REGRESSION IN HISTORY: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

William L. McBride*

Abstract: This paper starts from a remark by Jürgen Habermas to the effect that, while evolutionary sequences are irreversible – i.e., there is always progress – there can be retrogressions in evolutionary processes, brought on by force, such as Nazi Germany. It raises doubts about the supposed inevitability of historical progress, however defined, and then goes on to explore the meaning of history and the intelligibility of history, taken to be two distinct notions. Sartre's view that history has no final meaning which we could ever know is preferred over Hegel's and Marx's conceptions of the meaning of history. The issue of intelligibility is explored in the light of recent "surprises," such as the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc. Finally, it is maintained that the current cult of free market capitalism, which assumes the pursuit of libido dominandi to be supremely good, constitutes a serious, destructive historical regression that deserves to be combatted with the tools of criticism.

THE CENTRAL idea of this paper came to me when I was re-reading, for a course that I was giving, Jürgen Habermas' old essay, "Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism." Somewhere midway through this essay, which treats Marx's thought as being much more akin to Darwinian evolution than Marx himself thought it was, Habermas is making a case, with which I agree as far as it goes, against the idea of strong historical inevitability. He says that historical development is not necessarily unilinear, and moreover it is not guaranteed to be uninterrupted. Then he adds:

> "Finally, *retrogressions* [*Rückschritte*] in evolution are possible and in many cases empirically corroborated; of course, a society will not fall back behind a level of development, once it is established, without accompanying phenomena of forced regression; this can be seen, for example, in the case of Fascist Germany (Habermas, 1979, 141).[1]

He then goes on to distinguish between evolutionary processes, which he says are indeed reversible, and evolutionary sequences, which he says are not.

There is, it seems to me, much here that is interesting and much that is contestable. One significant element is the personal one: Habermas lived through his childhood, from the age of about five until mid-adolescence, in "Fascist Germany," as he calls it here, and that

---

*****WILLIAM MCBRIDE, Arthur G. Hansen Distinguished Professor, Department of Philosophy, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

Email: wmcbride@purdue.edu

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of* Society, tr. T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 141.

experience has of course marked him throughout his career – as it has no doubt marked many who as children or adults have lived through periods when their own countries were in the grip of regimes that themselves could only be labelled "fascist." But I mention this only to acknowledge it and move on immediately to broader issues: Habermas scholarship as such is not my concern here.

The next element of this text that I would like to consider, the one that originally attracted my special attention, is the assertion that the regression which was the Nazi era in Germany, and indeed any similar regression elsewhere, occurred and occurs only because it was "forced" – *erzwungenen* in the German text. This is intriguing to me. According to this way of thinking, German society had presumably reached a certain relatively high level of development when somehow it was temporarily forced backward. By what or by whom? The text does not say; the word, whether in German or in Spanish or in English, is incorrigibly vague. Most of us, I daresay, have a certain sense of that time in the early 1930s when the Nazis rose to power. Hitler's ideas were not unknown, there were severe rifts within the society, the economic crisis had wrought terrible hardships on many citizens, and yet we know that many prominent intellectuals did not at all anticipate, even a few months before, the sequence of events that resulted in the establishment of the dictatorship of the *Führer*: Hitler's ascendancy to the leadership of a coalition government, the Reichstag fire, the invocation of the state of exception or state of emergency, and … the rest that followed. Did Hitler force that large segment of the German masses who rallied to him to do so? Hardly. Did the experience of economic hardship force them to accept Nazi doctrine? No; if anything, one might conjecture, absent a knowledge of the historical facts, that that experience would have made the Marxist critique of the capitalist system appear more plausible to a larger segment of the masses. But this Habermasian text is making the assertion that Germany fell back by virtue of some kind of force, and we are left to wonder what that was.

