

Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino, California, President Obama called a rare Oval Office press conference. He described renewed efforts to battle the Islamic State organization in Iraq and Syria while ensuring that American policy, abroad and domestically, remained pluralistic and tolerant. The December 6, 2015 speech came with a familiar refrain: “I am confident we will succeed in this mission because we are on the right side of history.” What does he mean? That future generations will judge him wise? That history itself has sides and that the winds of change and progress are at his back? Appeals to historical judgment often share both qualities. And President Obama is not alone in considering his actions and options historically.¹ Six months earlier when the LGBTQ movement welcomed the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that made gay marriage the law of the land many pronounced that opponents now clearly occupied the “wrong side” of history.² Rev. Martin Luther King famously said that, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,” speaking to the idea, familiar since at least Immanuel Kant, that history has a progressive direction and it is up to us to hasten its movement on the way to peace and prosperity.

But while the experience of the twentieth century has called such confidence into doubt for some, political actors (including, of course, President Obama) continue to call on “history” as a guide or even a ledger for political action. In the absence of metaphysical and moral certainties, what makes history such an appealing measure of progress? And how should those seeking to transform social relations and economic distribution think about their place in history? In short, how can we make history useful “without banisters”³ to underwrite our sense that it moves in the right direction

1 President Obama has used the phrase often. In his First Inaugural Address he said “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

2 *The Economist*, “Stuck on the Wrong Side,” July 3, 2015

3 Tracy B. Strong, “Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Cen-

– or any direction at all? This paper explores that question with reference to two essays by very different authors: Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) and Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971).⁴

While they were composed at different times and in different philosophical traditions, both consider how a philosophy of history might motivate emancipatory politics absent any guarantees that human activity moves in some single, progressive direction. Though Benjamin and Foucault answer differently, they both assign the historian a central role in identifying potential sources of political change. Given their philosophical influence and common concerns, it is surprising that so few scholars have undertaken a comparative study.⁵

This paper aims to pursue that comparison by arguing that their normative accounts of political liberation are motivated by distinctive theoretical perspectives on history and on the historian’s task to *recover* (Benjamin) or *uncover* (Foucault) catastrophe and possibility, oppression and resistance. While Benjamin and Foucault advance divergent political programs, they share certain emphases that I bring out in my conclusion: the dangers of received, universalizing history; the political redemption of the suppressed past; the role of experience in understanding history; and the relationship between historical interpretation and assessments of political possibility. I begin by exploring their philosophies of history, with an eye to establishing points of contact and contrast.

I. Benjamin’s posthumously published “theses” have long been a source of fascination for philosophers and social theorists. The theses, like much of Benjamin’s writing, are infamously elusive and aphoristic. Richard Wolin has described their “magical quality” and the “hermetic and forbidding mode” characteristic of Benjamin’s “a-systematic” thought.⁶ Grounded in cultural criticism and Jewish intellectual traditions, Benjamin forged a heterodox

tury” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

4 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

5 Comparisons typically come in fleeting reference. In his *Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom*, for instance, Thomas Dumm footnotes a sentence (“This radical alterity of the present is always available to us as a practical alternative to being as we are.”) this way: “One other thinker who is evocative of Foucault on this matter is Walter Benjamin.” Thomas Dumm. *Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 27.

6 Richard Wolin. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), x-xi, xii.

Marxism that his friend Hannah Arendt called “most peculiar.”⁷ Understanding the theses requires sensitivity to their especially literary, fragmentary, and poetic qualities.

One of the best ways into Benjamin’s own theory is to understand “social Democratic theory,” the dominant alternative he attacks as a “false picture” of history. In Thesis XIII, Benjamin names the theory’s first-order implications: that, (to recall King’s refrain) “the long arc of history bends towards *progress*” in universal, infinitely perfecting, and morally irresistible ways. On the one hand there’s nothing especially original about this critique. Marxists have long claimed that progressive and universalizing histories are ideological cover, complicit and coterminous with the cultural logics of capitalism. What makes Benjamin’s attack surprising and significant is the depth of his claims about the conceptual architecture that supports progressive history, with implications extending beyond the theory at hand: “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (Thesis XIII).

