

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2018

Volume 45 Issue 1

- 3 *Matthew S. Brogdon* “Who Would Be Free, Themselves Must Strike the Blow”: Revolt and Rhetoric in Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno*
- 25 *Ariel Helfer* Socrates’s Political Legacy: Xenophon’s Socratic Characters in *Hellenica* I and II
- 49 *Lorraine Smith Pangle* The Radicalness of Strauss’s *On Tyranny*
- 67 *David Polansky & Daniel Schillinger* With Steel or Poison: Machiavelli on Conspiracy
- 87 *Ingrid Ashida* **Book Reviews:** *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu
- 93 *Kevin J. Burns* *Legacies of Losing in American Politics* by Jeffrey Tulis and Nicole Mellow
- 97 *Peter Busch* *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe* by Vickie B. Sullivan
- 103 *Rodrigo Chacón* *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* by Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro
- 109 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Shakespeare’s Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depths in Thirteen Plays* by David Lowenthal
- 119 *Elizabeth C’ de Baca Eastman* *The Woman Question in Plato’s “Republic”* by Mary Townsend
- 125 *Michael P. Foley* *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good* by Frederick Lawrence
- 129 *Raymond Hain* *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart
- 135 *Thomas R. Pope* *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* by Brian A. Smith
- 141 *Lewis Hoss* **Doubting Progress: Two Reviews**  
147 *Eno Trimçev* *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* by Matthew W. Slaboch

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

*Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University

*General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns

*General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)

*Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.  
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth  
W. Thompson

*Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)

*International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier

*Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert

*Copy Editor* Les Harris

*Designer* Sarah Teutschel

*Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

## Doubting Progress

---

Matthew W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 208 pp., \$42.75 (cloth).

---

LEWIS HOSS

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

*lhoss@niu.edu*

In his recent book, Matthew W. Slaboch provides an original and erudite study of an eclectic and generally neglected group of thinkers. Neglected in part, according to Slaboch, because of their unorthodox antipathy towards the belief in “progress,” or “the belief that humans are capable of making lasting improvements—intellectual and scientific, material, moral, and cultural” (4). The study not only sheds valuable light on these thinkers and their contributions to political thought, but also offers a promising illustration of the kind of work that might be done in the burgeoning field of comparative political theory. Slaboch examines various critiques of progress as manifested across German, Russian, and American cultural contexts, with special focus on the criticisms leveled by Arthur Schopenhauer and Oswald Spengler, Leo Tolstoy and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Henry Adams and Christopher Lasch, respectively.

*A Road to Nowhere* begins with the claim that laypeople and students of political theory alike ought to take more seriously the “possibility that long-term, continued progress might be merely a dream,” or “the possibility that progress is more fiction than reality” (3–4). Such a claim, Slaboch acknowledges, is not in keeping with the spirit of modern political thought which traces its lineage to the Age of Enlightenment. Disparate modern thinkers have generally found common ground in their historical optimism, and the

political cultures and discourses shaped by such thinkers have proved overwhelmingly hospitable to the idea of progress. Only a few brave souls have dared to challenge the optimistic spirit of modernity. Slaboch argues that the time is ripe to turn our attention to these historical pessimists because an unusual sense of pessimism now pervades many Western liberal democracies, as evidenced in polling data and the rhetoric surrounding recent political events in the United States and Europe.

It should come as little surprise then that the first chapter of the book is devoted to a philosopher whose name is synonymous with pessimism. Slaboch does an admirable job here of situating his analysis of Arthur Schopenhauer's critique of progress within its German context. Although Schopenhauer showed relatively little interest in political philosophy over the course of his illustrious career, he articulated a philosophy of history that was passionately anti-Hegelian. He understood it was no accident that a transformation in the historical optimism of German thinkers took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, characterized by a shift from the cosmopolitan universalism of Kant and Herder to the chauvinistic nationalism of Fichte and Hegel. For Schopenhauer, this shift was the inevitable result of a sustained faith in progress: there is but a short distance between committing oneself to the vision of a better future and prostrating oneself before an earthly entity powerful enough to realize that vision, namely, the nation-state. Thus, Schopenhauer's critique of progress is bound up with his aversion to the nationalist and statist tendencies associated with the idea. As an alternative to the rectilinear conception of human history, Schopenhauer proposed a conception that cohered with his equally pessimistic metaphysics, in which the "will"—the unchanging essence of reality that unifies all being—animates the world as a blind life force that operates toward no apparent end. Schopenhauer's philosophy leaves no room for lasting happiness, and thus technological and economic advances cannot be said to contribute to man's satisfaction. At best, such developments can result only in boredom. At worst, they intensify human desire and produce restlessness through the sheer magnitude of alluring objects and fleeting pleasures that masquerade as heralds of human progress. Schopenhauer's prescription, given the absence of progress in human affairs, is for the individual to turn inward. Only by eschewing politics and living a life of aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful and sublime can individuals find some respite from a world that is blind and deaf to man's longing for consummation.

