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The End of History, Acceleration and Chronopolitics: A Philosophical Look at Temporality

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Abstract

Our current societies are characterised by a lightning acceleration beyond the control of politics putting an end to history. This is what we aim to deconstruct by showing that the historical category of acceleration intervenes in a variety of ways in the regimes of historicity that characterise it, with varying rhythms. In fact, our era comprises several historical regimes, in which the trendiest can obscure emerging or minority models. We defend the idea that there is no inertia in politics, but rather a political acceleration that matches the lightning speed of the accelerationist emergency. The polychronicity of our societies is framed by a political rhythmology. The regime of historicity specific to acceleration leaves room for political solutions which, despite the difficulties constitute a viable means of collectively coping with the majestic waltz of acceleration in our societies. To achieve this goal, we used the method of direct analysis.

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Introduction

The pace of change in the orientations of action and the forms of practice distinguishes the time of life from that of politics. Universal changes in society should therefore be accompanied by political acceleration. The fact is that the society temporal structures no longer follow the temporal perspectives of politics, so that we are entitled to think that there is a time lag between the differentiated functional systems of the duration of the handling of political problems and the hypermobility of society.

Behind this dazzling mobility, the underlying structures of politics seem to be petrifying. There is a kind of disenchantment with politics and a spiral of events that sounds the knell of history. History has become a self-

perpetuating process; politics that is supposed to regulate it is slipping into inertia, and that is the problem. To counter such a feeling, we put forward the assumption that our era is ushering in a historical polychrony that parallels a political rhythmology. Does the spiral of historical acceleration disqualify politics' ability to react? The answer to this question, which concentrates all the density of this problem, has almost inevitably led us to recall, first and foremost, the thesis of an end to politics backed by an end to history. Next, we will focus on theories which posit the idea that our era is defined by mobility, and which reduce the counter-examples of the acceleration of life to consequences which confirm this basic axiom, or to marginal exceptions. This has allowed us, in the second part of this reflection, to return to certain conceptions of the acceleration of history, which

they assimilate to a loss of political vision generating a loss of everything, and whose solution would be acceleration in order to hasten its apogee or determine its resonance. In the third part, we have not offered a solution to the disintegration between acceleration and politics, but rather, we have offered a critique of the critiques of acceleration and chronopolitics by returning to the time of politics and its capacity to structure the present-day society. In the final part of this development, we have demonstrated that there is a plurality of non-linear and intertwined temporalities that make it possible to rehabilitate politics. This approach should enable us to show that there is a multiplicity of historical temporalities that make the idea of acceleration questionable.

The End of Politics, the End of History

The thesis of the history unstoppable mobility and of the petrification of structures sustains the idea of disenchantment with politics backed by an end to history. This idea is fuelled by the conviction that our era has created subsystems that have become 'largely independent of one another' Hartmut (2010), with heterogeneous time horizons and rhythms. This is why we can see that the light round of politics is faster than academic time and slower than economic time. The seasons of democracy, subject to the inclemency of decision-making and deliberation processes, appear to be desynchronised and even behind the fast pace of financial markets and technological progress as has put Hartmut in the following:

All these developments seem to indicate that the time for politics is over. Because politics continues to lag behind the transformations in the economy and society in terms of both its time horizon and the speed at which it works, it can no longer play its role (which is still culturally assigned to it) of setting the pace of social change or *shaping* history (Hartmut, 2010).

One should notice that this question of political delay trapped in its own temporality is not new. It has fuelled a debate between W. Lippmann and J. Dewey in the first half of the twentieth century. Lippmann and J. Dewey. Both scholars took as starting point the observation that the society was being brutally accelerated as a result of the Industrial Revolution, but whereas Dewey thought that democracy should play a channelling role by directing and controlling acceleration with a view to adapting it to the lives of individuals, Lippmann called on politics to adapt man to his new ecosystem. In the

face of acceleration, it is the category of adaptation that the two authors have promoted as the new political imperative, thus joining Stiegler (2019). The category of adaptation assumes that acceleration is uncontrollable that this self-perpetuating spiral reinforces the structures of society and that in the long term it can only lead to the end of the political project and its vocation to make history.

