
**A CONGRUENCE IN AUGUSTINIAN AND MARXIST PHILOSOPHIES:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE'S
AND KARL MARX'S VIEWS ON HISTORY**

Francisco Jayme Paolo A. Guiang
University of the Philippines – Diliman
College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Department of History
Email: faguiang@gmail.com

Abstract

Saint Augustine of Hippo was one of the most influential Latin Doctors of the Early Middle Ages. He contributed to the development of Christian dogma and philosophy starting with his seminal autobiographical exposition in the *Confessions* and his extensive work on Christendom's viewpoint of human history in *The City of God*. Not only a theologian, Saint Augustine was also considered to be one of the most radical thinkers of his time. His philosophy was groundbreaking in that he interpreted the Scripture in order to expound on important Christian concepts such as "original sin," "confession and conversion," and "love and the ethic of humility," to mention a few, in relation to human existence and history. His works and the ideas that he presented are well-preserved in the Christian tradition of the present.

In addition to Saint Augustine's Christian philosophy, it is interesting to look at how the Latin Doctor contributed to an explanation of human history. For example, in the first ten books of *The City of God*, he criticizes paganism and absolves Christianity in the destruction of Rome. But one interesting thing regarding Saint Augustine's ideas on history that could be found in Books 11 to 22 is that he expounds on the notion of a sacred history which entails the existence of a City of God and an Earthly City. In these books, he explains the role of God as the omnipotent being that controls the fate of mankind towards salvation in the end of time.

The historiography of Saint Augustine is an interesting aspect to explore because it allows readers to have an understanding about how human history was viewed by one of the Middle Age's most eminent Christian scholars. However, this paper will not only be concerned with an overview of the Latin Doctor's views on history. It will also expound on how it is, at some points, in congruence with another historical view produced by one of the most influential socio-political and economic theories of the 19th and the 20th centuries; namely, Marxism.

Hence, this paper shall present how Saint Augustine's historiography, classified as Providential History, has striking similarities with the Marxist view on history in terms of its linear development and how human agency takes part in the fruition of history. This paper will be divided into three main parts, the first of which shall define Providential History and how Saint Augustine's views on history fall under it. It will also discuss the portrayal of human agency in Providential History. In turn, the second part shall focus on the Marxist view on history – one that takes an emancipatory and materialist stand. In addition, it will elaborate on human

agency's role in Marxist historiography. The final part will be entirely devoted to a brief juxtaposition of Saint Augustine's and Marx's ideas raised in the preceding sections. It shall present how both philosophers have striking congruence and convergences in their views on history.

This paper would only be limited to analyses of two of Saint Augustine's seminal works, the *Confessions* and *The City of God*. More so, secondary sources concerning the Latin Doctor's philosophy will also be consulted to elaborate on some points that would be raised in this research. On the other hand, Marx's historical materialism will be expounded by primarily consulting Mandell Morton Bober's award-winning book *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History* (1948), Eric J. Hobsbawm's *On History* (1997), and other secondary sources pertaining to Marxist historiography. In addition, some passages from Marx writings will also be cited in order to give a deeper understanding on his views history.

It should be noted that this paper will not attempt to explore whether Karl Marx had actually read Saint Augustine's works thereby explaining the influence of the latter to the former's ideas on history. Such a topic could be reserved for a separate study on both philosophers. Also, this study shall not try to imply that Saint Augustine was a proto-Marxist, because such a reading of the Latin Doctor's ideas would be greatly anachronistic. This paper will simply be concerned with the outstanding congruence of both philosophers' interpretations of human history.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Saint Augustine

1. THE AUGUSTINIAN HISTORY: LINEAR, PROVIDENTIAL, AND THE ROLE OF CONFESSION

As discussed in the Introduction, Saint Augustine lived during the early part of the Middle Ages and served as both a Christian philosopher and theologian in the Northern part of Africa. The Christian philosophy that he promoted had contributed to a unique interpretation of history in which God functions as a primal agent in historical development. Providence, or a divine guide where God's power sustains human destiny, is an immutable fact in the historiography of Saint Augustine.

