‘The Report of My Death Was an Exaggeration’: Metanarrative, Legitimacy, and History (with apologies to Mark Twain)

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Lyotard’s Concept of Metanarrative

In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard defined a metanarrative as a vision of the historical process that served some legitimatory role. A metanarrative did not need to make claims regarding historical necessity, but it must function as a justification of a political position of some kind. Subsequent developments suggest that while his definition was sound, his prediction that metanarratives were in decline was falsified by events.

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” In fact, in neither the original French text nor the English translation that followed in 1984 did Lyotard declare outright that metanarrative was dead; that was a later popular misattribution. He did argue, however, that the contemporary world had supposedly entered upon a new era in which all metanarratives were now obsolete. But assessing this claim requires understanding what Lyotard meant by a metanarrative in the first place. In particular, we must pay attention to what a metanarrative was supposed to do.

Metanarratives had a legitimatory function. As the use of the prefix ‘meta’ implies, therefore, metanarratives were not self-standing; as a type of discourse, they were distinguished by having been created in the service of other discourses.

Etymologically, in ancient Greek, the prefix indicated that something came after or lay beyond something else. The classic case is the work by Aristotle that we know as the *Metaphysics*. It received that title because in the standard edition of his writings it was placed after the writings on natural philosophy, or as we say for short, “physics.” This example neatly captures Lyotard’s intended meaning. Insofar as a discourse like science “is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game,” Lyotard argued, it does so “with reference to a metadiscourse making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative.” Whatever our reasons for doing science, those reasons cannot themselves be scientific. Science, considered as a practice, needs public support in the form of funding, equipment, and so on; but it must make its case in unscientific terms. In order to do so, Lyotard argued, in the modern era, science had enlisted philosophy to make an unscientific appeal to a metanarrative.
of “progress . . . to which economic growth and the expansion of sociopolitical power seem to be natural complements.”

The metanarrative of progress that legitimated the work of the natural sciences was not the only kind of metanarrative that Lyotard identified, however. Political doctrines also typically appealed to metanarratives. Marxism, for example, drew on a “grand narrative” in which “the emancipation of the . . . working subject” was the key idea. Liberal democracy, in contrast, appealed to a metanarrative featuring “the creation of wealth” in which we are working towards “a good ethico-political end – universal peace.” But what these metanarratives have in common, according to Lyotard, is that they serve as a “philosophy of history.” By a philosophy of history here Lyotard did not mean a theory of historical knowledge, but a vision of the historical process. Philosophies of history in this sense were metanarratives, then, whenever they served a legitimatory function. It is this conjunction that is important; a purely explanatory philosophy of history would not count as a metanarrative, in Lyotard’s sense, nor would a narrative of political legitimacy that did not rely on invoking external sources such as a vision of the historical process.

Lyotard was thus careful to make clear that although he believed that metanarratives, or “grand narratives,” as he also called them, had lost their credibility, the need for legitimatory narratives as such had not disappeared. Rather, Lyotard claimed that for people who considered themselves post-modern, “legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.” This was, in fact, an optimistic position. It relied on the claim that “Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative.” The post-modern situation was not without its dangers. In particular, it was liable to treat technological possibility as a proof of ethical and political desirability; where “ought” had traditionally been taken to imply “can,” “can” now implied “ought.” Nevertheless, Lyotard treated post-modernism as a successful form of Enlightenment insofar as it involved an emancipation from traditional illusions. Scientific discourse, for example, had internalised legitimation procedures which meant that it simply no longer needed traditional metanarratives, at least in order to supply a narrative about its truth.

In hindsight, The Postmodern Condition can perhaps be read as an epigonic instance of the ‘end of ideology’ thesis that became popular following the end of the 1939–45 war. Already in 1946 Albert Camus had argued that Stalinism had confronted French socialism with a choice. If the French Left continued to endorse
Marxism, then it was accepting that “murder can be legitimized.” If it chose instead to “renonce Marxism as an absolute philosophy,” then, Camus declared, “the end of ideologies is upon us, that is, the end of absolute utopias that destroy themselves owing to the heavy price they eventually exact when they seek to become part of historical reality.” When Lyotard described metanarratives as terroristic to the extent that they involved the elimination of players from the language game thirty years later, his language was more abstract, but he was recognisably making the same point about the potentially lethal effects of ideology.