The social democratic theory of human progress assumes something about time itself: that it is “homogenous, empty,” unshaped by contents and tending inevitably towards the perfection of human subjects and human institutions. Benjamin seems to draw parallels to Leopold van Ranke, the *urtext* narrative historian, who claimed to tell things “the way they really are,” (Thesis VI), tread lightly, and renounce any philosophy of history. While it appears to be theoretically restrained, this style may still carry assumptions about the way history moves and feels – assumptions Benjamin captures in the phrase “homogenous, empty time,” thrice repeated in the essay. What does it mean for time to be “homogenous” or “empty”?

First, dominant modes of history claim false universality. They assume that time moves continuously (“[telling] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary”) and that the past consists of static data, static text awaiting a neutral discoverer to decode “causal nexus[es]” (Thesis A). Second, dominant modes naturalize the experience of time under capitalism as regular, predictable, and, indeed, clock-like.⁸ The phenomenology of homogenous time points to its deeper and more politically sinister consequences.

To Benjamin, by contrast, lived experience (like the disillusioning Hitler-Stalin pact that incited him to write the theses) argues against the directed, flat, and homogenous movement of time. Time is erratic: jolting and zigzagging in fits and starts. The “emptiness” of time reappears in Thesis

⁷ Hannah Arendt. *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 163.

⁸ See, for example: E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Past & Present*, No. 38 (Dec. 1967), pp. 56-97.

XVII, when Benjamin connects progressive, universal history to historicism, which radically particularizes and divides with “no theoretical armature,” and an “additive” method that “musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time.”

The “false picture” of history is not simply wrong; it actively instantiates and even advances class oppression and violence. The historian who seeks scientific accuracy by imagining herself into the past and shedding “presentist” bias, will inevitably repackage ruling class *doxa*. Benjamin describes the “historicist” attempt to (lazily, formally) empathize with the past as inevitably empathizing with the *ruling* class that has invariably won and produced the cultural spoils and received narratives that embody and repackage a cruel and bloody victory. Extending and contemporizing the saying “history is written by the winners,” Benjamin ventures: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (Thesis VII).

The claim does not seem very different from what a conventional Marxist might say about historicism (i.e. it is pure ideology), but Benjamin shows an unusual sensitivity to how that ideology might actually feel.

Progressive history assumes that an arc underwrites eras of triumph and failure. Progressive history professes confidence in waves, tides, and energies (Thesis XI) – a confidence that has often provided a warrant for insurgent working class and subaltern movements, supported by slogans looking to the “right side of history.” While this kind of confidence can seem to be politically useful, Benjamin also points out its dangers. His argument takes some work to reconstruct but is vital to understanding Benjamin’s alternative.

Given that history can seem to be a collection of ruling class victories, telling stories about “how far we’ve come” even when including caveats about “how far we have to go” can be dispiriting while also hardening past political defeats. Progressive narratives assume that some pitched battles have been (or will be) won and some victories have been (or will be) achieved, making it difficult in a “progressed” present so saturated with injustices of all scales to imagine radical improvement. Progress narratives can read transitions or reforms as directed by some centripetal force pushing history two steps forward for every one step back, inculcating mystifying gratitude in those who should be grappling for a new fight. Even worse, historians of this kind are complicit in the continuous project of misremembering or covering over the dead, treating the defeated as missteps or necessary sacrifices on the way to the right side of history.

Benjamin develops his positive theory against a number of other ways of reading history: “Whig” history⁹ and historicism. “Whig” histories

⁹ Herbert Butterfield. *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965).

read events as retrospectively inevitable and tending towards progress and Enlightenment; historicism, on the other hand, seems to do the opposite, characterizing all historical events as local, specific, and disconnected. While historical materialists also criticize these modes, following Ronald Beiner's description, Benjamin advances a "theological-materialist theory"¹⁰ that shares important roots but also breaks with Marx.

