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The Necessity and Contingency of Universal History

Deleuze and Guattari contra Hegel

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Abstract

History occupies a somewhat awkward position in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Although they often criticise history as a practice and advance alternatives that are explicitly anti-historical, such as ‘nomadology’ and ‘geophilosophy’, their scholarship is nevertheless littered with historical encounters and deeply influenced by historians such as Fernand Braudel. One of Deleuze and Guattari’s more significant engagements with history occurs through their reading and theory of universal history. In this paper I will explicate and critically analyse the nature of this universal history vis-à-vis its most pertinent counterpoint: Hegel’s philosophy of world history. In contrast to Hegel’s form of historicism, which universalizes by virtue of a unitary and totalizing force, Deleuze and Guattari develop a universalizing mechanism that is strictly devoid of any privileged essence. Following, Deleuze and Guattari’s form of universal history is marked above all by contingency as opposed to necessity. In this paper I will show precisely how. I will also go on to demonstrate how Deleuze and Guattari’s universal history offers the promise of an historical ontology commensurate with the processes of creativity and becoming, provided that appropriate steps are taken to reaffirm the radical contingency at its heart.

Keywords

Universal History – Deleuze and Guattari – Hegel – Necessity and Contingency – Creativity

1 Introduction

In their final joint work, *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari heavily criticize Hegel's treatment of history, reiterating an ambivalence that they had long held towards both history and Hegel. As Deleuze and Guattari claim, "unforeseeable creativity", in Hegel, is "poorly understood", for Hegel historicizes reality, reducing it to "an analytic and necessary principle" that teleologically unfolds in history – the unravelling of history itself, guided by the light of *Geist*.¹ Given this distaste for historical formulations that reductively subject reality to a unitary and totalizing force, it is somewhat surprising that Deleuze and Guattari simultaneously employ a form of universal history in their own work. However, if this notion of universal history differs from that found in Hegel, it is largely due to the insistence of Deleuze and Guattari upon its contingent, critical and creative capacities – aspects they believe are ultimately absent in Hegel, despite appearances to the contrary. By showing how history has the capacity to be universal yet contingent and auto-critical, history for Deleuze and Guattari is no longer placed in the service of a totalizing power (*pouvoir*). Instead, history itself exudes a power (*puissance*) of ongoing creativity that is capable of accommodating the process of becoming, in turn rendering history genuinely universal. If this gives rise to a notion of history that distinguishes itself from the image of Hegel's 'State history', then this, I will argue, is precisely the point of their universal history: the positing of a form of history that is nonlinear, contingent and creative, in contrast to the Hegelian histories of necessity that they oppose.

In order to demonstrate how this universal history works I will begin by briefly discussing Hegel's universal history, and in particular the role that both contingency and necessity play in it. Following this I will consider Deleuze and Guattari's objections, before setting out their alternative universal history. As we will see, the mechanism of their universalism (the complementary conjunction of decoding/deterritorialization and axiomatization) functions in a completely different manner to that of Hegel's, allowing in turn for a universalization of contingency as opposed to necessity. Grasping the novelty of Deleuze and Guattari's account, however, will require a closer look at exactly *how* contingency works in their universal history. The second half of this paper will therefore involve an examination of two kinds of contingency – 'retrospective' and 'continual' – the latter of which, I argue, carries the promise of a universal history coordinate with 'unforeseeable creativity'.

¹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 94–5.

2 The Universal History of Necessity

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel stipulates a number of different kinds of history – that is, ways in which historians in the past have written about and approached history.² As we find in this historiography, Hegel refers to the kind of history that he is practicing as ‘philosophical world history’.³ This history, Hegel says, brings with itself only “the simple idea of reason – the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process”.⁴ And so it is that Hegel presents us with, in short, a rational history of the process whereby rationality becomes progressively rational, to the point at which it is fully rational – that is, in the dialectical thought of Hegel. Employing the mechanics from his broader philosophical system, Hegel chronicles the journey of reason and spirit as it becomes increasingly self-conscious and increasingly free or liberated, beginning in the Orient and continuing through the Greek and Roman world en route to Hegel’s study in Germany.

What reason is liberated from, in one respect, is history. For example, in the Orient, according to Hegel, its people are shackled by inherited traditions. A strict adherence to historical traditions, in this respect, inhibits the ability of these people to realize that they are free. For Hegel, however, the progressive emergence of reason and freedom does not involve an overcoming of history per se, since it is this very process that Hegel calls ‘history’. Reason and freedom, as such, are by no means ahistorical. On the contrary, reason and the categories of the understanding develop *in* history, and history is nothing other than this development. The identity and nature of being and spirit in Hegel are thus not ahistorical or immutable; to the contrary, they are if anything the process or activity of historical self-production.

² I should note that while much of the explication of Hegel’s philosophy of history in this section of the paper may appear rather straightforward to the learned Hegelian, this rehearsal nevertheless remains quite necessary, given that later sections of the paper will seek to illustrate precisely where and how Deleuze and Guattari depart from Hegel’s account. Indeed, it is this juxtaposition, as opposed to advancing a novel reading of Hegel’s philosophy of history on its own, that serves as a major objective of the paper.

³ Although Hegel prefers the term ‘philosophical world history’ to ‘universal history’, it would nevertheless be accurate to refer to his ‘philosophical world history’ as an example of ‘universal history’, given that it displays many of the telltale signs – most of all the incorporation of all (human) history under a unitary rubric (which this paper will now go on to discuss).

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Hegel, 1975), 27.