Politics is forced to adopt a reactive attitude to the torrential wave of events. It gets bogged down in 'do-it-yourself strategies' devised to suit times. The global acceleration process is so devastating that it would be a 'profoundly unrealistic vision' (Hartmut, 2010) to consider applying the emergency brakes through 'determined political intervention'. There is no longer any lasting solution, not even a grain of sand capable of stopping the accelerating spiral. There are only '*residual or reactive phenomena*' (Ibid.) that cannot stop the majestic waltz of acceleration. Acceleration has become a total category of life, the Iron Law of history. It is at the helm of our society and has become an organising principle of modern collective life. It is a 'new form of totalitarianism', 'a totalitarian force within modern society and modern society itself' Hartmut (2012). The alternative to acceleration is either a radical revolution or a final catastrophe, which are the potential forms of the 'end of history' through which the technical and political meaning of lightning acceleration meets its primitive and eschatological form.

The catastrophic spiral of life accelerating its fleeting legislation brings to mind the 2010 film *Unstoppable* by American director Tony Scott. Inspired by real events, the film tells the story of how a train transporting extremely dangerous products is deprived of its driver by a faulty switch, with the automatic acceleration control locked in the 'on' position.

The train continued to accelerate until it reached a viaduct in a large conurbation, where the section of track did not match the train's excessive speed. The only way out was for it to derail and spill its toxic cargo onto the local population. The company had only a hundred minutes to avoid disaster, and this meant taking back control of the crazy train. In the end, there was a *happy ending*, a classic Hollywood ending. Denzel Washington, playing an experienced driver, managed to regain control of the train, with the help of his inexperienced colleague who was to replace him. The moral of this film, which is perhaps over-optimistic, is that wisdom and experience are the remedy for the acceleration of society.

Unstoppable is the image of the acceleration of history as staged by the author we have mentioned so far, with the fundamental difference that, in his scenario, no one manages to get back on the train, and there is no happy ending in sight. This perception of acceleration is true when we consider his first book, *Accélération*. In his second one, he proposes a solution to acceleration that does not involve braking strategies, but the establishment of a new relationship with the world, a relationship with neo-Romantic overtones, ‘resonance’ Hartmut (2018). The concept of resonance, as we know, refers to the idea of harmony, of agreement; it is a kind of ‘response relationship’ in which very varied entities ‘speak to each other’, ‘listen to each other’, precisely, ‘correspond to each other’. Hartmut sets out to draw up a list of concordances by making a Prévert-like inventory of the forms of resonance, which, from our point of view, has the merit of considering of the different contexts, thus giving them a precise meaning. Thus, the multiplication and coordination of criteria of appropriateness, the homogeneity of tastes through the existence of relatively unified tendencies, the diversity of life situations that should not obscure the profound consensus on which primitive life has functioned all along are some of the translations of this resonance.

But the difficulty lies in applying a concept that is both normative and descriptive to such diverse cases. Hartmut even integrates the concept of acceleration, which is already very globalised, into that of resonance, the deficit of which is said to be the clandestine cause of the latter: ‘It is possible that the fear of hearing nothing, of coming up against nothing but a mute and indifferent world, is a secret but powerful spring of the spiral of social acceleration in which the subjects of late modernity are swept’ (*Ibid.*). If we are swept up in the cavalcade of events for lack of resonance—of ‘vibration’, of ‘oscillation’; notions implied by this resonance—there is good reason to question the meaning that these concepts from physics can have in the field of historical reality. The difficulty lies in the determination and reliability of instruments for objectively measuring the degree of resonance of the social world. Hartmut has not forgotten this, and has suggested that only half-jokingly, measuring the quality of life [its resonance] according to an *index of the eye luminosity*, or ‘via indicators such as laughter, dance, song (and perhaps also *tears*)’ (*Ibid.*). Is this answer acceptable? Absolutely not.

There are still questions about the ways in which resonance can be empirically attested, because its implementation is out of control, if not ‘unavailable’.

Hartmut knows this, reason why he ultimately reduces politics to ethics, to the good life to which resonance is supposed to provide the answer. This is no more and no less than a dilution of ethics into the psychological, or even the emotional, which has become the instrument for measuring the degree of resonance of a society.

