

The Flow of History: Hegel's Historical Idealism Vs. Geussian-Benjaminian's Historical Realism

Ramze Endut

Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

(*Corresponding Author)

ramze@ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the concept of history in two opposite dimensions: idealism vs realism. As the background of discussion, I start by introducing GWF Hegel's progressive reading of history. With this approach, Hegel would like to demonstrate history in a linear and rationalistic perspectives as symbolizes in his famous dictum, "what is rational is real; and what is real is rational." As a result, this teleological perspective portrays the concept of history in a closed history and totally encompassing the past/present/future. I would argue this optimism and normative view of history is highly problematic. Following that, I invite Raymond Geuss who argues that certain society has its sense of locatedness and metaphysical need. This argument based on his proposal that each and every society should be understood in its specific historical context. It is at this point, I link the discussion to Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" by illustrating the discontinuity flow of history. Unlike Hegel, Benjamin views history as non-linear. Therefore, contrary to Hegel's optimistic reading of history, it seems that Benjamin's historical conception is likely pessimistic. To conclude, inspired by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, I discuss the tension between Hegel's historical idealism and Geussian-Benjaminian's historical realism by suggesting that our history is apparently trapped into the power of present time; where the present has become too broad: capturing altogether the recorded past and the predictable future.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji mengenai konsep sejarah dalam dua dimensi yang bertentangan: idealisme lawan realisme. Sebagai latar belakang, makalah ini bermula dengan memperkenalkan bacaan sejarah secara progresif oleh GWF Hegel. Menerusi pendekatan ini, Hegel membentangkan perspektif sejarah dalam versi linear dan rasional selaras dengan diktum terkenalnya, "apa yang rasional adalah real; apa yang real adalah rasional." Hasilnya, perspektif yang bersifat teleologi ini menzahirkan konsep sejarah yang bersifat tertutup dan normatif, yang semua ini sebenarnya bermasalah. Selanjutnya, hujah Raymond Geuss dikemukakan menerusi penekanannya mengenai keperluan nilai kesetempatan dan metafizik. Hujahnya ini adalah berasaskan setiap masyarakat sewajarnya difahami berdasarkan konteks kesejarahannya yang khusus. Pada tahap inilah, wacana ini membawa pemikiran Walter Benjamin menerusi makalahnya, "On the Concept of History." Pandangannya ini jelas menunjukkan ketaksinambungan sejarah. Tidak seperti Hegel, Benjamin menegaskan sejarah dalam bentuk bukan-linear. Justeru itu, berbeza dengan bacaan optimistik Hegel, ternyata konsep sejarah Benjamin bersifat pesimistik. Akhirnya, berinspirasi Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, ketegangan

antara idealisme kesejarahan Hegel dengan realisme kesejarahan Geussian-Benjaminian dirumuskan sebagai suatu wacana sejarah yang telah terperangkap dengan kekuasaan masa kini; apabila masa kini menjadi terlalu luas, sehingga dapat menebak masa depan dan merakam masa lalu.

Keywords: History; Idealism; Realism; Historical Continuity; Historical Discontinuity

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study two opposing views of the concept of history, namely; historical idealism and historical realism. By definition, I regard historical idealism as having a normative and single universal form of society, whereas historical realism leans toward judgment or assessment of society according to its situational contexts.

The paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, as the background of my discussion, in part (1), I will focus on the progressive reading of history by G. W. F. Hegel, and specifically, I am concentrating on the Preface of "Philosophy of Right", as the main text.

As an aside, I am sure that Hegel's concept of history can also be read differently considering the breadth and depth of his other texts. However, this paper specifically requires me to highlight Hegel's concept of historical continuity.

In this version, Hegel seems to describe history in a linear form based on a rationalistic program. To my mind, Hegel's quotation of "what is rational is real; and what is real is rational" clearly symbolizes the rationalistic orientation and, interestingly, contains its normative aspect of history. As a result, this teleological determinism portrays Hegel's concept of history as a closed history that totally encompasses the past/present/future.