History, as such, has a quite specific (and somewhat narrow) meaning in Hegel. And this must be borne in mind when we consider controversial statements such as Hegel's proclamation of 'the end of history'. In this instance, what Hegel is referring to is the point at which spirit becomes both self-determining and fully aware of this process, and as such fully free, thus bringing to an end the historical process of its emergence. In the words of Stephen Houlgate:

Note that this is not a claim about everything that has happened in the past, but a claim about what is to be understood by the word 'history'. What Hegel is arguing is that only those sequences of events which have been brought about by the development of human self-consciousness and by the pursuit of consciously articulated goals can really count as *historical*.⁵

When this happens, it is not as if the world comes to an end. The historical process of World Spirit's realization may have come to an end, but this 'end' is nothing if not a new beginning, the beginning of an era in which creativity and critique are possible and able to be realized like never before, since they are raised to the absolute level of self-creation and self-critique. In this manner, Hegel's philosophy of history could thus be said to be an explanation of how creativity becomes possible – or more specifically, how the creative force of spirit *becomes* fully realized, self-productive and entirely free.⁶ As Hegel says:

To say that spirit exists would at first seem to imply that it is a completed entity. On the contrary it is by nature active, and activity is its essence; it is its own product, and therefore its own beginning and own end. Its freedom does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation of all that threatens to destroy freedom. The business of spirit is to produce itself, to make itself its own object, and to gain knowledge of itself; in this way, it exists for itself.⁷

5 S. Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Blackwell Publishing Houlgate, 2005), 19. As Houlgate also notes, for Hegel "the structure of our concepts and categories is identical with, and thus discloses, the structure of the world itself, because we ourselves are born into and so share the character of the world we encounter" (Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 5–6).

6 For more on this interpretation within the secondary literature, see A. Speight, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (Stocksfield: Acumen Speight, 2008), 98. See also W. Maker, "The End of History and the Nihilism of Becoming", in *Hegel and History*, ed. W. Dudley (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 25–6.

7 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 48.

So, if we take Hegel at his word, the end is in fact the beginning, and the mechanism of negation is activity and dynamism par excellence, since what is negated is that which restricts freedom and the self-realization of a self-critical faculty. Spirit, furthermore, is not a pre-accomplished or ahistorical entity, insofar as it develops itself in and through history, and is thus historical. Spirit, in this respect, does not merely happen 'in' history, for it is what *makes* history, and in a certain sense *is* history. Hegel's philosophy of creation, as such, is pre-eminently historical, which suggests in turn why his philosophy of history is so strikingly central to his broader philosophy.

Similar points can be made when discussing the issue of contingency in Hegel's work. Hegel is often considered to have advanced a philosophy of history opposed to contingency, no doubt due to statements such as the following:

The sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent. Contingency is the same as external necessity, that is, a necessity which originates in causes which are themselves no more than external circumstances. In history, we must look for a general design, the ultimate end of the world, and not a particular end of the subjective spirit or mind; and we must comprehend it by means of reason, which cannot concern itself with particular or finite ends, but only with the absolute.⁸

Although this passage implies that Hegel is opposed to contingency, it could be noted that Hegel does not mean to suggest here that contingency can or should be eliminated from the world. On the contrary, contingency plays a crucial role throughout Hegel's philosophy of history. For example, to state the obvious, history clearly does not proceed in a smooth and measured fashion, casually bettering itself over time. Instead, as Hegel argues, the development of history proceeds by way of struggle and contradiction. A certain kind of society, with a certain degree of freedom and self-consciousness, exists for a certain contingent amount of time. Various contingent external circumstances and experiences impact upon both the relative continuity of this society, and ultimately, the timing and manner in which contradictions emerge that precipitate the progression of spirit from one level to the next. The specifics of historical progression, in other words, are by no means set in stone, and indeed, any progression that occurs is always specifically relative to the contingencies that it is faced with. But even more significantly, without the various struggles and contradictions that are thrown up by contingent occurrences and experiences, history will in fact be unable to proceed from one level of freedom

8 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 28.

and self-consciousness to the next. For this reason, it could be claimed that although it is the prerogative of reason to progressively eliminate contingency, Hegel's philosophy of history is not itself opposed to contingency, since contingency is *required* for the necessary progression of reason. As Iain Macdonald puts it:

By emphasizing experience, then, it becomes clearer how to interpret the demand that philosophy 'eliminate the contingent'. Contingency is not 'extirpated' by the concept; on the contrary, it is the historical moment of self-evaluation and self-correction prompted by doubt or suffering. Contingency is for that reason *required* for consciousness to recognize itself in the concept, for consciousness to redetermine and transform the universal as a result of contradictions that surge up in experience.⁹

From such statements we can see why scholars of Hegel's philosophy of history might be tempted to defend its creative and contingent credentials.¹⁰ Nevertheless we are compelled to ask: is it in fact accurate to say that the historical process elucidated in Hegel's philosophy of history is genuinely creative, contingent and open-ended? Can Hegel evade accusations of teleology, and if not, then does this not fatally compromise any attempt to forward a philosophy of becoming irreducible to being, and contingency irreducible to necessity? It may be that the progress of history, the path that it takes, is circuitous and full of surprises. But this path has a name – *Geist*, reason, freedom – and it also has a destination – absolute reason, the full realization of self-consciousness and freedom. And it is to *these ends* that contingency must answer in Hegel. The universal, it may be countered, itself transforms through history. But again, this is true only to the extent that the various universals are progressive stages en route to the absolute: immature or underdeveloped versions of a final form. Such transformations are thus arguably foregone.

It could therefore be claimed with some justification that the contingency of Hegel's philosophy of history is incidental or at best secondary. More precisely, it is reducible to the absolute. The giveaway is the word 'required'. To say that contingency is 'required' for the purposes of consciousness and reason to

⁹ I. Macdonald, "What is Conceptual History?", in *Hegel: New Directions*, ed. K. Deligiorgi (Acumen, 2006), 221–2.

¹⁰ See for example K. de Boer, "Hegel's Account of the Present: An Open-Ended History", in *Hegel and History*, ed. W. Dudley (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2009). See also Macdonald, "What is Conceptual History" and Maker, "The End of History and the Nihilism of Becoming".

function in the way that Hegel wants it to, I would suggest, is hardly a ringing endorsement of contingency as such. Hegel's broader argument may 'require' a notion of contingency as described above in order to work, but this in itself does not demonstrate the existence of genuine contingency in history or in Hegel's philosophy of history. To put it another way, necessary and universal reason is clearly the motor of history in Hegel's account, and if contingency is required, it is to serve as fuel for this motor. The supremacy of the necessary over the contingent thus remains firmly intact in Hegel's account, regardless of the need for contingent occurrences to serve as cannon-fodder for the mechanism of dialectical development.¹¹

We are thus left with a number of doubts about the status of contingency and creativity in Hegel's philosophy of world history. While some criticism can be warded off by reemphasising the specific context and terms of reference within which it is advanced – namely, reason, spirit and freedom – such a response obviously does little to alleviate the concerns of those commentators who view Hegelian reason, spirit, and the mechanism of dialectical development with suspicion to begin with. Furthermore, we are left to question whether Hegel's account of universal history is able to genuinely accommodate for the process of creativity, becoming and a concept of contingency irreducible to necessity.

