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Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. 372. £20.29 (paper).

The idea that modernity is characterized by a progressive and teleological conception of historical time has almost become a commonplace. The work of Reinhart Koselleck has been an important factor in the rise of this idea, just as François Hartog's view that there existed a typically modern *régime d'historicité* from around 1800 to the late twentieth century. A key argument brought forward by Koselleck and Hartog is that the modern conception of historical time involves an opening up of the future, linked with the idea of progress. In the field of postcolonial studies the view has taken root that the imposition of a Western temporal regime is a crucial aspect of colonial discourse. An especially influential advocate of this view is Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has argued that the Western conception of historical time entails the idea of non-Western civilizations being fundamentally backward because they are lagging behind in the historical teleology of modernity.

The volume *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, edited by Chakrabarty together with Henning Trüper and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, aims to give a wide-ranging overview of teleological conceptions of history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, comprising both Western and non-Western perspectives. It strongly emphasizes that there exists a broad plurality of historical teleologies in the period under discussion, informed by various cultural and theoretical presuppositions. Of course, this is an almost inevitable starting point, if at least one does not want to reproduce the imposition of one seemingly universal conception of historical time that is one of the focal points of postcolonial critique. Not surprisingly, considering this starting point, the range of topics discussed in this volume is immense. We can read about the notion of "the vocation

of man” in the German Enlightenment, about teleology in early nineteenth-century British geology, about anti-Darwinian points of view in German philosophical anthropology, about the historical teleologies implied in the nineteenth-century discourse on sea rescue, about race and nation-building in nineteenth-century Spanish America, about historical thought in colonial India, about the teleological dimension in international law and Marxism, and about eschatology in the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions—in the case of the latter, culminating in an analysis of the views developed by Osama bin Laden and other members of al-Qaeda.

The risk of such an embrace of heterogeneity is that it results in an incoherent collection of essays, marginally connected by a very general idea, which the authors adapt to their own purposes until there is nothing left but a faint suggestion of a shared theme. It would be easy to criticize *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World* on this ground. The editors and the authors have, however, made a serious effort to draw recognizable thematic lines through the volume. One of these lines, for instance, is the idea that in the course of the nineteenth century, teleological conceptions of history slowly migrated from philosophy and science to more practical political projects. Yet, drawing such lines does not make the variety of ideas and contexts addressed in the book less staggering. Furthermore, there are some unresolved tensions—or perhaps contradictions—in the volume, which would have deserved a more thorough analysis.

One of these tensions is that between Enlightened teleology and religiously inspired political eschatology. In the first of the two introductory chapters to the volume, of which Henning Trüper is the principal author, teleological historical thought is described as a project originating in the Enlightenment, more specifically in the philosophy of Christian Wolff. Wolff first and foremost discussed teleological ideas in connection with physics but also applied them to history. The success of this project, further developed by Kant and Hegel, was such that the teleological conception of history came to be regarded as almost self-evident in nineteenth-century European thought. The second introductory chapter to the volume, written by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, is about eschatology, a totally different kind of historical and political teleology with much older, religious roots. Unfortunately, the relation between Enlightened teleology and eschatological forms of teleological thought is not addressed in the two introductory chapters—apart from a brief remark by Trüper about the lack of influence of Christian eschatology on nineteenth-century historical thought. In the volume as a whole, the relation between Enlightened teleology and eschatology is similarly underdiscussed.

Another issue in *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World* is the relation between the detailed description of teleological conceptions of history in the past and the use of historical teleology as a focal point in the critique of modernity. In the latter case, historical teleology is seen in a negative light, as a way of thinking with oppressive effects,

especially in a colonial context. This view informs the volume as a whole, but the individual essays are mostly descriptions of past instances of teleological thought, in which the critical dimension is often rather marginal. That is not necessarily problematic: expanding our knowledge of the plurality of historical teleologies in the modern world might have a critical function in itself. Bigger questions are mainly asked in the two concluding essays, by Peter Wagner and Bo Stråth. Wagner presents a plea for human autonomy in the face of totalizing conceptions of historical teleology on the basis of a reading of Kant, Marx, and Weber. In a similar vein, Stråth uses Hegel and Koselleck to argue for a new regime of historicity, characterized by a more open conception of the future and a plurality of teleologies. Both Wagner and Stråth present the emergence of a teleological conception of history in European thought as an understandable answer to the question of how to make sense of far-reaching social developments. At the same time, they show that even in the work of Hegel and Marx—often seen as the worst culprits in the rise of historical teleology—there is some space for contingency and agency. Thus, the two concluding essays of *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World* express a paradox that is implicitly present in many other papers in the volume: teleology seems to be almost inevitable in modern historical thinking, both in Europe and in the non-Western world, but the consequences and implications of a teleological conception of history are hard to accept because they are at odds with other key assumptions in modern thought.

Jacques Bos