In part (2), I will focus on Raymond Geuss's work on "Realism" as the first counterpoint to Hegel's view of historical continuity. Geuss argues that society has its historical contexts and that each and every society should be understood in its specific environment, especially in relation to politics. For this reason, I identify that Geuss indirectly questions the Hegelian concept of historical continuity.

To directly grasp the strong contrasting view of historical idealism, in part (3) I have invited Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to the discussion. Unlike Hegel, Benjamin views history in a non-linear trajectory. In other words, he argues that history should be viewed in the context of historical discontinuity. Although Benjamin believes in the concept of a classless society, it seems the concept to be located in the past as a negative utopian concept. Indeed, Benjamin delegitimizes the concept of normative in history, and this move eventually leads him to make a close connection between the past and present.

In the final part (4) of the paper, I would like to suggest that it is inconclusive to imagine society merely through a historical development of rationality. From this viewpoint, I would articulate a historical approach by considering the possibility of detachment between historical events and historical time. The idea of detachment not only allows us to contemplate both patterns—

historical continuity and discontinuity—but it also allow us to understand our own complex modern society.

HEGEL ON HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

It is a common approach to begin the discussion of history by looking at Hegel's famous double dictum, "what is real is rational and what is rational is real". This phrase by Hegel, who is a philosopher in the tradition of German Idealism, has been widely discussed among scholars and it provokes various responses and different interpretations. However, for this paper, I intentionally read this double dictum in the context of a progressive reading, which means I refrain from discussing conservative reading (Popper 1966) and neutral reading (Stern 2006).

In progressive reading, this double dictum is read as "ought to", meaning that what is rational must be considered real. In this framework, Hegel believes that society is guided by reason.

In Hegel's concept of history, we can simplify that reason is synonymously linked to philosophy. For Hegel, by taking philosophy as its main mechanism of social development, society has the capacity to be self-creating to realize itself. According to Hegel (2005: xx), this means that "reason as the substantive essence of social order and nature." Equally, for Hegel, history is an irreversible process. From this interpretation of "endless iteration" of reason, I believe that the concept of history is represented in the linear motion of history. In fact, this tendency of Hegel's way of thinking can be easily found in the second and last paragraph of *the Preface*:

"Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as a counter part to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom." (Hegel 2005)

If we accept this view, it will place Hegel's notion of history in the form of society's normative aspirations. The double dictum itself is a normative outlook in a Hegelian sense. However, I believe that this normative outlook must be understood in terms of a genuine society structured by reason. In this scope, social history involves reason as its medium of development.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I agree with Michael O. Hardimon that the double dictum not only maintains normativity in an absolute sense but also stresses that sense in its current social reality. In this case, the existing social reality ought to reflect the stage of its historicity. According to Hardimon (1994: 75), "What was special about the essence of Hegel's social world was that it was as it ought to be both relative to its stage in world history and absolutely."

In fact, when Hegel (2005: xxi) enumerates that "When Philosophy paints its grey in grey then has a shape of life grown old", it thus provides us with a telos orientation of historical continuity. Thus, Hegel continues to say that "philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late" to tell the world what it should be. Therefore, if I understand him correctly, Hegel's concept of history is expressed in a form of idealism regarding its normative aspiration. Given this interpretation, it is no wonder that Hegel's historical idealism is also known as absolute idealism.

Nevertheless, there are some implications when considering Hegel's perspective on history.

Firstly, this double dictum seems to frame society with a kind of rationalistic manifesto. In this context, society is historically designed in line with the process of civilization. Otherwise, anything outside the form of reason may well be perceived as uncivilized. Therefore, reason has been the spirit and inner essence of society in the evolution of human civilization.

Secondly, I believe that this rationalistic program narrows down social development in a closed history. For Hegel, every stage in society is a synthesis, a combination of separate complex elements brought together from the previous stage. Therefore, Hegel endeavours to make a closed connection between the previous (the past), the current (the present), and the next (the future). Of course, we may say that the future in Hegel's model is still open for any possibility, but the openness of future history is bound-up with an ongoing development of reason. In this case, I contend that Hegel's concept of history sequentially combines past, present, and future. That is why, according to Pensky (2004: 188-189), "Time for Hegel is equated with history, and history is fully disclosed". With this historical closure, Pensky sums up history as "a narrative drama of self-creation." In other words, historically speaking, the double dictum itself is an outcome of a historical process in which the rational has become the real, and the real has become the rational. The outcome, with this perspective, offers us some hope for society.

