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# THE HISTORICAL PROMISES OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

## Abstract

This paper proposes some theoretical instruments for understanding the “historical promises” made by some modern philosophers of history. In our sense of the term, these “historical promises” refer to a desired future state of humanity/society, but insofar as it is related to a particular description of past historical development. The paper puts forth a hypothesis about how we should understand the notion of historical necessity involved in these promises and analyzes the three main discursive strategies that make up a promise. It then goes on to depict five successive waves of modern philosophical promises based on the previously identified categories.

**Keywords:** historical promise, necessity, irrevocable, heterogeneity of history, diagnosis

## 1. Introduction

This paper proposes some theoretical instruments for understanding the “historical promises” made by some modern philosophers of history. In the sense given to the term here, these “historical promises” refer to a (desired) future state of humanity/society, but insofar as this future state is related to a particular description of past historical development. The paper puts forth a hypothesis about how we should understand the notion of historical necessity involved in these promises (Section 2) and analyzes the three main discursive strategies that make up a promise (Section 3). It then goes on (Section 4) to depict five successive waves of modern philosophical promises based on the previously identified categories.

## 2. The Notion of Historical Necessity

The ideas in this article are, in large part, motivated by my unease with the fact that contemporary philosophers often denounce the absolute

necessity that modern philosophers of history allegedly bestowed upon the course of history; and, as a consequence of this, they often deride modern philosophers of history for having been completely wrong – or nearly so – in their predictions about where this necessary course of history was to lead humanity. This widespread condescending attitude of today's philosophers towards modern philosophies of history is based on two assumptions that might be worth questioning.

1) First, it is far from certain that “absolute necessity” is the type of historical necessity that modern philosophers see as being at work in history. If, by this absolute necessity, we understand that history follows a completely predetermined path, with each historical moment playing its predetermined role in leading to a particular outcome, then many modern philosophers of history may not be said to have fully embraced such a notion. Indeed, the image of history depicted by these authors often involves detours, false routes, dead ends, periods of crisis where the outcome hangs in the balance and so on. Therefore, the idea that the historical process, once it is “wound” like a clock, will inexorably follow its predetermined route is not an exact match for what many modern philosophers had in mind. In other words, “clock-like necessity” is not the type of necessity these authors bestowed upon history.

2) Second, it is not at all certain that modern philosophies of history were first and foremost meant to have theoretical – rather than practical – objectives. When, today, we deride past philosophies of history for having inaccurately predicted the direction humanity would take, we presuppose that these philosophies were assuming a neutral and even external position with respect to humanity/society, a disinterested position that was meant to facilitate the selection of the relevant facts for theoretically determining the future course of humanity. By doing this, we lose sight of the fact that for many of the authors we will discuss here, the main objective was that of *influencing* the course of humanity, rather than merely theoretically surmising what this future course would be. To take just one example, think of Auguste Comte, when he demands that the political authorities grant “positive philosophy” a tribune from which they could disseminate their message towards the general public, just like the theological spirit had its churches and the metaphysical one had its schools and universities (Comte 1844, 95-96). Comte was therefore far from merely intending to “predict” the future course of history. As I will emphasize below, there is an important element of mobilization in the historical promises made by modern philosophers and we need to admit that it is incompatible with

“clock-like necessity”: indeed, why would philosophers try to influence the course of humanity through this mobilization element of their work if they assumed that this course was, in fact, unalterable?<sup>1</sup> Unless we are ready to admit to gross logical inconsistencies in these authors’ works, we should try to see whether a notion of historical necessity different from “clock-like necessity” is present in these philosophies.

A candidate notion of historical necessity has been recently proposed in an extremely insightful article by Yemima Ben-Menahem (2009). Let me note from the very beginning that Ben-Menahem argues for a particular way of interpreting what the notion of “historical necessity” might mean in general, but it is absolutely not her goal to argue that this was the meaning modern philosophers of history had in mind<sup>2</sup>. She argues that historical necessity should be seen as a predicate of an event on the basis of this event’s sensitivity to initial conditions and intervening factors. If a particular event occurred<sup>3</sup> even if many of the initial conditions of (or factors intervening in) the focal system were to be altered, we would say that the event has a high degree of necessity. On the contrary, if the event did not occur because even small changes to the initial conditions (or intervening factors) had been made, then it would count as contingent. Stability or instability of an outcome thus become the means for understanding the necessary/contingent notions, and this is why I will use the term “necessity-as-stability” for denoting Ben-Menahem’s notion.

As Ben-Menahem stresses, necessity-as-stability allows us to call a historical event necessary not if it takes place “under all circumstances” – as the logical notion of necessity would demand –, but if this event “is *relatively* insensitive to small changes in the circumstances under which it takes place” (2009, 123). Because of this trait, necessity-as-stability seems *prima facie* much more compatible than clock-like necessity with the type of historical necessity advocated by modern philosophers of history. Indeed, the detours of history, the false routes, the dead-ends and critical moments that modern philosophers identified in history may be interpreted as disturbances of the initial conditions or intervening factors in the processes going on in the target system; but if, despite these disturbances, a similar outcome ensues, then necessity – in the sense of stability – may be granted to history. Thus, the first difficulty of the clock-like interpretation of necessity in modern philosophies of histories discussed above is neutralized if we assume the necessity-as-stability interpretation.

How about the second difficulty? Does the mobilization side of modern philosophies clash with the necessity-as-stability interpretation

of historical necessity just as it did with clock-like necessity? At first glance this does not seem to be the case. Note that here necessity is no longer an absolute term, but merely one end of a continuum, the end that exhibits a *relatively* low sensitivity to disturbances in initial conditions or intervening factors. This means that, for any historical event, there *are* disturbances that will prevent the desired event from happening. If we were to cast this interpretation of necessity over the work of a given modern philosopher of history, we would have to conclude that the future state of humanity promised by that philosopher is not guaranteed to happen in advance, that the event in question still has to be brought about: for example, by making sure that no significant disturbances are allowed to disrupt the existing circumstances or, on the contrary, by triggering such disruptions in order to increase the probability that the desired event will take place. Philosophers trying to mobilize their audience into preventing or affecting such disruptions thus becomes a logical option. Therefore, the relativization of historical necessity operated by the necessity-as-stability interpretation seems compatible with the mobilization aspect.