Conventional Marxism understands class struggle as the source of historical change and the working class as its agent. Change happens dialectically: oppression and liberation travel together. Greater possibilities for improvement, achievement, and emancipation arrive alongside greater potentials for debasement, exploitation, and unfreedom. Nevertheless, history moves inexorably towards a political and economic crisis that can only end in the repossession and universalization of the means of production.

Unlike many of the forms of history that Benjamin criticizes, historical materialism reads definitive patterns and dynamics into human action. It envisions a future beyond those patterns and dynamics without class struggle or human bondage. The political task of historical materialism is, in some ways, to put historical materialism out of business as such. Historical movement registers dialectical progress towards more revolutionary conditions and can be read as ledger for contemporary action. History becomes strategic: contemporaries can learn from the mistakes and defeats of their ancestors while remaining confident that ultimate victory sits beyond the horizon.

In his reflections in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx makes this point explicitly:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future...Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.¹¹

Like progressive history, historical materialism claims that there is a direction to human action. But where progressive history has some lightly guiding principles, historical materialism assumes a cumulative or repetitive movement on the way to the other side. The positions nevertheless share a sense that the main role of the past is to be a tactical resource for the future or to demonstrate progress. In either case history (to paraphrase the title of a ne-

¹⁰ Ronald Beiner, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," in *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Aug. 1984), 424

¹¹ Beiner, 426

glected melodrama¹²) “makes way for tomorrow.” In both progressive history and historical materialism Benjamin sees an impulse to suppress or just instrumentalize the past. He challenges that impulse to suppress or instrumentalize in his positive account.

II. Some scholars argue that by the time he wrote the “Theses” Benjamin had drifted from Marxism. Gershom Scholem writes that the “Theses” constitute a “decisive break with historical materialism and a return to the metaphysical-theological concerns of [Benjamin’s] early thought.”¹³ I disagree. Benjamin is a Marxist chastened by disappointment and frustration. He replaces metaphysical guarantees with theological foundations¹⁴ but nevertheless preserves the centrality of class conflict to the course of human action and classless society as a regulative ideal. Throughout his account, Benjamin balances a view that the historian should record and recover historical catastrophe while at the same time being responsible for “fanning the spark of hope in the past” (Thesis VI) and, perhaps, in the present, too.

The “false picture” of history that Benjamin challenges is characterized by dead, disenthralled, and linear narration, treating time as regularly marching towards universal peace and prosperity. This history violently suppresses its dead and defeated. The historian deploying Benjamin’s “materialist historiography” (Thesis XVII), on the other hand, understands history as alive, enthralled, and non-linear, hurling in fits and starts towards catastrophe, but also (dialectically) loaded with “messianic” potential to (quite literally) break that direction. Thesis IX famously captures the strange and mystical qualities of this account:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to say, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the

12 *Make Way for Tomorrow*, dir. Leo McCarey (Paramount Pictures, 1937).

13 Beiner, 423

14 In his an addenda to the essay, “Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin makes this rather Schmittian point explicit: “In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time” (Thesis XVIIa). In Eiland and Jennings, ed., 401.

sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (Thesis IX)

The angel sees human time in “tremendous abbreviation” (Thesis XVIII), propelled towards devolution, decline, and disaster by a storm (“progress”). Were the angel exclusively forward-looking (perhaps occasionally craning his neck to study the past, instead of facing it directly), he could come to believe that the current winds blow towards salvation. (This might be what ruling class histories in fact do.) But from his vantage point, with “wreckage upon wreckage” collecting at his feet and “debris” pelting his open wings, the resting order offers no guarantee of improvement. Indeed, the only hope of “[making] whole what has been smashed” lies in “awaken[ing] the dead,” which the angel cannot reach in the storm.