The third element of the text that I find striking, and that is implicit in the language of "levels of development," is the treatment of human history as a certain kind of natural history, with social structures being the entities that can best be seen to have evolved, one after the other. One is immediately reminded of those natural history museums where the earth's time is plotted, by graphic representations, from its earliest origins to the point at which, at last, a small hominid creature emerges, still not erect, and then very soon we come to *homo erectus* and in almost no time thereafter to Renaissance man, beautifully attired. Marx himself, of course, famously acknowledged the relevance of this natural history model to his own theory when, in the Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital*, he cited with apparent approval a lengthy excerpt from a Russian review of that book in which the reviewer said, among other things, the following: "Marx treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the

contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence."[2] But are we in fact so governed? Indeed, just what does it mean to be governed by such invisible but global "laws"? There is much about this way of viewing the world that is mysterious.

The fourth and final element of Habermas' text to which I wish to call attention is the fact that, although as I said at the beginning he denies what I called "strong historical inevitability," a point with which I concur, he remains committed nevertheless to a weaker form of historical inevitability, as is evident from his insistence that evolutionary sequences, as distinguished from the details of evolutionary processes, are irreversible. So, we are the happy beneficiaries of Progress, after all. The Enlightenment vision still prevails. What a surprise!

"Progress:" What does it mean, how is it to be measured? In the Americas we used to think, many of us, that we could identify the magic year in which progress arrived in the New World. It was 1492. By the time of the five hundredth anniversary of that date, although it was certainly celebrated far and wide, many people were no longer so sure that it had been unmitigatedly good. The Conquistadores; the decimation of the native populations through both conquest and disease; the destruction of the artifacts of the native cultures; the eventual diminution of the conquering nations themselves through the unforeseen consequences of, in the case of Spain, the quest for gold, or, in the cases of France and England, of the difficulties of maintaining docile colonies – all these developments, leading eventually to, among other things, independence. So now we have another date, perhaps a better one, on which to focus. A mere two hundred years, leading gloriously and inexorably – is it not so? – from societies whose older citizens still vividly recalled what it was like to be mere colonists, on to…..us. Of course, the official story goes, there have been occasional regressions here in the Americas, just like the case of Germany on the other side of the ocean – Texas, just to take a random example. Or, as V.I. Lenin famously put it during the early stages of that glorious evolution from himself to Stalin to Gorbachev to Putin and beyond: "Two steps forward, one step backward." But in any case, according to what I am calling "the official story," there has been no real retrogression in evolutionary terms, despite occasional lapses; on the contrary.

And of course this may seem more than obvious if we consider the domains of science and technology. Marx himself is responsible for giving us some of the most memorable lines in support of this cheerleading for progress when, in the *Communist Manifesto*, he wrote:

> "The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground – what earlier century had even a

[2] Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I, tr. B. Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 101.

> presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?"[3]

I should perhaps beg forgiveness for repeating once again lines that are so well known, but I have done so to remind you, my readers, and myself just how much Marx, and so the vast historical movement that claimed to follow him, was enamored of the idea of progress in history as exemplified first and foremost by material progress in what he called the forces of production. And there is, and continues to be, something thrilling about it, including all the dramatic new technological developments that have occurred over the past 160-odd years since the time of the *Manifesto*.

But we have now reached a point at which a bit more hesitation creeps into our hymns of praise even of this kind of "progress:" Have Nature's forces really been subjected? Has the clearing of whole continents really made the earth as a whole a better place? Is there not a very dark side to the changes that this "progress" has wrought? Increasingly, even scientists and technologists believe that there is.

The basic linguistic fact that must be recalled here is that the word "progress," like "regression," implies a *telos*, a point towards which or from which the movement, the *gressus*, is taking place. But there simply exists no rule book defining the nature of this *telos* on the infallibility of which all thoughtful people could ever agree, and the very nature of human reality guarantees – infallibly, if I may dare to say so – that there never will be such a rule book. In the remainder of my essay, I would like to consider three general issues concerning history in the light of this assertion: (1) the meaning of history; (2) the intelligibility of history; (3) what the history of the past several decades may tell us about, as I expressed it in my title, "where we are now."