We should not lose sight of the idea that politics has come to an irretrievable end, having lost all means of control over our accelerating societies: ‘... politics no longer appears as a stimulator of social change, but as an ambulance *lagging behind and in pain*’ (*Ibid.*). It is ‘remarkably powerless’ in the face of the new economic organisation. It is becoming increasingly ‘unavailable’, unable to master the ‘politico-social’ world ‘at a breathtakingly pace’ Hartmut (2020), as if the acceleration of society is paid for by the failure of politics.

The End of a Promethean Policy

Before returning to the major issues that elude philosophy, which reiterates the indisputable verdict of the end of politics and, consequently, the end of history, we will look at other cases that paint a broad picture of this disenchantment. N. Srnicek and A. Williams have revived this thesis with their “*Manifeste pour une politique accélérationniste*”. This text rehabilitates politics in the tradition of Marxism and pays homage to the *Communist Manifesto*. The authors, who were doctoral students in England at the time of publication of their manifesto, defend the idea of an acceleration of society and an emaciation of politics, a ‘paralysis of the political imagination’.

They argue that the apparent acceleration behind today’s capitalism places it in a permanent circularity like an imprisoned hamster. Capitalism does not produce any real progress; it is content to reproduce the same consumer objects in identical versions that include only marginal improvements. For these doctoral students, the solution to the problem of acceleration lies in a new form of politics.

According to them, it is not a question of combating acceleration but rather of using it as a favourable phenomenon to the construction of a generalised post-capitalist society: ‘An accelerationist politics seeks instead to preserve the gains of late capitalism, while pushing them far beyond what its value system, governance structures and mass pathologies can allow’ (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). This is why ‘We declare

that only a Promethean politics of maximum mastery over society and its environment can confront global problems and achieve a victory over capital' (*Ibid.*).

There are two explanations for the Marxian lineage claimed by our authors. On the one hand, Marx defended a dialectic according to which the victory of capitalism had to be accelerated in order to overcome it. In his 'speech on free trade', delivered to the Brussels Democratic Association on January, 7th 1848, he acknowledged that free trade was good for the protectionist system but bad for the workers. This apparently paradoxical position was based on the conviction that free trade would create an irrefragable antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which could only hasten the coming of the social revolution. On the other hand, Marx saw the determination of a completely different relationship to time – no longer subject to wage labour and production – made possible by the development of machines, as soon as capitalism was overcome. The two authors even hinted at this question by referring to the desire shared by all men to work less. The idea is that we need to accelerate to hasten the apogee.

It has to be said that the "Manifeste pour une politique accélérationniste", like any student work, lacks the architectural rigour of the work of the masters its authors claim to be. The extreme generality of their proposals, coupled with a lack of concrete examples of the kind of politics they wanted to see, and their silence on post-capitalist control of technology, ultimately rendered their solutions unacceptable. Even their subsequent book, *Accélérer le futur – Post-travail & post-capitalisme* (2017), in which they argue that empowerment and a universal basic income should make it possible to considerably reduce the legal duration of paid work, did not feel it necessary to return to the difficulties left in the dark by the 'Manifesto'. Better still, the reference to Lenin, another model evoked, and the diatribes against democracy as a horizontal process inevitably doomed to inefficiency and which must be reinforced by 'secrecy, verticality and exclusion' raise questions about the identity of the politics they are calling for [Wahnich \(2016\)](#).

Other scholars have addressed the question of the acceleration of history by linking it to politics. Halévy mentioned the French Revolution, which destabilised the country and opened the Pandora's Box of acceleration. He condemns the acceleration when associated with violence, which ultimately weakens politics. He quotes

the passage from the *Philosophy of History* in which Hegel praises 1798 stating that all thinking beings celebrated that day, and a subtle tenderness quivered within them, as if, for the first time, the world had encountered the divine' Hegel quoted by [Halévy \(1961\)](#). Halévy admired 1789 but condemned the acceleration of the revolution, which was dangerous for politics because it was 'a new fanaticism destined to take root in people's souls'. The other argument he puts forward against the acceleration of history is that of a loss of political vision, which generates a complete loss. Because everything moves so fast, the future becomes difficult to predict, nothing can be planned any more, the future becomes uncontrollable, life becomes a process that spirals out of control. This is the end of politics, because fear and hope are extinguished together, because the future and the universe have become unthinkable. And this remains the stupor (*Ibid.*).

