

THE GRAND PATTERNS OF CHANGE AND THE FUTURE

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Summary

Through its delineation of the patterns of history, macrohistory gives a structure to the fanciful visions of futurists. Macrohistory gives us the weight of history balancing the pull of the image of the future and the push of near-term historical trends. Yet like futures studies, it is value-based, seeking not merely to reflect upon the structure of social space and time but to participate in the transformation of past, present, and future (see *Epistemology and Methodology in the Study of the Future*).

From this perspective, to understand the future, more than scenario development of probable, preferred, and possible futures is needed. An analysis of the structure of history is needed. Is history and future linear or cyclical? How is time constructed, indeed, what are the different times of history and future? What are the relative roles of agency and structure in creating desired futures? Which theories and theoreticians of macrohistory are most useful in understanding the past, present, and future? How does the episteme define the construction of their theories? This entry seeks to answer these questions. It thus hopes to fill the space of what the future is likely to be through the patterns and structures of what was.

1. Introduction

Macrohistory is the study of the histories of social systems, along separate trajectories, through space and time, in search of patterns, even laws of social change. Macrohistory through its delineation of the structures of history—of the causes and mechanisms of historical change; of inquiry into what changes and what stays stable; of an analysis of

the units of history; and a presentation of the stages of history—provides a structure from which to forecast and gain insight into the future.

By knowing what historically can and cannot change, scenarios of the future can be more plausible. Thus, through a study of the grand patterns of change, we can better understand the likely futures ahead. By exploring the range of units or collectivities, we can break out of the straitjacket of nations as our only unit for the future. Finally by understanding the stages of history, we can better understand the stages of the future. Macrohistory gives us the weight of history balancing the pull of the image of the future. It gives a historical distance to the many claims of paradigm shifts, allowing us to distinguish between what are mere perturbations and what are genuine historical transformations. While giving us insights into the human condition, theories of macrohistory also intend to explain past, present, and future.

2. Historical and Epistemic Context

However, even as macrohistorians make truth claims, it is important to locate macrohistorians within the historical conditions they write in and the episteme that frames what is knowable. Thus, where one is situated partly determines what one sees. Attempts to forecast the future, to develop world scenarios, should not be construed as objective science but should be understood very much as products of the social, political, gender, and civilizational context of the writer.

For example, the United States government Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report on the future released in early 2001 (<http://odci.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015/index.html>) articulates four scenarios of the future. These are: (1) inclusive globalization; (2) pernicious globalization; (3) regional competition; and (4) post polar world.

Although the methods they use are rigorous, the paradigm remains that of searching for possible sources of conflict, possible sources of power that may decrease US power. While they are certainly not claiming to be immune from the politics of knowledge, even scientists and social scientists by virtue of the nature of language are caught in a range of subjectivities—the episteme that defines the boundaries of knowledge.

Whereas the contextual nature of knowledge is obvious to us when we (as modernists, the expanded West) examine the past, when we examine our present, following Comte, we tend locate it as the rational and the scientific. The past is constructed as relative and ideological (that is, not objective) with the future the fulfillment of truth, the final stage of history, once the last vestiges, the remnants, of the religious or philosophical past have been modernized, that is, vanquished. Thus we submit our own “present” as outside of history, outside of a metaphysic.

From a social constructivist perspective, every writer emerges from a discourse, a way of knowing and constructing the world even as they often claim empirical objectivity. This is true for thinkers across civilizations and knowledge perspectives. Hegel’s conception of history was a direct response to the third antinomy, contradiction, and

Kant's problematic solution to it. Hegel accepts Kant's antinomy and makes it his dialectic, with spirit as one variable and the state as his other variable.

Although Marx attempted to create a perfect new world realizable through an objective understanding of the real, he was responding to a tradition as well—the concerns of nineteenth-century Europe. His thinking was contextualized by the rationality of the Enlightenment and its German response (the idealistic perspective of Kant and Hegel). Given the idealistic nature of the philosophical nexus around him and of the recent Christian past, he claimed that his work was a science of the objective of the material world, and not a speculation on the idealistic or religious world of the medieval era.

Thus each stage of history writes the previous era as backward, as unfulfilled, as to be developed. In contrast, macrohistorians who posit that history and future follow a spiral pattern see true development coming from an integration of science and religion. Alternatively, scientists see true progress coming from the scientific method and religious thinkers from an authentic understanding of revelation.

3. Stages of History

Along with the historical context of the macrohistorian, crucial to understanding the future are the stages of history posited. Comte had his theological (based on religion–faith), metaphysical (based on philosophy–reason) and positive (based on science–truth). Sorokin has his three ages of the ideational, dualistic-integrated and sensate but with a fourth stage as the transition, the age of skepticism and chaos. Spencer relates his societal types to phases in history: barbarism, militant, industrial, and a fourth yet to emerge. Vico has his Age of Gods, Heroes, Men, and Barbarians (from which we return to the Age of Gods) and Ibn-Khaldun argues for a primitive-civilization-primitive pattern. More recently Sarkar has his four stages of the Shudra Era (Era of Laborers), the Ksatriyan Era (Era of Warriors), the Vipran Era (Era of Intellectuals) and then the Vaeshyan Era (Era of Merchants). This is followed by a Shudra (Workers') revolt, and the cycles continues again.

More common, of course, is the classical antiquity, medieval, and modern. Equally, agricultural, industrial, postindustrial with the new phase that of the knowledge economy. Alternatively, Alvin Toffler has argued for a first wave, second wave and third wave (in terms of dominating technologies and resulting social worlds).

