

# Foucault, Benjamin, and the Burden of History

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## **Abstract**

Through his cataclysmic assault on the familiar paradigms of modern thought, Michel Foucault has sought to entirely reconfigure the field of historical knowledge, and consequently the way in which we understand “history” itself. This paper seeks to explore Foucault’s historico-philosophical approach and its critique of traditional approaches to history, while also developing a critique of Foucault’s work by bringing it into dialogue with the work of Walter Benjamin. The neglect of a possible dialogue between Foucault and Benjamin is a significant gap in the literature, and this paper aims to use it as a means to better understanding Foucault’s work, while also using it to develop a substantive critique of Foucault’s approach. The paper begins by presenting an elaboration of Foucault’s historico-philosophical methodology, attempting to isolate the two branches (the genealogical and archaeological) that intersect to form this methodology, highlighting their Nietzschean and Kantian influence. It then proceeds to bring Foucault’s approach into a dialogue with Benjamin. While Foucault’s attempt to break through the orthodox position that permeates traditional historiography is a welcome development (and one similar, in several respects, to Benjamin’s), Benjamin’s work would suggest that the manner in which Foucault does so retains an aspect of the reified history he rejects—the absolute break between the past and the present. While Foucault will present a more nuanced version of this break—and one that will not deny historical change—for Benjamin this break produces a historical forgetting that ultimately denies the past an effective place in history.

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This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and geography.—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*<sup>2</sup>

Much like the passage from Borges had challenged his own thought, the historico-philosophical approach of Michel Foucault has sought to shatter the familiar landmarks and dogmas of modern thought—our thought. His central concepts (power/knowledge, archaeology of knowledge, genealogy, etc) have posed a direct challenge to various institutions of traditional philosophy and historiography. In presenting a new analytical tabula, Foucault has sought to entirely reconfigure the field of historical knowledge. But in doing so, he has also reconfigured the characterization of the past by interrogating the way in which we understand “history” itself. Indeed, Foucault has sought to challenge positivist characterizations of historical knowledge/events as something that is “always already there,” as well as linear conceptions of historical change; against these, he puts forth a historico-philosophical approach that seeks to sever itself from Identitarian principles and from uncritically accepted modernization theories. While this approach leads to a “discontinuist” history, it contains various nuances that suggest a reworking of the relationship between the “past” and “present.”

This paper seeks to develop a critique of Foucault’s historiographical approach through the work of Walter Benjamin. I begin by presenting an elaboration of Foucault’s historico-philosophical methodology. In doing so, I attempt to isolate the two branches (the genealogical and archaeological) that intersect to form Foucault’s historical approach, highlighting their Nietzschean and Kantian influence. I then proceed to bring Foucault’s approach into a dialogue with Benjamin, who likewise sought to address the problems associated with traditional understandings of event/moment, history and progress. While Foucault’s attempt to break through the orthodox position that permeates traditional historiography is a welcome development (and one similar, in several respects, to Benjamin’s), Benjamin’s work would suggest that the manner in which Foucault does so retains an aspect of the reified history he rejects—the absolute break between the past and the present. Indeed, while Foucault will present a more nuanced vision of this break—and one that will not deny historical change—for Benjamin, this break produces a historical forgetting that ultimately denies the past an effective place in history.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. xv.

## The Genealogy of a Methodology: Foucault's Approach to History

Taking up the challenge of Nietzsche's rebuke of the historian as a "spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge" prone to "the smug avoiding of life and action,"<sup>3</sup> Hayden White's "The Burden of History" aimed to set a new agenda for historiography, proclaiming the need to break with the "thoughtless obstructionism" contained in the "study of the past 'as an end in itself.'"<sup>4</sup> Addressing the question in the context of the declining status of history as an academic field, White placed the blame on "outmoded conceptions of objectivity" derived from nineteenth century artistic and scientific methodologies. For the discipline to regain its potency, he argued, it was necessary to adapt new modes of representing history that go beyond conceiving of the past as a mere object of contemplation, and transform it into a way of understanding and resolving the problems plaguing the present.<sup>5</sup> Foucault's work—not least for the Nietzsche connection—should be read in the context of White's demand, as an attempt to break with the inherited historical approach which aims to discover a past, with its events and forces, that is always already "there" waiting to be discovered in all its objective and scientific truth/reality.<sup>6</sup>

Through the invocation and development of a two-pronged approach, founded in the descent and emergence of what he refers to as genealogy and archaeology, Foucault aims to shatter the familiar landmarks of historiographical thought. As he states: "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times."<sup>7</sup> The point of this poetic, yet relatively vague, proclamation is that genealogy takes no aspects of history to be fixed for eternity. In denying the finality of events and development, it opens itself up to a free flowing and open system of interpretation that "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies."<sup>8</sup> This endeavor requires the constant reassessment of the available evidence, and the constant search for unexplored evidence. But it also suggests a new form of relating that evidence to the present. Foucault has no intention of writing a history of the past that is merely its teleological fulfillment in a completed

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> White, "The Burden of History."