In this paper, I propose the hypothesis that a third notion of historical necessity – different from both clock-like necessity and necessity-as-stability – should be used in order to interpret the promises made by modern philosophers of science. This notion of historical necessity may be seen as occupying a sort of intermediary position between the two. Whereas clock-like necessity advocates an absolute necessity of history, necessity-as-stability relativizes the notion of necessity to the point where it actually loses any connotation of absolute: a “necessary” event, in this sense, is nothing but an event that has a high probability of occurring, depending on the magnitude and nature of alterations made to its initial conditions or to other intervening factors. According to the necessity-as-stability interpretation, all historical events – and, consequently, history as a whole – are, in fact, contingent ones, and all “absoluteness” is thus evacuated from history. But disposing of any trace of absolute in history is certainly not fully compatible with the intentions of many modern philosophers. If they attempted to mobilize their audience into bringing about or preventing certain events, they did not do so merely because those events or those desired historical eras were, for them, more probable or “preferable” to others, but because they considered that such events or eras were contributing to the fulfillment of human history. This is the main reason why, in my view, the necessity-as-stability notion does not do justice to the promises made by modern philosophers.



A second reason would be the restricted scope of the necessity-as-stability notion. As the presentation given above shows, this notion refers to the sensitivity to changes in initial conditions of particular events (or events similar to them). It thus refers to *individual* events in history and it seems difficult to apply it to the course of history itself. Whether the course of history is sensitive or not to changes in initial conditions and intervening factors is a question that quickly tends to lapse into irrelevance: given that, in this interpretation, any event is probable – but not absolutely certain – any series of such events will quickly tend to become more and more sensitive to changes, so that using this sensitivity for distinguishing between various series of events becomes less and less interesting. More importantly, applying this notion not to particular events, but to the course of history would become akin to charting probability distributions of series of events: this is indeed very far from what modern philosophers of history were pretending to do.

The third notion of necessity that, I propose, might do justice to the work of many modern philosophers of history is what I call necessity-as-irrevocability. According to this notion, necessity refers to that which is irrevocably gained in history, those historical gains that may be neglected, ignored, even forgotten for some time, but which *cannot be essentially lost*. A necessary “gain” or “advance” is one that cannot be essentially effaced once it has been made, one to which human history will eventually get back – irrespective of how many detours this getting back to might take – and which will then be used as a basis for new historical gains. There is a crucial difference between this notion and those of clock-like necessity and necessity-as-stability. These two notions were essentially centered upon a future event: they are reached by choosing a focal point in history and by attempting to determine whether a *subsequent* event would be absolutely determined in advance (clock-like necessity) or whether its occurrence is relatively insensitive to changes in initial conditions (necessity-as-stability). By contrast, necessity-as-irrevocability is centered upon the future fate of a past event: for a philosopher engaged in such an enterprise, the main point is that of determining which past events are irrevocable and will thus necessarily serve – sooner or later – as the basis for the construction of the future.

The image of history that results from this view of necessity blends discontinuity with absoluteness. Indeed, if not all past events are irrevocable – if, in other words, the entire course of history is not predetermined –, then only a fraction of these events will be relevant for

the future of humanity/history, while the others will qualify as detours, setbacks, false routes or simply neutral phases. The work of the philosopher of history will thus consist in selecting the relevant – i.e. the irrevocable – historical gains. But discarding the idea of a continuous predetermined course of history does not evacuate the absolute from it. Irrevocability means that, once a historical gain is made, it cannot be essentially lost: it is, in this sense, an absolute. Precisely how such gains are made – what causal pathways lead to these events and the degree of inevitability of their result – is less important and may vary from author to author (with some insisting more on this aspect than others). But the crucial fact is that, once they have been made (i.e. by whatever more or less contingent pathways they may have been reached), these gains (or, as we will see, these losses) will remain irrevocable.

In this paper I will not attempt to make a full-fledged defense of the notion of necessity-as-irrevocability. Instead, I will use this notion in order to show how it may help us make sense of the historical promises made by modern continental philosophers. I will therefore not attempt to show that, when using the notion of “historical necessity,” each of these authors had in mind something like “necessity-as-irrevocability.” Instead, I will argue that this notion is supple enough to allow us to understand various types of historical promises that span from the Enlightenment to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The next section will present the coordinates used for the analysis of these multiple types of promise.

### **3. The Main Elements of Historical Promises**

The promises made by modern continental philosophers of history will be analyzed here along three main axes, which constitute the discursive strategies that make up a promise, namely: explanation, diagnosis and mobilization.

#### ***3.1. Explanation***

The first of these discursive strategies – explanation – consists in the laying down of a logic of history or a description of historical development and of its connection with a promised future state of humanity/society. It is important to emphasize here that the explanation is not limited to past historical events or eras, but that it extends into the future (at least)

up until a desired state of humanity/history. Explanation is therefore not merely retrospective, but also prospective, using past historical factors and trends in order to predict the future course of history. All this is, of course, not significantly different from what traditional exegesis has to say about modern philosophy of history.