I. The Meaning of History

Among the Twentieth Century philosophers with whom I find the most agreement is Jean-Paul Sartre. I would like to consider a few remarks that he made over the years – not all of them entirely consistent with one another – by way of illuminating this question of the meaning of history. There is, to begin with, his famous response to Albert Camus, who had attacked him for an unfavorable review of Camus' *L'Homme révolté* that had been published in the journal edited by Sartre, *Les Temps Modernes*. At one point Sartre cites a question posed by Camus and turns it against him as follows: "Does History have a meaning, you ask, does it have an end? For me, it is the question that has no meaning: because History, outside of the human being who makes it, is only an abstract and inert concept, about which one can say neither that it has an end nor that it

[3] Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in R. C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 477.

does not."[4] It may be worth noting, by the way, that in French the word "*sens*," which is translated in English as "meaning," also connotes direction, in other words *telos* of a sort, as in the expression "*sens unique*" meaning "one-way street." In any case, while in this text Sartre asserts that the only meaning that History has is the one that we human beings give it, some eight years later, at the end of the first volume, the only one published in his lifetime, of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre speaks of his expectation that through further investigation "we shall discover the profound signification of History and of dialectical rationality." [5] Perhaps it was his failure ever to do so, because as we shall see it is in many important senses impossible, that helps to explain why he never completed Volume Two of that work.

Let us briefly consider a couple of the major accounts of history that have attempted to give it a meaning before returning to Sartre for a few additional insights that I consider valuable on the question of the meaning of history. First of all, there is the Hegelian account: History as Theodicy. For Hegel, as you know, it was most important to discover *reason* in history behind the seemingly irrational and often tragic surface appearances. In the end, as Hegel said at the conclusion of his lectures on the philosophy of history, we should be able to see "that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not 'without God,' but is essentially His work."[6] This is the quintessential view of history as progress, and it still has its believers. I once heard a colleague assert that he was an Hegelian Christian who truly believed that the Spirit of God had been incarnated in the person of Napoleon as he worked to bring about greater rationality in the European world. But we, who are mostly not from that world, might well recall a remark made by Napoleon himself, which Hegel actually cites in his work: "Cette vieille Europe m'ennuie" – "This old Europe bores me." And if in fact we should continue to try to find reason in history after all, we will constantly be confronted by so much that is irrational – sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, or a mixture of both – that Hegel's confidence must to most of us seem completely misplaced, As just one example, consider the brief reign of Maximilian, whom the first Napoleon's nephew, the Emperor Napoleon, absurdly installed as emperor of Mexico.

Another major account of the meaning of history is, of course, the Marxist, which in a sense Habermas was trying to defend in the essay with which I began this paper. But it presents many problems, beginning with the question of just what that Marxist account is. To say that all of past history, or at least all of past history since so-called "primitive" times, has been a history of class struggle, as does the opening of the *Communist Manifesto*, is all very well, it tells us something very

---

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Réponse à Albert Camus" in *Situations*, IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 124 (my translation).
[5] Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Tome I (Paris: Gallimard, nouvelle édition, 1985), 894 (my translation).
[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 457.

important, but at the same time it is vague and incomplete. Obviously, class struggle cannot explain everything, or even nearly everything. Some have taken Marx to be saying that there is a very strong inevitability about historical progress, so that differences between individuals are unimportant and moments of apparent regression are illusory. But Marx himself was far less categorical than this, at least at times particularly in his letters and essays, and in any event the very complex systematic analysis that he elaborated in *Capital* allows, as I have shown elsewhere, for an indefinite postponement of the moment of transition to a post-capitalist society that Marx emotionally believed would come soon. Of course, it is said by many that recent actual history, characterized by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc for which one quite dogmatic form of Marxism was the official ideology, disproves Marx's predictions of the future and hence his view of the meaning of history. But my point is that (a) the so-called "orthodox" Marxism was not entirely faithful to the thought of Marx, (b) Marx was able at best to project certain future possibilities from within his system, not to predict the future with any certitude, and (c) what is called his view of the meaning of history, while strongly influenced by Hegel and the general Enlightenment belief in progress, is in fact very ambiguous in many respects when examined more closely. So the collapse of the Soviet Bloc at best undermined a conception of the meaning of history that was widely held but that constituted only one interpretation of Marx's thought, while that thought itself, although valuable in so many other ways, does not furnish a defensible overall view of the meaning of history.

