Tropes of History: Epic, Farce and Romance in Marx's Philosophy of History

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Summary

What is the relationship between the philosophy of history and literature, and how does this influence our understanding of actual historical events? Are narrative structures imposed *post facto* on historical events in the stories we relate, or are narrative structures part of the very structure of our experience of history? Adopting the hypothesis that historical events only become intelligible when placed within narrative structures, the article sets out to demonstrate the importance of such narrative structures as epic, farce and romance in Marx's philosophy of history.

The central claim of the article is that Marx's philosophy of history presupposes a tripartite narrative structure in terms of which historical events in the modern age are represented in three different stages: initially in terms of *farce*, that is as the inglorious power struggles of the bourgeoisie; then in *terms* of *epic*, a heroic struggle in which the proletariat gradually asserts itself; and finally in terms of *romance*, where the utopian society free from all conflict is founded. A further contention is that Marx's third stage is through and through teleological and eschatological, providing as it does a sense of history's *end*. It is this third stage, moreover, which is at one and the same time both the linchpin which reconciles farce and epic and the most dubious feature of Marx's philosophy of history.

Opsomming

Wat is die verhouding tussen die geskiedenisfilosofie en literatuur, en hoe beïnvloed hierdie verhouding ons kennis van werklike historiese gebeurtenisse? Word verhaalstrukture *post facto* op historiese gebeure geïmponeer in die stories wat ons vertel, of is verhaalstrukture deel van die struktuur van ons geskiedenisbelewing self? Deur die hipotese van dat historiese gebeurtenisse slegs verstaanbaar word binne die konteks van verhaalstrukture aan te neem, poog die artikel om die belang van sulke verhaalstrukture soos epos, klug en romanse in Marx se geskiedenisfilosofie aan te toon.

Die sentrale tese van die artikel is dat Marx se geskiedenisfilosofie 'n driedelige verhaalstruktuur veronderstel in terme waarvan historiese gebeurtenisse in die moderne tyd voorgestel kan word in drie verskillende stadia: eerstens in terme van *klugspel*, dit wil sê as die eerlose magstryde van die bourgeoisie; dan in terme van die *epos*, 'n heroïese stryd waarin die proletariaat homself laat geld, en laastens in terme van *romanse* wanneer die utopiese konflikvrye samelewing tot stand gebring word. 'n Verdere tese is dat Marx se derde stadium deur en deur teleologies en eskatologies is, omdat daarin die *einde* van die geskiedenis projekteer word. Hierdie derde stadium is nie net die kapstok wat klugspel en epos verenig nie, maar ook die mees twyfelagtige aspek van Marx se geskiedenisfilosofie.

> To think objectively . . . of history is the work of the dramatist.
>
> *Friedrich Nietzsche*

> The Marxist conception of history is secular *commedia*.
>
> *George Steiner*

On the opening page of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx remarks that all great historic facts and personages recur twice: first as tragedy, then again as farce. The remarks are intended to create a contrast

between the way we look at, respectively, the 1789 Revolution in France and the concomitant accession to power of Napoleon, and the 1848 Revolution and the subsequent *coup d'état* of Louis Bonaparte. Where Marx held both the Jacobins and Napoleon in some esteem, his attitude towards the February revolutionaries and the "second edition" Bonaparte was one of open contempt. Thus Marx's suggestion that a "cardsharper" was able to trick the French people by "sleight of hand", prepares us for what in effect is a *parodic* treatment of the events which took place in France between 1848 and 1851. But is this the only function of Marx's use of the terms "tragedy" and "farce"? Are they simply *subjective* terms in the sense that they refer only to Marx's *attitude* towards the events and not to the events themselves? Or is there a sense in which they might be regarded as having some *objective* reference?