However – and this is what sets apart the present approach from traditional exegesis – my analysis will concentrate on two characteristics of explanation, and it will do so because these characteristics significantly affect the tonality and the requirements of the promise.

i) The first of these characteristics is *the degree of heterogeneity of historical becoming* that is identified by a given explanation. In other words, this characteristic refers to whether and to what extent the historical eras put forth in the explanation are viewed as qualitatively different. This latter formulation – “to what extent” eras are qualitatively different – might seem objectionable because it seems to make a futile attempt at quantifying qualitative difference. However, as I will argue in more detail below, the degree of heterogeneity between two eras is not given by the qualities themselves that are attached to these eras, but by the type of movement that is required in order to pass from one to the other: two such eras might simply be qualitatively different – in which case there will just be a transition phase between them –, but they might also be seen as moving in opposite directions, at least with respect to certain key aspects, or, finally, they might be seen as being essentially disconnected, so that no historical passage from one to the next is possible. Though in all these cases the two eras are qualitatively different, there is a growing heterogeneity between them that is undergirded by the degree of radicalism of the movement required for effecting the transition between them.

ii) The second characteristic of explanation that is crucial for the present analysis is *the degree of necessity granted to historical becoming*. Again, one might object that necessity is an all or nothing quality: a historical event is either necessary or not, it may not be “more” or “less” necessary than another. But I have already noted above that, in sharp distinction with clock-like necessity, Ben-Menahem’s notion of necessity-as-stability does come in degrees. The notion of necessity-as-irrevocability that I propose here also admits degrees, but in a different manner. A historical gain – or loss – is irrevocable in an absolute sense: it may not be “more” or “less” irrevocable. But, depending on one’s explanation, necessity-as-irrevocability may be bestowed upon larger or smaller fractions of history: more or less of history might thus be deemed necessary

(i.e. irrevocable), and this is how two explanations may vary in the degree of necessity granted to historical becoming even if they keep an absolute sense for the term “necessity.” Once again, necessity-as-irrevocability occupies a sort of intermediary position between clock-like necessity and necessity-as-stability.

Let me add here that the distinction I propose in this study may help make sense of the similarity and dissimilarity between Enlightenment promises and promises of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Classical or contemporary authors working on eschatological elements in modern philosophy seem to me to have difficulties articulating the promises of the 18<sup>th</sup> with those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, insofar as they claim both that authors of the Enlightenment see their era as the advent of the empire of reason *and* that eschatological thinking returns in full force at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and, at least in part, as a reaction to Enlightenment thought). But this obvious tension (see, e.g., Taubes 2009, Wolfe 2018) may not be ironed out simply by an overhasty identification of the two, i.e. by acting as if no difference between Enlightenment and 19<sup>th</sup> century promises existed (this ironing out seems to me to have been classically operated by Löwith 1949). As we will see below, by disentangling the issue of historical necessity from that of the homogeneity/heterogeneity of historical becoming, we may come to better articulate the relationship – that is, the similarities and the dissimilarities – between the two kinds of promise.

### **3.2. Diagnosis**

The second of the discursive strategies that make up a promise consists in a diagnosis of the present state of society/humanity, i.e. in placing the present on the trajectory of historical development indicated by the explanation. At first sight, one might see diagnosis as subordinated to – and indeed as a part of – explanation, because the present state is actually part of the whole trajectory that unites the past with the promised future state of humanity/society. But, far from being a mere secondary element, diagnosis plays three crucial roles within philosophical promises.

i) First of all, it serves as *corroboration for the historical explanation* provided by the philosopher in question. Whether or not an explanation is good is actually at least partly determined by how well it allows one to account for the present situation and by how many elements of the present it may accommodate. This marks a difference with respect to religious prophecies. In the latter there are always signs that indicate

when the prophesized event is about to take place. But the plausibility of the prophecy is not contingent upon these signs, the appearance of these signs does not convince one of its truth, but merely indicates that the time for the announced events has come. Of course, this is because the truth of the prophecy is never in question for the believer, whereas the philosophical promise must always convince its reader of its truth, and one of the main ways to do this is by providing an overarching view that helps the reader make sense of the present situation.

ii) Second, diagnosis may serve as the basis for establishing a *specific, irreducible role for the philosopher*. In certain types of philosophical promises, based on their preferred explanations, philosophers may disentangle progressive from regressive elements that intermingle in the present situation. The philosopher would thus play the role of a symptomatologist of the present. But, as we will see below, this is not the only irreducible role that diagnosis helps assign to philosophers. This is the characteristic of diagnosis that my analysis below will pay particular attention to.

iii) Finally, diagnosis also involves a *relational and rhetorical element*. The philosopher and the writer are united by their sharing of the same present described by the diagnosis, the readers recognize themselves in the description of the present provided by the philosopher. This creates a sense of community in motion, the sense of a common direction, which is an essential basis for the third discursive strategy of philosophical promises, namely mobilization.

### **3.3. Mobilization**

The element of mobilization that is contained in philosophical promises consists, as the name explicitly points out, in the urging of the reader to engage in whatever activities are required for promoting the reaching of the desired future state of humanity/society. There are a number of potential ways in which mobilization may be carried out. The first one consists in actually addressing the readers in order to spur them in the desired direction. Probably the most famous instance of this is provided by the very last words of *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels (“Workingmen of all countries, unite!”).

But directly addressing the reader is a rarer form of mobilization, and the most frequently encountered ones are of the indirect kind. A very popular one consists in providing maximally-compelling descriptions

of the desired future state of humanity/society or, conversely, in offering extremely unfavorable descriptions of the state that needs to be surpassed. An alternative means of mobilization – which often works in conjunction with the previous one – consists in very favorable depictions of the historical agents working towards the desired future state or, conversely, in very unflattering descriptions of the agents opposing the former. Because of space constraints, in my discussion in the rest of this paper I will not insist on the mobilization element of promises. Nonetheless, it was important to highlight it here in order to give weight to my claim that there is an important practical side to modern philosophies of history.

#### **4. Successive Waves of Philosophical Promise**

In what follows, I will provide a brief presentation of five successive waves of promises made by continental philosophers, showing how the categories indicated above may help distinguish between different kinds of promise and may help us better understand each of these kinds. Before moving further, let us note that going through roughly two centuries of philosophical promises in the space of a single article forces this presentation to leave out a great many details and to assume a somewhat didactical tone.