He believes that the men of his century have given up any idea of politically controlling history because in the past, they followed events with naive attention. They prided themselves on understanding it and, to a certain extent, guiding it [...] but today, this pretension no longer exists (*Ibid.*). People have given up trying to understand the world in which they live, because they have been swept along by the dizzying spiral of events that is dragging them into the abyss. Faced with this flood of catastrophism, Halévy refers to Gaston Roupnel, who advocates a mystical doctrine based on a spirit of 'sacrifice and love', supposed to ensure a happy passage through the perils. This *Deus ex machina* cannot convince anyone and even reactivates the very fear it is supposed to dispel.

Criticism of Acceleration and Chronopolitics

The authors we have called on in our development are all from different sensibilities, but share the conviction that it is possible to use the concept of acceleration to construct a representation of history or a philosophy, the aim of which is a critique of our times. The acceleration of life escapes the careful planning of politics, feeds itself and becomes an autonomous movement. The loss of control over life is accompanied by a loss of meaning, and of political control. This critical diagnosis made by Hartmut (through the spiral of acceleration), Srnicek and Williams (with the image of the acceleration of society and the decline of politics), Halévy (with the image of a revolutionary acceleration, which is dangerous for politics), denounces political inertia and proclaims the end of history. Other scholars not mentioned above have

gone further, proclaiming *L'Obsolescence del'homme* replaced in its function as the subject of history and to which a new tempo "Prestissimo" is printed Jonas (1998) denounces this 'seizure of power by technology', whose 'torrential, exponential acceleration, which we realise with dread, threatens to get out of hand' politically.

These authors were right to think that social time is no longer the same as that of our democracies, which leads to disconnections and even tensions in times of crisis when the urgent need for political leaders to act profoundly reduces their room for manoeuvre. The criticism of these studies is that they proclaim political disenchantment to be inevitable, if not definitive. We are not unaware that the substance of these speeches is eminently progressive, but in their form they are reminiscent of what Albert O. Hirschman calls the 'rhetoric of the past'. Hirschman has called 'reactionary rhetoric', relying on the 'argument of inanity' to reduce political efforts to improve things to nothing, because they are doomed to failure because they clash with the deep structures of reality Hirschman (1991).

As a reminder, Hirschman distinguishes three typical figures of reactionary rhetoric: inanity, perverse effect and endangerment. R. Hartmut, for example, used the figure of the 'perverse effect' to argue that political projects aimed at solving society's problems 'tend to lead to the opposite of what was promised' (Hartmut, 2020). In fact, as A. Hirschman, history shows that failures are not more inevitable than successes. The discourse announcing the end of politics, like that decreeing the end of history, is no more than a 'performative disguised as a constant' (Bourdieu, 1997). No end to history, be it catastrophic or happy, is on the agenda.

Our century has freed itself from the primacy of hard ideologies and the disciplinary schema characteristic of the heroic stage of democracies, and has recycled itself into kit and express service. Which is not to say that we have broken all the ties that bind us to our origins, to stability: our volute society is not emerging from the infatuation with meaning, it is entering its flexible moment, it is not emerging from political management, and it is fulfilling it in the inconstancy of things. It does not inaugurate a post-history, the Hegelian-Marxist end of history as analysed by Kojève in the late 1950s. The completed constancy of history does not mean the disappearance of the anticipatory capacity of politics in favour of pure frugality without historical negativity. It

does mean a new relationship with ideals, a new investment in democratic values and, as historical transformations accelerate, a greater collective openness to the test of the future, even in the delights of the present. The dissolution of the great humanising referents, the permanent circulation of things and meaning, the terminal of acceleration makes resistance to change regress; it propels a humanity that is more deliberately historical and fussier when it comes to democratic demands.

We are not saying that our society is defined by a political supersystem that manipulates and rationally squares it in all its interstices. It must be reaffirmed that our society is not a whole that can be understood solely in the light of the acceleration process. The category of acceleration may intersect with political urgency, sometimes re-articulating it, but it does not absorb it into its own logic. We do not claim that politics homogenises the shifting diversity, but it always makes it possible to grasp the dominant historical trend in order to restructure certain parts of our collective universe. The idea of our contemporary societies being organised under the law of the imperative renewal and accelerated obsolescence is certainly that of scholars attentive to modernity, but with the particularity that it remains analysed within the conceptual framework inherited from the revolutionary spirit. It is blind to the fact that the radical-subversive perspective was itself embroiled in the accelerationist vogue. In this adventure, the category of acceleration has been largely ignored, and its real effects on history and politics are far removed from those castigated by those in revolt and, in many respects, by common sense. With acceleration, the cunning of reason is summoned to the podium of history: beneath the radicalness of the accelerating pace operates constancy, beneath the escalation of the spiral patiently continues the centuries-old conquest of human freedom.