Metanarratives and Grand Theories

This context supplies a possible lineage for Lyotard’s concept of a metanarrative in relation to post-1945 ideas about the end of ideology. But Lyotard’s claim that legitimatory metanarratives at large had lost their credibility can be questioned. An early indication that it was more hopeful than descriptive was the publication in 1985 of an edited collection of essays on The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences, edited by the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner. Since the English translation of The Postmodern Condition had only appeared the previous year, it is not surprising that Lyotard’s book went unmentioned. But Skinner’s understanding of “Grand Theory” can nevertheless be usefully compared to Lyotard’s concept of a grand narrative. Skinner credited the American sociologist C. Wright Mills with the definition of a Grand Theory as an “abstract and normative” account of human nature that would be “relevant to the explanation of political behaviour.”

Grand Theories thus differed from metanarratives in that they were not necessarily conceived of as having a legitimating function. Amongst the “grand theorists” considered in The Return of Grand Theory was Michel Foucault, for example, who was just as interested as Lyotard in questioning legitimatory narratives, including ones that relied on claims to historical necessity. That meant, for example, questioning the Kantian and Hegelian narratives that legitimated a liberal and Christian outlook, and the Marxist narrative of the necessity of revolution founded on the principles of dialectical materialism. Foucault, despite being indebted to both Hegel and to Marx in a general way for his conviction of the importance of the relation between ideas and power relations, was neither a Hegelian nor a Marxist. He was also profoundly sceptical towards most existing justifications of authority.
Had the other thinkers discussed in *The Return of Grand Theory* shared Foucault’s views, Lyotard’s thesis would have been vindicated. After all, a normative explanatory account is not identical with a legitimatory one. A normative account can be purely critical, as Foucault’s writings tended to be. But the volume also included a chapter on Louis Althusser, who energetically defended the dialectical materialism that Foucault attacked. This meant defending the notion of historical necessity: the scientific principles of Marxism proved that the ultimate overthrow of capitalism was inevitable.\(^15\) The thesis of historical necessity, however, was important for Althusser inasmuch as it justified revolutionary Communism in practice. From Lyotard’s point of view, therefore, Althusser was providing exactly the kind of legitimatory arguments that led him to describe Marxism as a metanarrative. In the various Communist regimes then existent in Europe and Asia, Marxist ideas were “aids in programming the system.”\(^16\)

It is worth remembering that in the mid-1980s, when *The Postmodern Condition* first appeared, the Cold War remained ongoing. Mikhail Gorbachev only announced the policy of glasnost or openness in 1985, the same year that *The Return of Grand Theory* was published.\(^17\) Very few people foresaw the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the construction of which in 1961 had come to symbolise the absolute division of East and West. The separation of the world into Western, Communist, and non-aligned nations seemed to have solidified into a permanent principle of international order. It was, of course, immediately obvious to everyone that the end of the post-1945 status quo was momentous; but what had happened to bring it about was less clear. One particularly well-known explanation was that offered by Francis Fukuyama: the world was witnessing “the end of History.”

### The End of History as Metanarrative

Fukuyama’s thesis was first published as article in the *National Review* for summer 1989, a few months before the Berlin Wall actually came down, which gave it something of a prophetic quality, even though (as Fukuyama himself noted) proclamations of the end of the Cold War had already begun. It was soon expanded into a substantial book. As Daniel Bell had cause to complain regarding his own work on the *End of Ideology*, however, some books are better known for their titles than for their contents.\(^18\) Fukuyama’s work was a case in point. His thesis became associated with Western triumphalism at the end of the Cold War when in fact he was far more equivocal. No doubt this impression was partly Fukuyama’s own responsibility; he did write of “the triumph of the West.”\(^19\) But he did so in the
spirit of Churchill’s remark that “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

To the extent that Fukuyama believed “the Western idea” had triumphed, it was only because its chief competitors (royal absolutism, Communism, and fascism) had shown themselves even less suited to the modern world. He did not mean to say that the “triumph” of the West in this sense was synonymous with the advent of a utopian ideal.