So let me then return to Sartre. As far as I am concerned, his insight that human beings make history and give it a meaning is essentially correct. In the terminology of his early work, *Being and Nothingness*, the past is *en soi*, in itself, one cannot change the basic facts – for example, Mexico gained its independence from Spain as the outcome of a struggle that began in 1810 – but the *meaning* of the past is based on our present projects. In other words, it is we who decide. He writes:

> This decision concerning the value, order, and nature of our past is simply the *historical choice* in general. If human societies are historical, that does not come about simply by virtue of the fact that they have a past, but by virtue of the fact that they *take it back* as a sort of *monument*.[7]

He then goes on to give an example of what he means that I find very significant and helpful. It is the decision of American capitalism, as he puts it, to enter the First World War on the side of France rather than on that of Germany for utilitarian reasons; this decision was then given an historical meaning after the fact with the aid of such symbolism as the famous words, "Lafayette, we are here!" – uttered by an American general who was recalling the contribution of the French Marquis de

[7] Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 581 (my translation).

Lafayette to the American Revolution some 140 years earlier. And Sartre says that if the United States had chosen to side instead with Germany, other elements of the past would have been invoked to justify that. This may sound cynical, but it rings true to the account of that period that my parents, who were young people at the time, related to me. The American President, Woodrow Wilson, was re-elected in 1916 above all on the basis of the slogan, "He kept us out of war," and then proceeded to involve the country in the war within a few months. This is in fact a very typical example of how history is given meanings.

My final consideration of the question of the meaning of history is drawn from another Sartrean work that I regard as quite remarkable. It is called *Truth and Existence*, and was published posthumously. Here, as well as in some other texts, he insists on the great importance of differences between generations in saying what is the "truth" of history, or of a given segment of history. The problem, of course, is that it is impossible to fix exactly the lines of demarcation between the different generations. Nevertheless, one can constitute some impressions that are half-vague, half-precise of a generation having particular characteristics, as we frequently do (for example, Sartre's own generation came eventually to be known in France as "the generation between the two wars"), just as one can talk meaningfully, using Hegelian language, of the "objective spirit" of a given society at a given epoch. Toward the end of the comparatively short work that is *Truth and Existence*, there is a text that is at once genial and beautiful, in my opinion, and that is probably the clearest in all of Sartre's work on my topic of the meaning of history; I would like to conclude this part of my essay by citing a few sentences from it:

> Inasmuch as a totalization of the human race is always possible, *there is a truth about the human race*. The human race has a destiny, human History has a meaning (were it only that of a succession of catastrophic absurdities, because then, since man is the being through whom meaning comes to the world, the meaning of History would be the impossibility of a meaning for the being who confers meaning on being). But this meaning of History could only appear to a being situated *outside of* History, since any understanding of History is itself historical and takes on its temporal meaning in the perspective of a future, thus of new goals. It is not necessarily a question of God or of a Demiurge – it could be a man located outside of the human sphere. In any case what is needed is *someone to close the eyes of humanity*. And that someone being in principle impossible, man is the worker of a truth that no one will ever know.[8]

II.The Intelligibility of History

I think that the distinction that I am making here between the meaning of history and the intelligibility of history is an important one – even though, as I shall indicate shortly, the two concepts have tended to

[8] Sartre, *Vérité et existence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 132 (my translation).

