For those who grapple with the problem of the diffusion of modern concepts and practices in colonial regions, Terry Pinkard’s recent reworking of Hegel’s philosophy of history is bound to feel disappointing. For although the book is a serious attempt to put “philosophical history” back on the table after a long hiatus, Pinkard’s approach to the question of whether modern norms can be affirmed as constituting a “world history” remains bound within a conventional historiographical impasse. This review will acknowledge the merits of the philosophical tradition Pinkard belongs to, but it will insist that his approach to, and his account of, modern history must be rethought in order for his own normative claim about modern freedoms to remain defensible.

To fully comprehend the necessity of philosophical history, Pinkard insists, we need both philosophical abstractions and careful attention to the “decidedly concrete” of empirical history. The philosophical insight that informs his account is Hegel’s unique view of the nature of human self-consciousness, one based on the larger distinction between nature, which has neither purpose nor determinate normative content taken as a whole, and spirit, all organic life that has purposes (or a telos) built into its constitution. What Pinkard calls “the logic of self-conscious animals,” is thus a reference to the different kind of self-relation that human animals have. We are aware of our purposes as purposes, which enables us to raise the question of the adequacy of our purposes.

Pinkard rightly points out that while this view of human subjectivity is metaphysical, it is also simultaneously historical and social. For Hegel, a historically
determinate shape of subjectivity — and its entailment in institutionalized practices — is the way in which the “universal particularizes itself and is herein identity with itself” (18, emphasis in original). It is this emphasis on the historicity of human subjectivity that opens up the possibility of a philosophical study of the succession of “orders of thought.” Hegel believed that historical failures in attempts by human beings to justify their norms and practices to each other and the successive attempts to pick up the pieces and rebuild another community, indicates that history is not just “one damn thing after another.” Rather, there is an “infinite end” at work in history — that of securing justice, which has transformed itself in the modern period into a concern with justice as “freedom for all.”

Throughout the book, Pinkard tirelessly insists that this view of history is a retrospective, and not a straightforwardly teleological one. In his apt words, while we cannot look back and say that older forms of Spirit were false, we can say that they “turned out to be false” (149). This is also an effective counter to poststructuralist views, which deny that any “logic” of self-consciousness can be found in history, thereby suggesting that human self-comprehension of its own history cannot go beyond an acknowledgement of radical contingency.

It is one thing to clarify the need for a philosophical history however, and quite another to actually write one. The central contradiction in Pinkard’s book is between what it wants to claim and what it can claim within a purely philosophical framework. While the philosophical argument is pitched at the level of the relationship between a universal logic of human self-consciousness and historically determinate practices and norms, this cannot directly enable the claim that any historically specific set of norms also constitutes a “world history.” Yet, Pinkard also wants to affirm the specifically modern norm of justice as “freedom for all” as constitutive of such a “world history.”

The impasse (and predictable resolution) to which this tension leads can be best grasped by tracing the key arguments in chapters three to five of the book. Chapter three, titled “Hegel’s False Start: Non-Europeans as Failed Europeans,” has a primarily negative purpose. It acknowledges that Hegel’s Eurocentric and racist comments about the lack of self-consciousness among the blindly rule-following communities of Africa, China, and India are both empirically wrong and morally inexcusable. Pinkard points out that China under the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) could boast of a “vibrant market society” (59) long before any European community could, and that up to the early nineteenth century, neither China nor India imported European goods for daily consumption. Indeed, Indian cotton textile production was “one of the provocations of the English industrial revolution in textiles” (64). He also states more than once that philosophy beyond Europe was capable of generating its own negativity, embedded as it was in a rich cultural life and (often) supported by dynamic economic institutions. Given Pinkard’s self-distancing from Hegel on this account, we can conclude that stories particular to different communities about how the modern conjuncture of
“world history” came to pass can be told. Moreover, we cannot judge which stories mattered in what ways in the transition to modern life prior to their telling. In short, even if the telos of philosophical history is modern history as “world history,” it is still profoundly contingent, and cannot possibly pin its hopes on a Eurocentric account of history.

Unfortunately, just when chapter three seems to have opened up a space for novel historical accounts of modernity, chapter four forecloses it. It is titled “Europe’s Logic,” and it essentially recounts Hegel’s sweeping account of European history as told in the Phenomenology. It begins in ancient Greece, where, according to Pinkard (and Hegel), “what became the agenda of world history” (144) began, and the chapter ends with nineteenth-century Western Europe, where, once again following Hegel, the norm of “freedom for all” is seen as being embodied in the tripartite institutions of the family, civil society, and the state. This equation of the history of “modernity” with the history of “Europe” clearly undermines the promise inherent in chapter three, and leaves unclear how the acknowledgement of differences pertaining to “cultures,” “civilizations,” and “traditions,” can be combined with an attempt to grasp modern norms as constitutive of a “world history.”