<sup>6</sup> Allan Megill, "Foucault, Structuralism and the Ends of History," *Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 3 (1979): 456-458.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," pp. 352-354, 362-364.

present: the present's mutability militates against the absolute Identity of the past, with its "necessary" events that progress in a linear fashion towards the present. Rather, his intention is to write a "history of the present"<sup>9</sup>: to understand a present that is not a result of the past, but a past that can only be understood in its sagittal relationship to the present. While much of this finds its roots in Nietzsche, Foucault's historical approach also has less recognized roots in Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment.

In offering a response to the question "What is Enlightenment?," Kant had turned the philosopher's gaze squarely to the present. As Foucault is quick to point out, previous philosophers had also reflected on their own present. But he sees something novel in Kant's approach: rather than viewing the present as "a world era to which one belongs...an event whose signs are perceived, [or] the dawning of an accomplishment," Kant sought to understand the meaning of "contemporary reality" itself.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, he sought to understand the meaning of the contemporary world divorced from a self-enclosed historical totality and divorced from some perceived future development. But this presentism is not to suggest a trans- or a-historical approach. On the contrary, Foucault argues, it challenges the Cartesian question that informs these anti-historicisms: "Who am I? I, as a unique but universal and unhistorical subject? I, for Descartes, is everyone, anywhere at any moment."<sup>11</sup> Kant sought to reflect on what we are at a specific moment: how we relate to our present, and how our present is related to us as subjects involved in a nexus involving reason, power and knowledge. In these respects, Foucault contends, Kant's intention is to connect the epistemological endeavor of the philosopher to history itself, by concluding that the way we look at history is in fact connected to this present, and that the present informs the specific task we undertake when trying to understand ourselves, and correlatively our past.

According to Foucault, this "is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way...the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing." By virtue of this critical reflection on his own intellectual position, Kant's thought is "at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history" and constitutes a specifically modern approach. Indeed, modern philosophy itself has been unendingly plagued by the issues Kant sought to address in "What is Enlightenment?" Yet, Foucault contends, our modernity ties us not to Kant's own answer, but to this critical gaze that he encouraged—to this critical, self-reflexive gaze that is endlessly interrogating our relationship to our own present. Such a Kantian inquiry is "oriented toward the 'contemporary limits of the necessary,' that is, toward

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Essential Foucault*, ed. Rabinow and Rose, pp. 44-48.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," in *Essential Foucault*, ed. Rabinow and Rose, pp. 133-134.

what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.” Critical investigation must “bear upon a material, an epoch, a body of determined practices and discourses” all of which bear upon this constitution of the subject (or subjectivization).<sup>12</sup> But, the present configuration of this body of knowledge and its critical interrogation will inform the historical object of inquiry, producing the past as an effect of the present. Thus the present cannot be conceived as an additive progression to the pre-existing metahistory. The “epistemological configuration” of each age alters the gaze of the observer, and necessitates a constant historical reassessment.<sup>13</sup> As Mark Poster, in analyzing Foucault’s complex relationship to Kant and the Enlightenment, summarizes: “Criticism—of which historical writing is one form—begins with the critic’s self-constitution, and that occurs through the recognition of one’s contingency and, at the same time, the recognition that social domination is contingent.”<sup>14</sup>

Hence, in this process, Foucault gives primacy to the “historical conditions that motivate our conceptualization,” rather than to the a priori conceptualization of history as an object. But he does intend to provide a conceptualization of this historical object (the past) connected to this archaeology of the present’s modes of being. For, even if the present—including its epistemological project—constitutes the starting point of criticism and/or historical analysis, the question remains: how does Foucault conceptualize the relationship between this present and the past? How does he conceptualize “‘today’ as difference in history?”<sup>15</sup> The answer is given in *The Order of Things*, a work that seeks “to describe not so much the genesis of our sciences as an epistemological space specific to a particular period.”<sup>16</sup>

In describing these epistemological spaces, Foucault aims to find a delineable system of regularity “at a given time and in a given culture” which defines and orders the thinkable field of inquiry. He refers to this space as an episteme, and defines it as the largely unconscious system which limits and also shapes the field of knowledge and the nature of inquiry, through “rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts and objects of study.” Moreover, each episteme possesses a relatively self-contained and self-sufficient rationality. And the historically specific nature of each episteme is comprised by the different ordering of these internal laws of rationality: “The fundamental codes

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<sup>12</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” pp. 47-48, 51, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” pp. 44-48, 51-56; Foucault, “Subject and Power,” pp. 127, 133-134; Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 2* (New York: New Press, 1999), p. 286.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Poster, “Foucault, the Present and History,” in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 309.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” pp. 47-48.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, p. xi.

of culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of practices—establish for every man...the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.” It would appear that the very essence of a subject’s being only has a meaning insofar as it conforms to the internal grid created by the organization of the episteme: an episteme is “a tabula, that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world.” And it is in the process of the reconfiguration of the internal dynamics of the episteme that a new order can emerge, and former ones become “invalid.”<sup>17</sup> It is in the nature of the change from one episteme to another that Foucault bequeaths a contribution to the question of historical periodization.