In chapter 2, Slaboch examines the idea of progress in nineteenth-century Russian thought, and once again provides an impressively concise overview of the relevant context. For Russian thinkers living in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, ideas about progress were often bound up with questions of Russian identity and the proper Russian stance towards the West. In the public discourse that ensued, “Westernizers” believed the key to Russian progress would be found in embracing the secular rationalism of European thinkers and the political activism of European revolutionaries. “Slavophiles,” on the other hand, believed that limitless progress lay in the direction of communal solidarity and the spiritual values of the Orthodox Church, as against the individualism and materialism associated with European thought. Both sides agreed, however, that in the coming years Russia was destined to become a nation of world-historical significance, and would share in the progressive development that was so evident among their Western neighbors. In this context, Leo Tolstoy stands out for rejecting the idea of progress in his novels and autobiographical writings, and Slaboch provides a fine analysis of the subtle criticisms of progress that emerge throughout *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. An admirer of Schopenhauer, Tolstoy believed that academic historians had failed to identify the forces at work in human history by attributing too much power to the free will of individuals while overlooking the unchanging role played by fatal necessity. For Tolstoy, blind mechanical laws govern man’s desires and thus his actions, without disclosing any discernible historical purpose. Yet while *historical* progress is a chimera, Tolstoy maintained that something resembling it operates at the level of individuals, the fostering of which lies within the purview of religious faith. Tolstoy’s views on fate and faith culminated in a philosophy of Christian anarcho-pacifism. In a manner reminiscent of Schopenhauer, Tolstoy advocated for the turning away from politics in order to focus on inward spiritual progress. Slaboch rounds out the chapter with an insightful contrast between Tolstoy’s criticism of progress and those of Tzar Nicholas I, a conservative autocrat, and Nikolai Danilevsky, a cyclical theorist and ardent proponent of pan-Slav unification, to illustrate that historical pessimism is amenable to a variety of political prescriptions.

Turning in chapter 3 to America, Slaboch draws a similar contrast between the criticisms of progress leveled by the historian Henry Adams and his brother Brooks. While adopting an interpretation of the American founding that emphasizes a commonly held belief in progress among the founders, and highlighting the general ubiquity of historical optimism in early American political culture, Slaboch focuses primarily on the proponents

of progress among nineteenth-century American historians. Not only were most historians optimists, but they interpreted human progress in light of the exceptional nature of American democracy. For those like George Bancroft and John Lothrop Motley, progress was identical with the spread of liberty and equality as the principles of social organization, the future advancement of which depended largely on the vanguard role of the American democracy in world history. As the study of history became more professionalized in the late nineteenth century and historians strove to become more scientific, those like John Fiske and Herbert Baxter Adams appropriated the language of evolutionary biology to defend notions of progress in which the American nation still played a central, even critical role. Unlike his peers, Henry Adams (also a close reader of Schopenhauer) was an unflinching critic of progress. Slaboch argues persuasively that Adams's 1880 novel *Democracy* indicates the degree to which his historical pessimism was linked to an aversion toward democracy. Where others saw the American model as a beacon of human progress, Adams saw democracy as corrupt and inefficient, an indicator of decadence. Being as scientific-minded in his approach to history as his late nineteenth-century peers, he eschewed the language of biology in favor of that of physics. For Adams, physics teaches of "the constant dissipation of energy" and the universal law that "all grow old and die"—lessons which can be applied to human history as aptly as those of biological evolution (80). Far from progressing, human history tends towards decline and eventual catastrophe. Henry's brother Brooks Adams, also a historian, agreed that humanity is largely governed by laws beyond its control which are guiding it toward a cataclysmic end. But whereas Henry's political conclusion was weary resignation in the face of democratic decadence, Brooks argued that American imperialism could provide a temporary solution, staving off for a time the inevitable collapse.