Providential History provides a discernable and recurrent pattern in which human beings commit sin, experience retribution because of their sin and, in the end, seek redemption through God's mercy. In fact, this view on history was not exclusive to Saint Augustine but was already prevalent in the Hebrew writings of the Torah – specifically, the Pentateuch, or the first five books. These five books, absorbed into the Old Testament of the Christian Bible together with the New Testament, contained stories that exhibit the recurrent pattern of providence – starting from humanity's expulsion from Paradise due to Adam's sin, to the redemption of the Chosen People under Moses' leadership, and, ultimately, to mankind's eventual salvation in the Apocalypse (Burrow, 2007, pp. 169-172). Although it could be argued that the Old Testament narratives actually exhibit a circular pattern in Providential History (e.g. the Book of Judges where the Chosen People repeatedly commit sin, experience turmoil, are redeemed through the appearance of a series of warrior-judges), **the general historical framework of the Christian Bible asserts a grand narrative that follows a linear pattern.** The pattern begins with the Creation, continues with the fall of man through Adam's sin, is followed by a

long history of human transgressions (with the appearance of Christ to deliver God's Word), and, finally, and concludes with the redemption of mankind in the Apocalyptic times.

What is clear in this linear pattern of history is that it highlights the importance of God's central role as the mover of history: That in the course of human existence, only God's redeeming powers had saved humanity repeatedly and it is only through such that humanity could be redeemed in end of times. Clearly, humanity's fate is dependent on God's power and grace. More so, Providential History features an evident relationship between God (as the mover and primary agent in history) and the Chosen People (as the dependent agents in the course of human history) where the faithful of Christendom eventually assumed the role of the Chosen People. What is most striking about this view is for history to move in a linear direction, sin has to be repeatedly committed by human beings (Burrow, 2007, p. 170& p. 172) in order for them to continually seek for God's grace.

The Providential History is the Biblical or Scriptural context by which Saint Augustine bases his views on history. The linear pattern apparent in the Christian Bible is likewise evident in *The City of God*, which attempts to recount humanity's long history. As already discussed in the Introduction, Books 11 through 22 are an extensive narrative that discusses the relationship of God, as the Creator of everything, to man, as one who fell from His grace and is continually struggling for redemption. Particularly in book 14, Saint Augustine gives evidence about man's vacillating relationship with God in the course of history. This is apparent in his exposition on the different natures of the City of God and the Earthly City:

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience (2000, p. 477).

It is clear that for Saint Augustine, the world is dichotomized into one which gives credence to man's vanity and pleasures, and another which values God and His glory. More importantly, the origins of this dichotomized world could be traced in divine history through the occurrence of the first sin, that caused the Fall of Man:

Our parents [Adam and Eve] fell into open disobedience because already they were secretly corrupted; for the evil act had never been done had not an evil will precede it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? ... the contrary vice of pride... specially rules his adversary the devil. And certainly this is the great difference which distinguishes the two cities of which we speak, the one being the society of the godly men [the City of God], the other of the ungodly [the Earthly City]... (2000, pp. 460-461)

In essence, the banishment of man from Paradise clearly meant the beginning of man's earthly life and an end to his/her heavenly existence in Paradise. Given this initial grasp of concepts of the City of God, the Earthly City, the occurrence of the Fall of Man, and the pivotal role of God, how are the concepts mentioned essential to an understanding of Saint Augustine's linear Providential History?

By closely looking at how Saint Augustine divided the books in *The City of God*, we could analyze how he presented his views on history. In the first part of his work (Books 1 to 10), he rewrites and debunks the prevailing idea during his time that Christianity was the cause for the decline of the Roman Empire. Instead, he reiterates that it was, in fact, Rome's pagan religion

which had caused the collapse primarily due to the empire's moral corruption and fall from God's grace. These first 10 books function as historical proof that the Romans lived in an Earthly City rife with ungodly and self-glorifying demeanors. On the other hand, the succeeding books (Books 11 to 18), attempt to historicize and argue that human existence, beginning with the Fall of Man up to the decline of Rome, was subjected to constant ambivalence between living under the context of the City of God or of the Earthly City. The last 4 books (Books 19 to 22) discuss the destiny of mankind and the possibility of living in eternal felicity in the City of God:

