

“PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ETHNOLOGY” REVISITED:
FOUCAULT’S HISTORICIZATION OF HISTORY

AMY ALLEN

ABSTRACT: This article re-examines the closing sections of Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* in order to address the longstanding question of whether he is best understood as a philosopher or a historian. My central argument is that this question misses the crucial point of Foucault’s work, which is to historicize the notion of history (as it is traditionally understood, represented by History with a capital H), which Foucault takes to be central to the historical *a priori* of modernity. An examination of his historicization of History thus reveals that Foucault is neither simply a philosopher—because he conceives of philosophy in modernity as a historical enterprise—nor a historian—because his own historical approach is designed to transform the modern historical *a priori* from within. This analysis also sheds new light of Foucault’s relationship to psychoanalysis and his conception of critique.

Was Foucault a historian or a philosopher? This question has had a surprisingly long life in the scholarly reception of Foucault’s work. Indeed, Clare O’Farrell argues—in her 1989 book, entitled, appropriately enough, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?*¹—that this question structured much of the initial reception of Foucault’s work in both French- and English-speaking contexts, albeit in different ways. For some, the suggestion that Foucault was a historian rather than a philosopher sounds like a dismissal of his work as dilettantish or not serious (the judgment “not really philosophy,” when uttered by a philosopher, usually being intended as an insult); for this reason, they have worked hard to position and claim him as a philosopher. Thus, for example,

Amy Allen is Liberal Arts Professor of Philosophy and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on continental (European) philosophy, critical social theory, and feminist theory. She is the author of three books, the most recent of which is *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹ Clare O’Farrell, *Foucault: Historian or Philosopher?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

the first large Foucault conference organized in Paris, in 1988, was given the title “Michel Foucault Philosopher” by its pro-Foucault organizers.² On the flip side, although professional historians have been sharply critical of Foucault’s work qua historical scholarship, his early work was clearly indebted to and in conversation with French history of science and the Annales School, and at least one eminent French historian proclaimed Foucault to have revolutionized history.³ More recently, this question—is Foucault a historian or a philosopher?—has been resuscitated in a spirited debate between two well-respected Foucault scholars (both, as it happens, philosophers): Gary Gutting and Béatrice Han-Pile.⁴ Gutting argues that Foucault is “not a philosopher in the modern sense” and that his works are “essentially historical,” while Han-Pile insists that Foucault’s work should be understood as an attempt “to historicize the transcendental, and thus to bring a nontraditional answer to one of the most traditional [philosophical] questions of all, that of the conditions of possibility of knowledge.”⁵

Now, it seems to me that what makes this debate so difficult to resolve is not just that there is ample textual evidence from Foucault’s oeuvre on both sides of this question.⁶ What really makes the debate over whether Foucault was a historian or a philosopher so intractable is that it is framed in such a way as to miss what I take to be the central point of Foucault’s work—a point that is particularly salient in his early, archaeological work, but that, I would

² See Béatrice Han-Pile, “Is early Foucault a historian? History, history and the analytic of finitude,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31, no. 5–6 (2005): 585–608, at p. 586. The papers from the 1988 Foucault conference were published in the volume *Michel Foucault Philosopher* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

³ See Paul Veyne, “Foucault Revolutionizes History,” in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁴ See Gary Gutting, review of Béatrice Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, May 1, 2003, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1262>. Han-Pile’s reply to Gutting’s review is posted online under the title “Reply to Gary Gutting” at: http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~beatrice/Gutting%20answer_%202003-05.pdf. Subsequent discussions of this issue can be found in Gutting, “Foucault, Hegel and Philosophy” and Han-Pile, “Is early Foucault a historian?” in *Foucault and Philosophy*, ed. Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁵ Gutting, “Foucault, Hegel and Philosophy,” 34, 31; Han-Pile, “Reply to Gary Gutting,” 3.

