

INTERVENTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY
THOUGHT

To my family,
as well as to all of my friends and mentors who have cultivated
practices of intervention

INTERVENTIONS IN
CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT
History, Politics, Aesthetics

Gabriel Rockhill

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Notes on Sources	viii
Introduction: What Is an Intervention? Metaphilosophical Critique and the Reinvention of Contemporary Theory	1
I History	
1 How Do We Think the Present? From Ontology of Contemporary Reality to Ontology without Being	37
2 The Right of Philosophy and the Facts of History: Foucault, Derrida, Descartes	55
3 Aesthetic Revolution and Modern Democracy: Rancière's Historiography	100
II Politics	
4 Is Difference a Value in Itself? Critique of a Metaphilosophical Axiology	117
5 Castoriadis and the Tradition of Radical Critique	139
6 The Hatred of Rancière: Democracy in the History of Political Cultures	165
III Aesthetics	
7 The Art of Talking Past One Another: The Badiou-Rancière Debate	193

8	The Hermeneutics of Art and Political History in Rancière	214
9	The Forgotten Political Art Par Excellence? Architecture, Design and the Social Sculpting of the Body Politic	243
	Bibliography	262
	Index	279

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Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

NOTE ON SOURCES

All of the texts printed below are circumstantial pieces anchored in specific moments and debates. I made an effort to keep modifications to a minimum in order to preserve the specificity of their conjunctural inscriptions. This is particularly important to emphasise in the case of chapters dealing with living philosophers (such as Badiou and Rancière). Updating these in order to integrate more recent publications would have required significant revisions, and the intellectual gain would have been minimal or none at all (particularly because their basic positions on the topics discussed have not changed). Moreover, it is true that I do not currently agree with all of the nuances of every individual position taken in the chapters below. However, attempted interventions always carry a certain risk with them, as well as their own specific historicity, and it is important for this project to accept both of these.

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Chapter 1

HOW DO WE THINK THE PRESENT? FROM ONTOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY REALITY TO ONTOLOGY WITHOUT BEING*¹

EPOCHAL THOUGHT

From ‘the postmodern era’ to ‘the post-industrial epoch’ and ‘the digital age’, people have not ceased to offer labels for the present. To find *the* concept capable of defining the nature of it, and thus to speak truthfully regarding the characteristic feature of our age, is in effect one of the major theoretical concerns of numerous contemporary thinkers. But less attention is paid to the historical logic on which such a preoccupation depends. By historical order or logic, I mean the practical mode of intelligibility of history that provides us with temporal schemes, methodologies and patent positivities. In the case of the search for the concept most capable of grasping the core of our era, it goes without saying, for instance, that the present is a singular phenomenon, that it is identifiable and delimitable, that it warrants being interrogated in and for itself, that it has a proper nature, and that a single and unique concept would be capable of defining it. Such an investigation thus falls within a historical order dominated by what we can call epochal thought. This can be generally understood as the reduction of history to a periodical chronology, and more specifically as the attempt to grasp – perhaps even with a single epochal concept – the nature of an era, or of an important subset of it.

It can turn out that the investigation into the nature of the present proves itself to be more revealing of our historical conjuncture than the responses it provides. At least this is what Michel Foucault suggests in several texts written at the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s. He initiates a reflection on what he proposes to call ‘the

* This chapter was translated by Theodra Bane in close consultation with the author.

ontology of contemporary reality [*l'ontologie de l'actualité*] by raising a fundamental question: where, historically speaking, does this interrogation into the very being of the present – so characteristic of our conjuncture – come from? In posing such a question, he attempts to historically resituate a certain form of historical questioning. In other words, he recognises that our relationship to the present, far from being invariable, is a thoroughly historical phenomenon. He thereby denaturalises our relation to contemporaneity along with our way of thinking of contemporary reality. In this way, he opens up the possibility of a historical critique of epochal thought.