This account can seem changeless, hopeless. Indeed it is not hard to imagine this passage supporting the sense that a utopian project aimed at radical political transfiguration must be resigned to rearguard marginality, valuable mainly in ensuring that its adherents keep their hands clean and their minds pure. The passage suggests that while history might move definitively against human emancipation it is also more than a repository of strategic defeats or political failures. Instead, in order to win, revolutionaries (and historians) must remember the past better.

Early in the academic consideration of the “Theses,” the political theorist Ronald Beiner described Benjaminian history as both pessimistic and “throbbing with revolutionary possibilities.”¹⁵ The description evokes a familiar dilemma: How can we be realistic about the state of the world while working for its revolutionary transformation? Benjamin’s theory of history seems to supply an answer: revolution does not depend on reading the historical tealeaves or lining up in history’s direction. Instead it demands breaking with the “empty, homogenous time” in order to “explode” the “continuum of history,” attempting to wake from what James Joyce might call the “nightmare” of history. That can seem abstract. But Benjamin makes the point in a more specific and historical way:

What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in time-lapse mode...Calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness... (Thesis XV)

Calendars, unlike clocks, cover vast amounts of unrepeatable time. Revo-

lutionary transformation does not merely change time (as the French attempted after the Revolution) but also discloses the “true picture” of history: the pitched and dialectical battle between its oppressive direction and its life, loaded with possibilities.

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. (Thesis XIV)

For Benjamin, true historical materialists can “brush history against the grain” (Thesis VII) and true revolutions enact a “messianic arrest of happening” – to survey oppression and, possessed of “weak messianic power,” say, decisively, *no*. This productive, sabotaging, no-saying of revolutionary action is only possible, however, once the revolutionary starts looking at history differently and identifies the continuity between the historical past and the unfolding present: to invite the “return of the oppressed,” redeem their silent suffering and “save the dead from oblivion” (Thesis VI) through a radical rupture with precisely the conditions, patterns, and dynamics and that buried and defeated them in the first place.

[The historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. (Thesis XVII)

Historical materialism, unmodified by Benjamin’s theological supplement, assumes that a revolution will arrive at the end of history. Given that history has been propelled by class conflict, Benjamin shares the desire to break with it but he thinks that break can happen in different ways. First, we cannot count on any preordained, progressive trajectory to reach a desirable end state. Indeed, as he wrote in the unpublished “Theological-Political Fragment,” freedom is not internal to history; it will not await those who merely, barely survive historical catastrophe: “...the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the *goal* but the *terminus*” (my emphasis).¹⁶ We may end up in Heaven at the end of history but this will not be by design.

Second, history can be jolted or stopped *in motion*. In the fragments

¹⁶ Eiland and Jennings ed., 305.

posthumously published as “Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin writes:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency break. (Thesis XVIIa)¹⁷

History, properly understood, then, endows those who want to change the world with the power to genuinely transform it – to decisively break with and put a break *on* the traditions and transmissions that characterize accumulating oppression. The historian’s role, properly understood, demands an active recovery of what ruling class history has paved over: to arrest the cycle of decay and, like a “pearl diver,” rescue, collect, and polish the debris that has crystallized at the ocean floor.¹⁸ This historian might resemble the revisionist in search of lost causes as well as the struggles that, while suppressed by official histories, actually transformed political and social conditions.

In summary, Benjamin calls upon the historian to (a) recover experiences, events, and possibilities drowned by the persistent ideological barbarism of ruling class victory; (b) upend the appearance of linear historical progress and insist on a reality of linear historical catastrophe; and (c) insist, nevertheless, that “messianic splinters” (Thesis A) can emerge to halt or change the course of history.

