

Terror and the Progress of History

by [Waller Newell](#) (July 2024)



The Storming of the Bastille by Jean-Pierre Houël (1789)

For those familiar with the history of revolutionary violence, the atrocities committed by Hamas against Israelis on October 7 of last year were appalling but not surprising or unprecedented. The fiendish depravity of the violence and torture recalled, down to specific detail, the Soviet Gulag, the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* and death camps, and the Khmer Rouge. Like those predecessors, Hamas describes itself as a revolutionary movement. The question therefore arises as to

what extent the ideology of these movements and their genocidal agenda is connected to developments in modern thought. The connection is very clear right on the face of it. The Bolsheviks claimed to be acting on behalf of Marxism. The Nazis invoked Nietzsche's call for a new master race of Supermen. Jihadist revolutionary ideology has roots in the third world socialist thought of Frantz Fanon by way of Ali Shariati, which in turn tracks back to Martin Heidegger. In this essay, I want to explore these ideological roots beginning with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and extending through the writings of G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, including their ramifications for political extremism down to the present.

I will conduct this exploration under four headings:

Why have modern thinkers beginning with Rousseau not been content with modern constitutional liberalism?

The longing of modern thinkers including Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger for the ancient Greek polis as a model for restoring a sense of community to modern life and curbing what they saw as its excessive emphasis on individualism and materialism. But, because the way back to the ancient cosmologies of the eternal order of the whole was blocked by what all agreed was the victory of modern natural science over ancient natural science, a new source of unity between self and other and man and the cosmos had to be found—the progress of history.

In each of the thinkers I am focusing on here, with respect to their view of the progress of history, the version of the *polis* for which they long varies with the vision they have of the future. In other words, as the debate between Hegel and his successors Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger over the meaning of the progress of history unfolds, we find that their respective visions of the ancient world act as a fulcrum for their critique of the modern bourgeois present and that their

expectations for the future also change in very profound ways.

My fourth rubric is to discuss whether and to what extent their thinking and its influence promoted extremist tendencies—in other words, to what extent could Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger be held accountable for contributing to the atmosphere in which these totalitarian movements emerged, visions of a collectivist utopia beginning with the Jacobins and including Bolshevism, National Socialism, the Khmer Rouge and Hamas?

The following discussion will be drawn from the analysis in my book *Tyranny and Revolution: Rousseau to Heidegger*, the third in a trilogy of books I have written for Cambridge University Press. The first book—*Tyranny: A New Interpretation*—was a scholarly work about the contrast between ancient and modern tyranny, focusing mainly on Plato and Machiavelli, while crouching up to the edge of modern totalitarianism but not really fully embracing that theme.

The second book—*Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice and Terror*—was intended for a general audience as opposed to academic specialists, and it was about the history of tyranny from ancient times to the present—including modern totalitarian regimes like the Nazis, the Bolsheviks, the Khmer Rouge and ISIS. The current book is an attempt to return to that totalitarian variant of tyranny—what I call millenarian tyranny—and try to explore it on somewhat more theoretical grounds, as I had done earlier with ancient versus modern tyranny, rather than for a general readership alone. The book is a series of interlinked essays on Rousseau, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger. As mentioned at the outset, I have four basic rubrics I would like to employ as an overview of what I was trying to do in the book, and I will now take them up one by one in detail.

All The Best People Hate Liberalism

The first is: Why hasn't everyone been satisfied with liberalism? By liberalism, I mean modern constitutional representative self-government, entailing the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, the securing of individual liberty and the promotion of economic prosperity. Indeed, as regards this latter feature, we can say that classical Lockean liberalism establishes the equality of opportunity for the earned *inequality* of result. Success in that competition furnishes us with the economic wherewithal to pursue whatever pastimes enrich us the most as long as they do not harm others. This liberation of individual economic competition was not incompatible with the state assuming a public role in establishing a level playing field so that no one would be disadvantaged in the competition to get ahead economically in life through poverty or lack of a privileged background.

It is no exaggeration to say that this combination of a constitutional self-governing regime with the encouragement of individual economic self-enrichment has, in the course of four centuries, created the most successful economies in Western history with widespread wealth and the leisure for the personal pastimes of one's choosing. So again we must ask: Why has that not been enough for some people? Why are some people attracted by revolutionary movements bent on destroying this system and replacing it with a totalitarian collective in which the individual is submerged in the whole, while private property and individual liberties are abolished?