The discourse on the end of history and politics is even complicit in the neoliberal ideology that would have politics be at the mercy of the economy. When we look at the broadest aspects of the temporality of politics, we realise that it is not as powerless as all that. While politics does not set the temporal norms that govern society, it does determine the frameworks within which these norms operate. One of the strong actions of politics is the reduction in working hours accepted in Europe in the twentieth century, or recently the 'right to disconnect', on this point we could usefully refer to the work of Bouton (2017). We understand that the question of acceleration leading to the end of history in fact poses

the problem of chronopolitics. R. Hartmut has put and I have translated in the terms:

‘The fact of knowing who defines the rhythm, duration, *tempo*, order of succession and synchronisation of events and activities is the arena in which conflicts of interest and the struggle for power are played out. *Chronopolitics* is therefore a central component of any form of sovereignty and, as Paul Virilio never tires of asserting, in history it is generally the fastest that imposes its sovereignty’ (Hartmut, 2010).

This reference to Virilio (1977) is intended to lay the foundations for a theory of late modernity in which politics would always lag behind the economy, so that chronopolitics would ultimately be doomed to failure, crushed by the lightning mobility of society. This view is very simplistic in that it limits political action on time to a race against time, the aim of which is to be very fast. The idea that political time lags behind economic time is highly questionable. The labour market, for example, and we see how quickly the government takes measures to reduce the unemployment rate, while the labour market takes months or even years to ‘reverse the curve’. In this area, the pace of reform and the political agenda are too fast. We will be told that on the financial markets, the frenetic pace of the economy is faster than that of democratic processes. This is true, but it is politics that regulates the economy and legislates to regulate high-frequency trading. So it is not outdated, it is not desynchronised with the ultra-fast sophisticated algorithms of the economy. We are not saying that banking lobbies do not influence political arbitration to the point of thwarting chronopolitics, but this is often an issue of a game of interest, not acceleration.

Legislation takes away with one hand the freedom it has given to the economy with the other. So it is not a question of desynchronisation but of power management. And the recent Covid-19 crisis is irrefutable confirmation of the power of politics to influence the economy. In every country in the world, governments have done their utmost to reduce the number of sick and dead as much as possible, at any price. In the meantime, the machine of economic acceleration has ground to a temporary halt. This ‘miracle’ seduced the supporters of the thesis that politics is powerless against economics, to the point that Hartmut (2020) could not help celebrating it during the first containment: ‘it was we humans who, by political decision and after deliberation, put the brakes on! The virus is obviously not corroding our planes. It is not destroying our factories. It is not forcing us to stay at

home. It is our political deliberation and collective action that is doing that. We are the ones doing it!

Historical Polychrony, Political Rhythmology

The uncontrollable spiral of acceleration, leading to the end of politics and consequently to the end of history, has given rise to a theory of the *Discordance of Times* (Charle, 2011), or even a conflict between social time and political time. The aim of this paper is not to accept or reject the acceleration of society. Our aim is rather to clarify the measures that need to be taken when handling this concept. When we consider things, we easily realise that the criteria of acceleration can be valid as long as we apply them to specific cases and do not turn them into a general maxim to condemn modernity. Their application must be contextualised, including the cases under consideration and the type of acceleration in question. The very idea of an acceleration of society or history is debatable. Koselleck’s nuance is illuminating as reported in the following:

“Is history accelerating? The question is: ”[...] acceleration does exist, but it is an acceleration not *of* history, but only *within* history, according to the degree of experience, whether this is defined as initially political or initially technical or economic’ (Koselleck, 2011).