##### **4.1. The Enlightenment promise**

Any discussion of the historical promises belonging to the Enlightenment should probably begin with the early work of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, the author that is widely accepted as marking the birth of the secular idea of universal history and a passionate defender of the indefinite progress that humanity is bound to experience. However, for lack of space, we will insist here on what is probably the best example of Enlightenment promise, which can be found in the work of Turgot's younger friend, Condorcet, and especially in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*. The way in which Condorcet presents the aim of his *Sketch* is already very instructive:

Such observations upon what man has been and what he is today, will instruct us about the means we should employ to make certain and rapid the further progress that his nature allows him still to hope for.

Such is the aim of the work that I have undertaken, and its result will be to show by appeal to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite (Condorcet 2012, 2).

Beside the indefinite perfectibility of man – which he explicitly acknowledges as being Turgot’s “doctrine” (Condorcet 2012, 102) –, what is crucial for us here is the explicitly *practical* orientation of his entire enterprise. Note that his aim is not that of presenting an implacable course of history from a theoretical point of view, but that of studying the past and present progresses of man with the specific aim of discovering the means for establishing and accelerating (*accélérer* is the French term used by Condorcet) the further progress of humanity. With Condorcet, the explicitly practical nature and aim of philosophical promises becomes fully apparent; and “philosophy” itself, in the sense that Condorcet assigns to this term, is a practical endeavor meant to act upon humanity as a whole, which, according to Condorcet (2012, 125), always and necessarily means upon all human beings: “For it is there that one finds the true subject matter of philosophy, for all intermediate consequences may be ignored except insofar as they eventually influence the greater mass of the human race.” There is no clearer manner of expressing the idea that philosophy of history is not a theoretical enterprise that aims to uncover the predetermined patterns of history;<sup>4</sup> rather, it is a manner of finding practical ways of “making certain” that future progresses will be made and of facilitating or accelerating their advent.

This does not mean that the future progresses of humanity are only “possible” ones. On the contrary, for Condorcet it is absolutely certain that humanity will progress indefinitely, but the transition phases between “progresses” – between historical gains, in my terms – are not predetermined, i.e. they may take various routes and various amounts of time. This means that the transition from a historical “gain” to the next one is not automatically made once we make the first one, we still need to effect that transition ourselves, it is our doing and not the doing of some pre-determined implacable historical fate. This is beautifully illustrated by a passage where Condorcet (2012, 15-16) explains the fact that certain peoples have not followed the path of progress by suggesting that this historical immobility has been chosen by these peoples in part as a reaction to the corruption, avidity and general unhappiness they perceived in more civilized peoples they came in contact with: this also

suggests that once the civilized peoples will have progressed enough to shed these unappealing moral vices, the peoples frozen in time will also have an incentive to take the route of progress.

Condorcet's view of history is thus one that regards necessity as irrevocability: any gain, once made, is irrevocable. As Condorcet says: "This progress will doubtless vary in speed, but it will never be reversed" (2012, 2). Many other instances of irrevocability are to be found in the *Sketch* (see, e.g., pp. 96-97, 147), but it is worth emphasizing that Condorcet also provides practical considerations for this irrevocability:

the principles of philosophy, the slogans of liberty, the recognition of the true rights of man and his real interests, have spread through far too great a number of nations, and now direct in each of them the opinions of far too great a number of enlightened men, for us to fear that they will ever be allowed to relapse into oblivion (2012, 122).

The irrevocability of progress – here, of the progresses made in modern times – is not a merely metaphysical assumption for Condorcet, but it is based on the actual acceptance that they generate in the "great mass of the human race," as well as on other practical considerations that may contribute to their further spreading among other peoples. As Manuel (1965, 63) rightly shows, the center of gravity of an act of progress is, for Condorcet, located less in the moment of a particular discovery by a great man<sup>5</sup>, and more on the moment and circumstances of the acceptance of that discovery by the general public. Similarly, the inevitability of modern progress for Condorcet is related less to the discoveries made by modern science and more by the inextricable relation established in modern times between science and public utility (see Manuel, 1965, 76-77). The same emphasis put on the factors and circumstances that help keep and spread the already made advances becomes obvious in the fact that the invention of writing and of printing are heavily praised by Condorcet (2012, 4-6 and 70-73) and are seen as the most important vectors of human progress. Thus, for Condorcet, necessity is granted to the whole of history, in the sense that all of the known history that he depicts in the *Sketch* constitutes a series of advances or gains that, once made, will have become irrevocable (and will sooner or later serve as a basis for further advances).

All these points underline to what extent the practical side of irrevocability was important for Condorcet. But this also clearly indicates that for Condorcet history remains a fundamentally homogeneous process:



the same type of factors – education and freedom, chiefly among them – constitute the “engine” of historical progress and they remain unchangeable throughout history. Internal differentiations between various periods of history are not qualitative differences between eras, but merely the effects of the various manners in which these two main factors are blocked or kept in the service of a small minority (clerics, tyrants and the like) in different periods. As was customary for other Enlightenment thinkers (see Cassirer 1951, 219-221), human nature plays here the central role, and history is only the successive unfurling of the potentialities of human nature.

This homogeneous view of history – common, for example, to Turgot, Condorcet or Kant – also explains why the diagnosis of the Enlightenment promise does not set up a specific role for the philosopher. The philosopher is indeed the promoter of progress in all its forms – be it scientific, cultural, moral or political –, but is, in this respect, no different from any cultivated person of the time. With respect to the present historical situation, the philosopher may point out that progress is accelerating – and Condorcet’s diagnosis is on this point concurrent with Turgot’s –, but as long as history is seen as one monotonous progress held in check for longer or shorter spells by opposing factors like tyranny or ignorance, a philosopher may only promote the factors that push humanity forward, without having a specific, irreducible role, a role that could not be fulfilled by other cultivated person of the time. That is to say, the historical explanation provided by Enlightenment authors is too empirical to support an interpretation of the present that would render philosophical expertise indispensable.

