

Opinion

How Would You Draw History?

When cracks start to appear in the world order, the old textbook timeline just won't do.

By Crispin Sartwell

Mr. Sartwell is a professor of philosophy.

Nov. 19, 2018

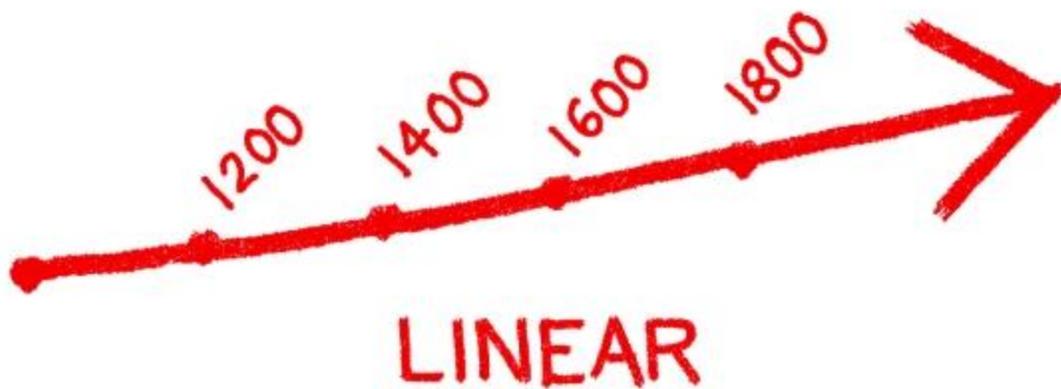
Illustration and animations based on drawings by Jane Irish

Recent world events — take your pick — might have you wondering about where human history is headed, and by what route. You would not be alone.

The fracturing of global alliances and the rise of hard-right movements like those in Hungary, Brazil and the United States have caused many of us to question the inevitability of what we generally call progress. Ecological disasters like the California wildfires, plausibly connected to climate change and suburban development, raise the specter of a human history moving inexorably toward self-destruction.

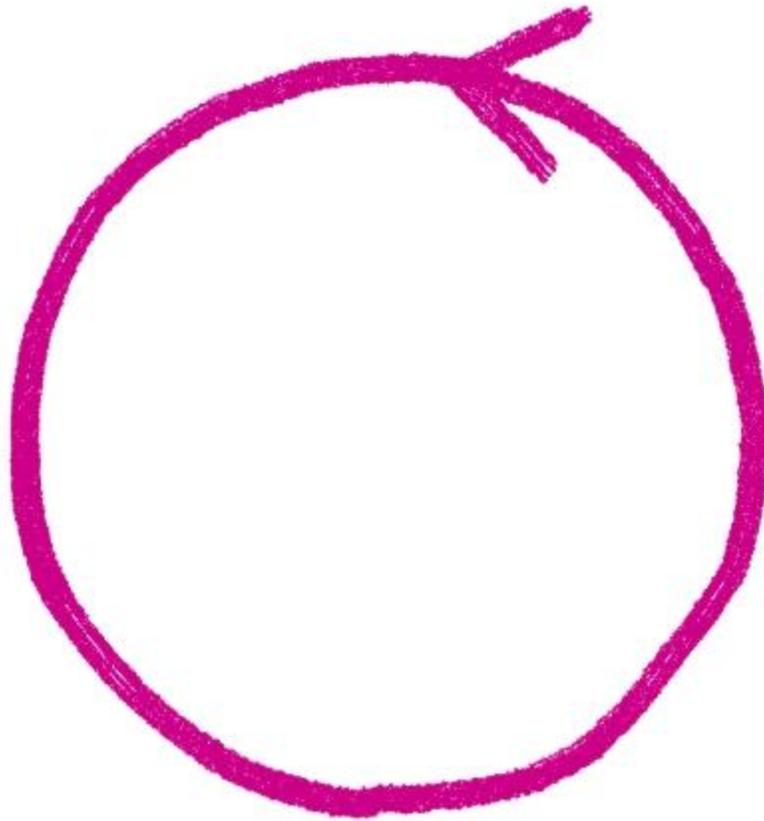
The philosophy of history, which flourished in the 19th and early 20th centuries and has enjoyed periodic revivals in the hands of thinkers like Arthur Danto and Francis Fukuyama, set itself the remarkably ambitious project of describing the forces that shape human events: history's structure, its direction, its aim, its point and even its end. There are good reasons to be skeptical of such a project, which we might associate above all with the names Marx and Hegel, and it is possible that history has no coherent shape or direction, or many. It may be, too, that the shape of history depends on our decisions and not on impersonal forces. But the philosophy of history is also a seductive project because, among other things, it seems to promise an understanding — even an approximate one — of what might happen next.