become identified, often to great disadvantage. History may have no ultimate meaning, or at least none, as Sartre has put it, that we can ever know, but still historical events may be understandable – and not merely be, as the famous expression of total historical agnosticism would have it, "one damn thing after another." The issue was put well, I thought, by an old friend of mine, Svetozar Stojanović of Serbia, once a member of the Yugoslav "*Praxis* Group" of Marxist philosophers, who responded to a request from the member society of FISP (the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, of which I am the current President) to which he belonged, the International Institute of Philosophy, to submit suggestions to us for a theme for the next World Congress of Philosophy, in Athens in 2013. Alas, he has since died, and the theme that has been chosen for the Congress, "Philosophy as Inquiry and Way of Life," is not his. He sent us a note that read as follows: "Historical cognition in light of recent astounding surprises and turns. (Explanation: the 1989-91 demise of Communism, the Warsaw Bloc, and the USSR and now the great global economic and general crisis in progress merit serious reconsideration of the understanding of historical processes.)"

Sveta made a good point. The demise of Communism, at least at the time at which it died, had certainly not been predicted by most experts or ordinary individuals. By this time, I suppose, most of us have absorbed it, we have all kinds of explanations in hindsight as to why it was in fact supposedly inevitable, and we have moved on. For the better part of the past decade or more now, "globalization" has been all the rage. For some, it has in fact been a source of real rage, anger, while for many others it has been wonderful, but what one heard repeated again and again about it was that it was, in any case, inevitable – just as many, in certain geographic regions, had once said the same thing about the triumph of Communism. But now something has happened. We are experiencing, as Sveta expressed it, a "great global economic and general crisis," and it is still going on. The least that this means is continued high unemployment and poverty of major proportions, with other dire potential consequences such as trade and currency wars looming on the horizon. But more about this later.

Stojanović was claiming that "we" apparently do not understand historical processes very well, or we would not have been surprised by the demise of the Soviet Bloc or by the global economic "meltdown". Or – let me interject two very important chronologically intermediate events – the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on Iraq by, respectively, Islamic *jihadist* terrorists and state terrorists. Well, many would immediately say, those two attacks were different: All sorts of contingencies had to fall into place together in order to give the *jihadis* the extraordinary success that they achieved from their point of view – even Bin Laden later admitted that he had not expected it to be such a total "success" – and the same – that is, the dependence on many contingencies – holds true of Bush's war. True enough: The attack plans might have been thwarted, and some American and international leaders – United States Senators, and Bush sycophants such as Tony Blair – might have mustered the combined requisite degrees of intelligence and

courage to say "no" firmly to Bush, which might have forced him to stay his hand. But, on the other hand, can there really be any doubt that, in retrospect, both of these events are quite understandable not only in their details but also in terms of what I am calling, using an expression borrowed from Sartre, "the intelligibility of history"? We can understand, however much we may dislike them, the respective religious fanaticisms motivating the masterminds of the two attacks. We can understand why the Twin Towers were chosen as a prime target – there had even been an attack attempted on them before, but from the ground – and we can understand why Iraq was chosen in terms both of Oedipal psychology – Bush *père* had refused to continue the First Gulf War, so the son would show the father what a superior leader like himself could do – and of greed – under the desert soil there were enormous additional petroleum reserves to be exploited. Even what we may want to call "stupidity" should not be taken as a surd, an imperceptible, inexplicable spiritual quality of the allegedly stupid person, but rather as shorthand for a series of decisions leading to failure – decisions that are themselves intelligible nevertheless. An expression that has become very popular in English in recent years, as the world has seemed to become increasingly surreal, is, "What could he (or she) have been thinking?" It is used, of course, as a comment about particularly stupid decisions and actions. But we can always reconstruct what the poor, misguided actor might have been thinking, and we are often correct when we do so.

