

## Conventions of National Historical Judgment: Outgrowing the Norms

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My research into Western cultural history over the several centuries that mark the modern era, approximately from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 through the present, has exposed as a significant cultural phenomenon national conventions of ordering and explaining historical events. Patterns of cause and effect in the preferred order persist over centuries as they become conventions for structuring all historical experience. They are for that nation what has been called "a right order in time," a concept that has existed in every world culture either explicitly or implicitly; the Greeks called this 'right order' *aidios*, the Egyptians *maat*, and the Western Enlightenment considered its presence as products of *right reason*.<sup>1</sup> Whereas individuals may differ in a particular culture as to how events are conceived and structured, these individuals must work through the rhetorical conventions of both academic and popular culture as they express their point of view. The conventions originate at a point in a nation's history when external and internal events demand a historical perspective adequate for justifying that nation's necessary actions. Unfortunately, as I hope to demonstrate, these conventions become embedded in the standards of cultural thought, and are imposed over time on situations that are no longer appropriate for the nation's interaction with other nations. Analytical minds know better, but the very gravity of how leaders and others have thought about states-of-affairs pulls judgment into what Jean-Paul Sartre called "bad faith"--that is, knowing better but nonetheless convincing oneself that what has been seemingly self-evident is really still the case.

I became interested in this phenomenon in my study of Austrian and German historical cultures. I was keyed to think about such a national pattern by an eighteenth century German Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. He wrote of 'national character' at that time when European nations began to compete with each

other on cultural grounds, a movement of national thinking that might be called the inception of modern nationalisms. Lessing studied how one play concerning the tensions of the popular will and aristocratic authority, entitled *Merope*, was staged by several European nations, showing that Italy, England, France, and Germany each had a distinct way of staging this play that reflected the core values and ways of historical understanding of that nation.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, Italy had constant sub-plots that defied a unitary development, reflecting their own inability to cohere a nation. England in Lessing's estimation in all their productions relied too heavily on the interactions of self-interested people, albeit often prudent persons, making history into a drama of congruent or conflicting perspectives, neglecting the ideas that could universalize the issues. France, on the other hand, stressed the interdependence of persons and events too heavily, insisting that all action include everyone on stage. Interestingly, ethnologists recognize in France a historical emphasis upon community that surpasses their Germanic cousins. Germany in Lessing's analysis staged *Merope* correctly as it showed that each separate action of an individual carried a universal truth (what Immanuel Kant would a decade later call the *categorical imperative*). While interdependence was a deep background of all individuals as each contributed to a common destiny, it was a radical individualism which sought through personal idea and feeling the appropriate act in time. This character of radical individualism, yet belief in a universal simultaneously realized in each act is well-known in historiographical theory as German historicism.

I do not approach the patterns by which a nation organizes events in time in their formulations and explanations as being better than one another. Each pattern had a rationale for its emergence that worked for that time in justifying the aims and the actions of that nation's authorities and populace, those responsible directly and indirectly for protecting the nation. I will in the short time of this presentation speak first about the conventions of German historical judgment (my chief field) which Lessing and Kant exemplified, and then contrast that form--which arguably still exists in the Federal Republic of Germany--with the conventional pattern of historical judgment possessed by the populace of the United States, a form

that arose before the American Revolutionary War and still informs our decision-makers.

The German pattern of historical logic can be characterized by two variables: a belief in the membership of every individual of the nation in that nation as an organic whole which is an outgrowth of each single, individual act--history a tension between radical free choice and its universal outcome for all; and, a sense of time that can be called dialectical in that every period of political-social identity is seen as distinct in character, a quantum whole, which is then reconfigured in a new period of time through conflict and resolution. The 'organicism' of the German community stems from its distant clan origins, yet a trope for national identity that remains even until today where German citizenship requires Germanic ancestry of at least one spouse in a marriage. The German pattern of dialectical movement in time can be traced to its medieval heritage of countless small principalities which nominally were under the highest authority of the Holy Roman Emperor, but individually had a de facto authority that allowed separate armies, independent alliances, and by the 1600s overt action even against the Holy Roman Emperor and his Austrian lands. What kept these over 300 principalities, by 1789 314 principalities, in an in-common cultural consciousness was the German language and the nominal authority of the Holy Roman Empire in its historic mission as a unifying institution, even if ineffective in this mission. I will call the normative historical logic that grew out of these political origins--the ancient clans and its persistence in the feudal structure and beyond-- *'the many as the one'*. To be sure, there were many temporary coalescences among these hundreds of states over the centuries, as one can see even in the most recent reintegration of the two German states into one: this experience of ever-new reconfiguration can be regarded as the cause of a dialectical vision of historical movement, where each period had a seemingly permanent form, only to be recreated. Moreover, the new period was not regarded as inherently better than the old. Rather, as the great historicist historian Leopold von Ranke stated "in God's eyes each period has its own integrity and value."<sup>3</sup> Dialectical thought requires this respect for the integrity of every phase and period. The German historical logic of dialectical thought eschewed projecting schemes of future development, rather saw the future as seminal in a principled manner

