

Is This A Turning Point In History?

I have had the good fortune to live almost entirely in an era of democracy. I was born in 1943 in the United States when the world teetered on the brink of autocracy everywhere. Autocratic government continued in the Soviet Union and China. But in the Western world—the United States and Europe, especially—democracy, imperfect democracy but still democracy, won the day and thrived.

Now, I am very distressed to say, the United States appears to be on the brink of a turn away from democracy to autocracy.

I have been thinking about this moment in history in Hegelian terms. Sorry, I know that the reference is more than a little arcane. So, for those of you who don't know, Hegel was an early 19th-century German philosopher who developed a “dialectical” theory of history. Simplistically stated, that is the theory that human life has a defining spirit in every period of history. Each era has a theme, as it were, which Hegel referred to as a “thesis”. As each era wanes an “antithesis” emerges, defining a new period of history. **More simply stated, the pendulum swings.** As time goes on, Hegel maintains, there is a synthesis of thesis and antithesis leading to a new thesis and a new period of history, which in turn will give way to an antithesis, and so on. Hegel maintains that these swings of history are driven by “world historic individuals.” The rest of us are minor players swept along by the force of historical change.

There are many reasons to question the Hegelian theory of history. Marx, for example, rejected the idea that history is a movement of spirit and maintained instead that it was a movement of economic forces towards a just society. That is “dialectical materialism”. That idea obviously has had a great impact on the world.

Of less, actually no, impact but more interesting in my view is Tolstoy's theory that history is not driven by supremely powerful individuals but by the actions of the billions of individuals who populate the world and who are the life—or lives—of humanity.

I personally like the view I first found in Gandhi's writings that there are two histories: (1) the history of wars and governments, of conquest and surrender, of the making and control of great wealth, and (2) the history of people living their everyday lives—making a living, being parts of families and communities, and being devoted to religions that promise one form of immortality or another.

But Hegel has a point. History makes big changes, and powerful leaders make these changes happen—or at least are credited with making them happen. Calling them “world historic individuals” makes sense.

In my mind, this raises two questions about this moment in history:

Is the United States at a turning point in its history? Is Donald Trump a world historic individual?

Let me be clear that I hope this is not a turning point in American history and that Trump and MAGA slip quietly into the past. I think that they are pushing policies that are regressive, that move this nation away from the ideals of liberty, justice, and equality—and away from the progress that was made in the 20th and early 21st centuries to create greater opportunity for people of lower socio-economic status and who are not White.

But I also think that those of us who favor political progress are too quick to dismiss some of Trump's vision for the future as ridiculous. We need to imagine the world in the next century. For example, Trump has proposed that Canada merge with the United States. Ridiculous? Maybe, but think about the history of the United States and its spread from 13 states on the Eastern seaboard



One ^{very} Old Man

to 50 states across the continent, 3000 miles into the Pacific, and north to Alaska. A United States of North America is certainly a possibility by the end of this century, no? Not likely to be on Trump's terms, of course. But it is a possibility.

I think too of the fracturing of the Alliance between the United States and Europe. I personally think that NATO is one of the greatest developments in history, but it is easy enough to imagine that it can be shattered and that new power blocs will emerge if Trump continues on his regressive path.

If the shift away from democracy and these changes in the control of the Earth's land masses and populations take place, the world will be a different place—and Donald Trump will have made it so. He will have been a world historic individual.

I don't believe that we know what the future holds yet. The mid-term elections could swing the control of government away from Trump and his followers, or they could reinforce his power.

Let me repeat that I very much hope that Trump's regressive movement will come to an end with a shift in the control of Congress.

But as my life is nearing its end, I try to imagine what the world will be like after I'm gone.

And, sad to say, I think it is possible that Trump will succeed in moving the pendulum of history. It is possible. No?