⁶ So, for example, as evidence in favor of his reading, Gutting can cite Foucault’s deliberate situating of himself as a historian in the 1967 interview “On the Ways of Writing History,” while Han-Pile can (and does) point to an interview from the mid-1970s in which Foucault says, “for all that I may like to say that I’m not a philosopher, nonetheless if my concern is with truth then I am still a philosopher.” See Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 279–95; and “Questions on Geography,” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 66. (Cited in Han-Pile, “Reply to Gary Gutting,” 2).

argue, remains salient throughout his *oeuvre*—which is, precisely, to articulate *not only* the historicity of philosophy (in that sense, he is a philosopher, but perhaps not a “modern” one) *but also* the historicity of History (in that sense, he is a historian, but, as we will see, not a Historian). The former aim Foucault shares with Hegel, but the latter represents both his attempt to break with Hegel and, I think, one of his most significant contributions to contemporary critical theory.

Anyone familiar with the path that Hegel took away from Kant will be able to make some sense of what is meant by talk of the historicity of philosophy.⁷ Moreover, this aspect of Foucault's work—the way in which his work constitutes a sustained reflection on historically specific conditions of possibility of thought, subjectivity, experience, and agency, on what he referred to early on in his career as the historical *a priori* and later as historical ontology—has been drawn out by recent Foucault scholarship, which has re-examined his relationship to Kant.⁸ This scholarship emphasizes the ways in which Foucault both takes up and transforms from within the Kantian notion of critical philosophy, precisely by historicizing its central categories. But what sense are we to make of the historicity of History? What does it mean to say that Foucault's most significant contribution to contemporary critical theory is his historicization of History? This is a complex question, but, as a first approximation, one can say that it involves his reflexive historicization of a certain conception of History where history is understood as continuous, dialectical, and, above all, progressive—what he refers to as the philosophical myth of history, or, simply, History with a capital H. Foucault takes History in this sense to be constitutive, along with the anthropological conception of man with which it is closely bound up, of modernity. His historicization of History also involves an attempt to break out of this conception of history—and its attendant humanism—*using historical means*, that is, by radically transforming that conception from within.

In this paper, I attempt to make this initial response more precise by closely examining the closing sections of *The Order of Things*: “History” and “Psychoanalysis and Ethnology.” My argument is that these sections reveal that Foucault's aims in his archaeological work go significantly beyond the kind of historicization of the transcendental that has been emphasized in

⁷ For an insightful explanation of this aspect of Hegel's work, see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 1.

⁸ See, for example, Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

scholarship on the Foucault-Kant connection (though this is no doubt an important part of the story).⁹ Foucault's early work has the more radical aim of historicizing History, through a notion of the historical *a priori* that doubles back on itself and becomes what I call the Historical historical *a priori*, that is, a historical *a priori* that is ordered by History, just as the classical historical *a priori* is organized around Representation. The aim of Foucault's historicization of History is to break open and transform this historical *a priori* from within, which is to say, using historical means. Returning to these closing sections of *The Order of Things* can thus help us to reframe the long running debate about Foucault's relationship to history. It can also, or so I will suggest, help us to reframe Foucault's much debated relationship to psychoanalysis. The key here is the distinction, briefly alluded to in the Foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things*, between the negative and positive unconscious of knowledge. Excavating this distinction and the work that it does in relation the historical *a priori* not only complicates assessments of Foucault's relationship to Lacanian psychoanalysis, it also sheds important light on Foucault's own historico-philosophical method. In the final section of this paper, I will draw together these methodological implications and connect them to the conception of critique that is operative in Foucault's work, if (at least at this point in the development of his thought) only largely implicitly.

1. HISTORY

One of the (very many) confusing things about the argument of *The Order of Things* has to do with how Foucault characterizes the modernity that he claims begins around 1790 with Kantian critical philosophy and continues until 1950, when it looks as if it is starting to break up and transform into something else, though this transformation is not yet complete and Foucault's discussions of it are thus cautious and tentative. He initially characterizes modernity, at the opening of the chapter on the Limits of Representation, as "The Age of History." But later, in the much discussed ninth chapter on "Man and his Doubles," he describes modernity as the age of man, that is, as the age of humanistic anthropology. Although there are clues here and there, it is only at the end of the text, in the short section on History, that it becomes clear how these two descriptions of modernity hang together.