The basic timeline of history, which still ornaments elementary-school classrooms, remains the way many of us picture how we got to where we are. Its ubiquity suggests that drawing history, trying to capture the shape of time graphically, on a page or in our imaginations, is fundamental to how we understand both the past and the future; we need to diagram history to grasp it, if it can be grasped at all.



There is only one history or course of time, in this view, and all humankind is swept up in it. As we tilt the right end up, we portray “the Whig interpretation of history,” a term coined in 1931 by the historian Herbert Butterfield to describe what he thought of as naïve progressive optimism, the idea that history was headed pretty directly for freedom and enlightenment. We’ve often gotten very much the same picture from progressive leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and former President Barack Obama, who tell the story of America as a march toward justice, characterized by the enfranchisement of oppressed groups, presented at times almost as inevitable.

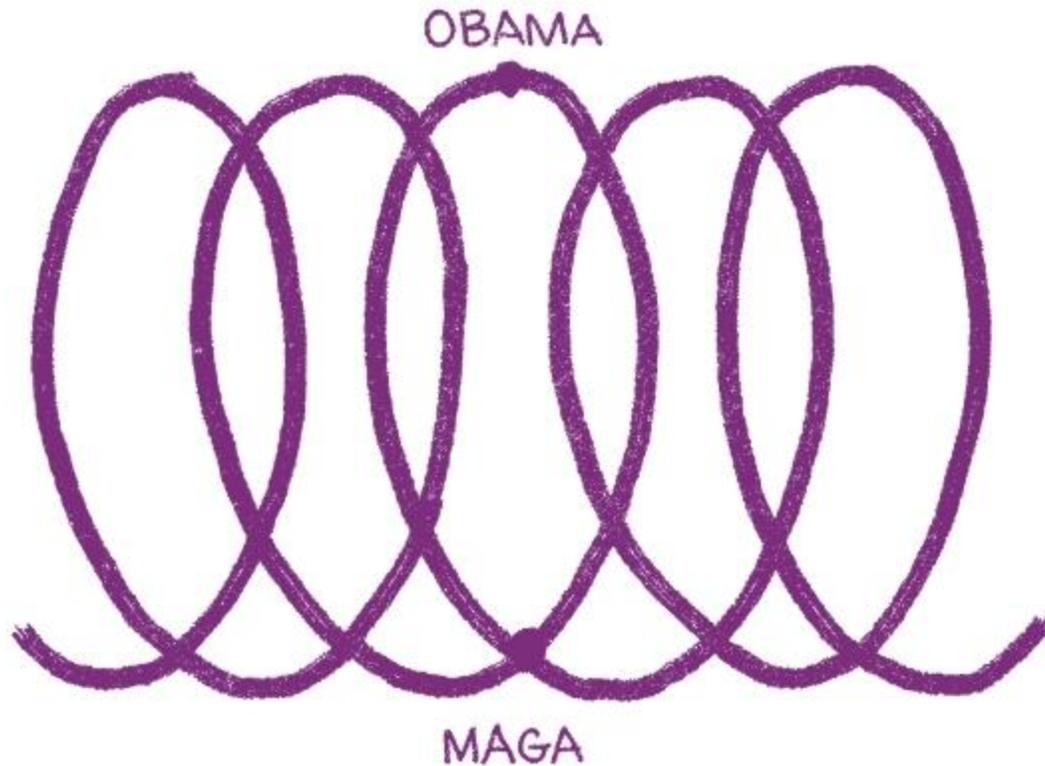
On the other hand, many theorists and many traditional cultures have envisioned time as circular or at least cyclical, which is even suggested by the rhythm of day and night or of the seasons.



CIRCULAR

Nietzsche, for example, speculated that a finite number of atoms in infinite time would assume the same configurations again and again, infinitely. But many ancient philosophies, such as Stoicism, and ancient religions, such as some elements of Hinduism, believed in the wheel of time (or kalachakra). We talk this way informally as well, when we say that history repeats itself, and certainly the idea that we live in an era when fascists and capitalists are squaring off against socialists all over the world sounds like 1930, and 1890 and 1850.