If Hegel correctly defined our historical development, it means that the "maturity of reality" is progressing in our society. For instance, it is well known that Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* can be read in this Hegelian sense. Although the Fukuyama's thesis (1992) could still be debatable, but it is undoubtedly true that his book is inspired by Hegelian historical idealism, which regards reason as the central orientation of society. Overall, Hegel's concept of history provides us with an optimistic view of the future of world history.

GEUSS ON HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

I have attempted to explain how Hegel locates history in the context of continuity and normativity, and these perspectives assume that history progresses through the development of reason. That said, I would add that history, for Hegel, is accumulative by time and reason. Yet, this Hegelian interpretation of history is surely rational, but perhaps too restrictive as its application may be limited to certain societies.

Furthermore, I would like to clarify that Hegel's concept of history has some flaws when examining the historical experience of non-liberal or non-western society. Raymond Geuss makes some arguments in defending historical realism, especially regarding politics. Here, Geuss argues that history should not be universally equated to all societies. In fact, every society is supposed to have its own historical contexts. A telling detail here is that history is fragmented through a particular time (period) and place (society). Therefore, Geuss (2008: 22) likely attempts to replace historical idealism with "the realist approach to political philosophy". In doing so, I will lay out three arguments by Geuss on why we need such historical realism in the context of political philosophy. I argue, these three arguments emphasize how history cannot be totally viewed as rational, accumulative, and universal.

Firstly, for Geuss, society must not be merely understood in the context of reason. It is of paramount importance to note that certain societies have different perceptions of how to deal

with matters of differential choice. To speak of the matter, therefore, we need to let go of the idea that reason is the only way to capture social reality. Geuss contends that a society is dependent on how its social structures are constructed, perceived, and observed in the foundation of that certain society, and this is true especially in relation to the concept of political authority. Accordingly, there are many forms of political power, depending on the time and place. As Geuss (2008: 27) mentions:

"It is probably a mistake to treat "power" as if it referred to a single, uniform substance or relation where it was found. It makes more sense to distinguish between a variety of qualitatively distinct kinds of powers."

Following this assertion, Geuss expounds that the substantive understanding of politics is not parallel to a single universal form. Of course, the medium of reason can be true in one form for one society and not for another. Therefore, it is perhaps safer to say that society would be better understood by analysing of its "existing social and political institution" rather than to view it solely on the historical development of rationality. In brief, Geuss seems to suggest that reason and society can be separated in certain social historical contexts and that there is no single universal form that fits into all social models of civilized society.

Secondly, Geuss proposes that history does not gradually accumulate. Geuss (2008: 14) argues that politics is usually based on non-recurrent situations and a historically differentiated society. In a similar vein, certain societies have "their own specific context" on how to organize its "forms of action together." Therefore, it is problematic to simplify society into a single universal form. With this understanding, if we set history as merely accumulative, then the history of society cannot be an irreversible process. The flaw of this perspective is that any mistake in the historical phenomenon can be interpreted as futile, wasteful, and has no purpose. This shortcoming, as Geuss argues, fails to address the complexity of various forms of society. From the outset, Geuss (2008: 31) pins down that the history of society may be better viewed through a "number of phenomena having to do with order, sequence, priority and the temporality or historically of collective action." Given that, it is no surprise that Geuss highlights politics as an art form for choosing the right moment in the historical development of a society. To consider this timely situation and the importance of timing in political action, therefore, I suggest it would be advisable to look at history in a non-gradual stage or non-cumulative effect. To put it another way, history must now be understood in various forms, either sequence (historical continuity) or non-sequence (historical discontinuity).