This being the case, as I see it, let us reconsider Stojanović's expressions, "understanding of historical processes" and "historical cognition." I would like to suggest that these rather commonplace expressions are good illustrations of how easy it is for our intelligence to become bewitched by means of language, as Wittgenstein put it. For the leap from asserting that we know many historical facts and can give plausible accounts of certain historical processes, the point that I have just illustrated, and can thus render past and present history "intelligible," to the assertion that world history has an ultimate meaning, an ultimate end, may seem to be a small one, and a very tempting one as well. In this regard, as I already suggested earlier, Hegel has contributed mightily to our confusion by his claim to have discerned a great, sweeping pattern in world history. Marx and Engels, of course, adopted this claim as their own, though dissenting from Hegel on the nature of the pattern. But, apart from the deficiencies of their respective accounts, is the assumption itself justifiable? If so, on what grounds? Really, those who have made it have based their philosophies of history on a very small "n": although anthropological findings can take us much further back in time, recorded history, which is all that interested Hegel, for example, is very sketchy indeed beyond about 2000 years, at most, before the Common Era. Imagine a series of individuals dying and being born, one immediately after the other – think of the transmigration of a single soul, if that pleases you – with an average age of 80, which is not unrealistic: the number of such individuals required to go back to 2000 BCE would be only 50. That is what I mean by a small "n". We all know about many events and developments that have occurred over this time

period, but when there is talk of "historical processes" and "historical cognition" within a theoretical context, be it more philosophical or more oriented towards an imagined social scientific approach to history, usually much more is meant than simply an aggregate of events and developments. What is meant is a law, or a set of laws, of history. But if, as, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss maintains, this very conception of "history" is a Western myth, then we should not be surprised when events occur that do not fall within the mythical patterns or laws of history that we ourselves have created and nurtured. In short, the human social events, processes, sequences which constitute what we call "history," the history of this small *n* of entities on this small planet, are at least in principle all intelligible, understandable, but not because they occur in accordance with some fixed set of transcendent rules to which we may some day have full access.

III. Where We Are Now

We have been surprised, I think that all of us have been surprised, by many recent events that at the time seemed quite remarkable, but now no longer do, or at least much less so. I have a sense that we all share a feeling that events are moving very quickly, but we know not where – which is only as it should be if my analyses in this paper have been accurate. Only seven years ago, at a conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, I read a paper entitled "El Futuro: Globalizacion filosófica, si. Hegemonía norteamericana, no." Its content was intended, if you will, to be more ethical and hortatory than predictive, especially since, as I hope I have made abundantly clear in this paper, I do not believe that the historical future is very predictable. But in fact the words of my title can be seen to have been at least somewhat predictive. I do think, no doubt in large measure because of my position within FISP and my resulting travels, but also by virtue of what I perceive to be greater exchange than ever of philosophers between countires and even between continents, that philosophical globalization – meaning exchange of methods and dialogue of concepts despite the continuing inclination of some philosophers to think of theirs as the only acceptable "way" – is an ever-greater reality today. At the same time, it would be difficult to deny the signs, not entirely clear-cut but still, I think, unmistakable, of a decline in North American hegemony: the sense that the invasion of Iraq was a fiasco, the global financial crisis with my country as its principal original source, the ever more widespread recognition that so many major aspects of American life – manufacturing, infrastructure, the education system, the notorious prison system, and so on – are seriously problematic both absolutely and in relation to many other countries. Meanwhile, as everyone knows, discontent within my country with respect to the internal state of affairs has increased greatly; for example, some polls – I agree that we should not rely very much on polls, which are extremely mercurial, but I think it may be useful sometimes to pay attention to them when they are very one-sided – show under 30% of the population having positive attitudes towards either of our major political

parties or toward the future as better than the past. The elections of November 2010 well reflected that discontent.

