

Michel Foucault and the Rhythms of Time - Part 4

Monday 1 February 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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The Vertical Time of Modernity

The elaboration of a genealogy of ethics in the last years of Foucault's life led him to a philosophy of present and modernity. One of the objectives aimed by the use of genealogy, during the 1970s, was to make a "history of present." Foucault understood these terms in a very different way than did the historians, who, following Pierre Nora, began to use them concurrently [1]. According to him, it was not a matter of making the history of the most contemporary period, insisting on the acceleration of history and on the reevaluation of the "event." Rather, it was a question of reversing our naïve understanding of the present by a circle going through a diagnosis of the current condition of our societies, based on the identification of their "political body technologies" (1975, trans. 1977, p. 35), and the genealogy of the latter which confirmed their hidden significance. The question was to understand correctly what kind of world we are living in and the genealogy was used to overcome the apparently obvious facts on which we are resting [2]. *Discipline and Punish* aimed at showing, for example, starting from the problem of prison and from its genealogy, the large panel of technologies which were used to discipline the bodies in our modern societies. In *The History of the Sexuality I*, the confession, the psychoanalytic cure, were singled out as occasions for the elaboration of the technologies of the body experienced today everywhere and yet not known as such.

But this problematic of present had been transformed by the study of the building of moral subject. This view, according to which our action was a consequence of our correct knowledge of the present, had been replaced by the complementary view, tracing the roots of our actions back to our temporal condition of *being-present* itself. In one of his last texts, dedicated partly to Kant (as curiously his first one too), "What is Enlightenment?" (Foucault, 1984e/1994), Foucault no longer contemplated the present as a question of knowledge, but as a question of ethics, what he called "*une ontologie de l'actualité*." Asking himself about the meaning of what he was experiencing, the *Aufklärung*, noted Foucault, Kant no longer considered the present as one of those revolutions of the world in which the world is turning backwards (as did Plato in *The Statesman*), neither as an attempt to decipher in it the heralding signs of a forthcoming event (as did Augustine), nor as a point of transition towards the dawning of a new world (as did Vico) (Foucault, 1984e/1994, trans. 1984, p. 33). He was probably the first philosopher to try to understand what was the contemporary status [*actualité*] of his own enterprise, that is certainly still how the present was placed in the global movement of history, with its fundamental directions, but also how the individuals were responsible for this global process and its bifurcations.

It is in the reflection on "today" as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie. And, by looking at it in this

way, it seems to me we may recognize a point of departure: the outline of what one might call the attitude of modernity. ("What is Enlightenment?", 1984e/1994, trans. Catherine Porter, 1984, p. 38,)

We understand why the reflection on the present led Foucault to join the panel of thinkers who, having abandoned the criteria for action which were provided by the various historicisms, collided with the question of the ethics: Nietzsche, Weber, Sartre and the existentialist thinkers, Heidegger, Bataille, Benjamin, Derrida and the postmodern philosophers. And it is very interesting to see what kind of solution he proposed. If he rejected those such as Marx and Habermas, who thought that the modernity was the historical period in which universal emancipation was promised to mankind and that we just had to realize that not-yet-fulfilled-promise, he refused, on the other hand, to adopt the theme of postmodernity developed by some thinkers who saw, in Heidegger's wake, the modernity as an ordinary epoch of the history of being arriving to its end. Criticizing Lyotard, without naming him, he wrote:

I know that the modernity is often spoken of as an epoch, or at least as a set of features characteristic of an epoch; situated on a calendar, it would be preceded by a more or less naive or archaic premodernity, and followed by an enigmatic and troubling "postmodernity." [...] Thinking back on Kant's text, I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. ("What is Enlightenment?", 1984e/1994, trans. Catherine Porter, 1984, p. 39)

Against the flight of postmodern thinkers into a philosophy of language games, actually closer to Heidegger than to Wittgenstein, and against the relativism that threatens them, Foucault kept the criterion of modernity while giving to it a meaning other than the one it possessed in the modern humanist tradition [3]. According to him, modernity was above all an "attitude" whose early features he traced back not only to Kant, but also to Nietzsche, to the Greeks and to Baudelaire [4].