In that city [the City of God], then, there shall be free will, one in all citizens, and indivisible in each, delivered from all ill, filled with all good, enjoying indefeasibly the delights of eternal joys, oblivious of sins, oblivious of sufferings... (2000, p. 866)

By following the analysis of *The City of God* above, it is quite obvious that Saint Augustine follows a linear pattern in historical development where mankind's aspiration for the attainment of the City of God serves as the end goal. In turn, humanity could only attain this end goal by seeking for the grace of God. Attainment of God's grace, on the other hand, would only be possible when man recognizes God as the Supreme Being who controls human destiny. William E. Connolly, in his book *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection of the Politics of Morality* (2000), emphasizes that God's projection as omnipotent, omnipresent, salvational, and benevolent is a necessary construct for Saint Augustine. Furthermore, the author adds that the Latin Doctor perfects God's nature by shrouding Him in mystery - in that He is responsible for the world's moral order and, at the same time, is absolved from any evil attributed to mankind. Connolly argues that this supreme image of a divinity is essential in order to stress that it is only through obeying God and seeking His divine grace could humanity heal its divided will (pp. 106-107 & pp. 110-111). Though Connolly is critical regarding Saint Augustine's Image of God, the traits attributed to Him are indispensable in reinforcing His primary role as the unquestionable source of redemption and unwavering mover in Providential History.

Indeed, for Saint Augustine, history's development is directed towards the City of God and is contingent upon God's redeeming grace. If God functions as the dynamic force in humanity's progress, how does Saint Augustine view mankind and in what way does man shape history?

Human agency in Providential History is always challenged by an immutable fact that without God, man would suffer eternal damnation. From the first instance when man fell from Paradise, humanity had always been scarred with original sin; that from the moment when Adam and Eve, the primal parents, disobeyed God, they had forsaken their descendants (i.e. mankind) into suffering in the world (i.e. the Earthly City): "Morality, death, misery, suffering, crimes, the war of the flesh against the spirit, conflict among men – all these evils... are the characteristics of fallen man" (Deane, 1963, p. 17).

Basically, Saint Augustine sees the long stream of human history as a burden for mankind, where from birth he/she is tainted with original sin, the rest of his/her human existence is then fraught with the misery of worldliness, and finally death would come to end mortal life (Deane, 1963, p. 18). Saint Augustine makes it a point to recognize the Fall of Man and original sin as essential concepts that could elucidate the existing conditions of human frailty.

Given this condition, human agency is constantly confronted by his vacillation in choosing between good or evil. That is, whether to follow the path of God or to succumb to worldly desires. In the context of Saint Augustine's Providential History, man must recognize his/her inherent condition that he/she is hampered by the legacy of the Fall of Man and the reality of

original sin. In doing so, man would inevitably seek for divine intervention that could give him/her absolution; and a viable way for absolution could be made through confession. In Book 10 of the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine stresses how confessing to God could transform a sinful man:

So, O Lord, all that I am is laid before you. I have declared how it profits me to confess to you... For you, O Lord, give your benediction to the just, but first you make a just man of the sinner... You have forgiven my past sins and drawn a veil over them, and in this way you have given me happiness in yourself, changing my life by faith and your sacrament (1961, pp. 207-208).

The passage above underscores the role of confession in mankind's quest for liberty from sin. It elaborates a process of personal liberation by which man must first undergo a recognition of his/her sinful nature before going through confession that would endow man with the grace of God. In this case, the attainment of God's grace would not only allow man to achieve history's end goal (i.e. the City of God), but it would also release man from his/her sinful condition.