His reflection on the ontology of contemporary reality revolves around Immanuel Kant, and notably around his essay 'Response to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784).² He hopes to pinpoint in this text what is perhaps the first formulation of the question 'what is our contemporary reality?'.³ Since the day Kant inquired into this question, philosophy has acquired, according to Foucault, a new dimension: 'it opened up a certain task that philosophy had ignored or that didn't previously exist for it, and which is to say who we are, to say what our present is, what that is, today.'⁴ This task is simultaneously historical and anthropological because it is a matter of an ontology of contemporary reality that is at one and the same time an ontology of ourselves: 'I think that philosophical activity conceived of a new pole, and that this pole is characterised by the permanent and perpetually renewed question; "What are we today?"'⁵ The philosopher from Königsberg had apparently responded to this central question in an almost entirely negative manner by defining the present 'as an *Ausgang*, an "exit", a "way out"': 'He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?'⁶ Thus it isn't at all surprising to see Foucault himself directly identify with this tradition of thought:

Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche, Max Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School have tried to answer this question. By inscribing myself in this tradition, what I am trying to do is thus to provide very partial and provisional answers to this question through the history of thought.⁷

It might seem that Foucault quite simply extends epochal thought to another level: rather than proposing a direct response to the question

of the nature of the present, he suggests that it is precisely this question itself that constitutes the characteristic feature of our age. Indeed, he explains in a 1978 text that the historico-philosophic practice that he himself lays claim to:

clearly finds itself in a privileged relationship to a certain period that can be empirically determined. Even if it is relatively and necessarily vague, this period is, of course, designated as a formative moment for modern humanity: *Aufklärung* in the broad sense of the term, to which Kant, Weber, etc. referred, a period without fixed dates, with multiple points of entry [...].⁸

But in his 1984 article, whose title repeats verbatim that of Kant, he proposes to speak instead of an 'attitude of modernity'.⁹ He even calls into question the identification between modernity and a period of history:

Rather than wanting to distinguish the 'modern period' from 'pre' or 'postmodern' epochs, I think it would be better to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'counter-modernity'.¹⁰

For Foucault, an attitude is 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality [*l'actualité*]' that does not necessarily extend to the totality of an epoch.¹¹ On the contrary, it is the result of a 'voluntary choice made by certain people'.¹² Hence it appears that each historical period is potentially torn between several attitudes.

Foucault's reflection on the ontology of contemporary reality has the advantage of shedding light, up to a certain point, on the historicity of temporal experience and of its privileged categories. Instead of thinking of the present as an invariable formal category whose contents would change over the years, he actually inquires into the historical reconfiguration of the very category of the present. He thus invites us to reflect on the relationship between opposing historical attitudes rather than accept as such the presupposition according to which there could be a single and unique experience of contemporary reality. This being said, his discussion of the attitude of modernity remains somewhat ambivalent because he nonetheless wishes to locate it at the opening of a new epoch of thought, which is in fact the age of the

advent of event-based thinking (*la pensée événementielle*).¹³ He thereby traces a line of demarcation, in what appears to be an abstract temporality, between the age opened by the modern attitude and preceding epochs. He even says that the response to the Enlightenment question establishes a reciprocal, intertwining relationship between philosophy and its age:

Aufklärung was made into the moment when philosophy found the possibility of establishing itself as the determining figure of an epoch, and when that epoch became the form of that philosophy's accomplishment. Philosophy could also be read as being nothing else than the composition of the particular traits of the period in which it appeared, it was that period's coherent figure, its systematisation, or its conceptualised form; but, from another standpoint, the epoch appeared as being nothing other than the emergence and manifestation, in its fundamental traits, of what philosophy was in its essence.¹⁴

We can therefore ask ourselves if Foucault went far enough in critically distancing himself from epochal thought, at least in his writings on the ontology of contemporary reality towards the end of his life.