It is important that we realize exactly what is at stake when we ask this question. For, over and above the *historical* question of determining the aptness of a characterization of the French Revolution as tragic, or a characterization of the turmoil in France in 1848 as farcical, are questions which belong more properly to the *philosophy of history* in general, and to *Marx's* philosophy of history in particular. First, what is the function and relevance of ascribing a narrative structure to a sequence of historical events? Are stories told only after the events themselves have taken place, or are stories lived before they are told? And if it can be shown that historical time is emplotment, how exactly do the "plots" of history differ from one another? For instance, what are the characteristic features of events which are experienced as farcical, and how do they differ from events which are experienced as tragic? Once we have answered these questions we will be in a better position to answer the *exegetical* questions which relate to the meaning of Marx's own texts. The key issue in this regard is to determine the narrative structure presupposed by Marx's philosophy of history. For instance, what role (if any) does tragedy and farce play in Marx's philosophy of history? Are there other narrative structures at play in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and if so, are they discernible elsewhere in Marx's work? Finally, how compatible are these narrative structures with one another?

My line of reasoning with regard to the first set of questions will be to try to show that a historical sequence of events only becomes intelligible in terms of the narrative structures which enable us to order events, both in terms of beginnings, middles and ends, and in terms of relative significance. Narrative should not be regarded as the exclusive domain of poets and dramatists, nor should it be regarded as the imposition of structures on events which in themselves have no narrative structure. Instead of looking at narrative as embellishment, we should regard it fundamental to the coherence of our experience of events. This, I believe, is the reason why Nietzsche said that: "To think objectively . . . of history is the work of a dramatist." To distinguish between events as they are in themselves, and events as they are interpreted, is to rely on the belief that there are facts whose truth-value is not subject to interpretation, a belief which as we shall see is unfounded. Once we accept the centrality of narrative structures in our understanding of history, it may become possible to identify more clearly the nature of historiographical

wrangles which, on the surface, seem unrelated to a study of narrative. Our next task would then be to gain a better understanding of the central characteristics of the narrative structures themselves.

With regard to the second set of questions, the exegetical questions relating to the meaning of Marx's writings, the position is somewhat more complicated. My central contention is that Marx's philosophy of history presupposes a tripartite narrative structure in terms of which historical events in the modern age are represented in three different stages: initially they are represented in terms of *farce*, that is, as inglorious power struggles between different sections of the ruling classes; then in terms of an *epic*, a heroic struggle in which the proletariat gradually asserts itself; and finally in terms of a *romance* which provides a happy ending, a utopian society in which all class conflict disappears.

For many contemporary historians and historiographers the most questionable feature of Marx's philosophy of history is the last stage, for it is here that Marx confidently predicts an end to history where reconciliation between the different classes takes place. It seems to me that many historians sympathetic to both Marx's trenchant critique of capitalist society and his passionate engagement in social struggle, are unable to accept his pronouncements concerning the end of history and the brave new world of a classless society. How crucial, then, is Marx's third stage for his understanding of history? First and foremost, we need to see that the third stage provides Marx with the *teleological* element which enables him not only to retrospectively interpret the movement of history in terms of progress and development, but also to prospectively predict what the outcome of history will be.

Now the teleology implicit in Marx's conception of a classless society bears a close resemblance to the function of an after-life in Christian eschatology. This was the point that Steiner was making when he said that "The Marxist conception of history is secular *commedia*" (Steiner 1961: 343). This implicit reference to Dante's masterpiece should remind us of the importance of a classless society in Marx's work; for, to conceive of capitalist society as a kind of Hell, and the proletarian struggle as a kind of Purgatory, one must *first* have a conception of Paradise, a society free from all conflict. Another writer who has compared Marx's utopian vision with Christian eschatology is Karl Löwith, who claims that it is:

> ... not by chance that the "last" antagonism between the two hostile camps of bourgeoisie and proletariat corresponds to the Jewish-Christian belief in a final fight between Christ and Antichrist in the last epoch of history, that the task of the proletariat corresponds to the world-historical mission of the chosen people, that the redemptive and universal function of the most degraded class is conceived on the religious pattern of Cross and Resurrection, that the ultimate transformation of the realm of necessity into a realm of freedom corresponds to the transformation of the *civitas Terrena* into a *civitas Dei* and that the whole process of history as outlined in the *Communist Manifesto* corresponds to the general scheme of the Jewish-Christian interpretation of history as a providential advance towards a final goal which is meaningful.
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> (Löwith 1949: 44–45)