Foucault argues that different epistemes do not comprise a genesis, because their succession is devoid of continuity (owing to the different nature of the internal ordering). Indeed, his history is one of “suddenness and thoroughness” in which drastic—cataclysmic—changes should not be minimized for the sake of convenience. He explains that this transformation is so profound that it “cannot be ‘explained’ or even summed up in a single word”: it shatters worlds, and radically disrupts “the entire visible surface of knowledge.” This complete rupture with past systems of knowledge has an important epistemological claim for the study of history: lacking continuity, Foucault contends that the ruptures are also devoid of progress. The nature of the episteme’s construction—its ordering of the field of knowledge—denies any external criterion of objectivity. An episteme is a field “in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or its objective forms...manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility.” Without continuity there is no perfection, only different forms of knowledge: the archaeological foundations change, but there is no objective measure which can show progression or regression.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, we must keep in mind that it is because of his elaboration of his concept of archaeology in *The Order of Things* that Foucault has been accused of proposing a discontinuist model of history. Foucault has expressed his own bewilderment at such accusations, and has clarified his position: “the rhythm of transformation doesn’t follow the smooth, continuist schemas of development which are normally accepted. The great biological image of a progressive maturation of science still underpins a good many of historical analyses; it doesn’t seem to me to be pertinent to history.”<sup>19</sup> This sentiment seems to underpin his entire corpus of work. But it must also be remarked that both this quote and *The Order of Things* refer to the knowledge forms that inform our understanding of the “objective” world. Once the archaeological premise has been established—that the present possesses no solid and secure, no self-identical basis of

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, pp. ix, xi, xiii, xvii, xix-xxii.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, pp. xi, xxi-xxii, 217-218.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Essential Foucault*, ed. Rabinow and Rose, pp. 302-303.

knowledge—then the past is equally conceded as a changing object of knowledge. But the changing basis of the past is then intrinsically determined as an effect of the changing nature of the present, and its form of knowledge—specifically, the Enlightenment question of the relationship between the subject, knowledge and power. This establishes a conceptualization of the present. But we then return to the notion alluded to at the outset: “a history of the present.” And it is in these respects that Foucault develops—via Nietzsche—the general principles of his genealogical approach.

The standard historical procedure would attempt to search for origins, and attempt to understand the present as the culmination of events. But, Foucault argues, the notion of an “origin” seeks “to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities” and seeks to describe “that which was already there.” This can only be established by the assumptions of a suprahistory: “a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a complete development.” In this approach, the event is forced into an ideal continuity with the overall march of history (from the basis of nature, in the rationalistic approach, or spirit, in the theological approach). In adopting Nietzsche’s genealogical outlook, Foucault rejects this permanence of the past, and the finality of the present, by recognizing the mutable present as the foundation of our relationship to the past. This mutability rejects the absolute essence/Identity of the past, and consequently asserts the understanding and the juxtaposition of the present to the past as merely a result of the way the present stands and understands—that is, the present’s existence as an archaeological formation. It is only by the demagogic invocation of “objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past” and the “necessary belief in providence, in final causes and teleology”<sup>20</sup> that the historian can search for the origins of the present.<sup>21</sup> In wresting the past from the monopoly of the historian, the genealogist seeks to understand the present through the analysis of *Herkunft* and *Entstehung*.

As Foucault notes, “*Herkunft* is the equivalent of stock or descent,” and it possesses three key characteristics that set it apart from the pursuit of origins. First, it denies a unitary and singular origin, as well as the development of an “uninterrupted continuity.” In contradistinction to these metaphysical concepts, descent connotes a search for a complex series of networks and interrelationships. Thus we find multiple nodal points at the present, each of which is connected to “numberless beginnings.” This breaks up the “coherent identity” that suprahistory attempts to construct and, by recognizing this as “an empty synthesis, [liberates] a profusion of lost events.” Second, the investigation of descent brings to light the events/moments “thanks to which, [and] against which” the present objects of inquiry were formed. This in no way entails discovering a continuity, or a series of causal explanations about events; correlatively

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” pp. 353-354, 358-364.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *Essential Foucault*, ed. Rabinow and Rose, pp. 276-277; Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *Essential Foucault*, ed. Rabinow and Rose, pp. 249-250.

the “task is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes.” Rather, this investigation involves drawing out the moments at which the object of inquiry has undergone changes—changes enacted, not by “historical necessity” but, by “the errors,” “accidents,” “minute deviations” that have brought into being “history” in its present form. This acknowledges that the “truth” of something lies not at its origin, but at its present incarnation. Third, “descent attaches itself to the body.” According to Foucault, the body is the parchment upon which history is written, and it displays these effects—the desires, dominations and diseases—often in a contradictory and conflictual way that pulls the body in the most varied directions. By no means does this imply a historical fatalism, or a notion of the historical body as unitary: rather it seems to imply the “dissociation” and deformation of historical subjects.<sup>22</sup>

