

Words Poorly Used #49 — Zeitgeist

There are many versions of “*zeitgeist*” in use in the world today, but I refer here to the difference between Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s use of the term as compared to Peter Joseph’s contemporary expropriation of the term. According to David Burrell, “Schools of thought influenced by Hegel tend [to] see history as progressive, but also as a possibly painfully arrived at outcome of a dialectic in which factors working in opposite directions are over time reconciled. History was best seen as directed by a *zeitgeist*, or Spirit of the Age, and traces of the *zeitgeist* could be seen by looking backward.” This seems to me to be a fairly concise restatement of the principle of unforeseen consequences. Hegel saw the *zeitgeist* as a far more likely explanation of events than the fashionable (even today) great man approach. In effect, there are no great men, but there are men who find themselves at junctures of flows of events. Hegel looked at *zeitgeist* as a process which might manifest itself in infinite numbers of ways. On the other hand, Joseph seems to be saying that because history (in his interpretation) has moved in certain ways then it must inevitably turn out as he predicts — a complete departure, a near opposite of Hegel’s view. I am very suspicious of futurists, aren’t you? There is a tendency among them to practice the Texas Sharpshooter logic fallacy.

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