III. Although extraordinarily prodigious, Benjamin wrote in elusive fragments, publishing only two books in his lifetime. He withheld his “Theses” for fear of “opening up the floodgates to enthusiastic misinterpretation”¹⁹ – the text survived as a loose-leaf draft, carried on Benjamin’s ill-fated attempt to escape Nazi-occupied France. Any theory building from those fragments requires some hermeneutical finessing; developing a legible methodology for radical revolutionary historiography means wrestling with Ben-

17 Ibid., 402.

18 “What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up in the world of the living – as “thought fragments,” as something “rich” and “strange,” and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphanomene*.” Arendt, 206

19 “I don’t need to inform you that I have not the least intention of publishing these notes (and certainly not in the form in which they have been presented to you). They would open up the floodgates to enthusiastic misinterpretation.” Walter Benjamin to Gretel Adorno (April 1940). Esther Leslie. *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 207

jamin's entire corpus. Indeed, Benjamin is best remembered as a philosopher of mass culture, not history. Before exploring Foucault's account of history, I would like to signal some important contrasts between the thinkers.

Unlike Benjamin, Michel Foucault was more prolific as a writer and somewhat less elusive as a thinker. He remained self-conscious about his theoretical activity as well, which can make reconstructing his theories somewhat less demanding. I read Foucault's 1971 essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" as a key to understanding his theory of history. Before attending to his positive account I will briefly canvass the kinds of history he sets out to challenge.

Foucault sets himself against three dominant historical tendencies. First, like Benjamin, Foucault worries about historical modes that sell their local, limited perspective as universal. Second, like Benjamin, Foucault is critical of historical narratives that seem to stack the deck at some finite endpoint and decisive origin, containing the full truth of an event, practice or institution. As he writes, "[Genealogy] opposes itself to the search for "origins."²⁰ Third, while Benjamin objects to the "radical particularization" entailed by historicism, Foucault embraces some version of historicism full stop, emphasizing that institutions and practices understood to be natural have a history. He further connects their naturalization to a process of philosophical and political preservation underwritten by a Western metaphysics that establishes some realms as *outside* history, *terra firma* considered inappropriate for analysis or critique. As examples he offers "sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" and the body itself. Indeed, "...the task [of genealogy] is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body."²¹

According to Foucault, dominant history has shaped our sense of what humans have done (what has changed and stayed the same) as well as what can change or must stay the same. By delimiting where change happens, these modes of history also depress any sense of where conflicts can transform relationships, habits or practices. Foucault develops his genealogical method to battle historical *doxa* and change minds (and hearts): to uncover and interpret contemporary institutions and practices as the result of non-linear and contingent bursts of relationships, contests, and discourses, and, in so doing, inject the present with the uncertainty, precarity, and potential political mobility that *also*, on his account, characterize the past.

Benjamin left few clues about how to do (or think about) history his way. Many scholars have looked to the Paris "Arcades Project" to which the "Theses" were a postscript for an example of the cultural critique and aesthet-

20 Rabinow (1984), 77.

21 Ibid., 76, 83.

ic collection supported by Benjamin's political-historical work.²² But for the working historian, the "Theses" can be vexing, with only very general methodological guides: to tell history from below; to revisit paths that we imagine to be lost; and to reject progressive narratives or assumptions.

Foucault, on the other hand, seemed to employ his theory of history in a number of texts.²³ He was also quite specific in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" about historical and archival practice. He begins the essay: "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary." He continues by describing the way that the genealogist must resist the temptation to interpret historical events captured in "entangled and confused parchments" as contributing to "any monotonous finality." In addition, the detailed work must be attuned to the details of experience often overlooked by historians: "sentiments, love, conscience, instincts..."²⁴

While Foucaultian historians work to understand familiar experiences, their practices are grounded in unfamiliar or obscure documents (or unfamiliar interpretations of familiar documents). They should read sensitively and attempt to see past intellectual habits that might lead them to otherwise ignore important evidence of both continuity and change.²⁵ Like Benjamin's historian, Foucault's genealogist attends to the strange, the defeated, the subaltern, and the oppositional: "[Genealogy] is...a reactivation of local knowledge – or minor knowledges...in opposition to the scientific hierarchies of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power: this, then, is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies."²⁶

In some ways this can sound like shotgun revisionism, or an order to explode the historical record, displace old, bad facts and old, bad, archives with new ones. In so doing, we might think of the historian as speaking hard-won truths to establishment power. While Foucault shares the revision-

22 Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Michael Lowy. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (New York: Verso, 2006).