Entstehung is defined as “emergence” or “arising,” and it denotes the emergence of sets of forces—largely embodied in the principles and concepts of morality and ethics—that struggle “against each other or against adverse circumstances.” But in denying the descent of an uninterrupted unity, the genealogist never sees “emergence” as a culmination: in fact, he/she must “avoid accounting for emergence by appeal to its final term.” As such, he/she denies the culmination of events and the objective judgment of this play of forces, in favour of the acknowledgement of a constant “play of dominations” between various different “systems of subjection.” The victor has not shown the “truth” or “the good”: he/she has merely seized the existing concepts and, through interpretation, altered their meanings to fit his/her own needs. The infinity of interpretation leads the genealogist to the conclusion that existing developments “are merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations”; and it is the genealogist’s goal to record the play of forces that emerge in history, and to trace their descent.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, while separate endeavors, the archaeological/epistemic/Kantian and genealogical/Nietzschean aspects of Foucault’s historical methodology intersect.<sup>24</sup> Once we understand the present as difference in history—i.e. the present as an archaeological or epistemic moment—then we can no longer derive the present from the past, one episteme from another: we must understand a “history of the present” by determining the present’s genealogical roots (i.e. its descent and emergence). Foucault suggests that this may even illuminate an unknown past: the present moment retroactively brings it to light as “history.” But the point is that the contours of the present archaeology—and, hence, the present’s epistemic rupture with the past—needs to be isolated in order to find the genealogy, rather than the metahistory, of the present. This is readily apparent

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” pp. 355-357, 364-368.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” pp. 357-359; Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, p. 274.

<sup>24</sup> Sigrid Weigel likewise notes the combination of the two methodologies in Foucault’s work in *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 31.

in both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality (Vol.1)*.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in both works, Foucault establishes “what difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday”<sup>26</sup> by isolating two epistemic/archaeological regimes (the classical and the modern) of punishment and sexuality, respectively: the present is, in both cases, a society of unending power relations and knowledge/discourse production that fundamentally differs from the classical age. He then attempts to discover the descent and emergence of these present configurations through a genealogical interrogation of the technologies of the self/subject that have come to comprise the archaeology of these modern regimes. Ultimately, then, the archaeological and epistemic description is a precondition for the genealogical extraction. This by no means implies a genealogy that is entirely discontinuist; but it rejects the progressive adding on of the new epoch to the pre-existing metahistory, and denies the progressivist or evolutionary value judgments that are usually assumed.

## **A Dialectical Intervention: Benjamin and the Burden of the Past**

It is not surprising that, a decade after his initial call to arms, White praised Foucault for attempting to shatter the prevailing historical orthodoxy: “[Foucault] writes ‘history’ in order to destroy it, as a discipline, as a mode of consciousness, and as a mode of (social) existence.”<sup>27</sup> And there is much to applaud and admire in Foucault’s attempt to break with the classical categories—“(totality, continuity, causality)”<sup>28</sup>—of historical analysis. But our appreciation of Foucault’s attempt to break the traditional mold of what constitutes history, should not lead us into the docile and dogmatic unwillingness to interrogate—using the same critical spirit with which Foucault himself operated—Foucault’s own work. In what follows, I attempt to take seriously Foucault’s criticism of “history” and aim to interrogate his method from “inside” this same critical tradition. And it is with this in mind that I turn to the work of Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin has been peculiarly absent from the engagement with Foucault. While various members of the Frankfurt School have been introduced into a critical dialogue

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<sup>25</sup> While these two works have generally been seen as heralding Foucault’s transition to a Nietzschean genealogy, Poster notes their continued debt to the Kantian branch of Foucault’s thought: Poster, “Foucault, the Present and History,” p. 309.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” pp. 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> White, quoted in Megill, “Foucault, Structuralism, and the Ends of History,” p. 456.

<sup>28</sup> This triad of the traditional history Foucault tries to break with is mentioned in Roger Chartier, “The Chimera of the Origin: Archaeology, Cultural History and the French Revolution,” in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p. 170.

with Foucault's work,<sup>29</sup> Benjamin's marginalized relationship with the Institute for Social Research has extended to this dialogue. Perhaps the singular exception to this tendency is Sigrid Weigel's *Body- and Image- Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, which devotes a chapter to exploring a possible dialogue between Foucault and Benjamin. Weigel's overarching intention in the book is to uncover "the buried links between the *early* Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and post-structuralism,"<sup>30</sup> and it is this intention that leads her to draw a picture of similitude—albeit a mirror-image similitude in which often opposite entry points turn out to be complimentary—between Benjamin and Foucault. In this vein, she rightly emphasizes the common "anti-historicist reflections" that underpin Benjamin and Foucault's "renunciation of unity, totality and the absolute" in historical writing.<sup>31</sup> But it must be noted that Weigel's central emphasis is not on Benjamin (or Foucault) as a historian or philosopher of history, but as a "thinker" or "theorist"—terms which she intends to overcome the division of academic labour which has skirted attention away from Benjamin's use of "images" as the central category of his thought.<sup>32</sup> Where she does consider the historico-philosophical elements of a Benjamin-Foucault dialogue, the overemphasis on similitude deriving from the organizing theme of the book leads Weigel to obscure the large gulf over the burden of history, and the relationship between past and present, that fundamentally separates Benjamin from Foucault. Ultimately, then, I start from a similar position as Weigel, seeing in Foucault and Benjamin a common interrogation of history and historical categories/knowledge, but I aim to probe the differences that emerge if we work through the specifics of their historico-philosophical projects.