This problem is not new. Historians have been grappling with it for many decades, although it is far from clear that any broadly acceptable resolution to it exists. The disappointing aspect of Pinkard’s book is that instead of owning up to this difficulty as a problem deserving further investigation, it falls back on nineteenth-century “imperialism” as the sole agent of the transition to “world history” It is worth quoting Pinkard at length here:

The conclusion that one can draw from Hegel’s conception of the modern concept is that just as the “master” and “servant” at the initial stages of the Phenomenology may be coming at each other from different systems, by virtue of the struggle, their own subjectivity (and therefore the final ends guiding their lives) become implicated with each other in a shared enterprise. After the European imperialism of the nineteenth century had extended its grip all over the world, world history became even more definitively “world” history... Just as the destinies of master and servant had become inseparable in [Hegel’s] own system, the destinies of the world’s people became more closely intertwined. (160; all quotation marks are Pinkard’s own.)

The problems with this assertion are many. It leaves unclear in what sense we can speak of a world history before the nineteenth century if the ultimate explanation for how “world” history came to pass remains imperialist expansion, it falls back on the tired metaphor of Europe as the master that schooled the world into enlightened knowledge as the only way to narrate the history of the past two centuries, and it forces
us to seriously ask how adequate Pinkard’s Hegelianism (however sophisticated) can be as an account of the modern world, if its historiographical end point is merely the affirmative opposite of the postcolonialist rejection of bourgeois modernity as such.

Pinkard offers no clues in other words, as to why we must retain a commitment to the core claims of Hegel’s philosophy of history, if the determinate account of “world history” that follows from it reproduces the logic of imperialism. Although this problem has often led to a rejection of Hegel tout court, I want to suggest that a Marxian approach to the historiographical impasse that Pinkard reaches can be helpful, since Marx allows for an immanent critique of bourgeois modernity instead of proceeding from either a one-sided affirmation or rejection of it.

Consider, for example, the contradictory role that concepts such as “market economy” and “civil society” play in the book, especially in Pinkard’s historical narrative of the transition from the early modern to the modern world. On the one hand, Pinkard argues that a “thinly constituted” civil society has historically been the basis for “formal” freedom (123), such that even the roots of the French Revolution can be traced to the decline of the mediating effects of guilds and estates (123). Linking formal freedom to guilds and estates, Pinkard suggests that civil society is intrinsically driven by the “competitive nature of a market economy” (159) and thus forms the ground for the intelligibility of bourgeois political norms. At the same time however, Pinkard says that for the market to be a part of a “civil society” based on “decency in interaction,” state regulation of the market is needed (163). Following Hegel, here the “market” is seen as an extrinsic feature of civil society, one that can and must be regulated by a political community in order to nurture ethical life.

The lack of clarity regarding the relationship between the “market” and “civil society” means that the question of whether “formal” freedom is to be seen as a norm finding plausibility only in the free play of market exchanges as a practice extrinsic to civil society, or whether such freedom must also be viewed as constitutive of civil society as such, is left hanging in the balance. If the former is true, we do not know what the appropriate response should be if formal freedom and the rather vaguely defined “decency in interaction” were to come into conflict. If the latter is true, we do not know how civil society might find resources within itself to overcome the thinning out of ethical solidarity generated by its own principles.

More significantly, if we take into consideration Pinkard’s own admission that a “vibrant market society” (59) had existed in Song China, the fact that the kind of state-backed economic dynamism in early modern Europe that Pinkard refers to (115) was not exceptional in the wider context of the early modern world and the fact that the norm of “freedom for all” had found plausibility in non-European spaces as early as the late eighteenth century, we will be forced to accept that neither “market society,” “market economy,” nor Hegel’s account of the “elements” of modern life as set out in the Philosophy of Right, can function as categories that grasp the web of institutionalized practices that make the modern norm of freedom (whether
substantive or merely formal) plausible. In order to account for the intelligibility of modern freedoms, and in order to argue for their “world-historical” significance, we need more historically specific categories that can grasp the specificity of modern life at the level of practices that are not bound by “tradition” or “culture.”

Long story short, Hegel did not have (and Pinkard does not either) a fully historicized account of why modern norms emerged at the time that they did, and hence he could not have much to say about whether the articulation of modern freedoms might not themselves lead to further contradictions and dissatisfactions. Hegel continued to believe in the possibility of using “ethnic” or racial-psychological types (94-95) as the ground for normative intelligibility, and Pinkard agrees that even Hegel’s account of the rise of modern nation-states is dependent on references to such “ethnic”s (116).