The final chapter augments the comparative approach of the whole by adding a cross-temporal dimension to the study. Here, Slaboch examines twentieth-century critiques of progress from each of the cultural contexts treated earlier. In the German context, Oswald Spengler elaborated a cyclical philosophy of history that allowed for the rising of particular cultures within a broader framework of civilizational decline. On this basis Spengler could remain generally pessimistic, while optimistically advocating for German nationalism and praising the fascist leadership of Benito Mussolini as a model of the political "Caesarism" needed for a nation to rise in the midst of surrounding decadence. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, on the other hand, remained much closer to his predecessor Tolstoy in his historical pessimism, rejecting

grand political solutions to the human condition and instead locating the true phenomenon of human progress in the soul of the individual. His lack of faith in the Enlightenment promise of limitless human development was shared by his American contemporary Christopher Lasch, who argued that “the modern conception of progress depends on a positive assessment of the proliferation of wants” that is no longer plausible (105). While equally pessimistic about the trajectory of modern history, Lasch too found a glimmer of hope in certain nonpolitical solutions at the level of the individual, family, and local community.

Slaboch’s most significant substantive conclusion is to establish a link between certain forms of historical pessimism and corresponding proposals for action. The pattern he finds does not parallel national or cultural context; rather, the political prescriptions seem to depend “on whether the authors in question view history as a bumpy but straight road to nowhere (or worse, to hell), or whether they discern in the passing of time a pattern of recurring hills and dales” (111). Pessimists of the former sort tend to be “antipolitical thinkers who seek refuge in art, religion, or intellectual pursuits,” while the “cyclical theorists” are generally “receptive to grand political projects” and tend to “argue that their own nations are fated to play important roles in global affairs” (111–12). Slaboch seems rather sympathetic to the antipolitical thinkers and their conclusions, entertaining the possibility that a significant amount of political disengagement or nonparticipation might arise from principled stances rather than mere political ignorance or apathy (116–17). While Leo Strauss presented “return” as the fundamental alternative to “progress,” Slaboch presents a third alternative: “withdrawal.” Yet the prudence of this alternative is not self-evident, and its potential ramifications seem to demand further reflection.

---

Matthew W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 208 pp., \$42.75 (cloth).

---

ENO TRIMÇEV

UNIVERSITY OF GREIFSWALD, GERMANY

*eno.trimcev@uni-greifswald.de*

Matthew Slaboch's book is a timely response to our disenchanted historical moment—the hung-over morning after the “end of history” (6). In fact, as one plausible way of counting would have it, this is our second morning-after: the Gulag and the Holocaust woke us up after Hegel, and now, after Fukuyama's Hegel-lite version, terrorism, nationalism, and a depressing series of political earthquakes in the West are doing the job. To these two moments correspond two night-before feasts of progress: the first was a nineteenth-century *philosophy* of history and the second was a twentieth-century *political* tale spun out of that earlier act of philosophical braggadocio. These two are nicely reflected in Slaboch's account, which focuses on the nineteenth-century spoilsports—Arthur Schopenhauer, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry Adams in Germany, Russia, and America, respectively—while their twentieth-century successors—Oswald Spengler, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Christopher Lasch—are given a brusquer treatment in a separate chapter. Neatly, the Germans are the philosophers, the Russians are the writers, and the Americans are the historians. The book may be read as a kind of reconciliation with our second hangover, marked by plunging rates of political participation and ever larger cracks in the facade of democratic representation. It may just be, says Slaboch, that nonparticipation (117), for example, may come with its own silver lining. Although Slaboch does not say so explicitly, it is possible to perceive through the detritus of progress new possibilities for a reasonable way of life. But—and here comes the crucial *but*—in order to see that silver lining, we must refuse to collapse reason into politics, that is, to turn the political into *the* vehicle of progress.