Like Foucault, Benjamin sought to bring into question the very notions of progress, continuity and truth in history. In this vein, he also attempts to elaborate a conception of history that breaks with its positivist/historicist permeations—centrally

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<sup>29</sup> The most exemplary example would of course be the direct debate between Habermas and Foucault. For a sampling of secondary literature in this vein, see: Thomas Briebicher, "Habermas, Foucault and Nietzsche: A Double Misunderstanding," *Foucault Studies* 3 (2005), which addresses the Foucault-Habermas debate; Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso Books, 1987), which brings Foucault into dialogue with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas; Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002), which connects Foucault with Adorno; Thomas McCarthy, "The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (1990), which refers largely to Habermas and Adorno/Horkheimer. In an interview, Foucault discusses his own relationship to the Frankfurt School, focusing on the work of Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer, and making a passing reference to Kircheimer: Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp. 115-129.

<sup>30</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, p. xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, p. ix.

the notions of a neutral historian, discovering an objective set of historical “facts” and representing the past (“the way it really was”) as the teleological fore-history of the progressive development of the present.<sup>33</sup> However, Benjamin’s intention in doing so was to return a critical vitality to Marxist concepts<sup>34</sup>—in the light of its reduction, by the “epigones” of Marx and Engels, to the reigning orthodoxies of 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific method—and we ultimately find in his work a divergence from, and critique of, Foucault’s approach.

According to Benjamin, the problem with “progress” lay in its complicity with emerging bourgeois conceptions of history and its end: the complete separation between the past—as a homogenous time or a heterogeneous series of moments—and the present. Under such conceptions, progress came to refer to a reified history which measured “the span between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history.”<sup>35</sup> This reversed the revolutionary meaning of progress, under which it denoted a rupture with existing concepts and an attempt at the actualization of social goals. As an accomplice in bourgeois reification, progress came to describe little more than the post-humous chain of causal connections that the present epoch had created in order to glorify itself; and this self-aggrandizing history’s “enshrinement as heritage” covered up the very possibility of unfulfilled revolutionary moments. For Benjamin this historical approach serves as the “spoils” of historical victors, and it is beholden on them to present their own epoch as the culmination of history, and their own coming to power as the fulfillment of a historical necessity. Moreover, this configuration attempts to turn the past into an eternal/timeless truth, by showing things “as they really were.” But, in doing so, it merely grabs hold of the present’s own constellation. For, as Benjamin contends, the “purity” of the gaze—the gaze that excludes “anything that has taken place in the meantime”—is impossible, and the present constantly informs the understanding of the past. In order to avoid such an “uncritical hypostatization,” Benjamin posited a new role for Marxist historiography: “it blasts the epoch out of the

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* (New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 42-44.

<sup>34</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an adequate discussion of the very complex relationship between Benjamin and Marxism. But it should be noted that Benjamin’s use of the term “historical materialism” should be quoted, as it is generally used as an immanent critical tool to challenge its regression into the very positivist forms of thought that Marxism—particularly the dialectical/critical Marxism of Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch, both of whose work influenced Benjamin—had sought to critique. For an elaboration of Benjamin’s complex relationship to Marxism, see Lowy, *Fire Alarm*. As Asher Horowitz notes, historical materialists have generally found Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History,” to be “an unwelcome intrusion of mystical and voluntarist notions into a rational method of historical explanation.” Horowitz, “How Levinas Taught me to Read Benjamin,” *PhaenEx* 1 (2006): 150.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 478.

reified ‘continuity of history.’”<sup>36</sup> It is in these respects that Benjamin’s work poses a challenge to the Foucaultian paradigm.

While Foucault has bled given historical moments (or epistemes) of their value-orientation, he succumbs to a reification by assuming that they contain an internal system of rationality that can be, or was, fulfilled. Maintaining a connection to dialectical principles, Benjamin contends that the founding concept of Marxism is actualization, a term denoting the attempt at the internal actualization of the system’s own immanent goals, or the systems correction through the explosion of the contradictions exposed in a non-correspondence.<sup>37</sup> We can draw an example of this failure of immanence from Foucault’s own work. He contends that punishment in the classical age was intended to illustrate the absolute power of the sovereign and that this was displayed through the ceremony of public torture. But Foucault also concedes that this ceremony often led to the solidarity of the masses with the convict, and to their revolt against the ceremony and the power of the sovereign.<sup>38</sup> Building on Benjamin’s notion of actuality by drawing out the “truth” immanent within this contradiction, we can re-contextualize this event. Rather than illustrating the power of the sovereign, the ceremony of public torture confirmed his ineptitude and powerlessness: the inscribing of the laws on the convicts body could only take place so long as the crowd allowed it. In dialectical fashion, things become their opposite: the powerless/slaves become the powerful/masters, and vice versa. It is this form of contradiction that Hegelian-Marxism has seen as the driving force of history.<sup>39</sup>

Foucault’s work would seem to allow for the characterization of such resistances as “illegalities” or perhaps “frictions,” but not as contradictions that rupture the very character of historical being. Indeed, we might query whether such an event—the inability of the ceremony of punishment to keep the masses in awe of the power of the sovereign, and to sever any solidarity with the convict—had a direct relation to the transformation to a new regime of punishment. Foucault fails to provide us with an answer, which has wider implications than this singular example. As Fredric Jameson has suggested, Foucault’s work generally fails to even attempt to conceptualize or represent moments of rupture; rather, “a general scheme is laid in place, namely that the old system breaks up, and among its ruins...a new system forms which has nothing to do with the predecessor. The latter does not figure in the former’s genealogy, nor is it in any way the agent of its destruction.”<sup>40</sup> While this critique may be correct, we might

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 460, 463, 473-478; Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 256, 262-263.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 460, 475.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 61-63.