Deleuze and Guattari are two such commentators with suspicions about the success of Hegel. As they claim in their late text *What Is Philosophy?*, Hegel seeks to link philosophy and its history via an analytic and necessary principle. But as they maintain, this can only be done by retrospectively placing the possibility of reason's eventual emergence into its own past. As such, it is the universal that, for Hegel, necessarily locates its origins in the past – itself a necessary act of self-legitimation. History for Hegel is thus, according to Deleuze and Guattari, "a form of interiority in which the concept necessarily develops

¹¹ Karin de Boer attempts to ameliorate this situation by noting that "Hegel never purports to construct the successive stages of world history by means of reason alone", since he must "always draw on empirical investigations". But as she goes on to admit, Hegel's 'empirical investigations' are unambiguously interpreted with a specific purpose in mind – "to lay bare the essential moments of [freedom's] actualization" – and from the perspective of reason. de Boer thus ultimately agrees that Hegel's history is driven by necessity: "By relegating these aspects [eg. the succession of events and the fate of individuals] to the realm of mere contingency, only those aspects of world history that testify to the increasing actualization of freedom emerge as essential to world history as such". See de Boer, "Hegel's Account of the Present", 53–4.

or unveils its destiny".¹² And as they further specify, this historicist account "rests on the abstraction of the historical element rendered circular".¹³

The cycle they are referring to is the following: absolute reason emerges within a history of contingencies, but as it emerges, it progressively and retrospectively universalizes the particularities from which it emerges, elevating or abstracting out certain aspects and diminishing others in order to manufacture an intelligible linear progression. Because of this, it could be technically argued that rationality is not imposed from the outside onto history, but is itself historical, since reason emerges from within and through history. This historical development, however, takes the form of a teleological progression that leads to a particular point, from which – and only from which – this history can be identified as such. If rationality and history are immanent to one another, therefore, it is because history has been retrospectively internalized by the mechanics of reason. And this is why Deleuze and Guattari say that philosophical reason, for Hegel, is indistinguishable from its own history.¹⁴

This result should hardly be surprising, since Hegel himself says: "Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect".¹⁵ Henri Bergson, interestingly, says a similar thing about the intellect, noting how it cannot but help intellectualise the world, and thus fixate things such as duration, which is in reality a flowing continuity. But as Bergson also says: "it would be a strange mistake to take for a constitutive element of doctrine what was only the means of expressing it".¹⁶ It is true that Hegel is not attempting to explain everything that has ever happened in the past through the prism of reason and World Spirit, but even in the areas that pertain to his analysis, it would appear that Hegel is knowingly amalgamating the processes of genesis and expression in his conception of reason. If there is an advantage in this approach, it is that history becomes universalizable under the rubric of reason, and following, the process of understanding becomes synonymous with the process of genesis. As Stephen Houlgate succinctly puts it: "we produce ourselves precisely through developing a fuller understanding that we do so".¹⁷ But if there is a disadvantage, it is that the existence of unforeseeable

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 95.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 95.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 95.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 29.

¹⁶ H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. M. L. Andison (Mineola, NY: Dover Bergson, 2007), 91.

¹⁷ Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 21.

creativity becomes compromised, since its contingency is ultimately reducible to necessity.

Bearing this in mind, let us now turn to Deleuze and Guattari's alternative formulation of universal history, paying particular attention to how it differs from, and at times resembles, Hegel's account.

3 The Universal History of Capitalism

Somewhat curiously, due to their critique of Hegel, Deleuze and Guattari also advance a theory of universal history. This universal history, however, differs in several key respects. To begin with, Hegel's philosophical world history, as we have seen, is more specifically a universal history of reason: it is a history not only 'of' reason, but a *rational* history of reason, advanced from the privileged position *after* reason has been fully realized. Deleuze and Guattari's universal history, on the other hand, will not be of reason, but of capitalism. In truth, Deleuze and Guattari do not have that much to say about the actual history of capitalism, and what they do say is mostly lifted from other historians, such as Fernand Braudel and Etienne Balazs. But they do remark quite extensively on the topic of capitalist history, by which I mean, a history that is *capitalist in nature*, and universal by virtue of this capitalist nature. So the question then becomes, how is it that capitalism universalizes the world and its history?¹⁸

To answer this we will have to recount the manner in which the capitalist machine works for Deleuze and Guattari – how it operates – with respect to other non-capitalist machines. As they expound in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, there are three great social machines – by which they mean, roughly, ways in which social reality is produced. The first of these social machines, what they refer to as the 'primitive territorial machine', operates by way of *coding*. For example, under the process of 'coding', the land that is the earth is converted into and understood as 'territory', which is then socially and politically organised and managed under this rubric. Human bodies are also similarly marked and socially/politically coded according to

18 It might seem somewhat of a deviation here to start talking about capitalism, but bear in mind that my interest in this paper is in universal history and how it works in Deleuze and Guattari, with respect to Hegel. To understand universal history in Hegel one needs investigate his notion of reason and the rational nature of history, but to understand universal history in the work of Deleuze and Guattari requires an appreciation of their analysis of capitalism, given that it is capitalism (as opposed to reason) that is responsible for determining the conditions of their universal history.

this ‘primitive machine’. In contrast to this process of coding, there is a second social machine – the ‘imperial machine’ – that operates by *overcoding* the various codes of society. This is to say that the imperial machine overlays a new unitary meaning on all the various codes that it encounters in society. As such, it is a despotic force that imposes itself as “the sole distributor and referent of social significations”.¹⁹ Finally, there is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘civilized capitalist machine’. This social machine is defined not by coding or overcoding but *decoding*, or what is also referred to by Deleuze and Guattari as *deteritorialization*, which in this context simply means the detachment of social meaning from a ‘territory’ or system of organization – a process that is invariably followed by a *reterritorialization* onto a new or other territory that organizes meaning differently. In this manner, capitalism, in the view of Deleuze and Guattari, works by *breaking down* (decoding) the codings and overcodings in society, allowing in turn for their reinscription and exchange.