As all readers of the early Foucault will know, the break between the classical age and modernity is marked by a discontinuity. Whereas for the

⁹ Thus, contra Han-Pile, my argument is that Foucault's aim is not best understood as "an attempt to renew transcendental philosophy" or to "rescue the transcendental from the doubles of man and . . . to reinterpret it in his own manner" (Han-Pile, "Reply to Gutting," 4, 5).

classical age knowledge was organized around identities and differences, general taxonomies, and universal characterizations, in a relatively short time, knowledge re-organized itself around temporal series, organic structures, and functional totalities. As Foucault argues in the opening section of the chapter on the limits of representation, entitled "The Age of History," through this transformation, History became "the mode of being of all that is given us in experience, . . . the unavoidable element in our thought."¹⁰ History in this sense is obviously "not to be understood as the compilation of factual successions or sequences as they may have occurred": it is, rather, "the fundamental mode of being of empiricities. . . ." (OT, 219). In other words, for the nineteenth century, History constitutes objects of knowledge and sets the conditions under which they can be known. As a result, Foucault notes that, in the nineteenth century, philosophy is continually and necessarily drawn back "to the question of knowing what it means for thought to have a history. This question was to bear down upon philosophy, heavily and tirelessly, from Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond" (OT, 219–20).

Moreover, tempting though it may be to read this transformation from Order to History as the result of a rational learning process, Foucault insists that "though we may indeed talk of prehistory from the point of view of the rationality of learning, from the point of view of positivities we can speak, quite simply, of history" (OT, 220). In other words, from the point of view of archaeology, we cannot understand the transition from Order to History as an increase in rationality or objectivity, or as the result of a historical learning process. The reason for this is that the very temptation to understand history as a rational learning process is itself a function of having undergone that transformation, that is, it is a function of inhabiting the modern historical *a priori*, a historical *a priori* that is structured by History. Thus, to understand history as a rational learning process would be to presuppose not only the victory but also the right to a victory of the very modernity that gave rise to the notion of historical learning processes in the first place.¹¹ Archaeology, by contrast, understands the transition from Order to History not as a cumulative progression but rather as an event: "this event, probably because we are still caught inside it, is largely beyond our comprehension . . . [it] could be appraised and measured only after a quasi-infinite investigation

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 219. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as OT.

¹¹ Here I am paraphrasing a well-known line from Foucault's Preface to the *History of Madness*: "We must therefore speak of this primitive debate without supposing a victory, or the right to a victory." (Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa [New York: Routledge, 2006], xxviii.)

concerned with nothing more nor less than the very being of our modernity” (OT, 221).

In other words, the temptation to read history in terms of notions of development, progress, and learning is itself a function of History, one of the basic structuring categories of the modern historical *a priori*. Archaeology attempts to excavate the modern historical *a priori*, a historical *a priori* which is both historical and Historical: that is, like all historical *a priori*, it specifies the historically specific conditions of possibility for knowledge that hold sway in a given episteme; but unlike other historical *a priori*, the modern one is structured through and through by History, by a particular kind of historical self-understanding. And yet, archaeology speaks, as Foucault says in the passage quoted above, “quite simply, of history.” Archaeology thus has a peculiar and doubled relationship to history: it reveals the modern historical *a priori* as both historical and Historical. In so doing, archaeology historicizes the very notion of History that makes archaeology possible but that archaeology simultaneously attempts to undo or break open from within.

In light of this complex relationship between archaeology and history, we should expect that history would have a unique place in Foucault’s account of the human sciences in the last chapter of *The Order of Things*, and this is indeed the case. In the penultimate section of chapter 10, Foucault offers us a “history of History” (OT, 370) according to which history is “the first and as it were the mother of all the sciences of man” (OT, 367). Although history per se is of course not unique to modernity—the Greeks wrote history, and the science of natural history is central to Foucault’s account of the classical age—Foucault claims that modernity discovered something new, namely, “a historicity linked essentially to man himself” (OT, 369). From this point of view, history “now concerns man’s very being, since he now realizes that he not only ‘has history’ all around him, but is himself, in his own historicity, that by means of which a history of human life, a history of economics, and a history of languages are given their form. In which case, at a very deep level, there exists a historicity of man which is itself its own history but also the radical dispersion that provides a foundation for all other histories” (OT, 370). And it is in this context that Foucault states reasonably clearly, though almost in passing, the link between man and History: historical man is living, working, and speaking man, and the human being “has become historical, through and through” (OT, 370). He underlines the point a bit more emphatically a few years later in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject. . . . Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical

development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought."¹²

History is, thus, the flip side of the strange empirico-transcendental doublet that is man (see OT, 250). We should not be surprised, then, to find History, too, toggling back and forth between the empirical and the transcendental. As Foucault puts it: "The more History attempts to transcend its own rootedness in historicity . . . the more clearly it bears the marks of its historical birth. . . ; inversely, the more it accepts its relativity . . . then the more it tends to the slenderness of the narrative, and all the positive content it obtained for itself through the human sciences is dissipated" (OT, 371). Precisely because it is so intimately bound up with the notion of man that is at the heart of the human sciences, History is, for the human sciences, "both privileged and dangerous" (OT, 371). Interestingly, we might say the same for Foucault himself: history clearly holds a privileged place in his own archaeological method, but given the centrality of History and its attendant notion of man to the modern historical *a priori* that Foucault aims to historicize and critique, it is dangerous as well. History is the ground that forms the conditions of possibility for thought in modernity—and thus for Foucault's thought as well—and yet it is unstable ground, already starting to shift underneath his, and our, feet.

How, then, should we understand Foucault's relationship to history? Han-Pile is, I think, half right when she argues that the answer to this question lies in Foucault's attempt to do history without anthropology, that is, without reference to man. As she puts it:

Archaeology has a meta-critical function towards the analytic of finitude. . . : it is meant to awaken us from our 'anthropological sleep' by showing that there is no absolute need to correlate the various historical *a priori* with the figure of Man. . . . Archaeology is thus designed as a way to keep the idea of a transcendental critique alive by historicizing it while invalidating its anthropocentric premises and conclusions.¹³

Han-Pile is undoubtedly right that Foucault aims to do history without Man, but she does not, in my view, push the point quite far enough. Since Man and History are so deeply intertwined (as Han-Pile herself argues), one cannot do history without Man without also, in some sense, doing history without History. And this, in turn, requires more than just invalidating the anthropocentric premises and conclusions of transcendental critique by historicizing the transcendental, which is what Han-Pile emphasizes in her

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 12.

¹³ Han-Pile, "Is early Foucault a historian?," 604.

account. It also requires historicizing the very notion of History that forms the ground or conditions of possibility for Foucault's own historical project.

Foucault claims that the goal of archaeology is to traverse

the destiny or slope of modern thought in order to reach at last the point where it could turn back: this clarity of our day, still pale but perhaps decisive, that enables us, if not to avoid entirely, at least to dominate by fragments, and to master to some extent what, from that thought formed on the threshold of the modern age, still reaches us, invests us, and serves as a continuous ground for our discourse. (OT, 250)

Similarly, my argument is that his own historical method can be best understood as a turning back of modern thought upon itself, a historicization of History that fragments the very ground of our discourse, our Historical historical *a priori*. As Foucault notes with not a little irony, this way of doing history will seem radical only to those philosophers who remain stubbornly committed to the philosophical myth of History. As for historians, they have "long ago deserted the old fortress and gone to work elsewhere."¹⁴

2. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ETHNOLOGY

Given the centrality of Foucault's historicization of History to my reading of his early work, it would be convenient for me if *The Order of Things* ended there, with Foucault's discussion of History as the privileged yet dangerous and unstable ground for both the human sciences and his own historical practice. Unfortunately, the text does not end there. Rather, it ends with a chapter entitled "Psychoanalysis and Ethnology," in which Foucault presents Lacanian psychoanalysis and Levi-Straussian ethnology as "countersciences" that "occupy a privileged position in our knowledge" (OT, 373) insofar as they are able to "disturb from within the entire domain of the sciences of man" (OT, 376). These two countersciences, Foucault claims, "form an undoubted and inexhaustible treasure-hoard of experiences and concepts, and above all a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established" (OT, 373). In other words, psychoanalysis and ethnology perform a critical function vis-à-vis the human sciences and, thus, vis-à-vis the modern historical *a priori* that makes them (the human sciences, including psychoanalysis and ethnology) possible.