If Marx's philosophy of history retains a substantial residue of teleology, and if, moreover, that teleology resembles Christian eschatology in certain respects, one might be inclined to ask what his philosophy of history would look like once divested of its belief in history's final end. Or, to phrase the question in terms of the narrative structures that I have suggested: what would Marx's philosophy look like without its reliance on a romantic account of world history? Would other important features of Marx's overall perspective on history suffer as a result of discarding his utopian vision, a vision which Löwith and others seem to regard as a form of secularized scripture? More particularly, what effect would the absence of such a vision have on the coherence of his representation of history in terms of farce and epic? For is it not precisely the romantic structure of Marx's world history which enables us to regard history's farces and epics as temporary stages which will later be transcended, mere stations on the *via dolorosa* whose ultimate end is a qualitatively different kind of life? Furthermore, if we rob Marx's philosophy of history of its state of final repose, don't we run the risk of emasculating both the *radical* nature of his critique, and the *militancy* of his call to action?

That these are not idle questions will immediately be seen if one turns to a historiographical debate which was recently waged in Marxist circles. In an empassioned polemic the English historian Edward Thompson has taken the French philosopher Louis Althusser to task for what he conceives to be a rigid and antihumanist conception of history (Thompson 1978). For our purposes what is significant about this debate is that *both* Thompson and Althusser reject Marx's providential, or romantic historical metanarrative. Althusser is quite explicit on this point when he says that: "History is a process without a *telos* or a subject" (quoted in Jameson 1981: 29). Thompson, writing from a perspective which is more sympathetic towards the efficacy of human agency, is more oblique in his denial of a final end to history when he describes history as "unmastered human practice" (Thompson 1978: 295). The crucial word in Thompson's formulation is "unmastered", since it suggests not only that human subjects are not in *control* of the ends of history, but that they are not even *aware* of those ends.

But if Thompson and Althusser reject the Marxian metanarrative, that does not necessarily mean that their writings do not represent history in the form of other narratives. (Althusser, it is true, would resist any attempt to ascribe an underlying narrative to his representation of historical events, but that is not reason enough to respect his wishes.) I would like to argue that Thompson's understanding of history, especially as it appears in his account of the origins of the English working class, (see Thompson 1963) is guided by an epic vision. In its massive scale, its heroic representation of the working class, its singular and unclouded moral perspective, Thompson's work features many of the more salient characteristics of the epic. Furthermore, I would contend that Althusser's account of how the "subjects" of history are hailed or "interpellated" possesses characteristics which are strongly reminiscent of farce. Exploiting an ambiguity in the concept of a "subject", Althusser emphasizes the passivity of human beings and their receptiveness to structural manipulation. It is this feature of Althusserian Marxism, a feature

in terms of which human beings are treated as "puppets" whose movements can be predicted, that provokes a description of his conception of history as a "farce". What I am suggesting, then, is that when we come to compare the whole range of issues on which Thompson and Althusser differ, issues such as Thompson's "voluntarism" and Althusser's "structural determination", we should not look upon these as discrete issues, but rather, locate them within the context of opposing narrative structures.

But if Althusser's account of history's farce is at odds with the heroic struggles recounted by Thompson, how are we to account for my own claim that Marx's work incorporates *both* farce and epic? If history has shown man to be a suffering, finite being, shackled by need and submissive to structural powers which he does not even understand, let alone control, how can history also depict man as a Promethean *homo economicus*, struggling to assert his freedom by gaining control of the means of production? Surely the "farcical" view of history rules out the "epic" view of history, and vice-versa? Or is this double image of man internally coherent?

In presiding over the debate between Althusser and Thompson, Perry Anderson has pointed out certain shortcomings in both writers' interpretations of Marx, and in so doing has suggested how this paradox might be resolved. Pointing out that both Althusser's typification of history as a "process without a subject" and Thompson's account of history as "unmastered human practice" presuppose an undifferentiated conception of history, he suggests that their "axiomatics", as he puts it, are themselves unhistorical. In effect, then, what Anderson is criticizing is a tendency on the part of both writers to describe *different* periods of history in terms of a *single* category. In other words, Althusserian farce and Thompsonian epic should be identified with qualitatively different stages in the historical process, rather than with the historical process as such. He sums up his argument as follows:

> Althusser's unilateral and remorseless stress on the overpowering weight of structural necessity in history corresponds more faithfully to the central tenets of historical materialism, and to the actual lessons of the scientific study of the past – but at the price of obscuring the novelty of the modern labour movement and attenuating the vocation of revolutionary socialism. Thompson's passionate sense of the potential of human agency to shape collective conditions of life, on the other hand, is much closer to the political temper of Marx and Engels themselves in their own time – but tends to be projected backwards as a uniform weft of the past, in defiance of the millenial negations of self-determination in the kingdom of necessity. Strangely, of the two unbalanced sets of generalizations, Althusser's inclines better towards history, Thompson's towards politics. The classical equipoise of the founders of historical materialism is some distance from both.
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> (Anderson 1980: 58)

From an orthodox Marxian perspective, this seems to me fair criticism. Yet it is precisely its "orthodoxy" which troubles me. When Anderson refers to the "classical equipoise" of Marx and Engels, he is suggesting that the contestatory interpretations of the historical process that one finds in Althusser and

Thompson are in fact reconcilable when contextualized as *moments* in a historical process which moves from the "kingdom of necessity" to the "kingdom of freedom". Thus Althusser's farce is applicable to the past where the "kingdom of necessity" held sway; while Thompson's epic perspective is better suited to the politics of the present where the inevitability of the kingdom of freedom presents itself on the horizon. Teleology has returned with a vengeance – in the form of an immanent human striving for emancipation! What I am suggesting, then, is that the only way that Anderson is able to claim "classical equipoise" for Marx's philosophy of history, is by retaining perhaps the most dubious feature of that philosophy, namely its utopian teleology. For it is Marx's *guarantee* that history is on the side of the oppressed, and his insistence that the eventual outcome of class struggle will *inevitably* be a harmonious social polity, that enables him to integrate the double image of man as both the victim and agent of history. By setting out an account of man as he *will* be when he achieves his *telos*, Marx gives the communist both the tools to criticize the unregenerate man who resists that *telos*, and the courage to fight him. And it would be foolish to suppose that those tools would remain as sharp, and the courage as indomitable were the certainty of the outcome placed in doubt. And it is precisely the function of Marx's utopian romance to place that outcome beyond all doubt. Despite the millenia of class conflict and oppression, there *will* be a reconciliation of all classes. And this will not take place at some distant point in the future: we are already living in the fullness of time, and the secular paradise is within our reach. Or, so we are made to believe, when we take Marx's romance seriously.

But what if there is no happy ending? Suppose that the utopia that Marx envisaged is nowhere in sight, and that the social conflict which he regarded as capable of resolution were a permanent feature of the historical landscape. Suppose moreover, that there were no "universal class" and that the perspective from which we adjudicate conflict is never disinterested, but always immersed in the muddy waters of prejudice and sectarian interest. Would such an outlook undermine Marx's critique of social relations in a capitalist society and his programme for revolutionary change? To ask such questions is to ask whether Marx's exposé of the bourgeois *Vanity Fair* and his call to arms is compatible with a *tragic* perspective on life. For it is in terms of the tragic *Weltanschauung* that conflict is viewed as an irreducible feature of the world we live in. The real contrast here, then, is the contrast between tragedy and utopian romance, for it would seem that the kind of redemption promised by utopian thinking is impossible in tragedy. Why is this so?

George Steiner in his *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) reminds us of the fact that Lunacharsky, the first Soviet commissar of education openly declared tragic drama to be illicit in terms of the ideals of communist society, and that Stalin demanded that all plays should have a happy ending. But even if we discount the gross distortions of communist ideals in the Stalinist era, it is difficult to escape the impression that tragedy is fundamentally at odds with historical materialism. There are at least two reasons for this, the one *existential* and the other *rational*. Existentially, there is no room in the

communist world-view for the vindication of despair. In this respect the Marxian vision closely resembles the Christian. It is not that Marx in any way denies or underplays the "slaughterbench of history", it is rather that he denies that even the most hideous disasters, the worst setbacks, should provide sufficient grounds for despair. Rationally, Marx's viewpoint finds itself at odds with the blind necessity that was so much a feature of Greek tragedy. This is because for Marx necessity can only be blind when it is not understood; and theoretically, it can always be understood.

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