in the present. What might occur in history could not be predicted, but by finding its range of probabilities, one could comprehend what did occur, even guiding to a degree the resolution of conflicting issues and persons. Until Germany was able to unify its diverse principalities into one nation-state, thus being able to compete as a national economy with England, France, and other major Western nations, the historical logic of organicism and dialectical movement enabled diversity to cohere in a meaningful sense of shared existence.

Germanic historical logic persisted not only in history books, but in how events in time were structured in fiction, in conceptions of the natural world, and as I will demonstrate in how artists depicted 'change over time' in the world. The Germans gave us the historical concepts of *Zeitgeist*, a spirit of the times which all persons knowingly or unknowingly exemplified in each personal action, and the dialectical movement of history, which is from *Zeitgeist* to *Zeitgeist*, in which the many as the one participate.

Germany became a unified nation as a constitutional monarchy in 1871, and immediately there arose in its now pluralistic structure of political parties of diverse interests a challenge to its former historical logical convention of the many as the one, as well as historical time as dialectical movement. There was competition between the political parties and the Emperor and his ministers over who represented the 'one'. Neither the Emperor or his chief minister could comprehend the role of parties, as historically these aristocratic executives had been the caretakers of the 'one'. Even after World War I when Germany became a people's government without aristocrats, and the role of political parties became clearer, still the 'many as the one' haunted the political operations of this new Republic. Each party became a church as it were for its adherents--the many as the one from each point of view. Parties cannot simply adhere to a philosophy, they must compromise in order to reach the consensus necessary for governance. The German historian Paul Joachimsen perceived the problem of ideology as crippling to the Weimar Republic in 1922: he pointed to the health of United States' conventions of historical judgment as represented by its parties' ability to arrive at consensus by bargaining among interests, and not stressing the *categorical imperative* that

justified a party's positions.<sup>4</sup> Joachimsen was an isolate voice. In 1928, a leader of the German Democratic Party, Theodore Heuss bemoaned the inherited historical logic that saw all Germans as an "organic community."<sup>5</sup> He criticized the idea of 'the many is the one' as an impossible formulation which no party could responsibly address. Neither his party nor any other could realize an idea that suited all. Heuss spoke as even members of his own party turned towards some authority who could bring unity, and thus we see from 1928 until Hitler's eventual election the "bad faith" convention of inherited historical logic of the 'many as the one' which gave rise to authoritarian government, i.e. the unifier of the many by the one vision. In the Weimar era (as well as in Germany's history before and since) dialectical history, the expectation of new periods emerging, and the constant examination of the present for the principles of a new emergence to come, also proved a destructive perspective in that one did not face the immediate problems as states-of-affairs that required pragmatic, cooperative solution. Rather, as Robert Musil wrote in 1933, one could not imagine a 'return to the old institutional order despite the horror of the new; rather, "National Socialism probably has a mission and that its hour has come, that it is no puff of smoke, but a stage of history."<sup>6</sup>

The present United States norm of historical logic began as an English norm to some degree, that is as Lessing saw it, action by personal interest that structured history as personal will. The American full-fledged historical norm with this as a core emerged in the 1760s as New Englanders and Virginians led a diverse set of colonies towards the inception of a new nation. Self-justifying representatives of this nation-to-be, even when paradigms of prudence--such as Benjamin Franklin, had to speak for the whole, but knew they were not the whole. [Enlightened Virginians like Madison perhaps with this in mind insisted upon protecting the rights of these undefined minorities.] History in its part-whole relationship of the people and the nation became for the United States' historical logic a tripartite set of relationships--'the many, the representative ones who spoke for them, and 'the in-common one which was an aggregation--not organic unity--of the representatives and the many.' The many, as I will illustrate, was largely undefined as the nation emerged, the representative ones more explicitly depicted--the agents and enactors of history, and the