This attraction, this revolutionary temptation, it should be stressed, emerged almost as soon as had liberalism itself, indeed was its crib-mate. Barely had liberalism gotten off the ground with Locke and the Glorious Revolution in England than in 1750 Rousseau raised the great cry of fury, scorn and contempt for what he calls the "bourgeois" world, a monstrous deformation of human character that was being created by the

Enlightenment and which represented a rejection of all previous traditions of nobility, patriotism and virtue. Rousseau's disdain for the bourgeois way of life—for classical liberalism—was the first installment in a long succession of European thinkers who shared the view that modernity was degrading the human soul, including the Marquis de Rivarol, Burke, Schiller, Marx and Nietzsche (whose nightmare scenario of the Last Man re-evokes Rousseau's detestation for the modern bourgeois) and Heidegger. Indeed, since 1750 it might be said that all the best people hated liberalism.

The Longing for the Ancient Polis

That brings me to my second main rubric: the longing for the ancient Greek *polis*. It is characteristic of most of the thinkers I discuss that they have a kind of longing for the communal societies of ancient Greece and are searching for a way of restoring what they see as its nobility, patriotism, its encouragement of self-sacrifice, and its discouragement of materialism—a paradigm for political life diametrically opposed to the bourgeois materialism and venality of the present. How, they wanted to know, could that ancient emphasis on placing the good of the community ahead of the good of the individual be restored in some measure in the contemporary world?

But here they encountered what appeared to be an insuperable road-block to this dream of restoring the heritage of the ancients and its prospects for ennobling modern politics. For it was agreed by all that the triumph of modern physics—the Baconian and Newtonian physics of matter in motion—had blocked the way back to a direct recovery of the society of the *polis* and its values. Why? Because ancient Greek morality and political practice had been derived from a view of the cosmos as eternally rational, orderly and beneficent in which human beings found their place. Plato, for example, argued that a

just society, in which the good of the whole took precedence over the good of the individual, derived from his metaphysics of the Idea of the Good. It was universally held that those cosmologies of eternal rationality had been completely refuted and overturned by the new physics, which posited that nothing in the world was eternal, that all was ceaseless change and motion. Bacon derided the belief in metaphysical concepts such as the Idea of the Good as “idols of the mind,” mere superstition based on a lack of rigorous empirical knowledge of nature.

The ancients believed that we should live within nature, that nature provides us with our *telos*—with our end and purpose. Therefore, we can never presume to step outside of nature and master it so as to wrest power and wealth from it to serve selfish human purposes. But that is precisely what the modern project had done—going back to Machiavelli, built upon by Bacon, and developed further by Hobbes, whose entire political teaching of a social contract based on individual self-interest was based on the validity of the new physics of matter in motion.

How to get around that impasse? The genius of the philosophy of freedom—or German Idealism—is that it finds a new source for the unity in human life between man and nature and man and man that had once been the domain of classical philosophy and cosmology. That new source of unity is *the progress of history*. This is the core of my argument in *Tyranny and Revolution*.

Beginning with Hegel, we must now look to the progress of history for an objective grounding for human aspirations to virtue and fulfillment. In other words, beginning with Hegel, history and the notion that history is progressive and benevolent provides us with the *telos* that, according to the ancients, we received from the objective order of the cosmos. The classical account of the soul’s teleological fulfillment under the aspect of eternity is replaced by the teleological

progress of history.

According to Hegel, historical progress is gradual and cumulative. A new step forward for mankind in the pursuit of freedom is conditioned and mediated by the previous stage. In this way, Hegel argued, the concept of the teleological progress of history introduces an element of moderation into historical action and discourages extravagant political longings for freedom overnight. It was Rousseau who, in a way, showed Hegel the path toward the progress of history as somehow providing this new grounding for human aspiration because it was Rousseau who provided the first genealogy of the evolution of civilization out of the lost golden age of the state of nature. This was an important clue for Hegel about how our inability to return in every way to the classical vision of the world could be ameliorated by a new understanding of history itself as giving us the path forward. However, Hegel completely reversed Rousseau's orientation: in his view, the evolution of civilization culminated *in* the golden age of the present, the "end of history." Hence whereas Rousseau introduced an impossible contradiction between human happiness in the long-ago state of nature and present-day political authority, sparking revolution, for Hegel the progress of history reconciles us to the modern liberal nation-state.