For one thing, Fukuyama had appended a question mark to his original title, suggesting a certain tentativeness. For another, when The End of History appeared in book form, the title had lost the interrogative, but gained a conjunctive clause: “and the last man.” Fukuyama was alluding to the figure of the “last man” in Friedrich Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, whose coming into being was anything but a positive development. Nietzsche’s target was the kind of utilitarian liberalism that he associated with modern industrial society: “‘We invented happiness’ say the last human beings, and they blink.”

Fukuyama likewise cautioned that “we risk becoming secure and self-absorbed last men, devoid of thymotic striving for higher goals in our pursuit of private comforts.” He shared Nietzsche’s view that human beings thrive when they struggle after goals that are more than merely personal; and in the absence of such goals, the simple impulse to struggle will likely persist in any case. Althusser had explained the protests of 1968 in terms of “the Marxist–Leninist thesis of the revolutionary character of the working class,” but for Fukuyama French workers and students were not victims of capitalist exploitation. They had been living in “one of the freest and most prosperous societies on earth” at the time. Rather, “what they rejected was life in a society in which ideals had somehow become impossible.”

On the surface, then, Fukyama might seem in agreement with Lyotard; the conflict between ideologies was over and “what remains is primarily economic activity.” But this reading would be mistaken. Fukuyama was offering not just a grand theory, but a metanarrative. His end of history thesis was a “conceptual framework for distinguishing between what is essential and what is contingent or accidental in world history.” But what marked Fukuyama’s thesis as a metanarrative in Lyotard’s sense was not his claim that it was possible to distinguish what was historically essential or necessary from what was contingent. It was that his argument was clearly designed, despite the cautions and qualifications, to legitimate liberal democracy as, if not the best, then at any rate the least worst, form of government.
This is evident from the fact that Fukuyama's later retreat from his bolder claims regarding historical necessity did not mean the end for the legitimatory function of the end of history thesis. When Fukuyama reflected on his original claims from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, he clarified that his account of the “overall logic to historical evolution” was only supposed to have been “weakly deterministic.” In this version of his argument, “The origin of “History” in the Marxist-Hegelian sense lies ultimately in science and technology.” In fact, it is not clear that the belief that science and technology constrain events in ways that make some outcomes more likely than others is deterministic at all (as distinct from, for instance, simply probabilistic.) But this change did not prevent the argument for the end of history from remaining an authentic metanarrative in Lyotard’s sense. Giving up historical necessity did not mean giving up the legitimation of liberal democracy. When protests broke out in the Arab world in 2010, Fukuyama could still interpret them in accordance with his earlier ideas; they were “just the latest demonstration of the power of the idea of democracy.”

The Rebirth of History as Metanarrative

The popular demonstrations that began in Tunisia in North Africa and spread via Egypt all the way to Syria in the Middle East were, just like the fall of the Berlin Wall, generally unforeseen and thus in urgent need of explanation. In hindsight, the debate over their significance was, amongst other things, a clash of metanarratives. For example, Alain Badiou’s response to the demonstrations, The Rebirth of History, was clearly both an allusion to and a rebuttal of Fukuyama’s work. What Badiou objected to in particular was the idea that there was no alternative to liberal democratic institutions which had settled all questions of principle, leaving room only for the pursuit of economic development.

Of all the French intellectuals who experienced the protests of the 1960s at an early period in their careers, Badiou was perhaps the one who remained most deeply attached to Communist, even Maoist, political ideals. Fukuyama would no doubt observe that Badiou was the perfect illustration of his point about the effects of utopian idealism having become implausible; but for Badiou, the importance of the protests was precisely that they marked the end of what he called an “intervallic period” in history since the 1970s and the return of genuinely revolutionary alternative possibilities.