Apart from this function of decoding or deterritorialization, there is a second key feature of capitalism that distinguishes it from other social machines: its *axiomatic* structure.²⁰ By axiomatic, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly mean that as defined and used by modern mathematics:

If it is true that we are not using the word axiomatic as a simple metaphor, we must review what distinguishes an axiomatic from all manner of codes, overcodings, and recodings: the axiomatic deals directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously; codes, on the other hand, are relative to those domains and express specific relations between qualified elements that cannot be subsumed by a higher formal unity (overcoding) except by transcendence and in an indirect fashion. The *immanent axiomatic* finds in the domains it moves through so many models, termed *models of realization*.²¹

Thus axioms do not offer their own exegeses but rather provide the formal system and operational field in which differential relations and capitalizations occur. Because of this, the axiomatic axis of capitalism is uniquely positioned

¹⁹ J. Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History* (London and New York: Continuum Lampert, 2006), 125.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 246: “[Capitalism] axiomatizes with the one hand what it decodes with the other”.

²¹ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), 454.

to interface with the processes of becoming that define its other side. As existing structures of coding and overcoding are decoded by capitalism, the capitalist machine can appropriate any and all of these escaping flows by adding on a new axiom or subtracting an old one. This gives capitalism an unrivalled flexibility and multiple realizability. Changes in the social field lead to the addition of new axioms, which in turn generate a new structure from which further decodings escape, only to then be reabsorbed by the addition of new axioms that 'capitalize' upon the newly generated difference. Examples of this process offered by Deleuze and Guattari include Keynesian economics and the New Deal – invented axioms that at one and the same time block escaping flows, renew the vibrancy of capitalism, allow for its continual growth, and in so doing create new deterritorializations that will in time necessitate recapturing by other axioms. In this manner, capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, continually displaces its own limits in the very same moment (or movement) that it realizes them. And this is indeed the "deepest law of capitalism: it continually sets and then repels its own limits, but in doing gives rise to numerous flows in all directions that escape its axiomatic".²²

Crucially for our purposes here, it is through this two-sided mechanism of decoding/deterritorialization and axiomatization that the capitalist machine universalizes the world. Capitalism's ability to continually meet and overcome its own limits illuminates a key aspect of the capitalist machine: there are no sacred axioms in capitalism. Capitalism exhibits a profound heterogeneity, a willingness if not need to incessantly change what it 'is'. This is why Deleuze and Guattari claim that capitalism is not a homogenizing force, contrary to common interpretations, but at best isomorphic: the capitalist machine does not make everything the same in kind, but rather trades in all kinds. Indeed, the capitalist machine requires a peripheral polymorphy of heteromorphic social formations that enable the capitalization of difference to continue. Far from homogenizing the world, capitalism "gives rise to and organises the 'Third World'".²³ Thus if capitalism is able to instantiate a field of immanence that spreads itself across the globe – the capitalist world market – it is due to the heterogeneous nexus made possible by the complementary relation of deterritorialization with axiomatization.

When capitalism is so described, it becomes impossible to perfectly define the form of the capitalist machine from the outset, for capitalism itself is

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 472. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 231 and G. Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 171.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 437.

constantly breaking down – it is by no means a well-oiled machine, but a beautiful disaster. Capitalism is characterised by anachronism, by fits and bursts, ebbs and flows, axiomatization and deterritorialization. This nature allows capitalism to incorporate not only the diversity of existing codings and overcodings in the present world, but all that has come before it, forming nothing less than “a motley painting of everything that has ever been believed”.²⁴ And it is in doing so that capitalism gives rise to a universal history. Capitalism is able to occupy every point in history, for it has no point of its own; it is able to interpret every coding and overcoding throughout history, for it has no essential or necessary code or sign of its own. Like a spectre or faceless ghost, capitalism haunts all previous forms of society “as their terrifying nightmare, [...] the dread they feel of a flow that would elude their codes”.²⁵ For this reason, “capitalism”, Deleuze and Guattari say, “determines the conditions and the possibility of a universal history”.²⁶

Now, admittedly, it would be possible to draw parallels between this account of capitalism and Hegel’s account of reason: for instance, both thrive on crisis, and both ‘require’ a peripheral polymorphy of heteromorphic social formations in order to validate their universalism. But one significant difference between the two is the manner in which this validation occurs. Insofar as Hegel’s universal history subordinates history to the teleological development of reason and spirit, it proceeds by way of *overcoding*. Deleuze and Guattari’s universal history, in contrast, is universal by virtue of its process of *decoding and axiomatization*. This distinction is of paramount importance. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if Deleuze and Guattari are to avoid becoming Hegelian on this issue, the distinction between these two machines – the despotic and

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 34 and 267. This phrase is taken by Deleuze and Guattari from F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. G. Parkes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press Nietzsche, 2005), 104.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 140. It could be noted that no other Deleuzian commentator, to the best of my knowledge, has specifically located the source of capitalism’s universalism *explicitly and primarily* in the complementary relation between its two axes of decoding/deterritorialization and axiomatization. Those who have written on the subject (such as Eugene Holland, Jason Read and Jay Lampert) have tended instead to focus on the retrospective nature of the capitalist machine when describing how it is that capitalism universalizes – something which I will go on to discuss further below. To take one example, “capitalism conducts universal history”, according to Lampert, “not only because it lies at the end of history so far; it does so because its decoding mechanisms make retrospectivity possible” (Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Philosophy of History*), 123.

²⁶ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 1984), 140.

the capitalist – and the manner in which they operate, must be repeatedly and strictly maintained. Put otherwise, if Deleuze and Guattari's universal history differs from Hegel's, it is not merely because the two theories involve different sources for the production of historical intelligibility, reason and spirit in the case of Hegel and capitalism in the case of Deleuze and Guattari. More significantly, it is because these two theories of universal history involve two different *kinds* of processes that *operate* in distinctly different ways, according to *different mechanisms* – one that is despotic while the other is deterritorializing. Thus it is not just that we have two different sources for universalizing history, but rather two different *forms or mechanisms of universalization*.