<sup>39</sup> Alexandre Kojève’s rendering of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic is almost identical to this example.

<sup>40</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso Books, 2002), pp. 67-68.

query whether it is fair to rebuke Foucault for his failure to give an adequate causal account—causality, in its simplistic/teleological formulations, being one of the paradigms of orthodox history that Foucault is attempting to break free from. While we might pose a challenge to Foucault here, this is not the only medium through which we might theorize the potentiality of historical ruptures and transformation in Foucault's historical analysis.

Rather than making the simple assertion, in an a priori fashion, of some factor being the causal variable in historical change, we would be better served to ask: does Foucault's approach deny historical change and/or is he caught up in a discourse which preserves the present? As Michael Roth suggests, by no means is this the case, and Foucault's presentism is intrinsically caught up in a discourse about change.<sup>41</sup> Roth argues that, in rejecting the attempts of historians like Michelet to preserve the present by portraying the substance of the contemporary world (its forms of being, knowledge and experience) "to be essentially the same through time," Foucault's presentation of historical breaks aims to "negate the possibility of such preservation by exposing the gaps among the various types of experiencing and knowing the world."<sup>42</sup> The central intention here is to dislodge and disrupt the present as the singular modicum of all historical existence by highlighting the different forms that have existed through time, hence betraying the transitory character of existence itself and rejecting a concept of perennial similitude or present finitude.<sup>43</sup> As Foucault states of his historical project: "it disturbs what was previously thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."<sup>44</sup>

Now it should be remarked that such a historical trope is not new with Foucault. It was familiar to Benjamin through the work of Karl Korsch—one of the major reference points for *The Arcades Project*—on the principle of historical specification.<sup>45</sup> More particularly, and more productively as we will see below, it was familiar to Benjamin through his friendship with Bertolt Brecht, whose work on historical representation in the theatre influenced, and was influenced by, Benjamin. In attempting

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<sup>41</sup> I focus here on what I take to be Roth's more plausible reading of Foucault. Roth's weaker and less plausible argument is that Foucault's archaeology is founded on the premise that Foucault is "writing from the brink of a dramatic shift" or that Foucault has one foot in the present and another in the future. Michael Roth, "Foucault's 'History of the Present,'" *History and Theory* 20, no. 1 (1981): 43-44. These assertions directly contradict the Kantian stream in Foucault's thought which patently *rejects* the hitherto common idea of treating the present as "a point of transition toward the dawning of a new world." Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Roth, "Foucault's 'History of the Present,'" p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> Roth, "Foucault's 'History of the Present,'" pp. 43-44.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, cited in Roth, "Foucault's 'History of the Present,'" p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> See in particular the chapters on historical specification in Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1938).

to break free of the historicist consciousness that turns events and social structures into something self-evident, permanent and natural, Brecht introduced the Alienation-Effect into his theatre. The A-Effect attempts to dislodge, or alienate, events and social structures from naturalizing conceptions/associations by turning them into something extraordinary and “un-natural.” As Brecht states: “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”<sup>46</sup> There is something here of Marx’s dialectical deconstruction of the commodity. While the commodity is treated as “an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” Marx attempted to show that it is only under specific conditions of possibility that the commodity emerges as a central force in society.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Brecht seeks to shock the self-evident consciousness by detaching its associations and showing the conditions and possibilities of everyday existence and, hence, simultaneously the possibilities of its manipulation as a product of a specific mode of historical being.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Brecht aims to turn daily existence into a historical event—in the dual sense of a historically situated event and a historically transitory event. Against the historicist presentations of historical being and events as permanent and/or final, the A-Effect draws out the differences between the social structures of various epochs, showing them as singular and separable (hence not subject to mere “quantitative” transformation) monadic structures. By comprehending and representing all epochs as historically specific, the A-Effect ultimately alienates the present and shows it to be one of many possible modes of being.<sup>49</sup> Thus the entire effect of a static representation of historical being is upset: “The audience is no longer taking refuge from the present day in history; the present day becomes history.”<sup>50</sup>

But there is a larger point here than the simple question of whether or not Foucault’s historical account theorizes or allows for change, and this brings us to the issue of the relationship between past and present, and it is from this more substantive position that Benjamin provides us with a critique of Foucault’s approach. Benjamin contends that past epochs—and the present one—have failed to achieve an internal/immanent actualization. Consequently, the absolute compartmentalization and detachment of historical moments has a complicity in asserting the end (or “ends”) of history by dismissing the failure to actualize past goals as a problem of “irrationality,” which has been remedied by the perfection of the present system. Benjamin seeks to resurrect these “irrational” moments to show the crisis of contemporary modes of

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<sup>46</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1964), pp. 191-192.

<sup>47</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), chap. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (London: Eyre Methuen Limited, 1978), pp. 76, 102-105; Brecht, “A Short Organum,” p. 191-192.