The same is true of the brief reflection that Giorgio Agamben proposed on the contemporary, in which he relies in many respects on Foucault's analysis (with Heidegger and Nietzsche as subtexts). For it is equally a case of a courageous attitude – judged to be rare – with regard to the present: 'to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage'.¹⁵ The contemporary is more precisely the one who dares to swim against the current of the times by having the courage to be untimely, occupying a position between the 'not yet' and the 'no more' (like fashion, according to Agamben).¹⁶ He writes:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*.¹⁷

And it is precisely such an untimely relation with the present that would allow contemporaries – according to the paradox extolled by Agamben – to grasp their moment better than anyone else:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.¹⁸

Yet such a paradox does not part ways in the least with periodic chronology. Quite the opposite: it presupposes it. For there is only a paradox provided that the present is thought in its epochality and the contemporary is defined as that which grasps the underlying nature of it precisely by moving away from it. Without the delimitation of the present – even if it be very general – and the relative coherence of epochs, anachronism would be incomprehensible. Moreover, the act of making distance from contemporary reality into the condition *sine qua non* of its conceptual seizure changes absolutely nothing with regard to the structuring of historical temporality. In the depths of this apparent questioning of chronology, we discover its endorsement. For the true paradox of this untimely anachronism, it might be said, is by no means situated at the level of a short circuit between proximity and distance with regard to the present. The true paradox is that the recognition of anachronism as such depends very precisely on well-structured time.

RETHINKING THE PRESENT

To rethink what is called ‘the present’, we must definitively part ways with epochal thought, that is the reduction of history to a periodic chronology and – more precisely – the effort to identify the underlying nature of each period, potentially resorting to a single and unique epochal concept. It is not enough to criticise this or that manifestation of it, or to slightly modify a few aspects. It is necessary to dismantle the historical order on which it depends. This entails, at the same time, the creation of an alternative logic of history that organises the problematic of the present entirely differently, and that abandons once and for all the chimerical quest for the epochal concept that is the most capable of grasping the distinctive feature of contemporary reality. This is because, to begin with, there is neither a nature of the present nor a conceptual essence of our moment. Nor are there merely two rival attitudes opposing one another since 1784.

For purely heuristic reasons, we should distinguish between three dimensions of history: the chronological dimension of temporality, the geographic dimension of space, and the social dimension of practices. As far as the first dimension is concerned, which often casts a shadow over the other two, it is important to recall that temporality is itself a historical element through and through.¹⁹ Given that time, as we know it, is a human phenomenon, it varies in accordance with the three heuristic dimensions of history. There is thus no time in general, except through the projection from a specific structuring of temporality. What we can call *the perennial problem* consists precisely in thinking of the temporal from the atemporal, the historical against the background of the ahistorical. This is a quasi-permanent problem in the history of thought, which directly results from the supposed permanence of temporality, understood as the invariable formal structure framing the flow of time.

Moreover, in the abstract temporality of what is called the scientific age, there is no reason to expect that each period display an internal coherence. As Siegfried Kracauer has shown, there may be other forms of coherence that do not depend on chronological parameters at all. The existence of an abstract temporal framework based on modern forms of dating by no means implies a fundamental homology between all phenomena situated therein: simultaneity does not necessarily mean unification, cohesion or even coherence. Incidentally, it is not at all necessary that time – and, more precisely, the scientific chronology of the ‘modern age’ – be the most fundamental mode of historical organisation.

For all these reasons, Kracauer is absolutely right to proclaim ‘the *Zeitgeist* is only a mirage’.²⁰ ‘Cross-influences’, he writes, ‘are often counterbalanced by sundry inconsistencies.’²¹ He thus calls into question the historical category of the epoch: ‘the typical period is not so much a unified entity with a spirit of its own as a precarious conglomerate of tendencies, aspirations, and activities which more often than not manifest themselves independently from one another.’²² And he is absolutely right to add: ‘This is not to deny the existence, at any given moment, of certain widespread and even prevailing beliefs, goals, attitudes, etc.’²³ Yet, rather than completely abandon the category of the epoch, the author of *History: The Last Things Before the Last* affirms that we must defend two apparently contradictory and incompatible positions. On the one hand, he states that ‘measurable time dissolves

into thin air, superseded by the bundles of shaped times in which the manifold comprehensible series of events evolve'.²⁴ But he immediately adds: 'dating retains its significance inasmuch as these bundles tend to coalesce at certain moments which then are valid for all of them.'²⁵ Hence his critique of periodic history does not entirely break with periodic historical logic. Rather, he makes an effort to rethink the category of the epoch by abandoning the presupposition that assumes it would result from the homogeneous flow of time particular to abstract chronology. A period would thus presuppose neither a homogeneous temporality nor a unifying spirit. It would be, properly speaking, a spatio-temporal unity with its own rhythm:

As a configuration of events which belong to series with different time schedules, the period does *not* arise from the homogeneous flow of time; rather, it sets a time of its own – which implies that the way it experiences temporality may not be identical with the experience of chronologically earlier or later periods.²⁶

Time is only one dimension of history, and the latter is never reducible to its temporality alone. Otherwise it would remain imperceptible and intangible. If there were no agents, objects or elements situated in space, we would only be dealing with the elusive unfurling of an ephemeral phenomenon. Without space, history would quite simply not take place. The *nunc* is always a function of the *hic*, and vice versa. 'Chronology and geography', writes Giambattista Vico, 'are the two eyes of history.'²⁷ It is for this reason that it is absolutely necessary to provide an account of the horizontal dimension of history, that is to say the distribution of phenomena in space.²⁸ It is precisely by emphasising the spatial dimension that we can avoid the homogenisation of historical space particular to the purely chronological conception of history, which reduces it to the sole vertical dimension of time.

This is what Foucault has a tendency to do in his diverse writings on Kant and the *Aufklärung*, which grant a considerable privilege to historical discontinuity. For he suggests over and over again that the philosopher from Königsberg opened a new age, and more precisely that his essay on the Enlightenment was the advent of event-based thinking. He thus finds in Kant the starting point that was at the origin of his own project: the inquiry into the ontology of our contemporary reality. Such an interpretation inevitably presupposes a socio-historical

compression (the *sine qua non* condition of epochal thinking). The variability and complexity of the social and historical world, as well as the effective circulation of Kant's article, are largely bracketed in the name of a vertical conception of history in which the latter comes to function more or less like a single thread susceptible to being severed at precise moments due to the simple existence of one written work.

This being said, there is at least one place where Foucault points out the geographic dimension of the history of the modern attitude regarding contemporary reality. Although he still keeps to the European tradition, he highlights, in an article on Georges Canguilhem, the differences between three cultural contexts:

It would be necessary no doubt to try and determine why this question of *Aufklärung* has had, without ever disappearing, such a different destiny in the traditions of Germany, France, and the Anglo-Saxon countries; why has it taken hold here and there in so many and – according to the chronologies – such varied domains?²⁹

He notably juxtaposes the 'historical and political reflexion on society' particular to the German tradition with the history of sciences in France.³⁰ But the same kind of questioning appears in different cultural conjunctures. Hence the Enlightenment question remains the unifying spirit of diverse orientations, that is to say the general theoretical framework whose contents vary according to context.

It is not sufficient to chart historical phenomena in the vertical dimension of chronology and the horizontal dimension of geography. It is equally necessary to account for the stratigraphic dimension of social practices. For each space-time is the site of diverse activities, and there can be absolutely divergent practices in the same chronotopic framework. It is thus just as important to think the sociality of history as to reflect on historical geography because geography always has a specific topography, composed of diverse strata of social practices. Victor Hugo provided an excellent illustration of this in the chapter of *Les Misérables* entitled 'The Year 1817', where he presents a long list of so many diverse details neglected by history:

Such was the confused mass of the now-forgotten events that floated like flotsam on the surface of the year 1817. History ignores

almost all these minutiae: it cannot do otherwise; it is under the dominion of infinity. Nonetheless, these details, which are incorrectly termed little [...] are useful. It is the features of the years that make up the face of the century.³¹

Despite his critique of the blackmail of the Enlightenment, Foucault tends to think social space, in his reflection on the ontology of contemporary reality, in terms of an opposition between two attitudes: that of modernity and those of counter-modernity (the same applies *mutatis mutandis* to Agamben). Such a dichotomy reduces the complex topography of diverse social force fields to a binary logic opposing the Kantian tradition, with which Foucault identifies, to that of its rivals. A procedure of historical legitimation is operative here that is well attested in contemporary philosophy. History divides itself in two in accordance with an epistemological-normative division: the true thinkers of this or that purportedly crucial issue (contemporary reality, discontinuity, the contemporary, difference, alterity, incommensurability, indiscernibility, etc.) oppose all of those who are grappling with ideas judged to be dangerous, obsolete or inauthentic (counter-modernity, continuity, the non-contemporary, identity, and so on). Incidentally, it is assumed that the former are more sophisticated, profound or penetrating than the latter, even in cases where a certain idea of historical progress is called into question, while relying on a purely vertical history, structured by the more or less eternal repetition of a conceptual battle seemingly without end.