To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*. ("What is Enlightenment?", 1984e/1994, trans. Catherine Porter, 1984, p. 41)

Thus, for Foucault, modernity was not a historical period but the project, the task and the work of making of "his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art" (Foucault, 1984e/1994, trans. 1984, p. 41). It required us to oppose the hermeneutical way of subjectivation, that dominated our culture, and to adopt an attitude close to that of the Greeks.

This last idea presented by Foucault hasn't provoked fewer reactions than the preceding ones. Numerous voices have reproached him for following the flow of the individualism of the 1980s. After having been one of the most influential ideologists of Parisian leftism, he would have pulled back out of the fight for emancipation. He would have adopted the attitude of an aesthete, of a dandy, of a postmodern without postmodernity. He would have surfed on the hedonist and narcissistic wave,

which submerged the entire Occident during those years [5]. But here, once again, it seems that these objections go in the wrong direction [6].

First, Foucault was not unconscious of the risks of misinterpretation of an ethics, which wanted to be “an aesthetics of existence.” We know that very early on, he read and appreciated Christopher Lasch’s (1979) book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, one of the first studies on contemporary narcissism (whose beginning Lasch traced, besides, much before the 1980s) (Martin et al., 1988, p. 4).

Second, if “the practices of liberty,” which Foucault now referred to, were not practices of “liberation” or “emancipation,” it was not because these practices were not sometimes, indeed often, necessary, but because they were not sufficient by themselves and because their mottos were still greatly inspired by metaphysical humanist concerns (1984f/1994, p. 710). The practices of liberty could not use any transcendental criteria as guides, be they transcendental markers emerging gradually out of the historical actions, or a vanishing transcendence as in the phenomenology. They were condemned to permanently invent and spring up, as untimely verticals, perpendicular to the flow of history, in order to break through the walls of the passing time. In this morality, which was closer to Walter Benjamin’s than to Sartre’s, the present opened onto a multiplicity of forms of action in which authenticity had less worth than autonomy (1984c/1994, trans. 1984, p. 351).

Third, Foucault avoided a simple return of the transcendental subject or the glorification of the I, because he considered the ethical subject in a very new way, i.e. not hermeneutically, as asserted Dreyfus, Rabinow and Han, but from a “poetics” viewpoint. The analysis dedicated to Baudelaire escaped from the genealogy versus phenomenology dilemma and showed what very few philosophers or specialists in human sciences have been able to see [7]. Baudelaire invented, *from his own literary practice*, a conception of modernity which was not historicist or simply “aesthetic,” nor aimed at flattering the sensibility, nor defined by the Heideggerian experience of the *Sprache*. He saw that modernity was not, as contended numerous philosophers, historians and sociologists, a never satisfied will to break with the tradition and a sterile attraction for the new. That it was not even an epoch dominated by subjectivity or science. For Baudelaire, it was first of all an ethical attitude, an “*ethos*,” a twofold mode of existence: on the first hand, it was imagining the present different as it was, it was criticizing it intransigently and transforming it through “practices of liberty” (Foucault, 1984e/1994, trans. 1984, p. 41); on the other hand, it was looking very carefully at it, and attempting “to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history” (Baudelaire, 1976, p. 693), that is to say, it was looking for something lasting and transmissible.

For him, being modern does not lie in recognizing and accepting this perpetual movement; on the contrary, it lies in adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement; and this deliberate, difficult attitude consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, within it. (“What is Enlightenment?”, 1984e/1994, trans. Catherine Porter, 1984, p. 39)

Thus this ethics of modernity blasted the individualist opposition between individual and society, between the I and the Other, between future and present, present and past. Indeed the literature necessarily escaped out of the biographic framework and addressed potentially everybody. In this new meaning, as Rimbaud would say “*Je est un autre* – I is an other,” the subject a *transsubject* and

the present a *transpresent*.

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The reader can now realize the importance of Foucault's contribution to the rhythmological turn that was taking shape in the 1970s. On the one hand, if *Discipline and Punish* did not explicitly thematize the concept of rhythm, it resolutely embraced the questions raised by the changes in the rhythmic organization of life implied by the development of modern prisons, schools, armies, hospitals and factories in the democratic and capitalist era. In short, this book provided the first detailed *rhythmanalysis* of Modern Times. On the other hand, his constant interest in the philosophical question of time and the richness of his historical documentation allowed him to propose, from book to book, a completely original conception of temporality which called into question the main views available in his time. This time, without explaining it either, he greatly contributed to *rhythmology*.