It must be noted, however, that Deleuze and Guattari do not always maintain this distinction, in turn giving their theory of universal history a Hegelian feeling at times. To better explain, let us return more directly to the issue of contingency, focusing in particular on a variant that is principally defined by its retrospectivity, before turning to another form that I refer to as 'continual contingency'.²⁷

4 The Retrospective Contingency of Universal History

As discussed above, it is doubtful whether there is any genuine contingency in Hegel's universal history, which is to say, a contingency that is not reducible to necessity. Largely in response to Hegel's account, Deleuze and Guattari claim that universal history must be "the history of contingencies, and not the history of necessity".²⁸ Thus in contrast to the Hegelian form of internal necessary development, Deleuze and Guattari insist upon reaffirming the contingent nature of events. But what do they mean here by contingency?

Surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari reproduce at times the necessary-contingency formulation that we have just critiqued when explaining their universal history. In Hegel, as we have seen, the happenings of external circumstances, or what specifically happens in actuality, is largely contingent – things

²⁷ As a point of comparison, Jay Lampert identifies seven different traits or senses of contingency in Deleuze and Guattari's universal history (see Lampert, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of History*, 120). While there is some conceptual overlap, broadly speaking, between the forms of contingency isolated by Lampert and the two that I will now discuss, there is no clear correlation between his forms and mine. In what follows I will therefore eschew discussing the intricacies of Lampert's treatment in favor of explicating my own.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 140, 195 and 224.

needn't have happened in the precise way they did, exactly when they did. But as we also saw, these contingencies and our understanding of them are nevertheless *contingent upon something*. In the case of Hegel, this something is rationality. But for Deleuze and Guattari, universal history is contingent upon the capitalist machine that produces it.

The link between these two accounts is retrospectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari contend, following Marx, capitalism retrospectively fabricates its own origins, in order to explain how the first original accumulation of capital occurred: due to their unique thriftiness, or so the story goes, the first proto-capitalists were able to generate their own productive difference upon which they rightfully capitalized. Such a story, however, is told after the fact by those who benefited, precisely so that they may legitimately continue to do so.²⁹ Moreover, capitalism is retrospectively contingent not only because it fabricates its beginnings, but also because it is the product of this process. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is an inner unity between the process of production and the product, and the various stages of this process can only be understood under the terms of the product. In Deleuze and Guattari's words: "It is the thing, the unnamable, the generalized decoding of flows that reveals *a contrario* the secret of all these formations [i.e. of coding and overcoding]. [...] Whence the possibility of a retrospective reading of all history in terms of capitalism".³⁰ Capitalism thus gives rise to a universal history because it projects its origins *and* those of previous social formations, all of which now culminate in capitalism: "If capitalism is the universal truth, it is so in the sense that makes capitalism *the negative* of all social formations".³¹

Marx famously makes this point about retrospectivity when he says that "Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape". As the rest of the quote goes: "The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc."³² This was of course exactly Hegel's point about the growth of rationality, and indeed lies at the basis of his Eurocentrism: insofar as disparate civilizations form a continuity in the progression of reason and spirit from restricted to full realization, then once full realization is achieved, it is

²⁹ This foundation myth, in Marx's view, functions as the equivalent to that of 'original sin' in Christianity. See K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1977), 873.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 153.

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 153.

³² K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1975), 105.

from this perspective, and only this perspective, that prior stages can be retrospectively understood as immature, incomplete or inhibited versions of itself.³³

So, on this point of retrospectivity, it would appear that Deleuze and Guattari's capitalist history, or the universal history of capitalism, operates in much the same way as Hegel's universal history. And yet, as we know, Deleuze and Guattari criticise Hegel's history for operating according to the principle of the State or despotic machine – namely, capture and overcoding. We therefore have a problem: insofar as retrospectivity is a defining feature of Deleuze and Guattari's universal history – including the universal history of contingency – then it is difficult to see how it differs *in its operation* from Hegel's universal history of necessity.

In response to this, as I have already intimated, we must reaffirm a distinction between the necessity of State overcoding on the one hand, and the contingency and creativity of decoding and deterritorialization on the other. More specifically, if we are to combat universal histories of necessity and the necessity of universal history – by which I mean, universal histories that are driven by a form of necessity – then we must insist upon not only the universal history of contingency, but the *contingency* of universal history – by which I mean both that universal history need not exist, and that if it does there is a form of contingency appropriate to it, and a form of the universal compatible with this kind of contingency.

Before I go on to suggest what this kind of contingency might look like, it would perhaps be prudent to expand on my critique of retrospective contingency and its attendant form of universalism, given the tendency within the secondary literature on Deleuze and Guattari's universal history to focus on its retrospectivity.³⁴ To this end Deleuze's notion of 'immanent-causality' might be of help. According to this concept, an effect cannot be said to transcend its cause, since the two must be immanent to one another. As Deleuze puts it:

33 See Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 14.

34 See J. Read, "A Universal History of Contingency: Deleuze and Guattari on the History of Capitalism", in *Borderlands*, Vol. 2, No.3, §5 and §21–3. Although Read provides an excellent account of the retroactive nature of capitalism in this article, noting the similarities shared between the despotic and capitalist machines, he does not take this as reason to seek a form of contingency specific to capitalism. Read's article, furthermore, focuses for the most part on providing a reading and explication of Deleuze and Guattari's history of capitalism within the landscape of Marx's and Marxist philosophy. While there is naturally some overlap between this agenda and my own, I am more interested in examining the nature of contingency and necessity in Deleuze and Guattari's brand of universalism with respect to Hegel's. For this reason, I will also draw on other significant sources for Deleuze and Guattari's historical ontology, such as Bergson, that are not covered by Read.