In promulgating this view, Hegel was very much concerned to blunt a repetition of the disastrous pursuit of overnight collective freedom thought to be called for by Rousseau that had plunged the French Revolution into the Terror of 1793, when any class standing in the way of the pure overnight collectivization of mankind had to be exterminated. Hegel was also very much on the side of modern constitutional liberalism and believed that this was the proper outcome of all previous historical transformations and struggles. He was the friend of liberalism in a way that had not been true of Rousseau and would not be true of his successors Marx, Nietzsche and

Heidegger. It has been said of Hegel that if you take away his ontological speculations about the dialectic of Spirit, his pragmatic political teaching is not very much unlike that of say Burke, John Stewart Mill, or Tocqueville. Hegel was a moderate progressive for his era. This is why we should not look at Hegel through the leftist lens of Marx and Kojève. That is not the true Hegel, who in my view was a conservative thinker without a revolutionary political project. His main interest was in human fulfillment through education and culture.

Different Visions of the Ancients, Different Visions of the Future

My third point is that in each of the thinkers I focus on with respect to their view of historical progress, the version of the *polis* for which they long varies with the vision they have of the future. In other words, as the debate between Hegel and his successors Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger unfolds, we find that their vision of the ancient world acts as a fulcrum for their critique of the modern bourgeois present and their expectations for the future. My conceptual approach to the Philosophy of Freedom and German Idealism is indebted to my teacher Emil Fackenheim. In his view, the Hegelian Middle (as he calls it) was assailed ferociously from both the Left via Marxism and from the Right via Nietzsche and Heidegger. That is also how I see the dynamic unfolding. As the assault on the Hegelian Middle unfolds from the left and the right, the version of antiquity that is invoked also changes in tandem with the different visions of the future that Hegel's successors entertain, and those visions of the future become ever more radical.

We begin with Hegel. The version of ancient Greece that Hegel most admired was that of Periclean Athens, which he called "aesthetic democracy." The thinker that he most admired from

that era was Plato. When Hegel searches for the ancient Greece that he loves, he finds in Periclean Athens a beautiful balance of political participation, civic culture, philosophy and art.

Hegel's leaning toward Periclean Athens makes sense because he has a moderate vision of the modern present in which, in his view, we can combine the best of the ancients such as their sense of communality with certain important hallmarks of modernity such as autonomy and individual liberty.

At this point, I hasten to add that not everyone in my list of thinkers cared very much at all for the ancient *polis*. That was certainly true of Kant, who had no respect whatsoever for Platonic or Aristotelian moral philosophy. He particularly disliked the whole Platonic and Stoic notion of "perfectionism" as a balance and harmony of mind and desire in which the affects were governed by the intellect, describing it as a "disgusting" jumble of theory tainted by psychological observations. The pure will to freedom that was, for Kant, the basis for morality had to be purged of all such ancient notions of happiness through the soul's psychological harmony. Marx similarly could not have cared less about the ancient *polis* and how it might be recovered because it was at bottom a slave society. Athens might have fancied itself a democracy but in reality it was an oppressive order of masters and slaves. Although it is true that Marx was partial to ancient materialism (understandable because he regards socialism as a sensuous lived experience and not an abstract Kantian ideal), ancient materialism itself was rather resolutely apolitical, and so it remains the case that Marx does not share any romantic nostalgia for the communality of the ancient *polis*.

Now to Nietzsche and Heidegger, who believed fundamentally that Hegel's dialectic of Spirit had robbed human beings of their freedom to define themselves and the future; that it was an iron cage of determinism which imprisoned people and stifled future visions and creativity. Because they rejected

Hegel's moderate version of modernity, they also rejected his fondness for the Periclean era and the classical age. Precisely because they envisioned a coming revolution that would be markedly violent and extravagant in its utopian expectations, they embraced the philosophy of the pre-Socratics. They embraced Heraclitus' famous maxim that *physis is polemos*: nature, or the world, is war and strife, and put this cosmological anarchy together with a love of daring Homeric heroism. The works of Nietzsche and Heidegger are redolent with this preference for the pre-Socratics and Homer and their complete rejection of Platonic metaphysics and classical thought in general. In fact, as Heidegger's work unfolds, he actually argues that the greatest threat to human authenticity in today's world, meaning to say global technology, is not a modern project at all but actually *originates* in Platonic metaphysics. Plato's metaphysics are already the incipient launching of global technology, or, as Heidegger puts it, Platonic metaphysics are now 'working themselves out' as global technology—one of his bolder claims.

In sum, I think what characterizes these post-Hegelian visions of the new world to come is that they bear virtually no resemblance to what we are now, and this again in marked contrast with Hegel. For Hegel, mankind is already edging into what he calls the end of history—meaning to say the fulfillment of history—and it is not going to be a terribly radical departure from what we have already experienced. He argues that this process of fulfillment, and a new sense of religiosity and harmony, has already been making its appearance felt. It took the shock or birth pangs of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars to bring about this final gestation. Now it is just on the horizon and we are already most of the way there, even if we do not yet realize it.