Thirdly, as a further discussion from the previous point, I am inclined to say that it is too much to universally conceive society as having the same form for all societies; modern and non-modern. Geuss understands that every concept of society hinges on a particular time and place. Still, in politics, besides a matter of differential choice and a form of actions, Geuss (2008: 34) perceives that politics can be used for "collective forms of legitimizing violence". Given this fact, there are many indirect ways to address the legitimization of violence. They vary from one society to another. However, the question is how can we relate this variation in the context of history? The answer requires an example. In modern times, for instance, the concept of the state, democracy, freedom, etc., is undoubtedly concentrated on force as the ultima ratio in legitimizing violence. However, Geuss again argues that every society has its "sense of locatedness." Therefore, it is almost trivial to see society merely based on enforcing the law.

This leads Geuss (2008: 35) to conclude that "The legitimacy mechanisms available in a given society change from one historical period to another."

In reality, I suggest that there is no compelling reason to stick to a single universal form of legitimizing violence, in which to be historically imprinted in every society. Essentially, if we wish to avoid such mistakes, we need to keep in mind that history must be particularly contextualized according to a certain time and place. As a result, history is not universal, as we seem to believe.

BENJAMIN ON HISTORICAL DISCONTINUITY

To obtain a stronger sense of objectivity regarding the progressive nature of history, Benjamin provides us with another alternative historical realism. In his proposal, Benjamin's concept of history emphasizes the discontinuity of history when he describes history as the struggle to preserve the ideal of the past. Furthermore, Benjamin (2007: 254) insists that "only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past." In essence, Benjamin refuses to see history in progressive reading. For Benjamin (2007: 261):

"The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself."

Similarly, Benjamin's concept of history can be viewed as discrete, or according to Trentin (2013: 1030) as a "topological hub in which various temporality co-exist." The striking point of breaking historical continuity will allow the moment of action to interrupt society. Therefore, the true meaning of Benjamin's concept of history is located at a particular point in time, meaning between the present and the past. I am fully aware that this is not the first time Benjamin rejects the progressive linear motion of history. In fact, in his earliest writing, *The Life of Students*, Benjamin (1996: 37) notes this tendency by advocating:

"A particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers."

By applying the concept of historical discontinuity, Benjamin blurred the link between normativity and history. Since Benjamin (2007: 257) appreciates the "state of emergency", thus history can now be interpreted as negative utopian, or the archaic image of prehistory. This turning point will allow us to observe such an anomaly in a historical event without discarding everything from the past. In political reality, therefore, the struggle for making interruption over interruption has haunted the status quo. Another hint at how Benjamin delegitimizes the concept of normativity is by referring to another central idea with the idea of classless society. Here, Benjamin relates the idea of happiness as something that belongs to the past. As Benjamin (2007: 253-254) indicates, "Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us." This summary provides us with Benjamin's imaginative construct about the negative utopian of society: a classless society without domination.

There are some consequences because Benjamin looks at history in discontinuity flow. Firstly, Benjamin stresses the need for action by interrupting society. For Benjamin, the moment of

action is essentially political and connected to the past as a source or motivation in its struggle against domination. Therefore, this reminds us of *kairos*, which Benjamin (2007: 255) pronounces:

"The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again".

Another consequence, Benjamin considers that there is a "secret agreement" between the past and the present. If my understanding is correct, then the past is the background of narrative for the possibility of the present. With this intention, Benjamin considers the past as remembrance, while the present is a redemptive action. The light of this presence also means that present action is a moment for remembering the past. As Pensky (2004: 180) voices, "the 'past' and 'present' are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles."

Next, Benjamin's historical discontinuity can also be interpreted as open history. He not only opens the future for various possibilities based on this action, but he also opens the past through redemption. To make more sense of this point, Loewy (2005: 115) admits:

"It is not just the future and the present that remain open in the Benjaminian interpretation of historical materialism but also the past. In this case, the opening-up of the past and the opening-up of the future are intimately linked."