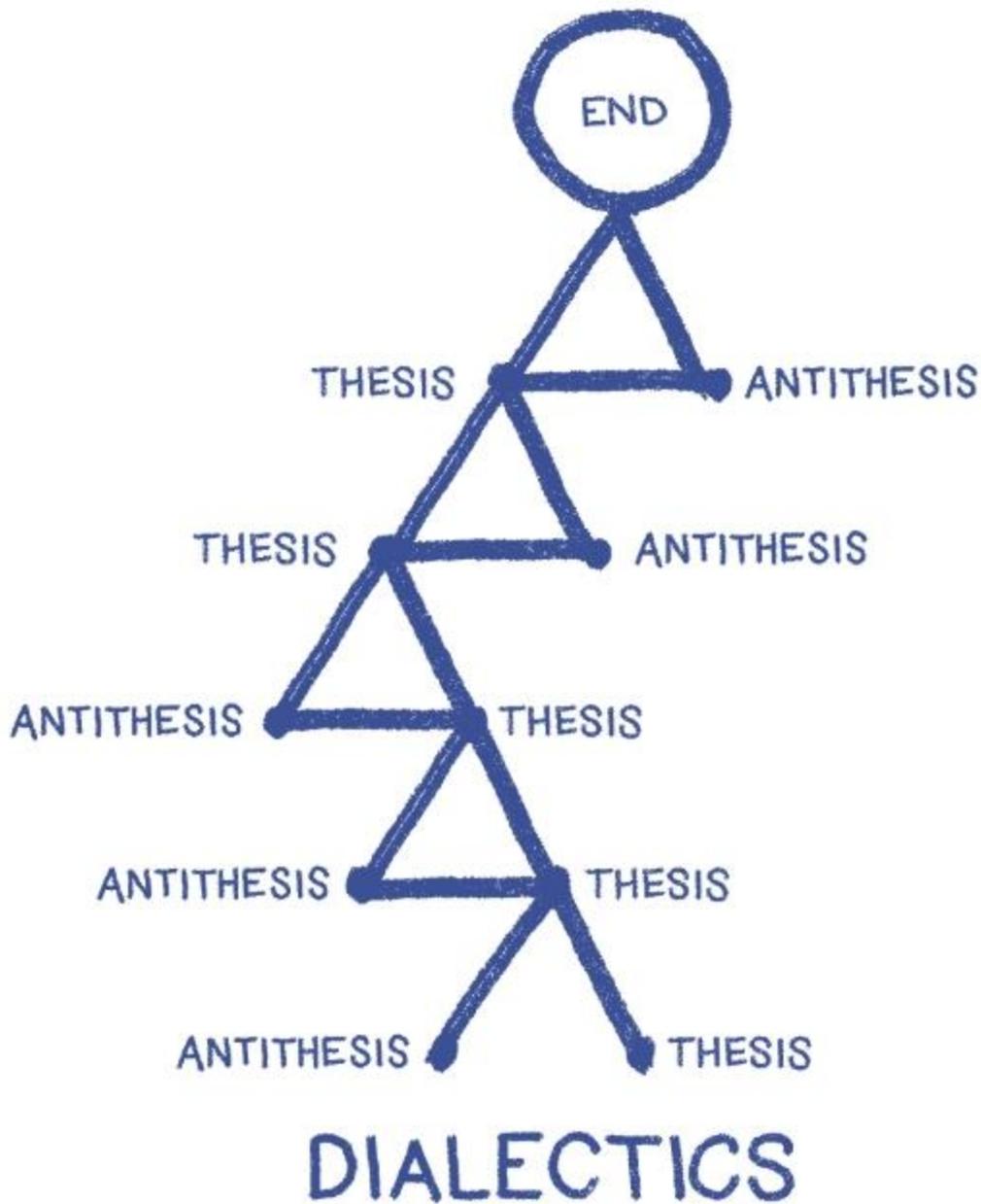
The repetitions are striking but not exact, so perhaps history has a loop structure.