1. Thanks to the development of the archaeological and genealogical methods, Foucault first got rid of both the philosophies of history developed during the 19th century and of the main philosophies of historicity that contested them subsequently. The former as well as the latter tried to face the challenge of the "original" and of the radical historicity of thought, but they all tripped on the difficulty, whether by anthropocentrism or by lack of radicalism in the critique.

1.1 Some adopted a naïve solution reducing time to an objective flow or to an eschatology (positivism, Hegelianisms).

1.2 Some others looked for, in "actual experience" or in "existence," a finer solution, but they couldn't escape from their oscillations between an ontology of life and a transcendental conception of time (Husserlian and existentialist phenomenology).

2. Some critics, as we have seen, considered that this critical endeavor led Foucault to adopt, at the end of his life, a perspective very close to that of one or the other of his predecessors.

2.1 For some, he would have finally endorsed a perspective almost similar to the Heideggerian hermeneutics (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Ijsseling, 1986; Dreyfus, 1989). Having learnt a lesson from "the failure of the attempt to supersede the phenomenology by the archaeology," Foucault would have then reached a superior degree of understanding of the question of time and would have adopted solutions close to the ones proposed by Heidegger. The Foucauldian concept of power would thus be equivalent to the concept of being as time elaborated by his predecessor. It would institute the "*Lichtung*" from which the objects and the actions would spread out. Thus the genealogy of power would be parallel to the Heideggerian history of being. It would allow a history of truth to be made, whose phases would be close to those identified by Heidegger, and to associate each one of these phases with a particular definition of the essence of man, analyzed by Foucault as form of subjectivation.

2.2 Other critics, while seeing some common points between the two thinkers, have challenged this interpretation and have read in the late Foucault a return to the Sartrean subject, reflexivity and

metaphysics of liberty, which would herald, this time, the “failure” of his entire work. Far from getting closer to Heidegger, Foucault would have missed both the deepening of his own Nietzscheanism and the adoption of a hermeneutical ontology towards which, it seemed, he was pointing (Han, 1998).

3. As far as I am concerned, I think, on the contrary, that the Foucauldian conception of time did not find its truth and meaning, be it positively or negatively, in any of his predecessors.

3.1 Foucault did not return at the end of his life, as Han claimed through a not always precise reading of the texts, to the classical conscious, reflective and auto-instituted subject. He proposed a real history of subjectivation processes, without postulating a transhistorical subjective entity. He fully historicized the subject, the body and the truth.

3.2 On the other hand, he was far from explaining this history, as Dreyfus and Ijsseling said, as a result of the “sending of the being,” of an erratic history of truth in time, which man would only passively receive and of whose actions he would be the result. Foucault certainly proposed to historicize the concept of man, to dissolve any transcendental principle through genealogy and archaeology, but this did not lead him, in contrast to Heidegger, to abandon the notion of human liberty for the only liberty of the being. What he suggested was a convincing alternative to the temporal mystics to which the Heideggerian interpretation of the radical historicity of thought finally reached [8].

4. Actually, Foucault drew out from Nietzsche’s undertaking very different conclusions than did Heidegger. That is why his entire work since the 1970s implied a virulent critique of the Heideggerian ontological conception and sketched the outlines of a new theory of time and history that we may legitimately call rhythmological.

4.1 In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger, who still remained under the influence of the Husserlian program, affirmed that time was “the transcendental horizon of any understanding of the being, generally speaking,” i.e. the archcondition of possibility of any knowledge and of any practice, since precisely it was the essential aspect of the one being who understands, the *Dasein*. Subsequently, while criticizing the rests of anthropological presuppositions which still marked this conception, breaking definitively with Husserl, he radicalized this description of the essence of being and argued that time must not be defined from the *Dasein*, but the *Dasein* from time. Thus, time would be the place for an erratic veiling and unveiling of being, which wouldn’t depend at all on Man, and which would, on the contrary, impose its mutations on him. Our condition of temporal beings wouldn’t leave any other choice to us than to try to listen to what would come from the being to us, especially, Heidegger added in the last part of his life, through “language” [*Sprache*].