In radical contrast, for both Nietzsche and Heidegger, what we are today is almost entirely unsalvageable and the future

world to come will bear almost no resemblance whatsoever to the bourgeois epoch of the present-day nation-state. The new age will be literally a night and day difference, like being reborn as completely different beings and, in my view, this is true of Marx as well. This is why I use the term millenarian revolution to describe these post-Hegelian movements—they have an apocalyptic fervor. The attacks on the Hegelian Middle from the left and the right demolish Hegel's attempt to strike a bargain with liberalism synthesizing the communal and the individualistic. In my view, Hegel thought of himself as liberalism's best friend because he brought to its assistance a richer and deeper understanding of human psychology that in his view liberalism itself did not possess. He is arguing that if we understand the deeper recesses of human psychology, ultimately liberalism itself will have a safer and sounder grounding and will be able to anticipate and perhaps fend off these more antinomian tendencies. For Nietzsche and Heidegger, by contrast, the bourgeois epoch must go up in flames.

Here I want to enter a qualification about Hegel, whom I have described as a moderate hewing to a version of the end of history that is in most respects perfectly friendly to bourgeois liberalism. For Hegel does pose a role for terror in the progress of history, because he argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that Europe had to pass through this terrible period of the Jacobin Terror and the Napoleonic Wars before the final gestation could take place by which we would emerge into the sunny uplands of a new era of spiritual and religious fulfillment. Hegel did not believe that the violence of that period would have to be repeated. He did not believe in permanent revolution, as Trotsky would put it. He says quite clearly that terrible as that interlude was, we will not have to go through it again. This inevitably raises the issue of modern genocide such as the Holocaust, and it prompted Emil Fackenheim to ask the question: If Hegel were alive today would he himself be a Hegelian? Because it is one thing to say that the Jacobin Terror and Napoleonic wars resulted in

terrible death and destruction but yielded the end of history, and so constituted an acceptable price that would not have to be paid again.

But can anybody really say that, as terrible as the Holocaust had been, it was the final necessary stage to bring us to this sunnier future? I think Fackenheim quite rightly surmised that even Hegel might have quailed at drawing that conclusion. Moreover, since the Holocaust we have witnessed many other examples of this dialectic of historical progress fueled by terror.

In contrast with Hegel, with Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger we enter a series of successive revolutionary dyads or apocalyptic Either/Others. Hegel had argued that all of mankind was on the verge of reenacting the ascent up the Divided Line (Plato's famous image of transcendence) into the spiritual daylight of the Image of the Cave; that we were all going to complete that ascent and bring to consciousness those moral and spiritual energies that had been accumulated over the eons. But Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger posit, on the contrary, that a race or class enemy stands in the way of future bliss for everyone, and that race or class enemy must be annihilated before the true blessings of the new world can come into existence—what the Nazis called “the National Socialist world blessing.” The origins reach back to the French Revolution, which after it departs from its comparatively moderate Girondiste phase and the Jacobins take over, poses a stark opposition between the revolution versus the aristocracy and the Church, which must be obliterated before the republic of virtue can finally come into being. During the Jacobin Terror, as many as a quarter of a million people in France were methodically liquidated, mowed into pits by cannon fire—a kind of early installment of what was later called industrialized mass murder.

For Marx, the dyadic opposition is between proletarians and bourgeoisie—socialism cannot unfold until the bourgeoisie is

eliminated as a political force. There is a long-standing debate as to what extent Marx viewed the transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat as an intensely violent and lengthy process or comparatively brief and limited. On some readings of Marx, it is as if most of the transition to socialism takes place under the sway of late capitalism itself, followed by only a brief transition to proletarian dictatorship because the bourgeois world has almost crumbled already from within. But on other readings of Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat as the transition phase to socialism will be a very lengthy process, and the violence entailed by the suppression of the bourgeoisie is not only a means to an end but actually cathartic for the personality of the new socialist man. The experience of inflicting revolutionary violence is something that has to be gone through before the new world can be begin. In my view, Marx did not have a consistent view of the transition to socialism. Sometimes he is an evolutionist, sometimes he is a radical revolutionist. At the end of his life, when he was written to by a Russian radical who asked him whether Russia could proceed straight to Communism after overthrowing the Tsar and skip the bourgeois stage of history, Marx, having maintained for decades that it would be unthinkable for socialism to unfold without having secured the productive apparatus of capitalism, suddenly reversed himself and in effect says: "Yes, go ahead, give revolution a whirl and see what happens." In this way, he writes the script for Lenin not all that long before the Bolshevik Revolution took place, not a proletarian uprising but a violent *coup d'etat*.