LOOP THEORY

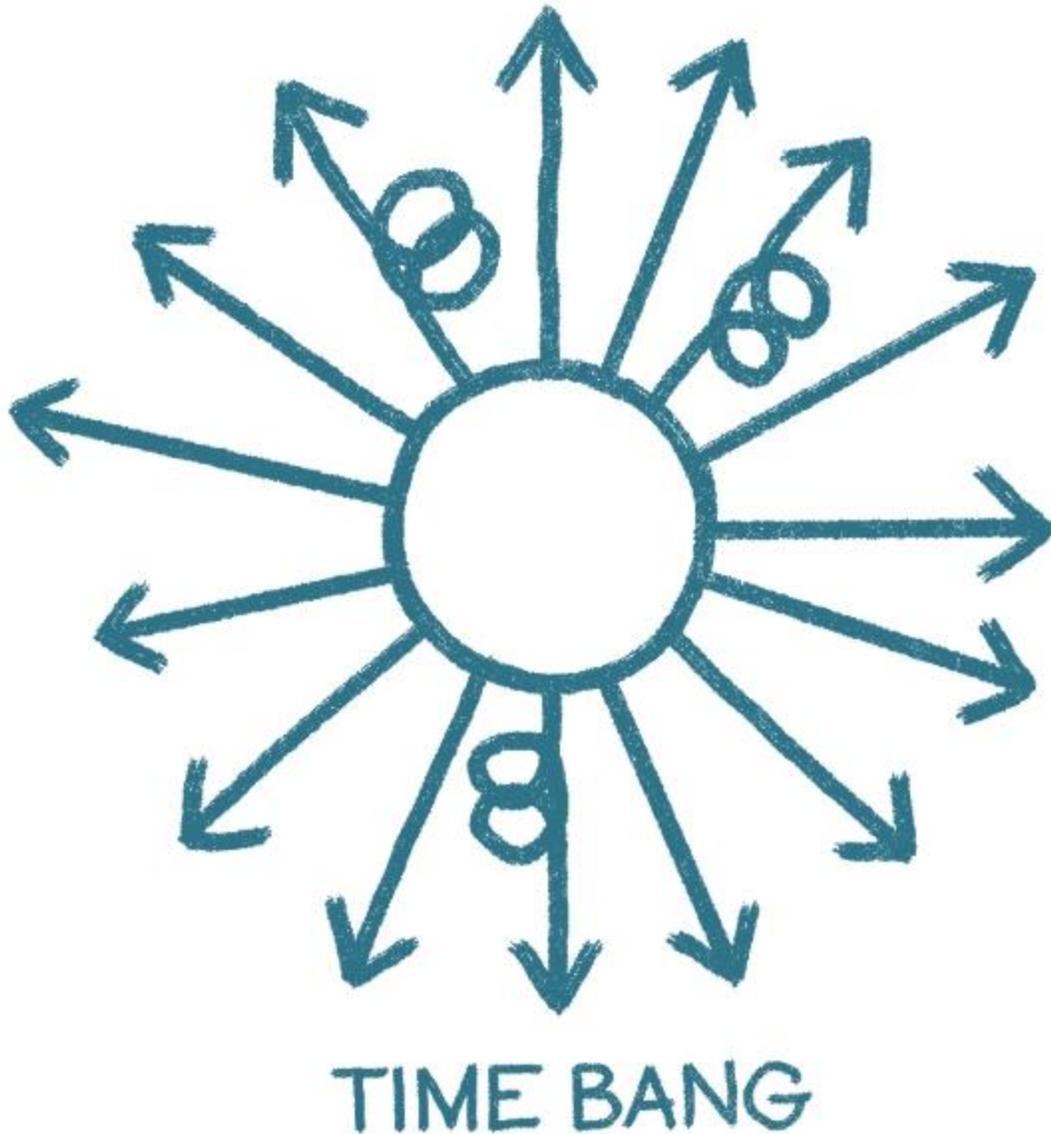
It's cyclical, but it often doubles back on its journey forward. Here we might also think of progress pursued through a revival of traditional values, or radical reform movements that make what almost appears to be a reactionary appeal to the source or origin, as in the philosophy of Confucius or the Reformation of Martin Luther. Obama's first inaugural address, typically for American political rhetoric, portrayed his victory both as progressive and as a return to the values of America's founding, as the top of the loop, as it were. A strength of this picture is that it explains seeming setbacks as continuations of the way forward. We are likely to flow out of our period of reaction and disaster.

The most ambitious accounts of history in the 19th century were Hegel's and Marx's, which described the structure in terms of "dialectics," or opposites that were reconciled at a higher level in the next phase: conflicting cultures or classes or spirits of the age that were merged and transcended at the dawn of the next period, which in turn generated a new conflict or tension.