The category of acceleration is a good heuristic tool for describing certain major political and technological developments within modernity, but it becomes nonsensical if we apply it to history in general; if we talk about the acceleration *of* history. Even the expression ‘acceleration *in* history’ needs to be used with care, because there are accelerations in histories and accelerations in history. This is why we propose that we apply the *historical category of acceleration* to certain phenomena observed in history. This avoids manipulating singular collectives: ‘Acceleration’ and ‘History’, which, incidentally, mix different realities and run the risk of defending a philosophy of history tinged with fatalism and pessimism: History is thought according to a necessary principle, a general law, with a single course that unfolds in linear and homogeneous time. We do not support the idea that the concept of acceleration is a ‘collective hallucination’, as did Rosset (2012). This thesis is just as false as that of generalised acceleration.

There are undoubtedly underlying trends in modernity that lend credence to the idea that many processes are speeding up, and this can give rise to a widespread

impression of emergency. We need to differentiate between these types of acceleration—social, political, technical and economic—in order to analyse them more effectively. We also need to bear in mind the undeniable reality that these processes are often intertwined. Typification and interweaving alone are not enough; they need to be categorised and a finer distinction made between the objects under consideration, the population into which they fit, and the geographical areas they occupy. Individual collectives can only give a global account, whereas a contextual approach reveals the adhesion, resistance and different rhythms according to the fields studied. To achieve this, we need to take account of the ‘polychrony’ of societies, to use the term coined by Hall (1984). For this American anthropologist, the word refers to a behaviour symbolic of the acceleration of the pace of life, ‘*multitasking*’, which consists of doing several things at once, juggling tasks. For the purposes of this study, we give this word a diametrically opposed meaning. It means ‘a heterogeneous multiplicity of incommensurable times’ Bensaude-Vincent (2014), a multiplicity of intertwined, non-linear temporalities that need to be untangled without giving in to the temptation to cut the Gordian knot.

Behind the monochrony of acceleration, there is a polychrony. There is a plurality of temporalities with different more or less rapid rhythms, different time scales, and different articulations between the past, the present and the future. In order to bring out the major figures of this polychrony, it seems to us that Hartog’s (2014) concept of a regime of historicity may be useful, provided that we do not make presentism the only model available for the present era. As Baschet (2018) puts it, ‘there is never, in any given epoch, a single, homogeneous regime of historicity’. In any given period, there are in fact always several regimes of historicity, several modes of temporality and several relationships to spatiality. A dominant model sometimes emerges from this multiplicity, but it is only a provisional illusion of globality that obscures other historical experiences that have been declared to be in the minority, or that are in the process of forming.

But the question arises as to what would happen if this spiral of acceleration really did get out of hand and brought about the end of politics. This unprecedented situation shows just how appalling this thesis, if true, would be, as it would be tantamount to waiting quietly, doing nothing, for the flood to arrive. However, this is not the case for the moment. The regime of historicity

specific to acceleration leaves room for political solutions which, despite the difficulties they encounter and however inadequate they may be, nonetheless exist and are undoubtedly the only viable means of dealing collectively with the polychrony of our societies. There is therefore no need to hasten the apogee of accelerating value systems, as N. Srnicek and A. Williams, but to establish a political acceleration commensurate with the emergency of lightning mobility in society. Better still, the key lies not in the response to the increased acceleration of our society but in the harmonisation of all the rhythms that weave the fabric of our history. Polychrony and harmonisation of historical regimes: that is the challenge of modernity.

Conclusion

Our current societies are characterised by an exponential acceleration that is beyond the control of politics and is putting an end to history. It is this monolithic, linear vision of history that we have deconstructed. The diagnosis is not entirely wrong, but it is flawed by the questionable use of broad, all-encompassing categories that obscure the irreducible multiplicity of historical reality. The apparent monochrony of acceleration conceals a polychrony with alternating seasons and different rhythms. The responses to the highly variable rhythms of this acceleration are not a matter of inertia but of a political acceleration that is equal to the fulgurating nature of this emergency. We are living in a historical polychrony framed by a political rhythmology. So there is no end to history, let alone politics on the agenda. Every era is characterised by the coexistence of several historicity regimes, in which the trendier ones can overshadow emerging or minority models. Emerging regimes of historicity do not bring historical time to a close with the instantaneity of a passing phenomenon, but indicate the general disposition of history. History always takes care to ensure its own sovereign pace. Man’s responsibility in this adventure is to be able to harmonise all the regimes of historicity that weave the fabric of history so that he can lead a truly human existence.

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