As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, this critical function has to do with the relation to the unconscious. Whereas the human sciences "advance

¹⁴ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 14.

towards the unconscious only with their back to it," psychoanalysis "points directly towards it, with a deliberate purpose" (OT, 374). Psychoanalysis thus "moves towards the moment . . . at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather, stand gaping, upon man's finitude" (OT, 374). Foucault argues that the figures of Death, Desire, and the Law in Lacanian psychoanalysis represent the unconscious conditions of possibility for the discourses of life, labor, and language that he so painstakingly excavates throughout *The Order of Things*. In the free reign of Desire, Death, and language (without signification), we recognize madness "as it is posited in the modern experience, as its truth and its alterity" (375). This recognition brings us face to face with "the finitude upon the basis of which we are, and think, and know" (OT, 375). In other words, it brings us face to face with the limits of our system of thought, our historical *a priori*, by giving us an image of "an existence at once real and impossible, thought that we cannot think, an object for our knowledge that always eludes it" (OT, 375). Psychoanalysis thus "recognizes itself when it is confronted with those very psychoses which nevertheless (or rather, for that very reason) it has scarcely any means of reaching" (OT, 376).

Ethnology's critical function is initially presented as having to do with historicity. Even though ethnology seems to have little to do with history—because it is "traditionally the knowledge we have of peoples without histories" (OT, 376)¹⁵—it is only possible on the basis of a modern conception of historicity: "ethnology has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture, even more to its fundamental relation with the whole of history, and enables it to link itself to other cultures in a mode of pure theory" (OT, 377). This does not mean "that the colonizing situation is indispensable to ethnology" but it does mean that "ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty—always restrained, but always present—of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself" (OT, 377). Moreover, ethnology is grounded in historicity without falling into historicism; ethnology finds a way around the danger of historicism "by inverting the movement that gave rise to it" (OT, 377). In its mode of questioning, ethnology reverses the problem of history; it attempts to determine, according to the rules and systems of a culture, what modes of history (circular, cumulative, or crisis ridden) are possible for that culture (OT, 377–78).

¹⁵ The fact that Foucault quotes this noxious judgment without comment is certainly problematic and puzzling, as are some of his comments mentioned below about the relationship between ethnology and colonialism. For an insightful analysis, see Robert J. C. Young, "Foucault on Race and Colonialism," *New Formations* 25 (1995): 57–65.

What links ethnology and psychoanalysis and gives them their critical potential, on Foucault's account, is not their ability to question man or to offer a general theory of human nature. As Foucault puts it: "Not only are they able to do without the concept of man, they are also unable to pass through it, for they always address themselves to that which constitutes his outer limits" (OT, 379). As countersciences, psychoanalysis and ethnology "ceaselessly 'unmake' that very man who is creating and re-creating his positivity in the human sciences" (OT, 379). They limn the edges of the modern historical *a priori* that makes possible knowledge of man and the human sciences in the first place, tracing the limits of our system of thought by studying the exclusions on which it is predicated. Psychoanalysis does this by revealing the "concrete figures of finitude" of Death, Desire, and the Law, while ethnology "is situated within the particular relation that the Western ratio establishes with all other cultures" (OT, 378). In this sense, it turns out that both psychoanalysis and ethnology are sciences of the unconscious: "they are directed towards that which, outside man, makes it possible to know, with a positive knowledge, that which is given to or eludes his consciousness" (OT, 378).

Here we find a perhaps surprising reference to a core psychoanalytic concept—that of the unconscious—to describe Foucault's own archaeological project. After all, archaeology, too, aims to uncover that which makes it possible to know whatever is given to or eludes the consciousness of man. In that sense, archaeology is, like psychoanalysis and ethnology, a science of the unconscious. This reading is confirmed by a brief passage in the 1970 Foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things*, in which Foucault describes his archaeological approach as aiming to reveal a "positive unconscious of knowledge" (OT, xi). Foucault contrasts this with a more typical approach to the history of ideas, which aims to describe not only the products of scientific consciousness but also "the negative side of science," whatever "resists it, deflects it, or disturbs it," the implicit assumptions, elusive influences, and unseen obstacles that elude scientific consciousness (OT, xi). By contrast, Foucault's archaeology aims to reveal the positive unconscious of knowledge, the "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" (OT, xi). In other words, the positive unconscious refers to the historically *a priori* conditions of possibility for thought in a given episteme.

