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Final Paper 2

**Concept of History in Marx, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida**

By examining a topic in a historical context, an author implies that the concept of discussion is dynamic and constantly evolving, that there has never been a “normal” or “natural” state. Whenever a concept is historicized, it allows the individual to draw into question the role it has in their life. Instead of explaining paradigms with “the way things are”, they are explained with series of interlocking causes and effects. Marx, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida all use historical analyses to call the concepts they discuss into question. Marx in “The German Ideology” looks at the evolution of social, economic, and political structures including hunter/gatherers, ancient communes, feudal states, and modern industrial societies and examines how these evolutions are intertwined. Habermas in “Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” writes about the development of social spheres, how they influenced writers and artists in European countries and how the Bourgeois social sphere eventually evolved into mass media and the welfare state. Foucault in the “The Perverse Implantation” chapter of “The History of Sexuality” writes how discourse on different types of non-marital sexuality has proliferated the practice of these acts. While each of these readings serves the purpose of causing the reader to reevaluate what they previously considered constant, each author brings to light different questions as a result of the history they give, has different explanations for and ideas about progress, and in general has different ideas on the concept of temporality.

While each author gives explanations for the events that influence the developments of the histories they describe, the extent which the authors believe these events were inevitable differs. Marx clearly believes that social and economic development happens in a structured and inevitable fashion, which is apparent by the way he dictates his history. Instead of describing the historical evolution of societies on earth using past events, he instead provides a structure of development that according to him all developing civilizations follow. For the most part, Marx provides a cause and effect analysis for every historical development, making his system a logical and inevitable progression. For example, Marx is careful not to call the ideas of one particular group “wrong” and does not call for a revolution, but instead writes that because of the social developments over thousands of years, revolution is inevitable. He believes the ruling class, in governing a large body of people, must dictate universality, which will clash with the non-ruling class, because there so many divisions of labor that no universal ideas can satisfy the needs of every division.

The other three authors confine their historical analysis primarily to approximately the 17th century to present. Foucault justifies the expansion of discourse on non-marital sexuality not through a chain of interwoven social, economic, and political conditions such as Marx does, but solely through human nature. He establishes a strong bond between power, discourse, and knowledge through his writing. Knowledge is not sought without a reason, so the desire to understand, scrutinize, and classify sexuality is based on a strong will of the individual to possess a greater understanding on the subject. He also uses pleasure through power as a motive for increasing scrutiny on sexuality, which is done both through medical observation to help a patient increase pleasure, and because drawing sexual habits into focus proliferates them. Derrida limits his historical analysis to the past 200 years, in which he believes there has been a profound change in the treatment of animals. By the tone of his writing, Derrida does not consider the way treatment of animals has evolved to be inevitable, but on the contrary highly unnatural. While the explanation for this development can be primarily attributed to industrialization, the primary focus of Derrida’s work is not why the change occurred, but emphasis that today’s treatment of animals is not natural and is much different than it was in the past. Habermas offers a different approach than the other authors in that he gives not just an overall history, but regional histories on how social spheres have developed in the countries he examines. The fact that these histories are given by country seems to suggest Habermas doesn’t believe these social spheres emerged in an inevitable manner, but in a way unique to the social conditions of each country. The later developments of the social sphere are much larger in scale, as Habermas describes how mass media has replaced these borgeois social spheres. Habermas attributes this shift to the rise of the welfare state, industrialization, and consumer capitalism.

The histories that the last three authors describe are all heavily influenced by the social, economic, and political changes that Marx describes. Both Derrida and Habermas attribute significant shifts occurring due to industrialization. While Foucault does not do this and instead believes increased dialogue is due to human nature, it must be asked why these extensive changes occurred in the last 200 years and not earlier. There are very clear parallels between the rate of development between all four writings to overlook the time frame in Foucault. One possible reason for the increased dialogue on sexuality and increased acceptance of “perverse” non-marital acts could be due to the history Habermas describes. The development of mass media could potentially allow this sexual knowledge to be proliferated easier and in response create greater acceptance and knowledge of non-marital sexuality. While this possible reason does not directly relate Marx’s history to Foucault’s, they are indirectly tied together through the history of the social sphere which Habermas gives. While Derrida, Habermas, and Foucault do not explicitly state that the history they give follows an inevitable form, a scholar such as Marx would believe that all these histories are indeed inevitable, as they are heavily influenced by the developments that he describes. Therefore, if one is to believe in an inevitable form of development for social, economic, and political structures, they must also believe that all other human developments such as sexuality, social spheres and media, and treatment of animals also follow inevitable paths of development because they are so highly dependent on these social and economic changes.