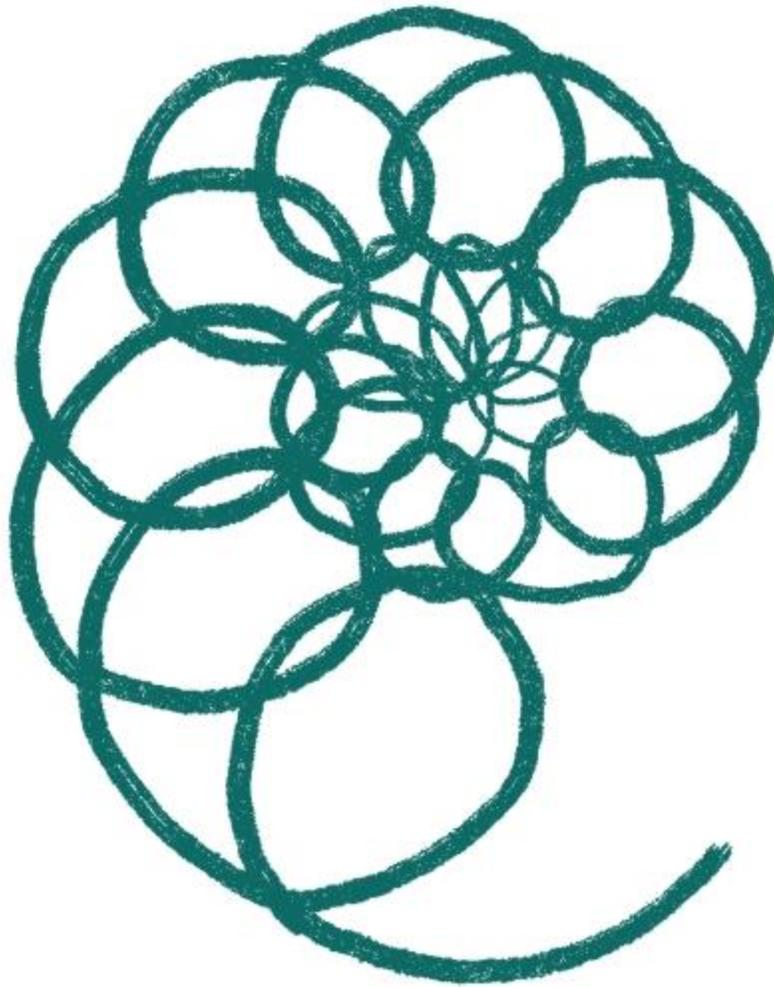
For example, Marx described the feudal economy as generating a conflict between lord and serf that was finally overcome by the rise of bourgeois capitalism, which in turn gave rise to a conflict between owners and workers that would inevitably lead to communism. Hegel looked on the Romantic art of his time as a synthesis and transcendence of symbolist or iconic art (Egyptian, for example) and classical Greek and Renaissance styles, overcoming the apparent opposition between reason and passion or reason and subjectivity. Both of them, like Fukuyama, thought that the whole thing was leading toward some kind of ecstatic or at least satisfactory end-state.

Once we let the physicists and cosmologists in on the action, however, things are liable to get explosively weird, and Stephen Hawking (following Richard Feynman and others) concludes from quantum mechanics that “the universe has every possible history.”



It's a big bang not only of matter but also of almost infinitely many timelines, each of which might be a line or a loop, a circle or spiral. At this point, however, the complexity might just be getting too great to yield much in the way of predictions. Or rather, if you predicted that everything that can possibly happen will happen, you'd be right, and finished.

If I were trying to draw history, I'd draw it as a loop spiral: all on a single timeline, but crossing and recrossing itself, not making any particular progress forward or upward, but blossoming or expanding outward, more complex with each spiral because of the accretion of events.



LOOP SPIRAL

Well, that's the shape I think history would have, if I thought history had a shape. I call it the Spirograph theory.

At any rate, depending on how the lines get drawn, Brazil and the rest of us will be looping around, or resolving our contradictions, or cycling back left, or will have every possible future.

So, dear reader, how would you draw history? The world wants to know (at least I do).

Crispin Sartwell teaches philosophy at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa. His most recent book is "[Entanglements: A System of Philosophy.](#)"

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 23, 2018, on Page A25 of the New York edition with the headline: How Would You Draw History?. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)