The Rebirth of History thus counts as a metanarrative in Lyotard’s sense because it sought to provide a justification for the popular demonstrations in terms of this idea.
larger vision of the historical process. Although Badiou identified himself explicitly as a Marxist, however, he differed from Althusser by not insisting on historical necessity. The existence of the working class was a necessary condition of revolution, but not a sufficient one: “It is always possible that no event actually occur.” Here it is worth noting that the concept of an “event” in Badiou’s philosophy is a technical term. It does not refer to just any happening. There are no “events” in Badiou’s sense in nature as such. In The Rebirth of History, the chief characteristic of an event is that it “makes possible the restitution of the inexistent.” The “inexistent” was Badiou’s term for the proletariat, for those “present in the world but absent from its meanings and decisions about its future.” The protestors were participants in a “historical riot” that permitted the formation of a general will in the Rousseauian sense of the term.

Despite the lack of any claim to necessity, therefore, Badiou shared with Fukuyama (and Hegel) a belief that it was possible to distinguish those goings-on that contribute to the unfolding of History from those that do not. The former were differentiated by their contribution to “the emergence of a truth.” The truth in question was the assertion of universal justice against the power of the state. The general will had the potential to liberate the people from the marginalised identities that it was the chief business of the state to impose. But the goal for North Africa (or anyone else outside the West) should not be democracy on the Western model. The kind of liberal democratic government that Fukuyama endorsed was, in Badiou’s view, part of the problem. It encouraged a cultural relativism that could not accommodate a truly revolutionary Communist politics in which “there are political truths and . . . political action is . . . a protracted struggle of the true against the false.”

Whether this was a fair representation of Fukuyama’s viewpoint is another matter. Badiou took himself to be arguing for “universal justice”; but we have already seen that Fukuyama made exactly the same claim. This suggests that one of the characteristics of legitimatory metanarratives is that they are exclusionary. Lyotard indicated as much in his account of the heroic, but abstract, subject of knowledge who was the central figure in the metanarrative of scientific progress. This subject “sends-receives denotative statements with truth-value to the exclusion of other language games.” Lyotard’s genealogy for this metanarrative was thoroughly secular, fixing on Renaissance humanism and on the Enlightenment; but it is worth recalling here that the kind of progressive vision of the historical process that it involved also had theoretical antecedents. Indeed, though Fukuyama dissociated
himself from theodicy, Hegel’s own philosophy of history was explicitly created to provide a justification of the divine plan.\(^\text{40}\)

**Religious and Nationalist Metanarratives: Allah and the Event**

An account of the contemporary scene would be incomplete, however, without noticing the religious and nationalist metanarratives that have flourished alongside the liberal and Marxist varieties since Lyotard wrote. Islamism is one obvious example. Sayyid Qutb’s demands for a purified Islamic society in *Milestones*, a foundational text for modern Islamist movements, can be seen as a theological metanarrative.\(^\text{41}\) Qutb explicitly placed his work in direct competition with Marxism and the belief in the primacy of the importance of “material production” around which he claimed America and Europe had organised their societies.\(^\text{42}\) Just like Fukuyama and Badiou, the claims of *Milestones* involved an assertion of an exclusive, and exclusionary, claim to possession of the truth founded in a story about the past. There was a “first generation of Muslims” who had the direct benefit of the teachings of Muhammed ‘and thus attained a unique distinction in history.’\(^\text{43}\)

In an argument that was structurally very similar to Martin Luther’s insistence on the need to restore the form of Christianity practiced by the early Church fathers, free from unscriptural institutional hierarchy and in particular from Popery, Qutb asserted the primacy of the timeless and universal message of Islam. “Throughout every period of human history the call toward Allah Almighty has had one nature.”\(^\text{44}\) Given the association of Qutb’s ideas with later Islamist terrorism it is important to recall the reasons for their influence. To the degree that they are legitimatory, metanarratives prosper when they are inspirational. Fukuyama appealed to freedom; Badiou to solidarity. Qutb’s vision was of a shared human identity that transcended considerations of both nationality and class.

