the idea that scientific laws consist essentially of prohibitions, that is, of assertions that something cannot happen” (HAYEK, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, p. 146). See also K. POPPER, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 48: “In this formulation we see that natural laws might be compared to ‘proscriptions’ or ‘prohibitions.’ They do not assert that something exists or is the case; they deny it. They insist on the non-existence of certain things or states of affairs, proscribing or prohibiting, as it were, these things or states of affairs: they rule them out. And it is precisely because they do this that they are *falsifiable*.”

²⁰These two examples are given by Hayek in “The Theory of Complex Phenomena,” p. 32.

However, once the idea of the universal validity of liberalism which inspires all his thought is abandoned, it acquires a much more skeptical and conservative nature and becomes closer to that of authors such as Michael Oakeshott and John Gray in his latest writings. For these thinkers, liberalism, the rule of law and capitalism must be defended and preserved, but not because of their intrinsic value, but rather because they are part of the peculiar and contingent tradition of the West. For this reason, they are skeptical about the possibility that they may have validity and applicability outside the specific cultural environment in which they arose. As Gray puts it: “If we abandon the delusive perspective of universality, we can see liberal society as a historical achievement, an inheritance of institutions and traditions which informs our thought and practice in profound ways, but which we are bound to acknowledge has no universally apodictic character.”²¹

²¹J. GRAY, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 240. For a comparison between Hayek and Oakeshott, see J. GRAY, “F. A. Hayek and the Rebirth of Classical Liberalism,” *Literature of Liberty*, 5 (4) (1982), p. 59.

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