What do we mean here by immanent cause? It is a cause which is realized, integrated and distinguished in its effect. Or rather the immanent cause is realized, integrated and distinguished by its effect. In this way there is a correlation or mutual presupposition between cause and effect, between abstract machine and concrete assemblages [...].³⁵

This idea of an immanent relation between cause and effect is a mainstay of Deleuze's philosophy and goes back to his understanding of the correlation between a problem and its solution. A solution, Deleuze observes, is always immanent to the problem it is a part of:

[T]he problem always has the solution it deserves, in terms of the way in which it is stated (i.e., the conditions under which it is determined as a problem), and of the means and terms at our disposal for stating it. In this sense, the history of man, from the theoretical as much as from the practical point of view, is that of the construction of problems.³⁶

Deleuze is here borrowing almost directly from Bergson's essay 'Stating of the Problems'. In Bergson's words: "The stating and solving of the problem are here very close to being equivalent: The truly great problems are set forth only when they are solved".³⁷ However, if there is something particularly novel and interesting about Deleuze's reading of this Bergsonian idea, it is the further connection he draws to Marx. As Deleuze continues in his analysis of Bergson:

We might compare the last sentence of this extract from Bergson with Marx's formulation, which is valid for practice itself: "Humanity only sets itself problems that it is capable of solving". In neither example is it a case of saying that problems are like the shadow of pre-existing solutions (the whole context suggests the contrary).³⁸

³⁵ G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. S. Hand (London and New York: Continuum, 1999), 37.

³⁶ G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1988), 16. Interestingly, Deleuze begins his book on Nietzsche with a strikingly similar statement: "We always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being or our style of life". See G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (London and New York: Continuum, 1983), 1.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 15–16. Compare with Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 37.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 16.

It is therefore unsurprising that when Deleuze reiterates this point again in his magnum opus *Difference and Repetition*, it will be in aid of confirming Althusser's reading of capitalism's immanent causality:

Althusser and his collaborators are, therefore, profoundly correct in showing the presence of a genuine structure in *Capital*, and in rejecting historicist interpretations of Marxism, since this structure never acts transitively, following the order of succession in time; rather, it acts by incarnating its varieties in diverse societies and by accounting for the simultaneity of all the relations and terms which, each time and in each case, constitute the present: that is why 'the economic' is never given properly speaking but rather designates a differential virtuality to be interpreted, always covered over by its forms of actualisation; a theme or 'problematic' always covered over by its cases of solution. [...] The famous phrase of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve', does not mean that the problems are only apparent or that they are already solved, but, on the contrary, that the economic conditions of a problem determine or give rise to the manner in which it finds a solution within the framework of the real relations of the society. [...] More precisely, the solution is always that which a society deserves or gives rise to as a consequence of the manner in which, given its real relations, it is able to pose the problems set within it and to it by the differential relations it incarnates.³⁹

This reading of Marx distinguishes itself from historicist interpretations that attempt to explain capitalism by a necessary historical succession, but it does so on the grounds that capitalism, as the social formation that is *presently* in power, retrospectively posits its origins and incarnates itself in prior formations – previous varieties of society are understood *with respect to it*. The past, as such, is covered over with a history that issues backwards from capitalism. Today's capitalist reality is therefore not merely the effect of an historical cause but rather an 'immanent cause' of itself, due to its retrospective power and the requirement that all solutions or effects be contoured by the problem or social machine that poses it.

In his later work Althusser amends this reading of capitalism's retrospection by elaborating further on its prehistory. As he acknowledges, any synchronic logic that purports universal and fixed laws is itself produced by an incremental and developmental process of becoming. There is thus no such

39 G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 186.

thing as necessity, for the concept of necessity can at best only apply to a reading of the past:

[N]o determination of these elements can be assigned except by *working backwards* from the result to its becoming, in its retroaction. If we must therefore say that there can be no result without its becoming (Hegel), we must also affirm that there is nothing which has become except as determined by the result of this becoming – this retroaction itself (Canguilhem). That is, instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies.⁴⁰

To label a present fact as necessary is thus somewhat misleading, according to the late Althusser, for it was not always necessary but only *becomes* so. Althusser is attempting in this essay to insist on the contingency of factual occurrences that appear necessarily irrefutable: “every accomplished fact [...] is only a provisional encounter, and since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, *there is no eternity in the ‘laws’ of any world or any state*”⁴¹ So to summarize, before an encounter occurs there is a particular system in place – meaning in relative equilibrium. The encounter, however, acts like a tipping point, itself brought about by what Althusser refers to as a ‘swerve’, shattering that equilibrium and eventually bringing about a new system with its own systematicity. Once settled, this new system in turn redefines necessity, specifically *what is necessary for it*. But most importantly, this necessity need not have happened, for it owes its very nature to a contingent swerve and encounter. Necessity is thus projected backwards over the course of an historical event.⁴²

Interestingly, Bergson arrives at a similar argument in his essay “The Possible and the Real”, though from the opposite direction. As his famous quote reads: “Backwards over the course of time a constant remodeling of the past by the present, of the cause by the effect, is being carried out”.⁴³ Bergson is here attacking the same notion of necessity as Althusser but through its companion conception of the possible. As commonly understood in its Aristotelian form, something must be possible before it is realized, like the oak tree whose very possibility is contained in the acorn prior to its realization. Everything that

⁴⁰ L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987*, ed. F. Matheron and O. Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 193–4.

⁴¹ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174 and 195–6.

⁴² Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 169.

⁴³ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 84–5.

occurs thus must pre-exist itself as its own possibility. But for Bergson, something which is possible can only *have been* possible:

As reality is created as something unforeseeable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this precise moment that it begins to have been always possible, and that is why I said that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared. The possible is therefore the mirage of the present in the past; and as we know the future will finally constitute a present and the mirage effect is continually being produced, we are convinced that the image of tomorrow is already contained in our actual present, which will be the past of tomorrow, although we did not manage to grasp it. That is precisely the illusion.⁴⁴

What all these examples have in common is the way in which a present power itself retrospectively posits contingency. Noting this, however, alerts us to their shared limitation: the retrospective sense of contingency is not on its own a genuinely productive and open contingency in-itself. In each case, what is being described is the way in which a static sense or being envelops or captures that which is beneath or before it. Or put differently, in each case the retrospective form of contingency has more to do with *pouvoir* (power-as-control or domination) than it does *puissance* (power-as-creation or energetic force). In such retrospective accounts of creativity, “Everything is accomplished in advance; *the structure precedes its elements and reproduces them in order to reproduce the structure*”.⁴⁵

Given that this retrospective capacity is ultimately a force of capture, it is not surprising that Deleuze and Guattari are also able to affiliate their universal history of contingency with the primordial State, what they refer to as the *Urstaat*: “Being the common horizon for what comes before and what comes after, it conditions universal history only provided it is not on the outside, but always off to the side, the cold monster that represents the way in which history is in the ‘head’, in the ‘brain’ – the *Urstaat*”.⁴⁶ But in recognizing this character trait, we are forced to reappraise the examples of contingency that we have thus far touched on: if ‘original accumulation’ and ‘original sin’ are both retrospective, it is in the sense of State-sanctioned histories or ‘authorized’

⁴⁴ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 82.