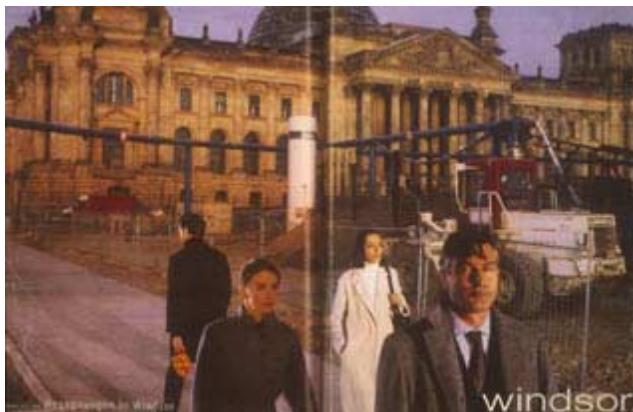
'in-common, aggregative one' was a premiss insisted upon that was a new phenomenon--the union, breaking with political traditions (**a colony become a nation**). The 'in-common one' was always in the making, an accumulative state-of-affairs arrived at by facing the immediate present. Time therefore was an incremental constant of human interactions and outcomes that changed in every act, but did not form ideas of organic unity as with the German. This normative pattern has given the United States historical judgment an emphasis upon the new as a development out of what has existed in the will of those who lead, and the new as always better than the old. As was said in our Constitution "in order to form a more perfect union." This was not to realize a *categorical imperative* of unseen truth, rather to make more effective the functioning of a new nation improving upon the Articles of Confederation. While a set of core values may be seen in the initial two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence, and in the initial paragraph of the 1787 Constitution, they function as operational values for problem-solving in issues markedly significant to the signers. Approximately seventh-tenths of the Declaration of Independence is a list of actions and events precipitated by George III that make self-evident these core values. Daniel Boorstin, one of the foremost American cultural historians of the 20th century, has articulately written of this American pragmatism which transformed abstract idea into a more 'self-evident' and tangible matter before one, thus matters that could be examined empirically and did not rely on a system of ideas.<sup>7</sup> History then became a matter of trial and error, not destiny and cohering principle. There was no form to be realized as with the German. Time for the American was always attention to the immediate past, the 'now', and the immediate future in its pressing material issues. One did not reconfigure history, one simply coped in the 'now' to meet what impinged. Boorstin speaks of the colonial American need for a "philosophy of the unexpected (*The Americans, The Colonial Experience*, 149-152)," as one abhorred the traditional systems of order that had existed, and thus could never know what could happen next. And thus, even until today our historical norms reflect abhorrence of 'social scientific' management which recognizes patterns and systems of order. [An interesting counterpoint to this adherence to the 'now' as a point between what just happened and what

could immediately be done is the Chinese vision of long, interlinked patterns that play out over age, patterns that can be discerned and foreseen. Han Xu, the Chinese Ambassador to the United States in 1985 spoke at the University of Louisville discussing China's 75 year plan to integrate capitalism into their economy. Could an American take such a statement seriously?]

What is wrong with this pragmatic understanding, where the standard of historical logic is the action of informed and prudent self-interested individuals who represent others who may not all be explicitly identified in the aggregative 'in-common one' we all share, where reflection stresses the immediately self-evident. Can we or should we ever grow beyond this normative manner of conceiving history? Before I offer my answer, I want to show you how the respective norms of historical logic of Germany and the United States enter into how states-of-affairs are visually depicted in these cultures. As a cultural historian I am influenced by German cultural theory whose aesthetics include the premiss that one's verbal judgments of states-of-affairs are analogous to visual judgments in that both forms of judgment organize the movement of particulars in time. I have found certain patterns prevalent to the genre of painting in each culture over the entire modern era. Although one can examine a painting in terms of an individual style, that of a Van Gogh, Picasso, or Thomas Hart Benton, as well as a style of a certain era, such as representational, impressionist, or abstract, one can find certain compositional conventions that are also present in each individual and period style that extend over centuries in a national culture. By dwelling on the indicative national compositional elements for a few minutes, I can synthesize some of my previous points, and allow my conclusions to rest on what I hope is the valuable American trait of self-evident argument.

1 - I begin with a fashion advertisement, then move to paintings. Here is a contemporary German clothing advertisement for *Windsor fashions*

As one looks at this scene, a myriad of forms and colors overwhelm the eye, much like a map of the many Germanies of the eighteenth century. The white cylinder then takes our eye to the white top coat of the woman and thence the entire human group--the thesis. The four persons are diverse in movement and dress, yet a tightly knit unity as an in-common parallelogram. The antithesis is another movement of the eye and mind: the construction project and the older building that is the German Parliament.