To sum up, the characteristics of the Enlightenment promise are the following: necessity (in the sense of irrevocability) is bestowed upon the whole of history; history is essentially seen as homogeneous; and the diagnosis does not allow for a specific, irreducible role for the philosopher.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.2. *The stadial promise***

For Enlightenment thinkers, history was essentially linear and cumulative. This makes for a monotonous view of history, one in which the little drama that exists is not inherent to historical development itself. Indeed, for these thinkers, the past as such opposes little resistance to the advancing of history: as noted above with respect to Condorcet, it is not the past itself that opposes historical progress, but the interest of various castes or individuals (the monopoly of knowledge in the case of clerics or the monopoly of power in tyranny). The one author who did

attempt to theorize such a resistance of the past, Turgot, still conceived it as the realization of a general tendency of the human being to prefer the comfort of routine, of repetition, of established habits to the effort required by innovation and experimentation. The factors resisting progress are therefore not historical ones (though they may be organized in particular institutions), but they are merely instantiations of general tendencies or inclinations of human beings (e.g. greed, laziness etc.). While historical development is the progressive realization of the predispositions inscribed in human nature, resistance to this development is, in a similar manner, the realization of general human inclinations. Thus, for the Enlightenment thinkers history seemed to lack positivity and depth.

This is no longer the case with what I will call “the stadial promise,” a type of promise I will exemplify with the work of Auguste Comte. His “law of the three stages of intelligence” divides the development of human mind into three historical periods, the theological (which mainly consisted in postulating subjectivities as causes behind the phenomena encountered), the metaphysical (which consisted in seeing phenomena as the manifestation of metaphysical essences laying behind them) and, finally, the positive one (which consisted in relying only on objective facts and in attempting to identify the regularities – i.e. the “laws” – that they may be subsumed under). There is an obvious qualitative difference between the three stages, and this is underlined by the fact that to each of these essential stages of intelligence corresponds a form of social activity, rendering the theological state military, the metaphysical one feudal, and the positive one industrial. There is no longer a linear progression – marked by occasional setbacks, detours, stases –, but there are differences between successive stages that require complete reorganizations and that may thus not be reducible to mere differences in degree.

Historical becoming thus becomes heterogeneous. But this also means that the progression between these states or stages no longer conforms to a straightforward cumulative pattern. Each of the first two of Comte’s states or stages constitutes a progress, only to later become a hindrance to progress.<sup>7</sup> Each historical moment thus acquires a hitherto unknown depth: it becomes the place of confrontation between factors that are not general or universal, but that are themselves historical. To put it otherwise, each moment becomes a stage – in the theatrical sense – on which a conflict takes place, a conflict between the progressive forces of the present and the forces of the past which oppose progress, but which have, at one point, themselves served as the basis on which today’s progressive forces have appeared.

Navigating through these murky, conflictual waters of historical moments or periods becomes the chief task of (positive) philosophy. When it comes to providing an interpretation of the past, both the theological and the metaphysical spirit tend to overemphasize the period when they reined, while the preceding and following periods are seen simply as times of dark confusion and inexplicable disorder (see Comte 1841, 61). On the contrary, the positivist interpretation of history shows the necessity of each period insofar as it is, as the notion of irrevocability above implies, based on other preceding periods and prepares the arrival of a later period. Positive philosophy is, in Comte's eyes, the only one capable of doing justice to the whole of history, i.e. of showing the necessity of the whole of history:

The positive spirit, thanks to its eminently relative nature, is the only one that can appropriately represent all the great historical eras as determinate phases of the same fundamental evolution, in which each era derives from the preceding one and prepares the next according to invariable laws (Comte 1844, 61).

It is important to emphasize here that the "relative" nature of the positive spirit refers to the fact that, unlike the theological or the metaphysical spirits, it does not postulate beings or essences behind the studied phenomena, but merely analyses the facts and tries to find the regularities that link them together. The positivist interpretation does justice to history precisely insofar as it does not postulate some driving force behind historical events, but merely tries to retrospectively deduce the "invariable laws" linking them *after* they will have taken place. Comte makes sure to emphasize this:

We can be certain today that the doctrine that will have suitably explained the whole of the past will inevitably obtain, thanks to this single test, the mental presidency of the future (Comte 1844, 62).

It is obvious from this crucial passage that Comte saw his whole enterprise as first and foremost a practical one: the interpretation of history is, of course, a theoretical endeavor, but it is subordinate insofar as it provides us with the means to move forward, it grants one the "mental presidency" for the construction of the future. Comte's work is therefore not directed at finding out the implacable clock-like march of a history

predetermined by some metaphysical agency hidden behind the actual historical phenomena; rather, it is geared towards amassing the means for constructing – in the most practical sense – the future of humanity. Indeed, this passage teaches us that, for Comte, only the best interpretation of past gains may help us choose new goals, new gains to pursue.

When it comes to diagnosis, the stadial promise radically differs from the Enlightenment promise. Whereas, in keeping with the homogeneous character assigned to history, the Enlightenment thinkers saw the present period just as an accelerated version of past periods, in the stadial promise the present situation is both one of transition and one of crisis. This is compatible with the qualitative and conflictual view of history. For example, for Comte, the metaphysical stage is both a period of transition from the theological to the positive stage and a process of dissolution or erosion of theologism. Similarly, the present is interpreted both as a period in which the positive stage begins to bud, but its future blossoming is still delayed by the fierce resistance opposed by the remnants of the theological and metaphysical states. This also opens the door for a specific role that only the philosopher can fulfill: armed with the historical explanation he has forged (e.g. Comte's description of the three stages), the philosopher is the only one who can disentangle the positive and thus progressive elements of the present from the theological and metaphysical elements that resists them and that may often be hard to distinguish from the former. For Comte, the period of the "great crisis" that starts with the French Revolution is characterized by an intellectual, moral and political chaos determined by the fact that the abrupt end of the theological political organization only showed the incapacity of the metaphysical spirit to provide such an organization and thus prompted a return, a restoration of theological political rule (1844, 51). Luckily, positive philosophy was now in place and it could both provide a guide to follow and interpret away the obstacles in its path.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the *Système de politique positive* will bring to the fore – beside the intellectual and the social organization one – the affective element, and the role of the philosophers – now called "the priests of humanity" and lead by the "High Priest," Comte himself – was that of making sure that the rhythm of progress was similar in all three domains, and that any lagging behind or too sudden advance on one of these fronts did not happen (see Comte 1853, 67). In both of these cases, the philosopher acts as a symptomatologist of the present: from the vantage point of his view of history, the philosopher can cure the ailments and confusions of the present by disentangling the progressive and the

regressive elements and can also act as an “auscultator” of the rhythm of the intellectual, activist and emotive progresses of the present.<sup>9</sup>