23 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Michel Foucault. *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage, 1988); Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

24 Rabinow (1984), 76-7.

25 In a late interview Foucault puts the methodological point even more clearly, establishing a relationship between his "archaeological" work and genealogy: "If we were to characterize it in two terms, then 'archaeology' would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and 'genealogy' would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play" (85).

26 Paul Rabinow, ed. *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1983*, Vol. 3 (New York: The New Press, 2001), 85.

ist's insurgent impulse (once describing his work as "a challenge directed to what is"²⁷), he also wants history to do more than demystify "reality" or just correct and replace old stories. These replacements are vital. But they are insufficient: Foucault seems to also argue that some of these stories are powerfully ingrained enough that their displacement (or replacement) might challenge some fundamental parts of our self-conception and expand our sense of where politics even happens. Thus Foucault's genealogical critique promises to change our understanding of history and experience of the world in ways that may transform the historian and offer new ways to be free.

IV. While genealogists live in the archives they do far more than retell the facts. According to Foucault genealogists should interpret history as a collection of accidents which, through technologies of power and discourses of truth, impress themselves as necessary and attach themselves to subjects as natural. A historian who is "effective" in her practice will "dismantle" (or dislodge) all the aspects of human experience that appear necessary; instead of studying "human identity" as history changes around her, the genealogist will "commit [herself] to [identity's] dissipation." As a critical exercise, the genealogist does not just seek new data but the transformation of the theoretical and cultural armature that underwrite all data: introducing contingency where there was necessity, perspective where there was objectivity, arbitrariness where there was *telos*, and dissolution where there was immutability. This kind of history is fundamentally disruptive and unsettling. In a 1978 interview, he reflected on the project:

If I had wanted...to do a history of psychiatric institutions in Europe between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, obviously I wouldn't have written a book like *Madness and Civilization*. But my problem is not to satisfy professional historians; my problem is to construct myself, and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed. Which means that at the end of a book we would establish new relationships with the subject at issue.²⁸

Madness and Civilization sought to reinterpret psychiatry and mental health-care by understanding how many of its central assumptions were fabricated within Western modernity, historically. The thesis challenged received opinion, and as a book of history (like any book of history) it attracted significant criticism about source and interpretation – but also, particularly about its

27 Rabinow (2001), 236.

28 Ibid., 242.

respect for the historical *truth* of (to recall Ranke) “what really happened.” Foucault pushed back in another late interview, drawing attention to how he meant the book to be read, received and, even, felt:

[*Madness and Civilization* is] a book that functions as an experience, for its writer and reader alike, much more than as the establishment of a historical truth. For one to be able to have that experience through the book, what it says does need to be true in terms of academic, historically verifiable truth. It can't exactly be a novel. Yet the essential thing is not in the series of those true or historically verifiable findings but, rather, in the experience that the book makes possible. Now, the fact is, this experience is neither true nor false. An experience is always a fiction: it's something that one fabricates oneself, that doesn't exist before and will exist after.²⁹

Foucault cites to “experience” throughout his late interviews. He describes *Discipline and Punish* as “an experience book, as opposed to a truth book or a demonstration book.”³⁰ He recasts *Madness and Civilization* as a book that, philosophically, was concerned with the ways in which “madness... [became] an understandable and determinable object.” About science itself he posited: “Might not science be analyzed or conceived of basically as an experience, that is, as a relationship in which the subject is modified by that experience?”³¹ But Foucault was long concerned about experience. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” he argues for an essential relationship between knowledge (once understood to be abstract and disembodied) and practices that involve forms of power and resistance, that are “inscribed” on the body itself. The body might not just be another or unexpectedly historical surface; for Foucault it could well be what history *does* and *produces*.