In this several staged temporal sequence of visualizing thus far one has moved from the raw empirical complexity to the separate groupings. Notice that one cannot see any one person without seeing the others, indeed, then one notices one cannot see any individual form or area of the painting without seeing the others. The compositional lines imbricate each in an in-common all. This 'in common all' is not an aggregation, rather an integrally connected whole.

The final movement of eye and mind ascertain this organic whole. This synthesis is underscored by the slogan on the facade of the older German Parliament "of the German people." The buildings are the German people's presence as an institutional whole, and one intimates that Windsor clothiers are the sartorial institution of this many as the one.

Time moves from the older Parliament to the modern persons in the successive historical *Zeitgeists* each represents.



2 - The second visual image is a painting, Caspar David Friedrich's *Landscape*, 1812. Again one's eye on entering the visual images is taken in all directions. An order is found initially by seeing the duality of a thesis foreground which is a mountain or hilltop with a cross, and then drawn by the two tall pines (like the white cylinder in the



clothing ad) to the distant mountain with its castle that might be called the antithesis. 'My kingdom is not of this world' could be the reflective synthesis: the yearning for a future heavenly structure from the foreground of the cross. One can see the projected succession of *Zeitgeists* from the mortal now to the hereafter.

What must be noticed as a visual logic is the interlinking of every aspect of the composition into the organic whole that tells this dialectical story.

3 - The third visual image is a century after Friedrich's landscape, Kathe Kollwitz's *Family*, an expressionist-influenced composition of 1910. The same movements of eye and mind are asked as in the above examples. Initially, one sees three persons but a myriad of bodily parts that must be sorted. The organic commonality of



the three persons lend to the lack of clarity about which parts belong to whom. Closer analysis enables one to discern the separateness of parts and how they structure an embracing form. The bodily amalgam offered by each of the three, arguably four persons, makes them an organic whole, a family. The thesis-antithesis

duality and tension has to do with the three or four as a family with each as a separate person. As one explores the integrity of each, one then appreciates more deeply their organic membership as a family. Each carries a quantum time that is both separate and one. Visually one cannot see any separate person unless one allows separateness to coexist with in-commonness.

The American historical logic as carried by its painterly visual tradition begins in my presentation with a mid-twentieth century representational scene, 4 - Guy Pène Dubois, *Fog, Amogansett* 1938. One's eye settles immediately on the dominant foreground figure moving towards one. A reflective analysis enables one to appreciate the converging diagonals that highlight



this person in their convergence (although as I will demonstrate with this and other American paintings over centuries, these diagonals continue either visibly or as a geometric invisible intention forming an 'x' with protagonist or chief matter at hand, embedded in or helping to constitute the 'x'. **'X marks the spot of the immediate 'now'**). What one attends in the moment is the historical salience. One's movement can go at will: only interest dictates.

The protagonist (or representative beachgoer) has come from the upper left towards the lower right, but he may turn to the right and move in the direction towards the upper right if he follows where his attention has been diverted. Trial and error, accident not necessity. History is what has occurred, what is occurring, what will occur: it is not a complex pattern of any sort for all involved.

There is no organic form, only an aggregate of individuals, to be sure on diagonals, but absent from any demand that they or one's eye move up or down either of the diagonals. The eye can wander, as can the

person or matter depicted. The spacing and non-contiguity of figure and connecting line allows this freedom. Time may be pursued in any direction. One should note also the lack of definiteness of any but the key figure. The many are there, but nonspecific; the representative one enables us to speak of the aggregate in-common.

5 - Alexandre Hogue, *Drought Stricken Area* 1934 has the prominent windmill on the crossing diagonals, the other human constructions of lesser definition. The windmill represents as an indexical shape the power of the wind and its immediate effects. The wind of the plains created the misery in the drought of these years. Nature is



as changing in its manifest moments as human interest and decision-making. One can't predict: yet Hogue makes the point elsewhere explicitly and in this canvas implicitly that human technology can be more thoughtfully employed in its relation to the environment. If one can harness the wind to meet situations, one can better manage the land so that the wind is not an enemy. Of course, that would require long-range planning by the farmer rather than a search for immediate gains. Since the 1930s ecological concerns and perspectives have taken great strides, and thus promises to be an area of cultural forethought that may help in changing the American historical convention of 'x marks the spot' in its narrow window of historical judgment.