<sup>49</sup> Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, pp. 36-37, 43; Brecht, “A Short Organum,” pp. 176, 190; Brecht, “Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>50</sup> Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 76.

existence that seek to suppress transformative potential by writing the lost struggles of the oppressed out of history. While “historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past,” the goal of Benjamin’s historical approach is to break open the continuum of history and explode the possibilities contained in each moment: to explode “the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins.”<sup>51</sup> These ruins are constituted by the resurrection of the historical exclusions—both the events that are suppressed, and the historical experiences and knowledge forms which produced these events—that deny the failed revolutionary moments of the past a place in the self-aggrandizing present. Foucault’s own focus on the historical exclusions and repressions of deviance speaks to the failure of each system’s goals, which must be achieved through suppression. But he treats these irregularities/frictions as merely momentary disruptions, which the reigning discourse or episteme’s growth and consecration would act to suppress (or, in keeping with Foucault’s “productive” definition of power/discourse, would produce as components of the discourse/episteme). Thus, while breaking the continuity and progressivism of traditional history, Foucault has reproduced a reified break between past and present: in turning to the past, Foucault aims to draw out a genealogy of the present, which finds the descent and emergence of the technologies of power/subjectivization that existed during, but outside of, previous epochs and were consecrated/victorious in the present.<sup>52</sup> Thus, regardless of his incorporation of a conception of change or resistance into his history of the present, through theorizing a complete break between past and present, Foucault partakes in the historical forgetting—that is, the repulsion of the past as a bygone era unconnected (even non-linearly) to the present—that permeates traditional historiography.

In defending this critique there is a wrinkle to be added, one which I hope will help draw out more clearly Benjamin’s position. Both Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek argue that Foucault posits a break between the modern and pre-modern, but does so to romanticize the pre-modern as an era *before* the rise of certain mechanisms of power. As Butler argues, this break produces “the pre-modern as the imaginary of the modern, as it were, the site of a lost pleasure,” implying that the “pre-modern will return to us as the postmodern, the break-up of the current regime, the proleptic return of a prior and lost happiness.”<sup>53</sup> On this reading, Foucault conceives of a bygone era—“before the fall”—which represents the direction/blueprint for a utopian future.<sup>54</sup> Aside from this argument’s tendency to iron over the more complex variation Foucault presents in representing the pre-modern, this characterization confirms the critiques leveled thus

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<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 474.

<sup>52</sup> On Foucault’s presentism, see Megill, “Foucault, Structuralism and the Ends of History,” pp. 492-498.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, “Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999): 16.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, “Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures,” pp. 15-17; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 251-252.

far. For, on the one hand, it includes the reification of a past moment as one in which there was a self-realization or an achieved rationality that would consequently deny the possibility of a contradictory and exclusionary character of that historical moment, confirming Benjamin's account of the historical writing of the victors. And, on the other hand, in valorizing the singular moment of an emancipated Antiquity,<sup>55</sup> Foucault subjects what has taken place between Antiquity and the present to a historical forgetting: outside of this singular moment of romanticized self-realization, the past is a dead and meaningless entity unconnected to the present. Roth portrays this as Foucault's attempt to break through the strangle-hold history has on the present, in order to open up the future.<sup>56</sup> But, if we return to Benjamin, what we find is that Foucault's break with the past repels not the function of the historicism which aggrandizes the present, but also the very history that this self-aggrandizing present attempts to forget.

Indeed, against the Foucaultian exclusion of the past, Benjamin suggests that bringing the exclusions/contradictions of previous historical moments to light will break the continuum of history and open up historical possibilities.<sup>57</sup> For, if the past possesses a critical content, if it holds the secret to the betrayal of progress and liberation, and if the unfree world perpetuates itself through repelling this past and maintaining a high-fallutin' dream about itself, then the prospect for breaking this containment exists in the social awakening of historical forces: the past and the present—or a past-present—collide, creating a dialectical relationship that explodes the social possibilities. But is this itself simply a restatement of the romanticization of a mythical past? For Benjamin there is no pre-modern moment of self-realization, and history itself is the continued catastrophe of failed attempts at such a self-realizing emancipatory project.<sup>58</sup> His attempt to resurrect the past is not an attempt to “return” to it, but to revive the dead struggles that have challenged the dominant historical narratives and bring the present into crisis. But even this is not the resurrection of an unsullied past. Here, the notion of a dialectical relationship is key for Benjamin, and specifically militates against the principle of a mythical, eternal return.<sup>59</sup> As a dialectical relationship, the collision between past and present events is not based on an ever-present relationship, nor is it based on the recuperation of a pure past. In denying eternal/timeless truth and the “purity” of the gaze, Benjamin denies “that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past.”<sup>60</sup> Rather, Benjamin views the moment of historical collision as a dialectical one, in which two moments come together in a new constellation, and illuminate each other in the “now of

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<sup>55</sup> Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 251.