This positive aspect of Qutb’s vision needs to be borne in mind when trying to understand its appeal, because in other respects it was divisive in nature. The claim that “Islam is the only Divine way of life which brings out the noblest human characteristics,” if taken literally, left no space for other ideals.\(^\text{45}\) Islam has the necessity of universal law on its side.\(^\text{46}\) The assertion that “Islam is the real civilisation” had as its corollary that others were unreal. Qutb was fully explicit on this point. “Islam knows only two kinds of societies, the Islamic and the *Jahili*. The
Islamic society is that which follows Islam in belief and ways of worship, in law and organization, in morals and manners. The *Jahili* society is that which does not follow Islam."\(^{47}\) His conclusion was apocalyptic, insisting that “Mankind today is on the brink of destruction.” But it was not technology which was responsible. It was, rather, the fact that “humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary … for its real progress.”\(^{48}\)

Qutb’s account of those values, however, was not as purely Islamic as he claimed. As is often pointed out, Islamism as a political ideology was as much a product of modern Western ideas as it was of traditional Islamic ones. Qutb’s “notion of Islam’s superiority . . . was tied to values of equality and social justice” derived from the kind of socialist opposition discourses that were common in Egypt in the 1950s.\(^{49}\) Despite his repudiation of Marxism, his argument that a “vanguard” was necessary to institute the “revivalist movement” which would restore the original spirit of Islam was the theological equivalent of V.I. Lenin’s belief in the necessity for a dedicated band of revolutionaries who would prepare the way for Bolshevism.\(^{50}\) Likewise, Qutb’s account of a technological modernity lead astray by its corrupt values can be read as an Islamic version of Heidegger’s posing of “The Question Concerning Technology.”

The final, nationalist, version of contemporary narrative that we shall consider is well exemplified by the Russian writer Alexander Dugin’s *The Fourth Political Theory* (2012). Dugin shares not only the exclusionary character that we have attributed to metanarrative in general with Qutb’s version, but his apocalyptic vision and his Manichean standpoint. The world is witnessing a conflict between a triumphant liberalism, which Dugin explicitly links to Fukuyama’s version of the ‘end of history’ and describes as “postpolitical,” and a movement for the restoration of traditional patriarchal values.\(^{51}\) Although Dugin sees this situation as global in scope, he is especially interested in its implications for Russia in particular. On Dugin’s account of modern history, many “generations of Russian people [have] lived and waited” for what he calls “the ‘Russian Ereignis,’” a “unique and extraordinary” event.\(^{52}\) The nature of this event remains unspecified, but it is clear that it is part of a metanarrative designed to legitimate a form of Russian exceptionalism.

As Dugin’s use of the term Ereignis makes clear, he is borrowing Heidegger’s narrative of Western history as the gradual covering up of the meaning of Being and its occlusion by an “age that would elaborate the essential form of beings from out of the truth of being.”\(^{53}\) The idea of a “sudden return of Being” that “takes place exactly at midnight of the world’s night – at the darkest moment in history”
has crucial implications for Russia’s future in particular.\textsuperscript{54} It will mark the end of Russia’s exclusion from the world established by globalisation, not least because it will mark the end of the globalised world. As Dugin understands Russian history, it is in its “entirety . . . a dialectical argument with the West and against Western culture.”\textsuperscript{55} It is not surprising, therefore, that Dugin recognises the “islamic project” as having affinities with his own, because Muslims were also “fundamental conservatives.”\textsuperscript{56} His purported aim, like Qutb’s, is a kind of awakening; but whereas Qutb wanted to restore the doctrinal purity of the first generation of adherents to the teachings of the Koran, Dugin’s goal is to rouse Russians from their passive consumption of a nihilistic Western culture.

Dugin’s new Russian revolution also involves a vanguard, or what he calls a ‘counter-elite,’ that will be thoroughly “anti-liberal.”\textsuperscript{57} Like Qutb, it is important to appreciate that Dugin puts forward some positive goals. He aims “to separate the materialist and Modernist aspects of communism and reject them, while preserving and embracing the social and holistic aspects.” This means retaining, for example, “communism’s social solidarity, social justice, [and] socialism” as “good in and of themselves.” He also denies that his nationalism equates to any kind of racism: “Differences . . . should be accepted and affirmed without any racist sentiments.”\textsuperscript{58} Nevertheless, the coming Event cannot be expected to be entirely peaceful. While a bellicose clash of civilisations is not historically necessitated, because there are no “linear rules” governing the historical process, war can be expected to remain a permanent feature of human life. There is nothing desirable in the perpetual peace envisioned by Kant: “pure war and pure peace are equally murderous.”\textsuperscript{59}