For someone so interested in the conditions for freedom in a world of unfreedom, Foucault, read this way, can seem like a Marxist missing the second half of the dialectic: dramatizing the shape-shifting powers that live above and act on human beings. These powers might lack a linear historical trajectory but they are consistent in their application. If Benjamin can make us depressed about history’s catastrophic direction, Foucault can leave us feeling rudderless or paralyzed, not knowing what to do, and forcing an uncomfortable readjustment to a new normal that feels both overdetermined and vertiginous.³²

29 Ibid., 244.

30 Ibid., 246.

31 Ibid., 254.

32 The political theorist Wendy Brown has described the vertigo of genealogy as “...a loss of ground, as particular narrative and presumptions are upended and scrutinized for the inter-

On the one hand, historicizing experience can threaten ideas of self-ownership, agency, and efficacy, leaving nothing insulated from the political transformations going on without. But Foucault also wants to give lived experience creative, political potential. It is, we might say, the missing side of the dialectic: “Men,” he writes, “are perpetually engaged in a process that, in constituting objects, at the same displaces man, deforms, transforms, and transfigures him as a subject.”³³

The human form and, therefore, human freedom are works in progress. Foucault reads Marxism (even the Western Marxism of the Frankfurt School which he greatly admired³⁴) as anchoring human freedom to either a stable or unfolding conception of human form. Foucault finds this stiff and inadequate. As an account it occludes the conditions for re-creation and self-creation, as well as the open-endedness of history: “What ought to be produced is not man as nature supposedly designed him, or as his essence ordains him to be – we need to produce something that doesn’t exist yet, without being able to know what it will be.”³⁵

Both Benjamin and Foucault approach history as a resource for emancipatory politics while denying that it makes sense to talk about being on its “right side.” For Benjamin we can have a theory of history based in class struggle that is alive to defeat and even tragedy. Redemption, however, comes through recognizing that transformations often have a messianic character – something that studying catastrophic eruptions in the past can help us understand. He invokes the eighteenth century French physician François-Joseph-Victor Broussais to understand what’s “irritating” about critique, writing that: “[c]ritical historians seemed to me more to be ‘anaesthetized,’ ‘irritated’ (in Broussais’s sense of the term, of course)”³⁶:

I have the impression of having had an irritant rather than an anesthetic effect on a good many people. The epidermises bristle with a constancy I find encouraging.³⁷

Again:

ests they serve and the comfort they offer.” Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9.

³³ Rabinow (2001), 276.

³⁴ “When I acknowledge the merits of the Frankfurt School philosophers, I do so with the bad conscience of someone who should have read them long before, who should have understood them much earlier. Had I read these works, there are many things I wouldn’t have needed to say, and I would have avoided some mistakes.” Rabinow (2001), 274.

³⁵ Ibid., 275.

³⁶ Ibid., 236-7.

³⁷ Ibid., 235.

Perhaps the reason my work irritates people is precisely the fact that I'm not interested in constructing a new schema or in validating one that already exists. Perhaps it's because my objective isn't to propose a global principle for analyzing society...My general theme isn't society but the discourse of true and false, which I mean the correlative formation of domains and objects and of the verifiable, falsifiable discourses that bear on them; and it's not just their formation that interest me, but the effects in the real to which they are linked.³⁸

Foucault seems to borrow Broussais's theory of irritation, connecting external stimulus to permanent, internal transformation. Broussais's conception of "sensibility," in particular, recalls the transformative implications of genealogical critique: not just to prod, dismantle or dislodge, but to reach some new vista and new experience of the world.

