

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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Matthew Slaboch's book is a timely response to our disenchanted historical moment—the hung-over morning after the “end of history” (6). In fact, as one plausible way of counting would have it, this is our second morning-after: the Gulag and the Holocaust woke us up after Hegel, and now, after Fukuyama's Hegel-lite version, terrorism, nationalism, and a depressing series of political earthquakes in the West are doing the job. To these two moments correspond two night-before feasts of progress: the first was a nineteenth-century *philosophy* of history and the second was a twentieth-century *political* tale spun out of that earlier act of philosophical braggadocio. These two are nicely reflected in Slaboch's account, which focuses on the nineteenth-century spoilsports—Arthur Schopenhauer, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry Adams in Germany, Russia, and America, respectively—while their twentieth-century successors—Oswald Spengler, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Christopher Lasch—are given a brusquer treatment in a separate chapter. Neatly, the Germans are the philosophers, the Russians are the writers, and the Americans are the historians. The book may be read as a kind of reconciliation with our second hangover, marked by plunging rates of political participation and ever larger cracks in the facade of democratic representation. It may just be, says Slaboch, that nonparticipation (117), for example, may come with its own silver lining. Although Slaboch does not say so explicitly, it is possible to perceive through the detritus of progress new possibilities for a reasonable way of life. But—and here comes the crucial *but*—in order to see that silver lining, we must refuse to collapse reason into politics, that is, to turn the political into *the* vehicle of progress.

If Slaboch's main aim is to show that critics of progress were "not mere defeatists" (4), then he has succeeded. He divides his pessimists into two groups: "critics of politics," who see history as a (somewhat) straight line with no happy end, and "cyclical theorists," who are not averse to political engagement (111). Interestingly, the critics are the heroes of the book while cyclical theorists play more of a background role—Brooks Adams, Oswald Spengler, and Nikolai Danilevsky count among them. The reason for that coincidence remains unclear, but that may not be a drawback; the book after all also aims to speak to "our situation." Slaboch moves comparatively across cultures—three great ones—and along them, from culture, to thinker, then to his heirs (in the case of Schopenhauer, for example, Nietzsche and Buckhardt), allowing the reader to get a sense of different cultural notions of progress and their interrogation by the pessimist or declinist heroes of the book. That these moves—backwards, forwards, and sideways—occur without any jarring effects speaks to the virtuosity of Slaboch's narrative. He is undoubtedly a storyteller: the narrative flows, easy, self-assured, and even playful (cf. 88, 89), making the reading experience pleasant despite the daunting range of the materials.

But there may be such a thing as too much comparative methodological clarity, especially when it comes to philosophical materials. This is more the case when the materials are at their most philosophical, in the first chapter: Schopenhauer with his predecessors and interlocutors. Schopenhauer's polemics against the philosophies of history then in vogue remain unclear. Why exactly was Hegel a mere "scribbler of nonsense" or "common mind" (12)? Or, what is the meaning of key philosophical terms such as "the will" or "metaphysical optimism" (and how does the latter differ from "eudemonistic optimism," 19)? Schopenhauer's candidacy as a crown-critic of progressivism seems an obvious choice, but his apolitical thought makes him less so. If Schopenhauer "held politics in...low regard" (24), then why pick his thoughts on the matter? After all, the lowly things are hardly worthy of engaging one's understanding. No wonder then that Schopenhauer's statements on political things such as popular participation, property rights, and the free press (24) fall rather flat. His mind was elsewhere.

And this elsewhere—philosophy—is sorely missing in the treatment of both Schopenhauer and his context. Slaboch's contextualizing discussion skips a bit too quickly along the surface. We learn, for example, that the nice Kant was not as nice as Herder, because the former was more state-centric and his cosmopolitanism less sincere (14–15). These piecemeal observations,

I suspect, follow from the refusal to grapple with the philosophical core of their thought (in the case of Kant, for example, man's "unsocial sociability"<sup>1</sup> as the irrational heart of progress which raises questions about its meaning and destination that are left untouched in the book). But, if these observations from outside the materials may be unwished for in the case of Kant, they become seriously detrimental in the case of Hegel. Here Slaboch is peculiarly unable to come clean about the sources of his own convictions. To say that Hegel should have perhaps seen "the state as something that limits its individual freedoms, as people often do" (17), or to depict him as a nationalist (16), is to ignore Hegel *tout court*. Hegel's thought had nothing to do with prescriptive philosophy; for him the legitimacy of the given—that is, of modernity and the state—is precisely the problem. But the difference is that, contrary to the American constitutional and the larger Lockean tradition, on which Slaboch often leans, he does not begin from a predetermined notion of freedom which would then allow him to think a state appropriate to that principle—whether "fat," in Schopenhauer's lingo, or lean and mean, in the Founders' variety. I suspect that by ignoring Hegel, Slaboch not only denies himself a powerful tool for understanding the theme of his book—the meaning and end of progress—but he commits the cardinal sin of progressive thought: to understand others not as they understood themselves.