Graham Molitor has extended this much further going out a thousand years. His stages include agriculture (declining since 1880s), industrial (declining since the late 1920s), services (declining since 1956), information (dominant since 1976), leisure (dominant commencing 2015), life sciences (dominant by 2100), mega-materials (dominant 2100–2300), new atomic age (dominant by 2250–2500) and new space age (dominant before 3000). Of course, while these stages illuminate the broader categories of history and future, they are not macrohistory. To be macrohistory, more than patterns are required. The mechanisms for change, the reasons behind the fall, or the unlimited rise, an exploration of how civilizations rise after the fall, or continue to grow unabated, are needed for a real macrohistory.

However, stages are useful as they provide a context for scenarios. They contest the assumption of a unified historical and future framework, an unbroken grand narrative of social evolution. This challenge is important as it is this grand narrative that guides many forecasts—probable, plausible, possible. Forecasters thus do not take into account the possibility of the entire framework of what it is we consider nature and truth changing, of the emergence of new nominations of significance, of fundamental discontinuity. Believing that the future will be data-led—focused only on current dominant drivers (economy or technology), forecasters present logical scenarios based on short-run current understandings (see *Multilayered Scenarios, the Scientific Method and Global Models*).

4. Agency, Structure, and the Transcendental

While stages privilege structure, equally important is the role of agency, or choice, in creating history and future. Most social theorists argue back and forth between agency and structure. However, macrohistorians find escapeways out of these categories. For example, for Vico, history and future, although patterned, are not predetermined—there are laws but these are soft. The hard and soft distinction refers to the level of determinism of the laws.

Critics, however, point out that generally macrohistory, by focusing on the grand stages, the laws of history, removes choice and contingency, privileges structure over human agency and misses too many significant details. However, while the structure/agency dilemma is central within the linear/developmentalist model or the cyclical/fatalistic model, writers such as Sarkar (*varna*—collective psychology/types of power), Galtung (cosmology), Foucault (discourse), and Sorokin (supersystems—sensate, idealist/integrative, and ideational) give us ways out of these dilemmas. For example, for Sarkar there is historical structure (evolutionary derived), but there is individual will and there is a cosmic will: a grander intelligence. These exist in dialectical tension.

Privileging one perspective (agency) results in individualism or liberalism (Smith, for example). Privileging another (structure) results in structuralism (Marx, for example). If one moves toward the third then divinity results (Augustine or Steiner, for example). The real has different levels—the task is to exist in them simultaneously, to develop a theory that has linear, cyclical, and transcendental dimensions and has agency, structure, and superagency (the transcendental) as to what causes movement through history. A theory of the future would equally need to embrace these multiple perspectives rather than mistakenly focus on any particular approach.

Choosing structure over agency would be a mistake as would be choosing agency over structure. Keeping divinity and other mysterious factors out of the macro analysis would also be a mistake. There is no necessity to make a decision to privilege a particular way of understanding; all levels of interpretation must be held on to simultaneously.

For Galtung and Foucault as well these are false choices. A particular cosmology and discourse gives us the possibility of including both horns of the structure/agency dilemma (and divinity if need be). Similarly, Sorokin develops his theory, arguing that any system must have its own inner dynamics and must interact with the structure of the

external world that causes external and internal change, thus allowing both agency and structure. To Galtung, Foucault, and Sorokin, however, superagency is not a possibility. The intervention of God or other mysterious spiritual forces is not an empirical possibility, but rather the type of approach one gets during ideational eras, or pertaining to a particular cosmology or discourse.

For most macrohistorians, individuals are important but they exist in larger fields that condition their choices: class, gender, dynasty, cultural personality, or ways of knowing the real. Equally important is the individual's ability in creating the future and the values that inform the good society, vision, in question. But these value preferences in themselves exist within certain structures: biological (the evolution of the species and the environment), epistemological (the historical possibilities of what is knowable and thinkable), social (one's own culture and its history), technological (the material and social ways through which actions can be expressed), and the economic (basic needs and growth, the realities of the material world).

Taking perhaps a broader view, Braudel believes that physical geography, or the *longue durée* (the long time), plays a role in history and the future. For Braudel, history must be divided into three levels. There is: (1) the history of events (the traditional individual level of history), (2) the history of civilizations and economic systems (processes), and (3) geo-history (geography). This last perspective, according to Braudel, is "history whose passage is almost imperceptible...a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles."

This macro-environmental view of Gaia is the temporal frame of history. Individual and structural time are but minor aspects of Earth or Gaia time. Humans are inputs and outputs in the rhythms of Gaia. They may or may not be necessary. This view markedly shifts the human-centered view of traditional macrothinkers. It reminds us that our definitions, categories, and attempts to create a history of humanity are narrowly human-centered, and even as we posit universals for all space and time, we fail to see that humans are but one minor dimension of the universe. While one might expect spiritual views to be more sensitive to the Gaian perspective—Teilhard de Chardin, Steiner, Ibn-Khaldun, or even Spencer—it is still the individual and his or her transcendental that is the key not the Gaian environmental context. In this sense, a Gaian macrohistory offers the possible worldview for creating a more sustainable future for all.

While some macrohistories balance the individual and the social, others focus on the system as a whole. In the macroview, size, structure (for example, vertical/horizontal or feudal/bureaucratic arrangements), relations (person to person; person to nature; person to society) are significant and primary over individual choices and hopes. Transcendental theories, in general, focus on the individual and his (and sometimes her) relationship to the Transcendental and less on the social structures in question as, for example, in the case of Teilhard de Chardin's work.

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Biographical Sketch

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