<sup>56</sup> Roth, “Foucault's ‘History of the Present,’” p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 462, 473-475; “Theses,” pp. 255-257, 261-262.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” p. 257.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 262.

recognizability”: each moment emerges with a new meaning that belongs solely to the moment of their interconnection and never emerges in the same way, or with the same meaning, again.<sup>61</sup>

If we refer back to Brecht, we may get a clearer picture of what Benjamin’s conceptualization entails. For both Brecht and Benjamin, the illustration of the transitory character of historical being is, as suggested above with specific reference to Foucault and Brecht, an indictment of the history of the present as itself merely a temporary configuration. But for Brecht and Benjamin this does not entail a rejection of the past, or the nostalgic longing for a primordial past. Rather, historical moments—including the present—act as monadic entities that interact, not through the retroactive or monocausal determinacy of the present, but through a mutual collision and interpenetration. Brecht incorporates this premise into the scene structure of his historical representations in the theatre. He suggests that “the scenes should...be played quite simply one after another...without taking account of what follows or even of the play’s overall sense.”<sup>62</sup> In this manner the scenes are presented as independent monads—or, as a series of self-contained historical moments—“so that the action progresses by jumps.”<sup>63</sup> By representing history as a montage of events and images unglued from our ordinary associations both in terms of temporality and causality, the moments do not seamlessly flow into one another, but are characterized by jumps and ruptures that break the flow of a simple teleological progression. This allows the events to be displaced from their imposed sequence: each individual scene is torn from its context. Without a necessarily (and necessary) linear thread tying together an entirely resolved plot, the contradictions, transformations and potentialities that are fulfilled or unfulfilled in given scenes can be related to other scenes and it can be seen that trajectories and relations were reversed or reinforced, and that things *could* have transpired other than the way that they did. Consequently, the scenes alienate one another: they become other than what they are in and of themselves, and as they would be in the context of a linear development.<sup>64</sup>

In this context, for Benjamin historical moments retain a monadic independence, but they collide and disrupt each other in instances of dialectical interpenetration that drastically upset the meaning of both moments. Rather than opening up a hidden past and drawing it into a “history of the present,” Benjamin argues that moments of historical awakening produce an entirely new relationship between the past and present that illuminates the *possibility* of a dialectical future. The past is never lost, or dead, but hangs in time waiting to be resurrected in such a dialectical collision that will ultimately unhinge the present. This poses a challenge to Foucault’s genealogy, which suggests that the present casts light on what has past, and thus the past only has meaning as a

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<sup>61</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 462-3, 470, 473; Benjamin, “Theses,” pp. 255, 262.

<sup>62</sup> Brecht, “A Short Organum,” p. 279.

<sup>63</sup> Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 104; Brecht, “A Short Organum,” pp. 278-279.

reflection of the present. Where he does attempt to recuperate the past, Foucault looks to Antiquity as a pre-distorted entity, but only at the expense of repelling the lost struggles that have occurred between then and now. Benjamin denies that there is a mythical past that can be recaptured. Indeed, the past itself can never be known outside of its dialectical relationship to the present. But this relationship is not permanently fixed, and Benjamin is quick to point out its fleeting nature: it “emerges suddenly, in a flash” but “in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.” Indeed, the goal is not to recognize history “the way it really was” but to seize hold of this image “at a moment of danger” and awaken “a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been.”<sup>65</sup> And the recognition of what has been must play an integral role in our understanding of what our present is. By refusing to herald “the dead to the table,”<sup>66</sup> history repels and forgets its own failures, even where it aims to herald change. For Benjamin, the historian must abide by the maxim: “Only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.”<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Michel Foucault’s work has posed a direct challenge to many of the accepted paradigms of historiography and the philosophy of history. Indeed, in the best traditions of *Entstehung*, he has attempted to wrest history away from tradition by endowing it with new meaning. In bringing the archaeological foundations of knowledge into the historical equation he has challenged the conceptualization of history and historical events as entities that are “always already there” and hence transparently visible to an observer. For Foucault, we always operate within a specific epistemological field which constrains and shapes our historical “gaze.” But with epistemic ruptures, this gaze is itself altered and consequently transforms that history which is visible to us. In writing these new histories, Foucault challenges the linear and singular search for origins which find their teleological fulfillment in the present. Instead, he seeks to write a history of the present by drawing out the de-centred and variable, descent and becoming that have shaped our “contemporary reality.” Ultimately, then, the Kantian and Nietzschean premises of Foucault’s work come together in rupturing the field of history and historical knowledge. However, the ominous and eminent shadow of Foucault appears to have obscured the no less cataclysmic contribution of other thinkers anchored in the same critical traditions and addressing the same critical problems. Indeed, the figure of Walter Benjamin has been peculiarly absent from the engagement with Foucault’s

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<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, pp. 462-3, 470, 473; Benjamin, “Theses,” pp. 255, 262.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 481.

<sup>67</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” p. 254.

work. But bringing Benjamin into dialogue with Foucault allows us to present a critique of Foucault's own errors and conformisms. In particular, Benjamin's thought challenges Foucault's conceptualization of a break between the past and the present. While Foucault's work in no way denies a conceptualization of the transformation of the present, his conceptualization of the past/present break reproduces the reified historical forgetting that has been characteristic of the historical approaches he attacks. Against this tendency, Benjamin aims to wrest history away from tradition in the services of a radical political project intent upon recuperating a suppressed past in order to bring the present into crisis. For Benjamin, this recuperation would not be a return to some primordial state of self-realized being, but the possibility of a dialectical future that would liberate both the past and the present from a closed history that seeks to exclude challenges to the dominant modes of historical experience and existence.