### **4.3. The bottleneck promise**

The bottleneck promise brings with it a sensible increase in the heterogeneity of historical becoming. The qualitative difference between the stages or eras of the stadial promise now turns into outright *opposition*. For Marx and Engels – because they are the authors I will use to instantiate the bottleneck promise – the present era does not only resist the desired future one; rather, the two are now portrayed as pushing in opposite directions. The present situation is no longer one of chaos and confusion underneath which, however, a transition is taking place whether we sense it or not; on the contrary, now the present situation is straightforwardly presented as one of decay, and it is only by reaching the bottom of this decay that a new era can rise. Therefore, the passage from the present era to the desired future one is no longer a transition, but requires a complete reversal, a revolution. Here is how Marx and Engels phrase this:

The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the process of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an overriding law (Marx and Engels 1988, 221).

Instead of the desired domination-free society, the present society exhibits a type of domination that continually degrades the status of the dominated. The logical distance between the present and the desired era is actually growing, the transition between them is not facilitated – progress is not accelerating as in the Enlightenment promise, the resistance of theological and metaphysical states does not get progressively weaker, as in the stadial promise; on the contrary, the transition between them seems to become harder to envisage. But then how does the transition still remain possible?

The solution for this problem proposed by Marx and Engels consists in identifying an element meant to guarantee that this transition will take place. By increasing the heterogeneity between the present and the desired

era to the point where it becomes an opposition, Marx and Engels are forced to emphasize the clock-like necessity of the transition between the two opposing forces. And the element that renders, for them, this transition necessary is the need for survival of the proletarians. As their position gets articulated with more and more precision, this element of clock-like necessity is more and more pronounced. In *The Holy Family*, Marx claimed only that the proletarian, “through urgent, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* – that practical expression of *necessity* – is driven directly to revolt against inhumanity” (Marx and Engels 1956, 52): here, the transition seems to stem from a revolt against inhumanity. But this element soon becomes hardened by taking the form of the need for survival of proletarians, already in 1846, in *The German Ideology*: “things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence” (Marx and Engels 1998, 96). This clock-like necessity of the transition between the present and the desired future era will get hardened in Marx’s thought to the point where it will receive the inexorability of physical processes: “Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation” (Marx 1990, 929).<sup>10</sup> To sum up, the bottleneck promise does introduce an instance of clock-like necessity in history, but it does not refer to the whole of history, but only to the transition between the present and the desired era.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, we must highlight that Marx and Engels also keep an element of continuity (similar, in some respects, to Comte’s) between the present and the desired era. What the present inhumanity of the living conditions of proletarians fosters is, for Marx and Engels, the class-consciousness of proletarians. But it is important to stress that this not only refers to their awareness of their own miserable situation, but also of their historical mission, namely that of de-alienating the whole of society. As Engels states in his 1888 preface to *The Communist Manifesto* (and this is an idea he attributes to Marx): “a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class – the proletariat – cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinctions, and class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1988, 207). The interesting logical connection here is that revolution will only take place when its effects will be irrevocable (“once and for all emancipating society”). The clock-like

necessity that the bottleneck promise is forced to introduce in (a certain part of) history does not preclude necessity-as-irrevocability and the two notions support each other here.

I will not insist here too much on the diagnosis element in the work of Marx and Engels: it is very extensive, as they continually showed how the historical events they were contemporary with were seamlessly compatible with their theoretical framework. Also, the role they often assumed was that of helping their audience navigate the treacherous waters of the multitude of existing forms of socialisms (see the last part of *The Communist Manifesto* or the *Critique of the Gotha Program*). But I will also mention here in passing that there is a heroic role for the philosopher in the bottleneck promise. The point of philosophy, as Marx's 1945 *Theses on Feuerbach* state, is no longer that of interpreting the world, but of changing it. Moreover, while Feuerbach claimed that modern philosophy only realized theology, for the young Marx it was now high time to realize philosophy itself: "Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy" (1992, 257) The philosopher-hero thus changes the world and, through this last heroic act, puts an end to philosophy itself.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.4. The nihilistic promise**

For the bottleneck promise, the qualitative difference between the present and the desired future was so great that it amounted to an opposition and the transition between these eras required nothing less than a reversal. The nihilistic promise goes one step further: in it, the qualitative difference between the present and the future eras becomes absolute. These two eras become incomparable, incommensurable – they no longer belong to the same ontological plane. To put it otherwise, no historical factor or factors could realize the transition from our era to the next anymore, there are no historical means, no means at our disposal for effecting the passage between these two eras.

A few remarks need to be made here to facilitate understanding. First, the nihilistic promise – like the bottleneck promise – sees the present as the pinnacle of decay, the lowest point in a history of degradation. However, unlike the bottleneck promise, it no longer has the confidence to identify a historically immanent mechanism that would operate a complete reversal of the situation, bringing it from the lowest point of

decay to heights unknown to man before. This degrading image of history is one of the factors that keep this type of philosophy from simply falling into a non-historical dualism that would radically separate this world from another world, with no potential passage between them.