⁴⁵ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 198.

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 220–1 (translation modified).

biographies (gospel or secular); if Marx's capitalist example of an effect that causes itself is of significance, it is only insofar as it resembles the power of the archaic State or despotic machine, in which "He is the sole quasi cause, the source and fountainhead and estuary of the apparent objective movement".⁴⁷ This does not mean that such retrospectives are without effect – as Jason Read puts it, "a misrecognition of the source of production [...] is in turn productive, producing obedience and docility".⁴⁸ But for the same reason that this latter productivity is described by Read as a 'displacement' of the former, and for the same reason that capitalism is the *negative* of all social formations, it must be noted that a retrospective power ultimately pertains more to the power of capture than creation.

In light of this, we must be cautious when discussing the retrospective contingency of universal history, for it is essentially synonymous with the *synchronic* power of the despotic machine, a power which freezes time in order to give an ideal description – namely, the description of the *Urstaat* throughout all time. The universal history that ensues from this cannot be solely attributed to the capitalist machine, for what distinguishes capitalism from the synchronic State is its *diachronic* nature, which concerns an *historical development*. This is indeed the 'great difference' between the two: "[T]he despotic machine is synchronic while the capitalist machine's time is diachronic. The capitalists appear in succession in a series that institutes a kind of *creativity of history*, a strange menagerie: the schizoid time of the new creative break".⁴⁹

Following this analysis, we can conclude that if Deleuze and Guattari's theory of universal history is to avoid replicating the form of contingency as found in Hegel, if it is to involve a genuine and nonlinear form of contingency (by which I mean a form of contingency that is not reducible to necessity), then it must go beyond the rationale of retrospectivity. This outcome could have perhaps been easily foreseen: that history is written by the victors, and that this history will in turn give rise to various further effects, including the way people act, think, desire and perceive, is by no means a radical claim. In response, it might be argued that new readings of the past can have very real effects on the present (and future). But while this is most certainly true, such a claim does not directly challenge the causal-linear or teleological ontology that Deleuze and Guattari seek to problematize in Hegel. Nor does it fit with the particular

⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 194.

⁴⁸ Read, "A Universal History of Contingency: Deleuze and Guattari on the History of Capitalism", §21.

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 223 (emphasis added).

nature of universalism produced by capitalism. A more radical notion of contingency is therefore called for.

5 The Continual Contingency of Universal History

In my terminology, the form of contingency appropriate to this theory of universal history could be thought of as a ‘continual contingency’. In this sense of contingency, history is not merely shown to ‘have been’ contingent (but is no longer) and nor is our ‘understanding’ of history merely shown to be ‘contingent upon’ the forces that posit it. More profoundly, history is contingent because it is *itself* never done with, which is to say that it remains livid (as opposed to an inert entity manipulated or fabricated by a present power). History, in this respect, remains *continually coexistent* with the present. By ‘continually’ I do not mean well-measured or homogeneous, but rather what Bergson calls a continuous or heterogeneous multiplicity. As this heterogeneity continuously emerges, it does so in a nonlinear and non-teleological fashion that evades what Bergson would call ‘radical finalism’.⁵⁰ As such, this continuity is full of abruptness and unpredictability. Paradoxically, it might even be more accurate to characterize this continuous multiplicity by “ruptures and limits, and not continuity”⁵¹ For example, although the history of the French Revolution could be described as a singular trajectory that is continuous and heterogeneous, it can equally be said to be composed of nothing other than accidental encounters (in varying degrees of accidentality). The encounter and the continuum of history, when both understood heterogeneously, are thus not opposed, but compositional. State powers may recast an event in order to break or capture an existing continuity (for example, the contrasting ways in which the French Revolution is captured by the First Empire and the Third Republic, the former

⁵⁰ See H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 39: “The doctrine of teleology, in its extreme form, as we find it in Leibniz for example, implies that things and beings merely realize a programme previously arranged. But if there is nothing unforeseen, no invention or creation in the universe, time is useless again. As in the mechanistic hypothesis, here again it is supposed that *all is given*. Finalism thus understood is only inverted mechanism. It springs from the same postulate, with this sole difference, that in the movement of our finite intellects along successive things, whose successiveness is reduced to a mere appearance, it holds in front of us the light with which it claims to guide us, instead of putting it behind. It substitutes the attraction of the future for the impulsion of the past. But succession remains none the less a mere appearance, as indeed does movement itself.”

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 140.

reducing the event to Napoleon and the latter to Republicanism), but they only do so by conjoining a new one and becoming in turn a part of future ones. This means that it is not a question of what comes first – the caesura or continuity, the instant or duration, Bachelard or Bergson – nor is it a question of which one is made up of the other, for lingering on such a dichotomy is misleading: they are together one.

Althusser's rendering together of the swerve and the encounter demonstrates this compositionality most capably. As he says, a swerve induces an encounter of one atom "with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world – that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter".⁵² We can thus see how a swerve and an encounter combine to produce a world – a world, moreover, that is in no way necessary but instead always contingently becoming necessary (and becoming unnecessary, it might be added). A world is born from an *unraveling and diverging* continuity of heterogeneity, a succession or progression of dynamic and intensive encounters. This becoming does not occur all at once, nor are previous encounters in the chain ever fully done with, since they make themselves felt as *themselves* in the present encounter under consideration (as well as every swerve-encounter in between).⁵³ As Bergson says when remarking on the process of falling asleep, it is not just the last tick of the clock that causes one to fall asleep. Rather, it is the accumulation of time – the previous ticks heard as it were – that collectively make themselves felt in a present moment that is *rich* or *laden* with them:

When the regular oscillations of the pendulum make us sleepy, is it the last sound heard, the last movement perceived, which produces this effect? No, undoubtedly not, for why then should not the first have done the same? Is it the recollection of the preceding sounds or movements, set in juxtaposition to the last one? But this same recollection, if it is later on set in juxtaposition to a single sound or movement, will remain without effect. Hence we must admit that the sounds combined with one another

⁵² Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 191.