However, it would seem that man's pursuit for personal liberation makes him/her overly dependent on God, thus robbing him/her of an active role in history. Saint Augustine presents a clear picture of God's relationship to man - where the former takes on the dominant role while the latter tends to be more docile, although, admittedly, man could never override God's hegemonic role in Providential History. Nevertheless, it should be clarified that humanity does not assume an absolutely passive and docile part with respect to shaping history. In fact, human agency asserts an active role in history when man attempts to create solidarity in society through the transformative power of love. This love is not a self-centered love but a selfless love - one that is directed toward God and others. Saint Augustine himself exhibits selfless love in his prayer to God in Book 11 of the *Confessions*: "O Lord God, listen to my prayer. In your mercy grant what I desire, for it is not for myself alone that I so ardently desire it: I wish also that it may serve the love I bear to others" (1961, p. 254).

Selfless love is a transformative power that allows man to create solidarity in human existence. It is transformative because it transcends man's exclusive relationship with God and touches the lives of his/her neighbors. This selfless love "flows through the entire social body, including friends and enemies in the earthly city and even the inhabitants of the heavenly city." Conversely, when love is privatized and individualized, it could stagnate and transform man into a self-absorbed being (Schuld, 2003, pp. 40-41). In essence, Saint Augustine implies that selfless love is a tool for human agency to surpass personal liberation and take an active role in Providential History by transforming human society into a selfless entity that possesses love for God and others.

To summarize the essential points raised in this section, it is important to recall that for Saint Augustine, human history should be written in terms of God's divine guidance or providence which begins with the Fall of Man and continues to encapsulate humanity's current existence. Mankind's long history is marked by an oscillating attraction either towards or away from the City of God and/or the Earthly City. Ultimately and ideally, Saint Augustine projects that this linear development in human history ends with the City of God. More importantly, human agency in history is not entirely deprived of an active role because mankind possess the transformative power to create solidarity through selfless love.

2. MARX'S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM: LINEAR, EMANCIPATORY, AND THE ROLE OF CLASS STRUGGLE

Before pointing out the striking similarities that Saint Augustine's linear Providential History has with Marx's Emancipatory and Materialist History, an elaboration of the latter should be done first.

The philosopher, Karl Marx, lived during the 19th century and his ground-breaking ideas on economics had undeniably influenced succeeding views and interpretations on the impact of economic production on socio-political relations. More so, his philosophy had contributed to a unique view of human history in which man possesses a materialist consciousness that shapes the dynamic interaction of social classes. The materialist method in history was expounded by Marx and Engels in one of their essential works entitled, *The German Ideology* (written in 1846 and first published in 1932):

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life... Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas... they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these... (1977, p. 164)

This means that the creation and flow of history is based on mankind's social interaction, its material relationship with nature, and the productive forces derived thereof. More so, the materialist conception of history goes against the idealist stand point where man's ideas determine his/her material conditions and life (Hobsbawm 1997, p. 160). If it is possible to look at humanity through a materialist lens, how could history actually unfold in terms of man's "material intercourse"?

Evidence of historical development in the materialist sense could be seen in the theory of basis and superstructure expounded by Marx in the *Preface to "A Critique of Political Economy."* For him, man's "material intercourse" occurs within his/her society that is composed of two essential parts - **a base and a superstructure**. The former is determined by the means (e.g. sweatshops and machines) and relations (e.g. employer-employee relationship) of production, while the latter (as a direct influence of the base) generates society's constructs such as politics, religion, and culture (cited in McLellan, 1977, pp. 388-391). In principle, social interaction happens as a result of the dynamic activities of the base and superstructure which ultimately defines the materialist development of history.

Another important view on historical materialism was raised by Eric J. Hobsbawm, a prominent British Marxist historian of the late 20th century. Hobsbawm contends that most Marxist scholars misread historical materialism when they treat the concept as coterminous with economic determinism. According to him, it would be impossible for all events in history to be derived from economic phenomena. There are a multitude of reasons why historical events transpire and the economic aspect is but one of the various factors that should be taken into

account. On the contrary, Hobsbawm asserts that the focus of historical materialism should rather be on the “relationship of the social being and consciousness” (1997, pp. 160-161). Following his analysis, this means that Marxist historiography is primarily concerned with how mankind functions as a social being, how he/she is associated to prevailing social classes, and how history is inevitably produced out of class interaction.