It is also notable that Foucault individualises the question of the modern attitude, edging even closer to a simplified form of historiography that is omnipresent in philosophy. It is not only that the history of the modern attitude is a heroic history (Hegel) or a monumental history (Nietzsche) of the great men of the European past, from Kant and Hegel to Weber, Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School. It is also that the anthropological question 'what are we today?' is largely thought of within the individual framework of the constitution of an autonomous subject.³² Far from offering us a truly social anthropology, Foucault brings the question of *our* contemporary reality back to one of an individual decision within a binary social space: either we adopt the modern attitude in daring to ask ourselves about the difference of our historical moment like Kant, or else we display an anti-modern attitude by turning our backs on it.

As I have already had the opportunity to emphasise elsewhere, this individualisation of the question of the *Aufklärung* is particularly problematic in Kant's case. For, contrary to what Foucault would like us to believe in some of his writings, the philosopher from Königsberg insisted precisely on the properly social dimension of the Enlightenment. He writes:

For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult [...] But that the public should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow.³³

Incidentally, it is the transformation of the community – if not of humanity as a whole – that is at the heart of the project of the *Aufklärung* according to Kant. Far from being a personal question or an individual affair of historical attitude, it is a reconfiguration of society due to the public use of reason. Given that such a transformation is necessarily a long-term task ('the public can only slowly attain enlightenment'), there cannot be an event-based discontinuity in the history of the Enlightenment according to Kant: 'Perhaps a fall of personal despotism or of avaricious or tyrannical oppression may be accomplished by revolution, but never a true reform in ways of thinking.'³⁴ It is probably for this reason that Foucault neglects the vitally important distinction that Kant proposes between the age of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) and the enlightened age (*aufgeklärte Zeitalter*).³⁵ To the question 'Do we now live in an *enlightened age*?', Kant responds, 'No, but we do live in an *age of enlightenment*.' And he immediately recalls the properly social dimension of the *Aufklärung*:

As things now stand, much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction.³⁶

Taking into account the social dimension of the Enlightenment, we must ask ourselves how many people were really interested in the *Aufklärung* debate. There were many who had not read Kant, Mendelssohn, Erhard and the other participants in the debate.³⁷ And as far as their readers are concerned, is it really legitimate to speak of a

division between the attitudes of counter-modernity and an attitude – judged to be novel – of modernity? Let us briefly linger on the revealing case of J. G. Herder, who is not only situated in the same space-time as Kant, but was also described by the latter – despite his severe criticisms – as a thinker having had the courage to go beyond the superstitions of his profession. Herder called into question the ethnocentric idea of a linear and universal progress leading straight to European, that is to say ‘enlightened’, culture. Indeed, insisting on the diversity of cultural conjunctures, he lashed out directly at ethnocentrism and epochal thinking, and more generally at the historico-geographic abstraction on which they rely. ‘No one in the world’, he writes, ‘feels the weakness of general characterisation more than I. One paints an entire people, age, part of the earth – whom has one painted?’³⁸ Emphasising the epistemological limits of finite beings, he fittingly highlights the gap between historical, geographic and social diversity on the one hand, and the generality of our categories of classification on the other:

I know by the way, like you, that every general image, every general concept, is nothing but abstraction – the Creator alone is the one who conceives the full unity of any one and of all nations, in all their great diversity, without thereby losing sight of their unity.³⁹