4.2 To these arguments, Foucault replied that if time could not indeed be conceived phenomenologically as a mere transcendental and immutable condition of possibility of any human knowledge and practice, he could not either be thought of ontologically as a horizon of a multiple and erratic spreading of the original essence of truth, which would be independent of the human beings and their fights. The very idea of an “original,” constantly setting back, such as the one described through the figure of “the ontological difference,” or the idea of a primordial opening which would allow all openings by its very obscurity, badly masked the will and the moral

perspectives which motivated them successively.

4.3 Behind the radically and willingly “destructive” concept of a disappearing *arche*, we could perceive Heidegger’s revolutionary desires, experienced very concretely between the two wars, whether on the ethical level (against Judaism, Christianity and humanism) or on the political level (against democracy, capitalism and bolshevism). Destroying metaphysics was actually to participate in the destruction of the world which was supposed to be founded on it.

4.4 Similarly, the language-based reinterpretation of the relation between being and time proposed by Heidegger after WW2—which actually took into account only *la langue* and totally ignored the activity of language—did not completely hide the new moral and political viewpoint adopted by the philosopher after the failure of his former political commitment. Thus, the idea that “only the language speaks” [*nur die Sprache spricht*] and that man says and understands in history only the aspects of the being that the language—in the sense of *la langue*—uncovers for him, this idea was linked to his search of *Gelassenheit*, i.e. interior serenity, mystical wait of the coming of the word, retreat and passivity regarding history.

4.5 Thus, the ontology of time, even in the very particular meaning Heidegger gave finally to that term, was nothing but a viewpoint about time. The latter, as well as the being, was actually always interpreted, constituted by the perspective and the force which applied to it. It only received form and meaning from the various moral perspectives, which solicited it in the midst of the current struggles [9].

5. Therefore, time could be conceived in multiple ways, or better yet, as multiple rhythms or ways of flowing, which corresponded each time to a position in an existing conflict, as shown by the various complaints Foucault had to face each time he changed his conception of time.

5.1 For example, time could be seen as a stratified flow composed of temporalities proceeding at various speed, as a string of immobile blocks separated by swift breaks, as a succession of exploding events, as a series of sequences progressing in spirals, as an oriented length of time following another length of time subjected to a slow systemic drift, or as a present which raises vertically its practices of liberty. Time had changing faces according to the objects whose transformation it measured (dividing practices of reason, rules of knowledge generation, apparatus of power-knowledge disciplining the bodies, productions of moral subjects), but these objects were themselves chosen accordingly to moral and political projects.

5.2 That is why, our radical historicity and the critique of the anthropological illusion which it implied, did not indicate that we have to imprison ourselves in the only erratic and mysterious temporality of the *Sprache* and adopt an attitude of retreat and of quasi-mystical waiting. On the contrary, our historicity opened up infinite possibilities for us to “interpret” time—in all senses of the word—that is to say to give it a certain rhythm or a certain way of flowing, and therefore to develop as many “practices of freedom.” This was, in my opinion, one of the most important rhythmological results obtained by Foucault.

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Footnotes

[1] On the “history of present” according to the historians, see Nora (1978). For Foucault, see “The history of present and the interpretative analytic” in Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982).

[2] In an interview given in 1977 in the aftermath of the publication of *The History of the Sexuality I*, the question of what we are in our *present [actualité]* is presented as the question of a correct analysis of what we are living (1977/1994, trans. 1988, p. 121).

[3] For a historical and conceptual distinction of the “modernity” and the “modern” see (Michon, 1999).

[4] This interpretation of Kant, which could seem strange to some readers, follows the lines of the interpretation of Nietzsche as hyper-Kantian explained above.

[5] See, for example, the question asked by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1984c/1994, trans. 1984, p. 350), (Ferry and Renaut, 1985 and 1987), (Hadot, 1989, p. 267).

[6] Except those of Pierre Hadot, who reads Foucault all at once with sympathy and without leniency (Michon, 2002).

[7] As far as we know, Henri Meschonnic is the only one thinker, with Foucault, to give their full significance to Baudelaire’s intuitions of the necessity to reconceptualize the concepts of modernity and present from the viewpoint of the poetics (Meschonnic, 1988/1993).

[8] For a critique of the Heideggerian conception of time and history, see (Michon, 2000).

[9] See Leonardo Daddabbo’s book (1999) dedicated to the question of time in Foucault. Daddabbo explained the diversity of Foucault’s conceptions by the project of “thinking the time through the body.” It was an interesting hypothesis, which should be discussed seriously, and I regret of not having been able to do it here.