It is with respect to this problem of providing an adequate account of the historicity of modern life that Marx turns out to be a better Hegelian than either Pinkard or Hegel himself. The reason, simply, is that within the framework of a critical Marxian approach, the category “capitalist society” refers to a historically determinate set of practices — commodity production and exchange — that both constitute “world history” as an object of inquiry and function as the explanatory ground for the intelligibility of freedom as a modern political norm. The specificity of these practices, and hence of capitalism as a form of social mediation, lies in the fact that within the capitalist form of life, labor acts as the fundamental constituting unit of social relationships, whereas in all other human communities, labor had been organized through more overt relationships such as kinship ties. This practical fact that labor in capitalism mediates a new, abstract form of social (and not just political) interdependence that is not intrinsic to laboring activity as such, is grasped by the category of “abstract labor,” which is a “real abstraction” rather than a taxonomical one that merely refers to concrete labor in the abstract. Abstract labor is thus the “substance” (in the Aristotelian sense, i.e. both form and content) of value — which is the historically specific form of wealth in capitalist societies — measured in terms of socially necessary labor time, and embodied in commodities.

What sets apart the Marxian theory from more casual invocations of “capitalism,” then, is that it sees capitalist society as constituted by normative practices that rest on the socially mediating role of labor. In contrast to all approaches that continue to accept the economic/ethical binary at face value, and therefore founder on the question of how genuinely ethico-political acts may become possible on a large scale in the contemporary world, the Marxian approach seeks to understand the centrality of the “economic” in capitalist societies as itself inextricably bound to the normative force of abstract labor as a form of social mediation. Marx, however, did not believe that bourgeois modernity could adequately realize its own aspirations to freedom, emphasizing instead that commodity production and exchange as the basis of social interdependence relies on practices of alienated labor. That is, it relies on the role of
labor as a means to a means (a wage) and because in capitalist society the purpose ultimately governing productive activity (endless capital accumulation) is indifferent to the personal aims of laborers as well as of capitalists, social life under capitalism is at once a condition of practical freedom and an engine of systematic unfreedom. In short, Marx’s use of “capitalist society” allows us to grasp the historical specificity of bourgeois modernity, and renders visible its contradictions through an immanent critique.

In historical terms, such a Marxian approach can serve as a powerful analytic to understand the plausibility of modern freedoms in non-European spaces, without reducing the driving motor of that history to imperialism. For instance, Andrew Sartori has convincingly argued that the constitutive role played by a new vision of freedom in the peasant politics of agrarian Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century onward, cannot be understood without reference to the history of capital, with which local processes of commercialization had become increasingly intertwined since the early nineteenth century. Specifically, the normative significance of the “property-constituting powers of labor” that informed peasant politics, was tied not to an atavistic demand for autarkic existence, but rather to the peasants’ embrace of commodity production as the way to participate more deeply in processes of commercialization. The key issue, in other words, is that the transition to capitalist society cannot be understood as existing in a merely extrinsic relationship to more particular histories. Rather, Sartori’s point is that the content of peasant agency cannot be historicized and effectively grasped either as mere derivative mimicry or as the functional expression of already-constituted interests. In a related vein, I have argued elsewhere that an adequate historical understanding of the conceptual roots of state planning in mid-twentieth century India can open up the possibility of putting Indian history in conversation with a broader development of the time, namely the separation of political economy into economics and sociology, and that the condition of possibility of such a comparison is the increased imbrication of vastly different cultural contexts within the expanded vortex of capitalist reproduction.

It might be said therefore, that what began as a philosophical insight in Hegel, that the “bad infinite” of history can “make sense” to us only when viewed as the working out of the “infinite end” of securing justice, must become a historically specific critical social theory of capitalism if the modern norm of “freedom for all” is to be affirmed as constituting a “world history.” Indeed, as mentioned earlier, even “world history” is an historical concept that gains plausibility only under capitalism. As Marx himself put it:

The further the separate spheres, which act on one another, extend in the course of this development, and the more the original isolation of the separate nationalities is destroyed by the advanced mode of production, by intercourse, and by the natural division of labor between various
nations arising as a result, the more history becomes world history. Thus, for instance, if in England a machine is invented which deprives countless workers of bread in India and China, and overturns the whole form of existence of these empires, this invention becomes a world-historical fact.5

The Marxian approach therefore, insists that a practical basis in the historical experience of diverse peoples must be demonstrated in order to argue that the problem of “freedom for all” and self-conscious reflection on social norms had become a problem for such peoples, and not just one imposed on them. Otherwise, it is hard to argue from within the terms of Hegelian philosophy that people who have no basis in their immediate or mediate experience to warrant an identification with modern norms, and who rarely have their own histories written (for instance, the communities of North-Eastern India), must necessarily and unquestioningly submit to such norms. What Marxian approaches have — and what is crucially lacking in Pinkard — is an approach to history that mediates the discussion between a philosophical and an empirical history of modern life.

Notes