If Slaboch's main aim is to show that critics of progress were "not mere defeatists" (4), then he has succeeded. He divides his pessimists into two groups: "critics of politics," who see history as a (somewhat) straight line with no happy end, and "cyclical theorists," who are not averse to political engagement (111). Interestingly, the critics are the heroes of the book while cyclical theorists play more of a background role—Brooks Adams, Oswald Spengler, and Nikolai Danilevsky count among them. The reason for that coincidence remains unclear, but that may not be a drawback; the book after all also aims to speak to "our situation." Slaboch moves comparatively across cultures—three great ones—and along them, from culture, to thinker, then to his heirs (in the case of Schopenhauer, for example, Nietzsche and Buckhardt), allowing the reader to get a sense of different cultural notions of progress and their interrogation by the pessimist or declinist heroes of the book. That these moves—backwards, forwards, and sideways—occur without any jarring effects speaks to the virtuosity of Slaboch's narrative. He is undoubtedly a storyteller: the narrative flows, easy, self-assured, and even playful (cf. 88, 89), making the reading experience pleasant despite the daunting range of the materials.

But there may be such a thing as too much comparative methodological clarity, especially when it comes to philosophical materials. This is more the case when the materials are at their most philosophical, in the first chapter: Schopenhauer with his predecessors and interlocutors. Schopenhauer's polemics against the philosophies of history then in vogue remain unclear. Why exactly was Hegel a mere "scribbler of nonsense" or "common mind" (12)? Or, what is the meaning of key philosophical terms such as "the will" or "metaphysical optimism" (and how does the latter differ from "eudemonistic optimism," 19)? Schopenhauer's candidacy as a crown-critic of progressivism seems an obvious choice, but his apolitical thought makes him less so. If Schopenhauer "held politics in...low regard" (24), then why pick his thoughts on the matter? After all, the lowly things are hardly worthy of engaging one's understanding. No wonder then that Schopenhauer's statements on political things such as popular participation, property rights, and the free press (24) fall rather flat. His mind was elsewhere.

And this elsewhere—philosophy—is sorely missing in the treatment of both Schopenhauer and his context. Slaboch's contextualizing discussion skips a bit too quickly along the surface. We learn, for example, that the nice Kant was not as nice as Herder, because the former was more state-centric and his cosmopolitanism less sincere (14–15). These piecemeal observations,

I suspect, follow from the refusal to grapple with the philosophical core of their thought (in the case of Kant, for example, man's "unsocial sociability"<sup>1</sup> as the irrational heart of progress which raises questions about its meaning and destination that are left untouched in the book). But, if these observations from outside the materials may be unwished for in the case of Kant, they become seriously detrimental in the case of Hegel. Here Slaboch is peculiarly unable to come clean about the sources of his own convictions. To say that Hegel should have perhaps seen "the state as something that limits its individual freedoms, as people often do" (17), or to depict him as a nationalist (16), is to ignore Hegel *tout court*. Hegel's thought had nothing to do with prescriptive philosophy; for him the legitimacy of the given—that is, of modernity and the state—is precisely the problem. But the difference is that, contrary to the American constitutional and the larger Lockean tradition, on which Slaboch often leans, he does not begin from a predetermined notion of freedom which would then allow him to think a state appropriate to that principle—whether "fat," in Schopenhauer's lingo, or lean and mean, in the Founders' variety. I suspect that by ignoring Hegel, Slaboch not only denies himself a powerful tool for understanding the theme of his book—the meaning and end of progress—but he commits the cardinal sin of progressive thought: to understand others not as they understood themselves.

Even if the price becomes less steep, the lightness continues with Schopenhauer's heirs. Is it possible to grapple with Nietzsche's view of progress without consideration of its final product, *Zarathustra's* "last men"? The discussion is not without interest, however. It underlines, strikingly, that the more enthusiastic the Germans' embrace of the philosophical notion of progress grew, the more regressive German politics became; the two, as ever, did not go hand in hand. Surely there is a lesson for us somewhere in there.

But as we ascend from the dark, heavy thoughts of the Teutons to the spirited intellectualism of the Russians, the strengths of Slaboch's narrative skills come more into evidence: at once synthetic and graceful, the narrative starts moving in ever greater harmony with the materials. While there are bones to pick along the way—can we, for example, make sense of Dostoyevsky's faith in "universal brotherhood" (49) without his religiosity?—the story flows pleasantly and productively. The succinct analysis of the unity

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Fourth Proposition in "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44–45.

of Tolstoy's fiction through its metaphors and symbolisms is enriched by its placement in the Russian cultural context.