What I said with respect to the case of Germany near the beginning of this essay, namely, that, if we were not familiar with the actual historical facts, we might very well conjecture that the experience of economic hardship in the 1920s and early 1930s would have made the Marxist critique of the capitalist system appear more plausible to a larger segment of the masses there, could equally well be said of the contemporary United States and indeed of much of the rest of the world. But the facts belie such imaginary speculation. Indeed, the most significant winners in the elections to which I have just referred were those who claimed, in general, that the capitalist system was in excellent condition and that it would be even better were it not for governmental regulations that impede its development. Development toward what? Why, I suppose, toward unlimited accumulation for its own sake. As Marx said, "Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets." At present, as we know, accumulation by the wealthy few, not only in the United States but in countries throughout the world, has continued almost without interruption through the financial crisis, while the economic gap between these few and the vast majority of people continues to widen. But the fact that this is the case seems to have little if any effect on actual political practice, either on the part of the political elites or of a majority of ordinary citizens.

There is a very real sense in which, as many others have noted, the cult of the so-called "free market" has come to resemble a religion – though perhaps something more like an esoteric cult than like one of the mainstream religions such as Christianity. The latter may have some supposed "mysteries" such as the Trinity, but these are mysteries that are ultimately quite transparent and comprehensible, explained over and over again in books of theology that are open to all. But my basis of comparison with the "free market" would be something like the Orphic cult, which none of us – let us be honest about it – can really explain, although we at least know that it held out the promise of transmigration of souls, of which some of us may well be the outcomes – who knows? (We do not know: That is my point.) The cult of the "free market" is more like that, and here is one typical illustration: When the American Congress recently threatened to tax severely the bonuses of the managers of the section of the insurance company, AIG, which had been most responsible for the financial disaster, those who opposed this argued that depriving them of their bonuses would be terrible because only they understood well enough the very complicated system that they had manipulated and used to bring about the disaster, and so only they were in a position to deconstruct it. That is a truly esoteric cult!

Meanwhile, large segments of some other established religions, especially Christianity, have become quite comfortable with the thought that capitalism is pefectly compatible with their teachings – in other words, that "*enrichissez-vous*" is a good Christian principle. But it is not. I myself have enough background in theology to know that an economic system that preaches the maximization of profit as the goal to which all

others are to be subordinated by those who control corporations, large and small, is ultimately in conflict with the ideals of a religious community – with the ideals of religion itself. Of course, the temptation to take advantage of others, the *libido dominandi*, is as old as humanity itself; but what is peculiar to capitalism is its systematic justification of this tendency as being supremely good. In theoretical writings, we can trace elements of this back to Adam Smith and further back to Locke and others, but it is perhaps only in more recent times that this mentality has become so widely pervasive in the popular mind in so many societies. Incidentally, the failure to confront head-on this fundamental philosophical difficulty in regard to capitalism is characteristic of virtually the entire corpus of Twentieth Century liberal social and political philosophy, including the work of John Rawls and of Habermas himself, together with most of their followers and commentators.

It is this cult of capitalism which, it seems to me, constitutes a truly deep regression in history, one from which many thought that humanity could be extricated in the past century or so, but which, from the vantage point of the present, has begun to take on the appearance of historical inevitability and to be defended as inevitable. That, as I see it, is where we are now. But if the very notion of inevitable evolutionary sequences leading to a predetermined historical *telos* is itself an indefensible myth, as I have been maintaining throughout this paper, then the continued employment of the tools of criticism in the attempt, however difficult and often discouraging, to undermine the dominant current version of that myth and the many negative, destructive consequences that it entails remains a supremely worthwhile endeavor for us in this very brief niche that we occupy within the relatively brief span of time that has been human history up to now.

References

1. Habermas, Jürgen. 1979. *Communication and the Evolution of* Society, tr. T. McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press.
2. Hegel, G.W.F. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree. New York: Dover.
3. Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*, Vol. I, tr. B. Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.
4. -----. 1978. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in R. C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton.
5. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1943. *L'être et le néant*. Paris: Gallimard.
6. -----. 1964. "Réponse à Albert Camus" in *Situations*, IV. Paris: Gallimard.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1985. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Tome I. Paris: Gallimard, nouvelle edition. (my translation).
7.-----.1989. *Vérité et existence*. Paris: Gallimard.