Even if the price becomes less steep, the lightness continues with Schopenhauer's heirs. Is it possible to grapple with Nietzsche's view of progress without consideration of its final product, *Zarathustra's* "last men"? The discussion is not without interest, however. It underlines, strikingly, that the more enthusiastic the Germans' embrace of the philosophical notion of progress grew, the more regressive German politics became; the two, as ever, did not go hand in hand. Surely there is a lesson for us somewhere in there.

But as we ascend from the dark, heavy thoughts of the Teutons to the spirited intellectualism of the Russians, the strengths of Slaboch's narrative skills come more into evidence: at once synthetic and graceful, the narrative starts moving in ever greater harmony with the materials. While there are bones to pick along the way—can we, for example, make sense of Dostoyevsky's faith in "universal brotherhood" (49) without his religiosity?—the story flows pleasantly and productively. The succinct analysis of the unity

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<sup>1</sup> See the Fourth Proposition in "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44–45.

of Tolstoy's fiction through its metaphors and symbolisms is enriched by its placement in the Russian cultural context.

The book then comes completely on its own into the unbounded pessimism of Henry Adams and its American context.<sup>2</sup> The story of Adams's rigorously pessimistic—and hence downright “un-American,” if we may be permitted the McCarthyism—view of his country's singular experiment in democracy flows with analytical and narrative rigor. Not content with the evidence presented to his senses and elaborated in his fiction, Adams turned to history for explanation, running into paradoxes along the way—paradoxes that paralyzed him, but not his brother Brooks. What was it about Adams's first-rate intellect that held him continuously back? Does this paralysis hint at a contradiction in Adams's psyche: here was, perhaps, a philosophic psyche—“a born spectator,” Judith Shklar calls him<sup>3</sup>—committed to the world of action in a Puritan milieu where the good was measured by its use? Be that as it may, the dialogue between Henry and Brooks tells us a great deal about the American version of antiprogressivism.

Moving to the whole of Slaboch's project, there seems to be an originary confusion that underlies what otherwise is a wonderful and in large part well-executed project. Slaboch, it seems to me, conflates the philosophical nature of the idea of the “end of history” with the political thesis that considers it disproven by actual history (6). Perhaps the misunderstanding may be gestured at not by what is in his analysis, but by what has been left out of it. The meaning of the concepts that are present in the book—progress,<sup>4</sup> history, metaphysical optimism/pessimism, etc.—for the authors and for Slaboch himself is only sporadically clarified. Moreover, two concepts are conspicuously absent in this lineup: technology and time. If we are to meaningfully tackle the first two questions of the book on the meaning and end of progress (4), these two concepts almost impose themselves on any answer. And they show the question of progress to be of deeply philosophical import. Technology is decisive in two senses: first, because it brings about the necessarily progressive nature of the contemporary world, and second, because it abolishes the natural limits

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<sup>2</sup> Here too a bit more unpacking may have helped; certainly, the idea of progress was ubiquitous in America (67), but this—be it of the religious Whitfieldian or the political Jeffersonian variety—was radically unlike Hegel's philosophical or the totalitarians' political idea of progress.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Shklar, “*The Education of Henry Adams*, by Henry Adams,” in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 81.

<sup>4</sup> While Slaboch justifies his lack of definition (116), the effort to untangle the philosophical from the political dimensions would have been appropriate to the materials.

of human action while transforming its principle. That is, under its rule the very nature of human life is up for grabs. Its progressivism is therefore qualified in a twofold sense: First, it does not permit an end state; technology is the overcoming of every technologically constituted resting point. Second, and incomprehensibly for us, it abolishes the very engine of progress, that is to say, action (or Kant's "unsocial sociability"). Progressive techno-civilization thus becomes, as Slaboch's title has it, *the* "road to nowhere." Yet, at the same time, technology *is* a sort of destination; an infinite point where, from this side of history, it furnishes the only "authoritative allocation of values" (morals) and, hence, power (politics) for us. As Nietzsche made terrifyingly clear, to that end point belongs a *justice* (of the strong), a *principle* (efficiency), and, accordingly, a *disorder* ("immense" or unlimited wars). It is, therefore, a complete world. Meditating—for thinking through may well be made impossible by our incapacity to grasp the look (*eidos*) of techno-being—on this paradox may well be a precondition for grappling with the question of progress as that question arises for us.

The other missing concept is time. The experience of time is presumed by the problem of progress; whether it is the historically finite and linear time of Christianity or the progressive linear time of the Enlightenment, the experience of time bears directly on the kinds of progress available *in* time. To illustrate: techno-progress, as a reading of Hegel would have it, abolishes time, and with it science and therefore progress.<sup>5</sup> More immediately, however, unpacking the experiences of time of the thinkers in question would strengthen, I suspect, our understanding of the kinds of progress presupposed by each.

With these two gaps in mind, the book skirts around *the* question most important for us: whether we inhabitants of the "new world"<sup>6</sup> are on the way to becoming sages or last men. Slaboch thus domesticates the problem of progress to the point where it becomes unphilosophical and hence manageable. The elegance of this evasion, however, is more than enough cause for admiration.

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<sup>5</sup> See especially chapter 5 of Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 100–149.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sect. 11–12.