This reference is surprising, perhaps, because it is starkly at odds with how the relationship between Foucault and psychoanalysis is typically framed, which is in largely oppositional terms. For example, in a recent paper, Lynne Huffer argues that Foucauldian and psychoanalytic perspectives are, despite

their common assault on the Western rational subject, philosophically incompatible.¹⁶ The major source of their incompatibility, according to Huffer, is precisely the problem of history. As she puts it, “by history I mean a destabilizing movement of temporal dispersion that Foucault variously called the historical *a priori*, the genealogical method, or historical ontology.”¹⁷ Huffer goes on to argue that “this question of history produces an unbridgeable gap between the genealogical and psycholinguistic perspectives.”¹⁸ Whereas the Lacanian conception “shatters subjectivity at the expense of history,” for Foucault, “it is history that undoes us.”¹⁹ Although Huffer holds out some hope for the possibility of a historicized psychoanalysis that could be compatible with a Foucauldian understanding of history, she also contrasts Foucault’s “other-than-psychoanalytic historical approach to desubjectivation” with (queer) psychoanalytic approaches—such as those of Lacan and Judith Butler—and finds the latter wanting.

My reading of the last chapter of *The Order of Things* at the very least complicates Huffer’s claim that the problem of history is what separates Foucault from psychoanalysis. For what we find in that last chapter is not only a historicized understanding of psychoanalysis—psychoanalysis emerges with modernity, as the Other of the conception of man that stands at its core; this explains how psychoanalysis can help us to trace modernity’s limits—but also an account of how psychoanalysis serves as an important conceptual model for Foucault’s own notion of the historical *a priori*, thus, for his radical transformation of History from within. In other words, despite Foucault’s well-known critique of psychoanalysis in his later work, the historicized and historicizing vision of psychoanalysis offered in *The Order of Things* makes me wonder whether it is wholly accurate to describe Foucault’s notion of the historical *a priori* as “other-than-psychoanalytic.” To the contrary, his own archaeological approach seems to be modeled on psychoanalysis as a critical, counterscience that helps to push our historical *a priori* to its limits, thus compelling its transformation from within.

Huffer, by contrast, insists that “Foucault’s lifelong practice of historical ontology separates him from both anthropological and psycholinguistic structuralisms.”²⁰ Although there is a sense in which this is undoubtedly true—even *The Order of Things* is meant to offer an *archaeology* of structuralism, not an *example* or a *defense* of it—it is also the case that his understanding of

¹⁶ Lynne Huffer, “Freud-Foucauldian Politics and the Problem of History,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (2016): 130–38.

¹⁷ Huffer, “Freud-Foucauldian Politics,” 131.

¹⁸ Huffer, “Freud-Foucauldian Politics,” 131.

¹⁹ Huffer, “Freud-Foucauldian Politics,” 131.

²⁰ Huffer, “Freud-Foucauldian Politics,” 134.

archaeology, as a historical practice that aims to transform our Historical historical *a priori* from within, is framed in their terms. In that sense, Foucault's early text may already offer a compelling answer to Huffer's question as to whether psychoanalysis can be rethought in a fundamentally historical way. *The Order of Things* shows not only how the core insights of psychoanalysis can be historicized, but also how they have been put to work in the notion of the historical *a priori*, which is itself central to the project of undoing or desubjectivation that Huffer outlines. As Foucault puts it, through the countersciences of ethnology and psychoanalysis "we see the destiny of man being spun before our very eyes, but being spun backwards; it is being led back, by those strange bobbins, to the forms of its birth, to the homeland that made it possible. And is that not one way of bringing about its end?" (OT, 381).

3. CRITIQUE

The Order of Things famously ends with Foucault's heralding of the end of man and his tentative gestures toward a new episteme on the horizon, which he refers to as the "return of language," and associates repeatedly throughout the book with Nietzsche. But even this event finds its roots in the modern historical *a priori* whose limits and contours archaeology aims to sketch. The modern historical *a priori*—a historical *a priori* structured by the twin ordering principles of Man and History—forms, says Foucault, "the immediate space of our reflection. We think in that area" (OT, 384). Thus, even the radically discontinuous ideas represented by the demise of the age of Man and History and the return of language are themselves made possible by the modern episteme: "it is even that episteme which, by its logic, gave rise to such an experience, constituted it through and through, and made it impossible for it not to exist" (OT, 384). Because we are still within the modern episteme, which serves as the constitutive ground for our thinking, we cannot know for sure whether the sense of its ending will turn out to be illusory. Such knowledge could only be available to the retrospective glance of the future archaeologist. Either way, the very posing of the question of whether and to what extent the ground beneath our feet is crumbling "may well open the way to a future thought" (OT, 386).