**Conclusion: The Scepticism to Come**\textsuperscript{60}

In hindsight, Lyotard’s diagnosis of the legitimatory function of metanarrative was astute. An examination of the Liberal, Left, Islamic, and Russophile metanarratives that have flourished since he wrote *The Postmodern Condition* suggests that he was correct in thinking that the philosophy of history, understood as a vision of the historical process, typically serves an ulterior political motive of some kind. But the same examination shows that Lyotard’s suggestion that metanarrative was on the verge of exhaustion turned out to be premature. Accepting his definition of postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives produces the corollary that the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were, at least in this respect, not postmodern at all.
This is nonetheless an important result, because it prompts us to reflect on the role of history in the justification of political action. Fukuyama, Badiou, Qutb, and Dugin all claim to make sense of the main tendencies that have been at work in modern history. But they do so in ways that are not innocent. Whether we are inclined to sympathise with any of their narratives or not, Lyotard’s account draws our attention to the work that these visions of the historical process are doing. They all have in common an effort to support some practical political agenda that leaves little or no room for alternatives. Such narratives may or may not invoke historical necessity or a divine purpose, but insofar as they insist that history has a particular destination, they run the risk of narrowing the political horizons of those who adopt them.

This risk arises because philosophies of history that function as legitimatory metanarratives may go beyond simply providing that orientation to the past and future which is essential both in the life of the individual and in collective political action. We cannot act without a sense of where we have been and where we are going. But accepting one or another of the stories that Fukuyama, Badiou, Qutb, and Dugin are telling carries risks if it means always having to interpret what is happening to us in a way that conforms to that particular narrative. Doing so is likely to foster not incredulity, but its opposite. Lyotard has, however, reminded us of the value of an old question when we are confronted with some claim or another about the past in a political context which can provide an antidote: cui bono? The sceptical habit of asking it in relation to the philosophy of history may allow us to become postmodern yet.

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Tags: Jean-François Lyotard / Metanarrative / the end of history

2 See G.E.R. Lloyd, *Aristotle: The Growth and Structure of his Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1968], 13, for the formation of the Corpus Aristotelicum. Lyotard remarks in *The Postmodern Condition* at 29 that “Aristotle was . . . modern . . . in separating the rules to which statements declared scientific must conform (the *Organon*) from the search for their合法性 in a discourse on Being (the *Metaphysics*).”

3 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

4 Ibid., 7.

5 Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

6 Ibid., xxiv.

7 Ibid., does however claim at 35 that hermeneutics is the legitimating metanarrative of historiography, making its role analogous to that of philosophy in respect of the natural sciences.

8 Ibid., 41.

9 Ibid., 47.

10 Ibid., 54, 60.


14 Ibid., 3.


21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, translated from German by Adrian del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 9, describes “the last human being” as “the most contemptible person.” Italics in original.

24 Ibid., 5.
25 Ibid., 3.
29 Ibid., 39.
31 Ibid., 179.
32 Badiou, Rebirth of History, 56.
33 Ibid., 56.
34 Ibid., 60.
35 Ibid., 60. Italics in original.
36 Ibid., 69–70.
37 Ibid., 87.
38 Ibid., 60.
39 Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 30.
40 Fukuyama, End of History, 130.
43 Ibid., 31.
44 Ibid., 56.
46 Ibid., 101.
47 Ibid., 106. Italics in original.
48 Ibid., 23.
50 V.I. Lenin, Essential Works “What Is To Be Done?” And Other Writings, ed. Henry M. Christman. New York: Dover Books, 1987 [1966], 83, argued that “[T]he role of vanguard can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by an advanced theory.” Italics in original.
52 Ibid., 24. Italics in original.

54 Dugin, Fourth Political Theory, 22–23.

55 Ibid., 22.

56 Ibid., 126.

57 Ibid., 200.

58 Ibid., 204.

59 Ibid., 79.

60 With apologies to Jacques Derrida’s notion of “the democracy to come”. 