Epochal thinking presupposes an epistemological mastery of time, of space, and of social topography. This is exactly what Herder calls into question. In light of such a critique, situated precisely in the space-time of Kant, it behoves us to inquire into the Foucauldian thesis regarding the unprecedented nature of the latter’s historical reflection. Was the author of ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ truly the first in the entire world to raise the question of contemporary reality in terms of event-based difference? Methodologically, we must first emphasise that it is impossible to know this with precision, since we quite simply do not have access to the thought of the totality of individuals at a given moment. And even the textual archives that we have at our disposal for this period are extremely vast, especially if we take into account publications in all of the languages of the world. Even if we restrict ourselves to the three linguistico-cultural spaces privileged by Foucault, numerous potential counter-examples come to mind. Due to lack of space, it is hardly possible to begin an exhaustive analysis here. We must then limit ourselves

to indicating some cases that would merit closer examination, without pretending to have definitively proven, in the present framework, that these are pre-Kantian 'ontologies of contemporary reality'.

Let us begin with a position on the issue that was staked out well before Kant's. I have in mind the description of the theatre, and more precisely of theatrical performance, by Shakespeare in what is without a doubt his most well-known play. When addressing a troupe of actors, whom he defines in general as 'the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time', Hamlet advises them not to deviate from 'the purpose of playing':

Whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.⁴⁰

Claudius's nephew is not only providing a general description here. By making such a declaration while a brief play is being prepared to be performed before the new king (Claudius) and his wife (Hamlet's mother), he confesses his true intention: to conjure forth the hidden essence of contemporary reality, to lift the veil of history by showing the true nature of the present moment (which proves to be a disjointed time due to the fratricide committed by Claudius). Through a reversal so characteristic of Shakespeare's plays, it is the game of appearances that reveals the hidden depths of things: 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.'⁴¹ It is theatrical performance, Shakespeare seems to suggest in this spectacular *mise en abyme*, that is capable of unveiling the present reality that has been concealed by the false theatricality of life.

Since one might say that this is more a calling into question of the true nature of the present than an investigation centred on the question 'who are we today?', let us turn to the Enlightenment, where other examples come to mind. Although Giambattista Vico does not open an inquiry into contemporary reality as such in the *New Science* (1725 and 1744), he bases his entire project on the need, in his age, for a new science of human institutions. He thus takes on board the scientific method of Francis Bacon in order to establish a science of history and of society. Such a task uses a 'new critical art' that links philosophy to the historical analysis of the languages, customs and activities of diverse

peoples ('philology' is the name he gives to such an analysis).⁴² While it is true that Vico's project is not specifically centred on the study of contemporary reality, his new science clearly originates in his own present and advances a method for analysing history in its entirety, whether it be the past or the present. Evidence can be found for this, for example, in his references to the 'latest times of the civilised nations' and to 'the humanity of our day'.⁴³ This is more explicit in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (1709), where he aims precisely at pinpointing the difference between his age and that of the ancients by comparing 'the advantages afforded by the study methods of the two epochs': 'My goal [...] is to indicate in what respect our study methods are superior to those of the Ancients; to discover in what they are inferior, and how we may remedy this inferiority.'⁴⁴

We should also consider the role of contemporary reality in the work of Montesquieu, and notably in the *Persian Letters* (1721), where he describes the society of his time from diverse perspectives. In this regard, it is very revealing that he himself makes reference to contemporary reality (*l'actualité*) in 'Some Reflexions on the *Persian Letters*', which was added to the 1754 edition: 'novels of this type are usually successful because *one provides an account oneself of one's current situation [on rend compte soi-même de sa situation actuelle]*, which means that emotions are conveyed more powerfully than any narrative accounts of them could do.'⁴⁵ As a final example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau seems to directly anticipate the conceptualisation of the present as a moment of outlet or exit (*Ausgang*), as well as the motto proposed by Kant for the *Aufklärung*, which in fact dates back to Horace: *aude sapere* (have the courage to know). In the preface to the *First Discourse* (1750), he writes:

There will always be men destined to be subjugated by the opinions of their century, their Country, their Society: Some men today act the part of the Freethinker and the Philosopher who, for the same reason, would have been but fanatics at the time of the League. One ought not to write for such Readers when one wants to live beyond one's century.⁴⁶