But this degrading view of history does not mean that any historical irrevocability is rejected. It just means that it is understood in a negative sense: it is the irrevocability of a loss and not that of gains, and this is the main reason for calling this the “nihilistic” promise. What is irrevocable, for this type of philosophy, is the wrong turn taken at some point in history. Once such a wrong turn has been taken, it can no longer be righted by historical or merely human means. The best example of this type of promise is provided by the “second” Heidegger – and especially Heidegger of the 1940s – for whom this wrong turn is onto-theological thinking (or metaphysics), situated at the very beginning of Western philosophy, in Ancient Greece: for Heidegger, Western history is essentially the history of Western philosophy, and this history has not stopped descending the slope of the forgetting of Being that had been set for it at this initial moment of confusion.<sup>13</sup> But characterizing this initial moment is not easy, and it seems to come in two steps: first, some of the pre-Socratic thinkers were able to name the essential ambiguity that links Being to beings and that renders the former prone to being forgotten; but the more decisive moment comes with Plato and Aristotle, where this ambiguity itself is forgotten, and we thus forget the very fact that there is a “question of Being.”<sup>14</sup> The situation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – mainly consisting in treating all the world, including human beings, as a resource for an ever-accelerating process of production and thus bringing the objectification of world and humans at its peak (see Heidegger 1982, 241-242) – is traced by Heidegger to this forgetting of Being.

The originality of the nihilistic promise comes from the fact that, in it, the two characteristics of philosophical explanation – the degree of heterogeneity and the degree of necessity (as irrevocability) of historical becoming merge: the fact that there no longer are historical means for making the transition between two eras separated by an ontological gap is just another way of saying that the wrong turn taken by history is irrevocable or, in any case, it cannot be revoked by human, historical means. In Heidegger’s terms: “the plan to overcome nihilism becomes superfluous, if by overcoming we mean that man independently subject that history to himself and yoke it to its pure willing” (1982, 225). If the transition between the present and the desired future era is to take place,



it will do so not by human or historical means, it will have to be operated by Being itself.

But then what role could there be left for the philosopher? In a theoretical context in which the diagnosis only encounters a present of decay that lacks the means for its own overturning, the only role left for the philosopher is that of guarding the possibility of a different future as possibility. For Heidegger, this comes down to contemplating the absence of Being (in the nihilistic present) as a mode of Being itself: Being is recognized as such in its very absence. The main role of the philosopher is thus that of a commemorator: not someone that can elicit change by themselves, but someone that could keep open the possibility of a new regime of Being by meditating at the fact that even its absence is a regime of Being.

Let me briefly note that, despite their enormous theoretical and political differences, both Heidegger and Walter Benjamin might be seen as adhering to the nihilistic type of promise. Without going into details, I will just note that Benjamin's "Theologico-political fragment" establishes an absolute, an ontological gap between the historical and the messianic, and this separation itself is irrevocable<sup>15</sup> unless some extra-historical intervention were to take place; the role of the philosopher-commemorator here becomes that of studying, with respect to various historical situations, the missed possibilities of what might have been. The philosophers-commemorators thus keep open a possibility that they themselves could never bring about.

#### ***4.5. The hopeful promise***

The last wave of philosophical promise that I will discuss here will be exemplified Herbert Marcuse's 1969 *Essay on liberation*. A few significant novelties characterize this type of promise. First, Marcuse seems to revert to pre-marxist views with respect to the heterogeneity of history. There is, for him, a qualitative difference between the present society and the desired future one ("a socialist society qualitatively different from existing societies", one that would amount to a "radical transvaluation of values" – Marcuse 1969, ix, 6), but the latter is already prefigured, at least in part, in the former. Thus, Marcuse emphasizes the "new sensibility of the young," one that could open the path for the societal change, a sensibility that Marcuse does not attempt to explain historically, but that, he urges, needs to be encouraged. Second, also like in the stadial promise, the transition

towards the desired future state is seen as a progressive rejection of the present society by its members: it is therefore a change from within, one that will become progressively more rapid as more and more elements of the present society get eroded.

As far as historical necessity is concerned, there is little doubt that the benefits brought about by Marcuse's desired socialist society would be irrevocable<sup>16</sup>. But, as in Marx's bottleneck promise, irrevocability seems to be granted not to the whole of history, but only to the gains brought about by one particular period in history, that of the advent of the desired socialist society. But this already leads us to the great difference of the hopeful promise with respect to the stadial and bottleneck promises, as well as with respect to all the other promises discussed here: the hopeful promise brings with it an etiolating of the historical content of promises. The hopeful promise approaches the issue from the opposite angle to the one adopted by the other promises: it attempts to determine what the preconditions for the promised society are in theory<sup>17</sup> and only then to find out whether and to what extent these conditions are found in the present society. Note the striking difference with respect to Marx: it is no longer a matter of providing a mechanism of clock-like necessity that would implacably force the transition between the present and the desired societies. Rather, it is about *what would be needed* for the future society to be realized. As Marcuse (1969, 71) states at one point: "the revolution would be liberating only if it were carried by the non-repressive forces stirring in the existing society. The proposition is no more – and no less – than a hope." This is why I call this the "hopeful promise": it is not a promise about what will happen, but about what is hoped to happen. But, most importantly, in the hopeful promise – and this is its major novelty with respect to all the others – the past is no longer the engine of history, the past is no longer the force that pushes history in one direction or another. In the hopeful promise, it is not the past that leads to a particular future; it is the future that "attracts" us towards it. Indeed, it is no accident that when he identifies preconditions of the promised society in the present, Marcuse often presents them not as factors leading towards the future, but as "ingressions of the future into the present" (Marcuse 1969, 89; see also 21-22).

But if the description of the past no longer plays a role in introducing the desired future and if everything gets concentrated into the relationship between the present and the future society, what I called explanation gets absorbed into diagnosis to the point that they become practically

indistinguishable. With the hopeful promise, we reach a point where the promise loses its historical footing and, as a consequence, it becomes problematic to continue to call it a “historical promise.” As for the role granted to philosophy, without a historical explanation that attempts to embrace the past, present and future into a single encompassing theoretical structure, the philosopher becomes a militant.