In Nietzsche's thought we find another dyad, the struggle between the herd morality of the Last Man and the emerging Superman, leading to (Nietzsche predicts) a planetary clash in the 20th century. While Nietzsche hopes that the Superman will triumph, he cannot be certain. In my view, Nietzsche meant what he wrote quite literally in his posthumous work *The Will to Power* that this planetary struggle might entail the loss of

millions of lives, providing a spiritual test for an emerging new global ruling caste proving that they could carry out such terrible tasks and yet not succumb to bourgeois or Christian compassion. Indeed, some of these aphorisms in the *Will to Power* could almost be from the Himmler's Posen speech celebrating the Holocaust. While some question that work's provenance on the assumption that Nietzsche had suffered a nervous breakdown, in my view it is a completely valid part of Nietzsche's corpus. Moreover, one can find passages just as disturbing in Nietzsche's earlier works, such as calling for the elimination of the unfit.

Finally, with Heidegger's writings in the 1930s, we encounter a struggle between *das Volk*—the authentically rooted German people—and global technology, which as he says in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* is squeezing the German people from both sides like pincers spearheaded by the technological superpowers America and Russia. It is up to the German people to respond to this overwhelming danger. They will either succumb to global technology themselves, becoming like America and Russia, or they will wrest from within the energy to recommit themselves to their unique German destiny. Later on he has a rather different vision that pretty much abandons hope in any form of the traditional nation state as the solution to this challenge, I think mainly because Germany lost the war.

The Extremist Political Implications of The Philosophy of Freedom

That brings me to my fourth and final rubric, which is to discuss whether and to what extent the thinkers under discussion and their influence promoted extremist political tendencies.

In other words, to what extent could Marx, Nietzsche and

Heidegger be held accountable for contributing to the atmosphere in which these totalitarian movements emerged? It is a nuanced question and the answer to it is not the same in each case.

I have already suggested why I think a good case could be made that the totalitarian implications of Soviet communism are already inherent in Marx's own thought. Soviet communism was not just a good idea badly implemented. It was always a bad idea because Marxism itself was laden with these totalitarian and technocratic dynamics.

What about Nietzsche? Could his thinking have encouraged an atmosphere in which fascism could emerge? In my view, without question. His rhetoric is inflammatory and extravagant, redolent with so many summons to violent action. It is impossible to maintain that they were meant only rhetorically; that his extolling of a master race was restricted to an inner struggle for self-mastery. This is an attempt to defang Nietzsche and exculpate him from the stigma of fascism. However, can we *know* that he would have embraced Nazism specifically? Not necessarily. But can we insist that he would *never* have been attracted to any of these totalitarian worldviews? For all the reasons mentioned earlier when referring to the *Will of Power*, I do not think so.

In the case of Martin Heidegger, there is good deal less ambiguity. He was a committed Nazi. He was not a politically naive head-in-the-clouds intellectual who lost his way. It was not because his wife was a social climber who wanted to be in Nazi high society. If you read Heidegger, it is plain that he had a deep and penetrating understanding of a certain version of National Socialism to which he was deeply drawn.

This brings us full circle to the atrocities of October 7 committed by the revolutionary movement Hamas with which I began. There are two struggles of self-governing societies against tyranny unfolding today that are directly seeded by

the extremist themes in European historical philosophy we have explored here: Ukraine's struggle to defend itself against Putin, and Israel's struggle to defend itself against Hamas, the proxy of Iran.

Heidegger's *Volkish* fascism of the 1930's has been adapted by Putin's ideological guru Aleksander Dugin, who derives his own vision of a reunited Russian Slavic empire from Heidegger's understanding of Germany as the salvational people of the world, transferring that historical role to Russia. As regards the Iranian Revolution and Hamas, you can trace a lineage from Frantz Fanon's ideology of third world socialism, heavily dependent on Heidegger's writings, to Ali Shariati, who was thoroughly versed in Heidegger's collectivist existentialism and was backed by the Ayatollah Khomeini in his call for a synthesis of Marxist and Shia revolutionary millenarianism. Given this pedigree linking the Iranian Revolution and Hamas with continental European political extremism, it is hardly surprising that the current Ayatollah recently sent U.S. students congratulations for being on "the right side of history" in supporting Hamas and an American intifada.

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