Amidst the differing construal of the concept, it is undeniable that Marx’s materialist view on history contributes to a comprehensive analysis of human society based on a multitude of factors which includes economic phenomena as one of history’s most influential forces. In this light, it is interesting to expound on the direction where materialism takes the history of humanity. Given the vital but complicated role of socio-economic forces in the society that inexorably produce class interactions, where does history lead to?

Marx calculates that the rapid progress of capitalism in human history would produce an exponential growth in social inequalities. In this case, the ruling capitalist class would continue to immensely reap the benefits of the market while the working class would endure further poverty, deprivation, and exasperation from excessive labor. The growing indifference between these social classes would eventually take the form of a struggle (i.e. struggle for equality) and would cause a decline and breakdown of the status quo. This means that the deterioration of social relations would usher in a phase where the working class would be enlightened and organized to fulfil its mandate in history – the relinquishment and replacement of the capitalists as the dominant class (Bober, 1965, pp. 258-261).

Both Marx and Engels recognize that the toppling of the ruling class would only be possible through a violent revolution. Mandell Merton Bober in his work, *Karl Marx’s Interpretation of History*, enumerates three reasons why both assert that the revolution is, indeed, an “essential historical instrument” which is inevitable and indispensable:

First, they are convinced that the ruling class will not relinquish its power without a desperate struggle. Second, the building of communism demands a change of heart on a mass scale, and only in shock revolution can this change be wrought... Third, revolution shortens the pains of transition (1965, pp. 262-263).

More importantly, the materialist conception of human history does not only highlight the inevitability of a revolution, but it also fulfils the ultimate objective of emancipating the working classes from their current social disposition marked by class discrimination. For Marx, the disadvantaged in the society could only set themselves free by partaking in the class struggle that would lead to a truly liberating revolution. However, it should be stressed that the occurrence of a revolution is not the end goal of Marx’s materialist history. On the contrary, the revolution is only a means towards achieving a final aim which is the establishment of a Communist society.

What must be understood in the transition towards Communism after the revolution is that it is a step-by-step process. It involves successive phases where, in the end, the existence of social classes would vanish and the need for a state would cease to be necessary.

Indeed, Marx’s historical design for an inevitable approach towards revolution and Communism would not be possible without human agency and its underlying manifestations in social classes and class antagonisms. It is in the dynamic yet conflicting relationship of historical agents (e.g. the oppressor-oppressed, the elite-masses, or the capitalist-worker) that humanity’s spirit is

made manifest in Marxist history. Furthermore, Marx contends that historical progress is dependent on the dialectic of thesis and anti-thesis which the contending social classes represent. The movement of the opposing forces in society is bound to produce an entirely new social order for mankind. In his book *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx explains that:

An oppressed class is the vital condition of every society based upon the antagonism of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class, therefore, necessarily implies the creation of a new society. In order for the oppressed class to be emancipated... the existing social relations should no longer be able to exist side by side (cited in McLellan, 1977, p. 111).

In this sense, the philosopher identifies human agency as an essential component in the movement of history. He interprets man as a social agent who lives and survives through constant interaction with his/her surroundings (both with fellow man and nature). Therefore, in order for history to advance, it needs the presence of conflicting and interacting social classes. Through these constant interactions, contradictions would inevitably emerge due to man's desire to further his/her class interest. Hence, the materialist view of human history which adopts a linear progression. For Marx, this linear approach foresees the inevitability of a class struggle that would, ultimately, lead to the emancipation of the oppressed class through the Communist society.

In summary, Marx creates a materialist interpretation of history in which social classes and their impending struggles thrive. This materialist view follows a linear progression starting from the long history of class antagonisms, up to the occurrence of a revolution, then finally toward the end goal of Communism. In this final instance, mankind would experience true emancipation, dignity, and freedom.

3. NOTABLE CONGRUENCES IN SAINT AUGUSTINE'S AND KARL MARX'S PERCEPTIONS OF HISTORY

After thoroughly discussing the ideas of Saint Augustine and Marx, it should be interesting to know how both philosophers converge in their perceptions of human history. By juxtaposing the different concepts and views raised above, it could be possible for readers comprehend how both philosophers are alike in their philosophies on history even though they lived in totally different eras.