Each of these readings forces the reader to reconsider what they have considered constant, and also bring up additional unique questions. “German Ideology” is important because of how easy it is to use the ideas of being “right” or “wrong” or also “good” or “bad” in reference to politics. Marx does not define his progression of different social structures as a progression from bad to good, nor basic to more advanced. This raises the question of whether there is one social/economic system which is universally right, or instead a variety of different systems which work best depending on countless other circumstances of the society. Marx also suggests, without explicitly taking a particular side, that conflict between the ruling and non-ruling class, whether that be the serf and noble in feudalism or the government and working class in modern society, is inevitable. This suggests not two wrong or right sides, but instead two sets of very different lives and very different interests. As divisions of labor increase according to Marx, this seems to suggest that the gap of disagreement between ruling and working, as well as between individual divisions of labor, will only continue to increase, contributing to the inevitability of revolution. Such a gap can be observed even in the United States as politics have become rapidly polarized in recent years. Marx shows how historically, gaps between classes and divisions increase with time, and this brings up an issue that must be addressed.

Derrida, in giving a history of animal treatment, brings up an issue that is often not consciously thought about though it is a daily part of our lives. Although hunting of animals has occured for thousands of years and animals naturally kill and eat each other in the wild, the treatments of animals as products and industry both for food and testing has only come about in the last 200 years. Because we see and eat packaged food every day, it is easy to overlook the process behind it, or to consider if our treatment of animals is logical. In giving the history of animal treatment, Derrida raises questions such as why some animals are acceptable to kill/eat and others aren’t, which cannot simply be answered with “Because it is the way things have always been”. By providing a history, Derrida shows that the standards of treatment of animals will continue to change in the future. Certain animals that previously were not may become acceptable to kill, eat, or test on, or the progression may be reversed and treatment and institutional raising and killing of animals may be reduced. Either way, those who understand the full history of animal treatment will be able to evaluate any future changes without solely considering the present circumstances.

Foucault’s passage “The Perverse Implantation” is particularly interesting because it not just discusses how sexuality has evolved, but how the processes of discussing, observing, and classifying it have all evolved. By choosing to write on the evolution of a nature of a discourse, rather than on the actual content itself, Foucault forces the reader to not just consider how a particular history of a concept has evolved, but the circumstances for obtaining knowledge evolve as well. Even the idea of Foucault writing a book on sexuality and having it be discussed and written about in an academic environment is something that could not have happened in the past, due to the nature of the discourse on sexuality at the time. This shows that there could be plenty of potential subjects that are not being studied in depth right now, whether that be that they are not deemed relevant or too taboo. Acknowledging this will allow more open minded thought when new fields of academic discussion arise. Another reason “The Perverse Implantation” is important is due to how strong the opinions of some people are on issues of sexual preference. There are many sexual acts which are both illegal, and deemed disgusting and morally unacceptable by most. However, acts such, homosexuality, sodomy, and even any form of extramarital sex were at one point in the past considered the same way. Increasingly today, a person who wanted these acts illegal and deemed them disgusting and immoral would be looked down upon. By giving this history, Foucault raises the point that no matter how uncomfortable to think about, we should consider whether our standards on appropriate and inappropriate sexual activities are logical and justified, or merely what we are accustomed to and have been repeatedly been told by society to accept or reject.

Similar to Foucault, the history described in the Habermas is of interest because it asks the reader to examine their sources of knowledge and how these change over time. Instead of taking every word on the page at face value, the reader must look deeper and consider the circumstances that the author wrote in, and how these are different from their own. Of particular interest would be to look at how styles of writing and art changed during the transition from bourgeois social circles to mass media. Today it is often taken for granted that we can access a massive array of books and excerpts from around the world and from multiple time periods easily using the internet. When considering the limitations of past writing, the limitations of the conditions of the authors must be taken for granted. Specifically, the social circles before industrialization and mass media were much more localized. Being able to visualize the circumstances that writers and artists were in when they created their works helps the reader to be more accepting of their ideas and look past limitations or criticism of the writer’s character.

The use of history in exploring a concept assists the reader in causing them to consider how aspects of their life that may be overlooked or considered constant have changed over time and will change over the future. Each writer approaches the idea of history differently, with different beliefs of the inevitability of history, as well as which events are most important in shaping the history. Though each of these readings raises their own unique questions, the overlying message is that all concepts we explore are both constantly changing, and interrelated.