⁵³ Deleuze gives a quite similar description of creative emergence when remarking on the Foucauldian historian who proceeds gradually and successively: "[W]hen a new formation appears, with new rules and series, it never comes all at once, in a single phrase or act of creation, but emerges like a series of 'building blocks', with gaps, traces and reactivations of former elements that survive under the new rules" (Deleuze, *Foucault*, 21–22).

and acted, not by their quantity as quantity, but by the quality which the quantity exhibited, i.e. by the rhythmic organization of the whole.⁵⁴

Deleuze and Guattari's account of the encounter has much in common with Bergson's last tick of the clock and Althusser's tipping point. As Deleuze and Guattari note, the most important point in a series is the penultimate point – the last point before the point of change. The significance of this penultimate point is that it gives consistency to the series that leads up to it; it marks the limit beyond which a new threshold of consistency is engendered. As an example, the most important drink for an alcoholic, within their series of drinks, is the one *before* the one that will force them to discontinue drinking (by rendering them physically incapable of continuing to drink). The ideal alcoholic is thus the one who reaches for the penultimate drink but never for the one after, since to do so would hamper their ability to continue their drinking session, and perhaps their way of life.⁵⁵ Put otherwise, the art of alcoholism consists in knowing how to align the last drink with the penultimate one, for knowing where this penultimate point lies is essential to warding off a change in kind.

My point, however, is the following: it is not *just* the penultimate moment that is responsible for the series leading to it, for the penultimate moment *is itself produced (in part) by that very series*. As Deleuze says of F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Lowry's alcoholism, their disintegration is in part brought about by the gallons of alcohol already in their body – the body laden with past drinks;⁵⁶ their crack-up may appear suddenly, but it is certainly not disconnected from the life that has been lived leading up to that point, regardless of one's powers of denial. But to be rich with the past is not merely to retrospectively posit it or to 'recollect' it in a certain way, for this would be nothing more than a form of presentism or State subjugation. Rather, for a penultimate moment to be rich or laden with the series that leads up to it means that the past moments of the series must themselves be alive and vital, effective of and within the present.

The upshot of this ontological account is that the present forms a heterogeneous continuity with the past, and it is this continuity *as a whole* that continuously undergoes change. The 'as a whole' aspect is key, because it indicates how the relation here is not between an inert past and a vital present. Rather, it is the *relation itself*, or 'interpenetration' as Bergson might say, that is vital.

54 H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 105–6.

55 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 438.

56 G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. C. V. Boundas, trans. M. Lester with C. Stivale (London: Continuum, 1990), 157.

Accordingly, if the past is contingent then this is not simply because it is retrospectively posited by the present in various ways, but more profoundly because it itself continues to be contingent through its continual participation in the emerging whole that is reality – in other words, it is continuously contingent, not retrospectively.

This nonlinear form of contingency may go beyond what Deleuze and Guattari originally had in mind, giving rise to not only a ‘universal history of contingency’ but also a ‘*contingency of universal history*’ (a phrase they never actually use). Nevertheless, it would appear to be necessary if we are to think “not only the contingency of necessity, but also the necessity of the contingency at its root”.⁵⁷ It would furthermore appear to be needed if we are to avoid inappropriately conflating the universal-contingency of the capitalist machine with the overcoding of the despotic machine. For while the contingency of capitalism may be retrospective in one sense or in some instances, it could also be said to be much more than this: capitalism is not universal ‘once and for all’ but is rather *continually* universal ‘again and again’. If there is a difference between these two universals, it is that one is necessary while the other is contingent. And following, one is incapable of understanding ‘unforeseeable creativity’ while the other is compatible with it.

6 Conclusion

Throughout this analysis of universal history we have encountered a number of conceptions and uses of contingency and necessity. At stake in these discussions has been the possibility of articulating and defending a notion of universal history that is not at odds with creativity and critique, but, ideally, is one with them. For Hegel, the processes of self-realization, self-consciousness, self-determination, etc. are eminently historical. They also require in their own way a form of contingency. But as Deleuze and Guattari point out, it is questionable just how open this form of contingency actually is, since it would appear that the processes of becoming in Hegel are ultimately reducible to the being of *Geist* and the necessary history of reason.

In response to Hegel’s brand of historicism, Deleuze and Guattari do not abandon universal history but rather suggest to us a different kind. This universal history differs from Hegel’s principally with respect to the form of its universalism: while the universalism of Hegel’s philosophy of history operates by way of overcoding – the totalizing re-interpretation of all history from the

57 Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 187.

perspective of reason – the universalism of Deleuze and Guattari's universal history owes its nature to the capitalistic process of decoding/deterritorialization and its complementary relation with axiomatization. As a consequence of this difference, Deleuze and Guattari's universal history could be said to be a universal history of contingency, as opposed to necessity, since capitalism bears no intrinsic essence and occupies no privileged vantage point. Thus in contrast to a dialectical mechanism that progresses through negation and the elimination of contingency towards absolute necessity, the universalism of Deleuze and Guattari's alternative is a product of the conjugation of decoding with axiomatization, and what results from this is a proliferation of contingencies. In this respect, Deleuze and Guattari's universal history could be said to be the converse of Hegel's: while one is linear, teleological and proceeds by way of negation and overcoding, the other is nonlinear, non-teleological and proceeds by way of affirmation and decoding. Although it may be true that Deleuze and Guattari's universal history at times replicates facets of Hegel's (for example, when focusing on its retrospectivity), the novelty and significance of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of universal history can be maintained and reasserted by insisting on the nonlinear nature of contingency, as can be sourced from their wider ontology. The result is a kind of history, I would suggest, that evades the historicism of Hegel and remains faithful to the processes of becoming and creativity.