And finally, I am convinced that Benjamin's historical discontinuity, or historical realism, proposes such pessimism. Since Benjamin mentions that this struggle is to overcome domination, it can be interpreted that society is burdened with the task of redemption. In this sense, Benjamin's negative utopia in a classless society needs a precise moment of action for us to taste the happiness of the past.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the discussion, I have outlined the consequences of history about historical idealism or historical realism. Therefore, let me finish this paper by highlighting three crucial points:

Firstly, it is acceptable to view society in relation to reason, as Hegel perceives it. From this perspective, Hegel favours the unknown future over the past. Yet, I believe it is more appropriate to assume that reason is just one form of the historical development of society. By allowing ourselves to view society differently, we suppose to take that history has many forms, as Geuss suggested. By taking this strategy, in turn, it allows us to describe our complex society in a more comprehensive way.

Secondly, in a certain sense, I have a strong affinity with Benjamin, who proposes the moment of action and the discreteness of history. This view enables us to appreciate the moment of action, which I think can give an advantage to an event over time. Following this line of reasoning, I suggest that the dimension of time between the past, present, and future could also be questioned. It seems that the distinction will be paradoxical with regard to our predictable everyday life or our future world. In our so-called 'post-modern' society, we can 'buy' our future. For instance, the concept of the future has been, slowly but surely, replaced by the concept of

risk (Beck 1992). A further sense here is that the future is structured in advance through the present action: one can think of ecological disasters, healthcare insurance, Gallup polls, and virtual communications to name a few. In this context, the present has become “a broad present” (Gumbrecht 2014) that can absorb the predictable future into the present action. In fact, our fast-paced society has saved our thinking and action time by guaranteeing our present actions. With our obsession with ‘going fast’ and ‘saving time’, the future has lost its unique sense of originality. The future can now be labelled as the “future past”. Likewise, the “past future”, where the past is apparently matched with the predicted future.

As a result, the dimension of the past/present/future may be insufficient to explain our current social reality. Following Reinhart Koselleck’s *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, this viewpoint suggests that past and future are likely modes of possibility.

Koselleck prefers to view historical time based on the quality of experience, temporality, periodization, or the layers of time. Again, it is not too difficult to accept these views if we accept Benjamin’s discreteness of history. However, the price of the acceptance must be paid by the detachment between the event and time. What is highly regarded right now is not “when does it happen”, but “what does happen” or “how did it come to that?” In short, we can say that experience and history both begin with the event.

If my theoretical construction holds so far, and this leads to my final point. I think it would be plausible to see history as a methodological approach. Here I view the concept of history as either continuity or discontinuity. However, the way we experience history is neither with optimism nor pessimism. Since we are not concerned with time, the quality of events has become much more significant in our everyday life. Hence, we can also look at the relentlessness of an event as sequentially continuous or discretely discontinuous. However, the dramatic departure is that the future no longer surprises us because the predictable future is not foreign to us; while the past is no longer to be regretted because we can still reach the recorded past.

All of this happens just because our broad present time is now more expansive because of our present modern innovations and actions. With the cult of speed, ‘slowness’ has simply become the enemy of our present-day lives, but ironically, it could also be our vital panacea for our everyday lives in the future.

REFERENCES

- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London & New York: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2007. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1996. *Selected Writings (Volume 4)*, Howard Finland & Michael W. Jennings (eds.). Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2006. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.



Geuss, Raymond. 2008. *Philosophy and Real History*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. 2014. *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hardimon, Michael O. 1994. *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. 2005. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde. New York: Dover Publications.

Loewy, Micheal. 2005. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. Chris Turner. New York: Verso.

Pensky, Max. 2004. 'Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images', in David S. Ferris (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-198.

Popper, Karl. 1966. *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath (Volume 2)*. London: Routledge.

Stern, Robert. 2006. 'Hegel's Doppelsatz: A Neutral Reading', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44(2): 235-266.

Trentin, Filippo. 2013. 'Organizing Pessimism': Enigmatic Correlations between Walter Benjamin and Pier Paolo Pasolini', *The Modern Language Review* 108(4): 1021-1041.

Ramze Endut
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
MALAYSIA

ramze@ukm.edu.my