A part affected by a foreign body, may be excited to motion without the individual being conscious of it. In this case, there is nothing but irritability; but if the individual experiences that kind of modification which induces the man to say, "I feel, I perceive," there is both irritability and sensibility. Sensibility, then, is the consequence of irritability, and not irritability of sensibility; in other words, we must be irritable, before we are sensible.³⁹

Genealogical critique is an irritant deployed to aggravate and then reshape sensibilities. "The permanent critique of ourselves" that it propels begins a long road to self-transformation, and serves as a necessary condition for the practice of freedom in the present.⁴⁰

V. Although Benjamin and Foucault share some critical impulses, their theories of historical movement and human freedom are significantly different. To reiterate, briefly: While he rejects a progressive reading of history, Benjamin nevertheless retains (and even intensifies) the historical materialist promise of human salvation through revolution as politically desirable. Unlike most Marxists, however, he claims that such revolution might have a messianic character. Foucault, meanwhile, calls on genealogical critique to agitate subjects into new relationships with institutions and practices thought to be immobile and ahistorical. This process, he thinks, might allow people

38 Ibid., 237.

39 Joseph-Victor Broussais. *On Irritation and Insanity*, trans. Thomas Cooper (Columbia: S.J. M'Morris, 1831), 23-4.

40 Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA: Seimotext(e), 1997), 121.

to begin to change themselves in order to rearrange the world around them. While Benjamin and Foucault both reject any traditional theory of history as progressive or even linear, their theories generate different implications for political struggle. In particular, they differ in important ways about the possibility and desirability of emancipation⁴¹

That said, there are a few promising points of contact that may be helpful for those seeking to understand and develop these theories: first, both share an attention to history as a lived experience; second, both emphasize how the historian recovers (and redeems) or uncovers (and broadcasts) what has been traditionally suppressed; third, both locate untapped possibilities or unexplored paths in the past as potentially generative for the political imagination of the present.

First, Benjamin and Foucault feel history in their bones. Benjamin does not reject “empty, homogenous time” for merely philosophical reasons. He also theorizes that treating history this way mistakes how it actually feels, its phenomenology in the buzzing of bursts, busts, eruptions, and catastrophes that actually characterize its tragic unfolding. Progressive history gets the experience and texture wrong and so teaches bad feelings about where we are and where we are headed. Foucault, meanwhile, understands the body and corporeal experience as shaped by historical transformations inside and outside, as “modernity” comprises the tension (even dialectic) between knowledge/power and subjective resistance and refashioning. A historian or philosopher synthesizing both accounts might thus pay attention to what ideological abstractions about time do to the bodies and minds of those living under the clock.

Second, Benjamin and Foucault look for history in unfamiliar, unusual places. Official, received histories, according to both, have been written from positions of false universality. Official, received histories have suppressed, silenced, and covered over. Benjamin maintains a heroic, romantic attitude to the oppressed past (and passed), and to those who cannot speak for themselves (and their descendants who continue to struggle). Foucault looks for histories in the cracks and crevices, in silences and beyond the framings transmitted by traditional channels. The Foucaultian historian discovers contingencies and tendencies in exotic, avant-garde, marginal ar-

41 “I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression...I am not trying to say that liberation as such, or this or that form of liberation, does not exist...[but] I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation; again, the latter indeed have their place, but they do not seem to me to be capable by themselves of defining all the practical forms of freedom.” Paul Rabinow, ed. *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 282-3.

chives. Together, Benjamin and Foucault focus on the overlooked and (quite literally) historically under-served to revitalize an insurgent counter-memor y.

Finally, Benjamin and Foucault dislodge historical necessities to introduce political mobility into the present. Although they do this in different ways, the effects are similar: hope instead of despair and slivers of possibility instead of the certainty of defeat. For Benjamin that means thoroughly eviscerating a progressive theory of history that lends any support to the idea that its direction bends inevitably towards emancipation. In so doing, he interprets those who have fought for justice and salvation as doing so against history, not with it, and that contemporary revolution will require the same kinds of explosive, oppositional moments. Foucault, meanwhile, draws on historical interpretation as a disruptive counterexample to a resting state sold as inevitable, necessary, and natural. By reviving the memory of a time when things were different and telling a story about the circumstances surrounding their transformation, more potential for rearrangement of our habits, institutions, and subjectivities begins to emerge in entirely new places, in entirely new ways. Unfastening the past from a set of conditions sold as necessary and natural begins to make the present look more permeable and more dangerous on the way to a different tomorrow.