3.1 On Historical Progress

An evident similarity in both could be in their linear approach in history. As already stressed, Saint Augustine follows a linear pattern in history that is contextualized in divine providence. For the Latin Doctor, mankind's destiny should ideally end with the City of God. Likewise, Marx's historical materialism perceives that humanity is drawn towards an inevitable revolution caused by class antagonisms. For the philosopher, mankind's destiny lies in the attainment of a Communist society.

In order for their linear histories to have actual progression, both Saint Augustine and Marx created the necessity of an "end goal". For the former, the realization of the City of God should be humanity's ultimate purpose so that mankind might bask in God's eternal grace. For the latter, humanity (at least for the oppressed classes that comprise the bulk of the society) should

struggle against its oppressors in order to introduce a truly egalitarian society under Communism. It is also in this sense that Saint Augustine and Marx could probably share a common criticism in that their linear approach on history seeks to establish a Utopian “end goal.” Although the Latin Doctor describes in length the characteristics of the City of God, nobody has enough certainty that such a city could be attained. Equally, Marx’s idea of a Communist society would remain a theory until his principles are put into accurate and sufficient practice.

In addition, both Saint Augustine and Marx share an optimistic view with regard to historical progress. For the Latin Doctor, there is always a bright future for mankind, and that is through aspiring for the City of God. Similarly for Marx, though mankind should suffer in the process through class struggle and revolution, the notion of a life that is completely devoid of discrimination and inequality would be a truly liberating and rewarding end. In this sense, both philosophers could also claim that human history is generally emancipatory. For Saint Augustine, man could experience liberation through God’s redeeming grace. While for Marx, man could emancipate himself/herself through a revolution that could break the chains of oppression.

3. 2 On Human Agency

Although both Saint Augustine and Marx share an optimistic view on historical progress, it is noticeable that they also share a pessimistic view on humanity. For the former, mankind is construed as burdened by original sin: “Hence the whole mass of the human race is condemned; for he who at first gave entrance to sin has been punished with all his posterity...” (Deane, 1963, p. 19). Therefore, humans are born in a world that continues to suffer because of the Fall of Man. With similar pessimism, Marx interprets humanity in terms of conflicting class interests. Thus, man has no other option but to partake in a struggle that would end social inequality for a hope of an egalitarian - in fact classless - future.

Lastly, Saint Augustine and Marx converge in their ideas of man’s quest for personal and communal liberation. Saint Augustine makes it manifest that in order for man to achieve personal liberation, he/she has to seek the grace of God. This redemption would only be possible if man follows the Scripture and recognizes God as omnipotent, omnipresent, benevolent, and just. In essence, redemption through God’s grace is man’s key towards the attaining the City of God. However, Saint Augustine stresses that mankind’s redemption will only be complete when man transcends personal liberation, creates solidarity, and transforms society through selfless love. Man’s transformative power of selfless love is a vital tool for communal liberation.

In the same way, Marx implies that in order for the revolution to happen, the members of the working class have to recognize their dire disposition. This “enlightenment” called class consciousness enables him/her to see himself/herself in relation to other classes in the society. By obtaining class consciousness, a collective effort for class struggle could pave the way for the revolution and, eventually, Communism. Hence, class consciousness as a manifestation of man’s personal liberation would give way to a broader emancipation of the entirety of society.

4. CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

Individually, the philosophers mentioned above were highly esteemed during their respective generations – Saint Augustine as a foremost Latin Doctor and Karl Marx as a ground-breaking economic theorist. Although Saint Augustine’s medieval philosophy and Marx’s 19th century

theory may seem oblivious to one another, both have their common grounds in their analysis of history. As expounded on in the previous sections, Saint Augustine and Marx could have actually agreed on several views regarding human progress, the role of mankind in history, and the transformative power of humanity. Indeed, both became movers of history respectively because of the legacy and influence that their ideas had on existing philosophy.

Finally, though some might still assert that Christianity and Marxism would never agree and would only polarize one another, the following might be an important doctrine by which Saint Augustine and Karl Marx could undeniably converge on – the need for an unwavering compassion for the future of human race.

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