## 5. Conclusions

There are a number of tentative conclusions we can draw from our discussion above. First, as I tried to show, the degree of heterogeneity granted to historical becoming may serve as the main criterion for a typology of the promises made by modern philosophy. Second, the promises that see history as homogeneous as well as the promises for which the explanation of the past loses its centrality do not seem to grant a specific, irreducible role for the philosopher. The corollary to this is that the explanations that see history as essentially non-homogeneous and that gain momentum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century create a significant cultural niche for philosophy.

Third, historical promises do not hinge on the idea of an implacable course of history, nor on postulating a “final stage” for the history of humanity. Rather, they are dependent on the idea that there are irrevocable gains (or losses) in history. This entails that, even though ideas about an inexorable course of history or about a “final goal” of history may have lost credibility in the philosophy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this loss of credibility does not necessarily render historical promises obsolete. The twilight of philosophical promises would thus have to be related to the abandoning of the idea that there are irrevocable gains in history. But determining whether this has indeed occurred in contemporary continental philosophy is something that should be proven elsewhere.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In a beautiful book about the “prophets” of Paris from 1750 to about 1850, Frank Manuel (1965, 299) notes at one point that these authors “were both determinists and activists.” Statements of this sort need to be taken with a grain of salt unless one explains how these two stances are compatible with each other. This is one of the motivations behind my approach here.
- <sup>2</sup> Therefore, when I suggest that Ben-Menahem’s notion of necessity is not fully compatible with that of modern continental philosophers of history, this in no way detracts from the merits of Ben-Menahem’s notion.
- <sup>3</sup> Ben-Menahem rightly points out that this notion of necessity refers not to whether or not a particular event occurs if we change its initial conditions, but to whether or not a *similar* event occurs. I will ignore this complication here, given that it does not make a difference for the aims of my discussion.
- <sup>4</sup> When he comes to making predictions about the future progress of humanity, Condorcet does not claim that they are certainly accurate (and that therefore his presentation of history captures its absolutely predetermined course). On the contrary, he only claims “some pretence to truth” (2012, 125) for his prediction (“quelque vraisemblance”), though as his presentation moves forward his confidence seems to grow a little, while still falling short of any absolute certainty, when he speaks, for example, of “a hope that is almost a certainty” (134), or, in his original words, “une espérance presque certaine.”
- <sup>5</sup> This seemed to be the case for Turgot, as Manuel acknowledged. Another difference between Turgot and Condorcet is the fact that the former did believe that “final causes” guide humanity through history, whereas the latter did not – indeed this point had become an inside joke for the two friends in their private conversations (see, e.g., letters CVIII and CIX in Henry 1882, 149-150). For other slight differences between Turgot and Condorcet, see Boarini (2011).
- <sup>6</sup> Instead of Condorcet (or Turgot), we could have used some of Kant’s work in order to illustrate the Enlightenment promise. I do not have the space to insist on this here, but I will just point out that Kant’s endorsement of what I called here necessity-as-irrevocability is obvious in a number of key expressions. For example, in “On the common saying: this may be true in theory, but it does not hold in practice” (1793), Kant states that “this progress will occasionally be *interrupted* but never *broken off*” and he also speaks of making “the good, which, once it exists, preserves itself, dominant” (Kant 2006, 62, 65). Similarly, in “The contest of faculties” (1798), Kant states that, after a republican constitution will have been established, this will guarantee “a progression of the human race from then on toward the better that can not be completely reversed” (Kant 2006, 158).

7 For example, the theological stage was deemed by Comte indispensable for the upsurge of our intelligence as well as for our sociability, only for later to become, through its remnant opinions, mores and institutions, a vicious force opposing the spread of the positive philosophy.

8 Comte, for example, dismisses the various doctrines of utopian socialism on grounds that they constitute an attempt at a theological restoration (Comte, 1844, 66).

9 Another example of the philosopher-symptomologist may be found in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *Philosophy of progress* (1853, 52-53), who argues that, in the present interregnum (i.e. the post-1789 period) between the old regime of the Absolute and the new regime of Progress, there is a great confusion brought about by the fact that we do not know whether our embracing of a particular idea stems from our adhesion to the Absolute or to Progress. The role of the philosopher is to dispel this confusion by disentangling progressive ideas from absolutist ones.

10 This is the side of Marx that many thinkers inspired by Marx tend to reject nowadays (see, e.g., Laclau 1990; Löwy, 2005).

11 Marx and Engels openly rejected the idea of an implacable predetermined course of the whole of history (see, e.g., Marx and Engels 1998, 58).

12 Recall Adorno's (1973, 3) well-known words: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."

13 "Being itself withdraws. The withdrawal happens. The abandonment by Being of the being as such takes place. When does it happen? Now? Only yesterday? Or a long time ago? How long has it been? Since when? Since the being came into the unconcealed as the being itself. Metaphysics has prevailed ever since this unconcealment occurred; for metaphysics is the history of the unconcealment of the being as such. Since that history came to be, there has historically been a withdrawal of Being itself; there has been an abandonment by Being of beings as such; there has been a history in which there is nothing to Being itself. Consequently, and from that time on, Being itself has remained unthought" (Heidegger 1982, 215).

14 "it happens not only that Being as such stays away, but that its default is thoughtlessly misplaced and suppressed by thinking. The more exclusively metaphysics gains control of the being as such and secures itself in and by the being as the truth 'of Being,' the more decisively has it already dispensed with Being as such." (Heidegger 1982, 219).

15 Even a reading of Benjamin that is more optimistic and less prone to giving a role to divine intervention in historical change – such as Michael Löwy's reading – has to admit that there is a sense of a "fall" in Benjamin that comes after "primitive classless society" (see Löwy 2005, 63).

16 See, for example, his ardent declarations at the end of the *Essay* (1969, 90)

17 On the issue of the preconditions of the promised society, see (Marcuse 1969, ix, 4-5, 10, 18, 53, 91).

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