6 - Let us look now at a compositional example from the initial emergence of 'x marks the spot' in historical judgment. Charles Wilson Peale's *George Washington at Yorktown, 1781* shows General Washington as a centerpiece, indeed geometric facilitator of the crossed diagonals. He has just come from a successful battle and rests with the potential motility of his next decision and movement. This might be in any direction: he awaits what impinges as a focus of his needed attention and interest. The other persons are barely noticeable. The aggregative in-common one has been won: what will emerge?



7 - Larry Rivers's *The Last Civil War Veteran 1961* is appropriate for its time: the bird of prey head above the human one looking up at its star on the crossed diagonals shows us self-evidently that the uncommon aggregate is not a 'one', even though each may deem it his or hers. As Margaret Mead said of the 60s, there would never be a war in common after Vietnam. Impassioned self-interest is seemingly laid to rest here. The limitation of our historical logic is the presumption of the aggregative one from a particular point of view, and, the blocking



out of any other integrity in the big picture. Was Rivers indicating the end of a bad faith where national unity was a falsehood that kept us from seeing the cultural strife of differing impassioned positions that must be addressed? The civil rights movement did begin to address this.

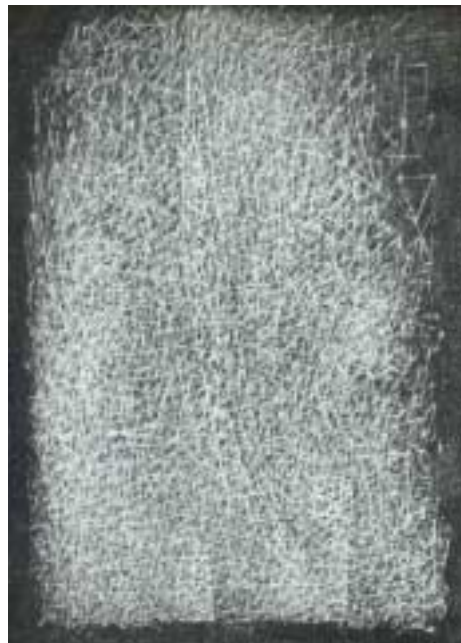
8 - Finally, Jackson Pollock's *Pasiphae* 1943 raises the crossed diagonals to a conscious symbol that seems a headstone for a reclining figure that initially was 'Moby Dick' the white whale that was the object of a destructive passion that governed the history of a man and a



ship, later titled "Pasiphae," representing the Cretan queen who had a deceptive model of cow made she could lay in to satisfy her destructive passion, mating with a white bull.<sup>8</sup> The product of that false presentation of self was the Minotaur. The 'x' is both the symbol for the here and now place of action and the labyrinth that results. Pollock was in years of Jungian analysis prior to this work,<sup>9</sup> thus familiar with the symbols of spirit over time. Although artists do not tell us in words their intentions, he seems to have seen how the compositional elements inherited in his genre functioned to show the flux of time and events.

The world in 2002 has reached an alpha and omega point: for the first time since the initial human family all humans in their respective 190 nations are in an in-common institution, the United Nations. All national cultures must be understood in their separate integrities, just as members of a human family. We are now in our outlived historical logic that stresses the representative one in "bad faith," much like Pasiphae. What could a better historical logic be? I would say an aggregative in-common one that is a true national federalism, and a world-wide federalism, where our canvas is not ruled by the crossed, centrally dominating diagonals, rather a lattice of diagonals linked more like the Germanic organicism, yet looser. I found such an American artist, Mark Tobey (1890-1976), whose philosophy of human interdependence finds its graphic corollary in the compositional forms I imagined possible for a new historical logic.

1) City Radiance 1944 with a plethora of diagonally crossed small areas with distinct integrities even as interdependently rendered



2) The organic forms of a 1959 painting loosely interdependent in an aggregation







## Endnotes

1. See Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), 54-55 for Egyptian *maat* and the general introduction to the notion of a "right order in time" in historical cultural expressions. *Aidios* as the historical manifestation of the divine order of *aion* is defined in F.E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms, A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), pp. 7-8.
2. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover, 1962), especially pp. 136-164.
3. See Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History, The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 80.
4. Paul Joachimsen, *Zur historischen Psychologie des deutschen Staatsgedankens in Die Dioskuren: Jahrbuch für Geisteswissenschaften*, vol. 1 (1922), p. 118.
5. Theodore Heuss, "Democracy and Parliamentarianism: Their History, Their Enemies, and Their Future, (1928)," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 53-56.
6. As quoted in Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1973), 415.
7. Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans, The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 152ff. Further reference to this text and edition.
8. Jeremy Lewison, *Interpreting Pollock* (New York: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999), 22, 26.
9. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock, An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 327-338.