Moreover, like Herder after him, he proposes a critique of the idea of ethnocentric historical progress, which is so characteristic of his contemporary reality, and he summons us to shake off the yoke of historical myopia and of national prejudices: 'the whole earth is covered

with Nations of which we know only the names, and yet we pretend to judge mankind!⁴⁷

TOWARDS A TOPOLOGICAL SEIZURE OF HISTORICAL PHASES

It is in obscuring the spatial and social variations of historical phenomena in the name of synthetic blocks and homogeneous units of practices that some people pretend to be able to establish sovereign concepts capable of grasping the totality, or the quasi-totally, of what takes place at a given moment. It is as if everything was miraculously linked – be it only within a specific region or for a particular tradition – by a sole and unique spirit of the times. Once we bring to light the geographic and social variability of practices, it must be recognised that there is no unifying spirit of the times, that there is no *Zeitgeist*. Time is, moreover, only one dimension of history, and there is no metaphysical force organising it into more or less homogeneous units. The consideration of the three dimensions of history therefore necessitates the abandonment of the traditional categories of epochs and events, as well as those of continuity and discontinuity. To be sure, it can sometimes be useful to make heuristic references to temporal phenomena of this kind without being obliged to reconstruct a more complex historical logic each time (evidence for this can be found in a few of the references in this chapter), but we must not forget the purely pragmatic status of these references. In general, then, we should think instead in terms of phases and metastatic transformations. A phase, contrary to a historical period, always distributes itself in a singular manner in the three dimensions of history. And a metastatic transformation, as opposed to an event, attests to a specific propagation at variable rhythms, spreading in social space-time through waves of progression or regression.

That is not at all to say that we are condemned to remain silent in the face of temporal complexity and spatial diversity. It is absolutely possible to rethink contemporary reality from the alternative logic of history outlined above. To this end, we must abandon epochal thinking in the name of a topological intervention that proposes, from a very precise point in space-time, a cartography of diverse constellations of practices. And just as a constellation is neither a raw positivity nor a pure invention, a topological seizure is neither purely objective nor absolutely subjective. It is the attempt on the part of a socio-historical

agent to grasp the broad lines of a historical conjuncture by mapping, as far as possible, its phases and its metastases in the three dimensions of history. A conjuncture is not a homogeneous space-time or an epoch susceptible to being enclosed within a single container concept. It is a socio-historical field of forces. Such a seizure thus proposes a three-dimensional chart that functions as a modifiable navigational map orienting us in the conjuncture.

Ultimately, what is interesting about Foucault's thesis is not his claim to have grasped the nature of the modern attitude from its moment of initiation by the genuine thinker of the Enlightenment. What makes his position interesting is much rather that he proposes *nolens volens* a topological seizure of Kant's conjuncture, and more precisely of a very specific constellation of theoretical practices centred on the present. Like any constellation, it does not at all dominate the totality of the conjuncture, but it shares the historical sky with numerous other constellations (that do not necessarily organise themselves into a binary opposition). Foucault thus poses a question that is very much worth pursuing: was there, in a certain constellation of theoretical practices situated in the European culture of the end of the eighteenth century, a relatively singular interrogation into the specificity of the present?

By way of conclusion, let us return to the question pinpointed by Foucault in Kant in order to propose an entirely different solution. As we have seen, the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* sees in Kant an ontology of contemporary reality in the sense of a novel investigation into the very being of the present. It is certainly interesting that it is about an inquiry, but it is precisely this element that, through a conceptual reversal, comes to define the nature of the present. Moreover, this present strictly distinguishes itself from other 'presents' that preceded it. Foucault thus supplies us with a discontinuous history founded on a largely chronological conception of history, which generally eliminates the geographic and social dimensions. Once one accounts for these, it is necessary to recognise that we can only do an ontology of contemporary reality provided that we recognise that being is lacking: there is no 'present' in the singular, there is no single 'we'. This means that the ontology of contemporary reality must become, properly speaking, an ontology without being or an ontology without being an ontology (*une ontologie sans l'être*). Without unicity, 'our present' cannot be grasped by an epochal concept, or any other container concept claiming to lay hold of the essential core

of a historical moment. Thus, instead of desperately searching for *the* concept of *our* era, we should develop – from specific anchoring points and relying on a completely different historical order – topological seizures of the phases and metastases of diverse constellations. Rather than rethinking the nature of the present by proposing the umpteenth epochal concept, what is at stake, more profoundly, is the task of rethinking the very way in which we think the present by recognising that there is no being at the heart of time.

NOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Mogens Laerke and Diogo Sardinha for their comments and suggestions.
2. It is interesting to note that Foucault traces the critical attitude, defined as ‘the art of voluntary inservitude’, much further back than Kant in a text from 1978 entitled ‘What Is Critique?’ (in *The Politics of Truth*, pp. 41–81).
3. Foucault, ‘What Our Present Is’, in *The Politics of Truth*, p. 129 (translation slightly modified).
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–30 (translation slightly modified).
5. Foucault, ‘The Political Technology of Individuals’, in *Power*, p. 403 (translation slightly modified).
6. Foucault, ‘What Is Enlightenment?’, in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 34. See also *ibid.*, p. 38: ‘It is in this reflexion on “today” as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie.’
7. ‘The Political Technology of Individuals’, p. 403 (translation slightly modified). See also Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp. 19–21, and ‘What Our Present Is’, p. 10.
8. ‘What Is Critique?’, p. 57 (translation slightly modified).
9. ‘What Is Enlightenment?’, p. 38.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 39 (translation slightly modified).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. I take the liberty of referring the reader to my own analysis of this problematic in ‘Avènement de la pensée événementielle? *Aufklärung* entre Kant et Foucault’, in *Logique de l’histoire*, pp. 363–84.
14. Foucault, ‘Life: Experience and Science’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, p. 467 (translation slightly modified).
15. Agamben, ‘What Is the Contemporary?’, in *What Is an Apparatus?*, p. 46.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

18. Ibid., p. 40.
19. See Elias, *Time: An Essay*.
20. Kracauer, *History: The Last Thing Before the Last*, p. 183.
21. Ibid., p. 183.
22. Ibid., p. 66.
23. Ibid., pp. 66–7.
24. Ibid., p. 154.
25. Ibid., p. 154.
26. Ibid., p. 155.
27. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 11.
28. Space as we know it is, of course, a historical phenomenon like time, and it is therefore variable.
29. 'Life: Experience and Science', p. 468. See also 'What Is Critique?', pp. 50–5.
30. 'Life: Experience and Science', p. 468.
31. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 118.
32. 'What Our Present Is', p. 137. It should be noted that Foucault insists more on the public dimension of the *Aufklärung* in *The Government of Self and Others*, pp. 7–12.
33. Kant, *On History*, p. 4.
34. Ibid., p. 4.
35. To my knowledge, there is a single place where Foucault edges closer to this distinction, without actually announcing it explicitly and entirely. He recalls in one of his courses at the Collège de France that 'the German text says very precisely: We are in the period, in the *Zeitalter*, in the age of *Aufklärung*', without however adding that it is not yet an 'enlightened age' (*The Government of Self and Others*, p. 37).
36. Kant, *On History*, pp. 8–9.
37. In 1800, Jean Paul estimated the German 'literary' public at 300,000 people, which constitutes an important change as compared to 1700, but still only amounts to 1.5% of the population. See Wittman, 'Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?'
38. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, p. 23.
39. Ibid., p. 27.
40. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 484–5; *ibid.*, III, ii, 17–20.
41. *Ibid.*, II, ii, 561–2.
42. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, pp. 5–6.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 111 and 16.
44. Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, p. 5; *ibid.*, p. 6.
45. Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, p. 258 (translation slightly modified and emphasis added). In the chapter entitled 'On the Right of Conquest' in *The Spirit of the Laws*, he declares without beating around the bush: 'Here

homage must be paid to our modern times, to contemporary reasoning, to the religion of the present day, to our philosophy, and to our mores' (*The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 139).

46. Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, p. 4.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 211.