The book then comes completely on its own into the unbounded pessimism of Henry Adams and its American context.<sup>2</sup> The story of Adams's rigorously pessimistic—and hence downright “un-American,” if we may be permitted the McCarthyism—view of his country's singular experiment in democracy flows with analytical and narrative rigor. Not content with the evidence presented to his senses and elaborated in his fiction, Adams turned to history for explanation, running into paradoxes along the way—paradoxes that paralyzed him, but not his brother Brooks. What was it about Adams's first-rate intellect that held him continuously back? Does this paralysis hint at a contradiction in Adams's psyche: here was, perhaps, a philosophic psyche—“a born spectator,” Judith Shklar calls him<sup>3</sup>—committed to the world of action in a Puritan milieu where the good was measured by its use? Be that as it may, the dialogue between Henry and Brooks tells us a great deal about the American version of antiprogressivism.

Moving to the whole of Slaboch's project, there seems to be an originary confusion that underlies what otherwise is a wonderful and in large part well-executed project. Slaboch, it seems to me, conflates the philosophical nature of the idea of the “end of history” with the political thesis that considers it disproven by actual history (6). Perhaps the misunderstanding may be gestured at not by what is in his analysis, but by what has been left out of it. The meaning of the concepts that are present in the book—progress,<sup>4</sup> history, metaphysical optimism/pessimism, etc.—for the authors and for Slaboch himself is only sporadically clarified. Moreover, two concepts are conspicuously absent in this lineup: technology and time. If we are to meaningfully tackle the first two questions of the book on the meaning and end of progress (4), these two concepts almost impose themselves on any answer. And they show the question of progress to be of deeply philosophical import. Technology is decisive in two senses: first, because it brings about the necessarily progressive nature of the contemporary world, and second, because it abolishes the natural limits

---

<sup>2</sup> Here too a bit more unpacking may have helped; certainly, the idea of progress was ubiquitous in America (67), but this—be it of the religious Whitfieldian or the political Jeffersonian variety—was radically unlike Hegel's philosophical or the totalitarians' political idea of progress.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Shklar, “*The Education of Henry Adams*, by Henry Adams,” in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 81.

<sup>4</sup> While Slaboch justifies his lack of definition (116), the effort to untangle the philosophical from the political dimensions would have been appropriate to the materials.

of human action while transforming its principle. That is, under its rule the very nature of human life is up for grabs. Its progressivism is therefore qualified in a twofold sense: First, it does not permit an end state; technology is the overcoming of every technologically constituted resting point. Second, and incomprehensibly for us, it abolishes the very engine of progress, that is to say, action (or Kant's "unsocial sociability"). Progressive techno-civilization thus becomes, as Slaboch's title has it, *the* "road to nowhere." Yet, at the same time, technology *is* a sort of destination; an infinite point where, from this side of history, it furnishes the only "authoritative allocation of values" (morals) and, hence, power (politics) for us. As Nietzsche made terrifyingly clear, to that end point belongs a *justice* (of the strong), a *principle* (efficiency), and, accordingly, a *disorder* ("immense" or unlimited wars). It is, therefore, a complete world. Meditating—for thinking through may well be made impossible by our incapacity to grasp the look (*eidos*) of techno-being—on this paradox may well be a precondition for grappling with the question of progress as that question arises for us.

The other missing concept is time. The experience of time is presumed by the problem of progress; whether it is the historically finite and linear time of Christianity or the progressive linear time of the Enlightenment, the experience of time bears directly on the kinds of progress available *in* time. To illustrate: techno-progress, as a reading of Hegel would have it, abolishes time, and with it science and therefore progress.<sup>5</sup> More immediately, however, unpacking the experiences of time of the thinkers in question would strengthen, I suspect, our understanding of the kinds of progress presupposed by each.

With these two gaps in mind, the book skirts around *the* question most important for us: whether we inhabitants of the "new world"<sup>6</sup> are on the way to becoming sages or last men. Slaboch thus domesticates the problem of progress to the point where it becomes unphilosophical and hence manageable. The elegance of this evasion, however, is more than enough cause for admiration.

<sup>5</sup> See especially chapter 5 of Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 100–149.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), sect. 11–12.