While most of the critical attention to the closing of this text has focused on Foucault's supposed attack on humanism, what has gone mostly unnoticed is the role of critique in this classic statement of Foucault's early, archaeological project. In these closing pages, Foucault makes clear that the point of archaeology is to engage in a kind of immanent critique of its own historical *a priori*: to sketch the limits and contours of our modern historical *a priori*, which is organized around the twin organizing concepts of Man and

History, and, in so doing, to open up the possibility of thinking differently. Given the importance of History to our own historical *a priori*, and given Foucault's acknowledgement that the modern episteme still constitutes the conditions of possibility for his own thought, archaeology proceeds historically, but not Historically. The discontinuous, nonprogressive, and nonteleological aspects of Foucault's historical method are thus central to his own conception of critique; they allow us to see our own historical *a priori* as both historical—that is, as historically specific and contingent, as having genuine historical alternatives—and as Historical—that is, as structured around a specific understanding of History as a rational, progressive, directional learning process. I call this a kind of immanent critique for two reasons. First, it steadfastly acknowledges its own historical situatedness and refuses to help itself to a transcendent or wholly external point of view. Thus, in response to the often-posed question: where does the archaeologist stand? I think Foucault's answer clearly must be: within the modern episteme. Second, this critique is immanent, because it draws its critical force by taking up and radically transforming from within one of the main structuring principles of modernity, namely, history.

Although the critical aims of archeology are mostly implicit in the text of *The Order of Things*, Foucault makes them explicit in an interview from 1966. When he is asked what determines his choice of the historical periods that he discusses in his research, Foucault replies: "This kind of research is only possible as the analysis of our own subsoil. . . . And it's the subsoil of our modern consciousness of madness [for example] that I have wanted to investigate. If there were not something like a fault line in this soil, archaeology would not have been possible or necessary. . . ." ²¹ In other words, the point of archaeology is, Foucault goes on to say, "the critical analysis of our own condition." ²² As a mode of critique, archaeology traces the fault lines within our subsoil; in so doing, it opens up what Foucault elsewhere calls lines of fragility and fracture within our present, opening up a gap between ourselves and our historical *a priori*, enabling us to think and do otherwise. ²³ These lines of fragility and fracture and the gaps opened up by tracing them thus represent, in a Foucauldian conception of immanent critique, something like transcendence from within or immanent transcendence. ²⁴

²¹ Foucault, "The Order of Things," in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 2*, 261–67, at p. 263.

²² Foucault, "The Order of Things," 263.

²³ See Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 2*, 433–58, at pp. 449–50.

²⁴ As I argue in more detail in chap. 5 of Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

Excavating the subsoil underneath our own feet is, however, a difficult business. It requires revealing the ground that serves as the foundation for our thought to be a contingent foundation. As Foucault describes it elsewhere, using a visual metaphor rather than one of subsoil and ground, the goal of his work is to “make visible precisely what is visible, that is to say, to make evident what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to us, that because of that we do not perceive it.”²⁵ The degree of difficulty involved in making the visible visible or excavating the subsoil beneath our feet explains the apparently polemical character of Foucault’s archaeological analyses of modernity. As he explains in a 1967 interview, in uncovering the historical *a priori* of modernity, “one has to delve into the mass of accumulated discourse under our own feet. Through gentle digging one can uncover the old latent configurations [e.g., of the Classical Age], but when it comes to determining the system of discourse on the basis of which we still live, as soon as we are obliged to question the words that still resonate in our ears, that are mingled with those we are trying to speak, then archaeology, like Nietzschean philosophy, is forced to work with hammer blows.”²⁶ In other words, what often sounds like a critical dismissal or rejection of modernity is in fact a function of the difficult work involved in subjecting it to immanent critique.

Understanding archaeology as a mode of critique also shifts our perspective on the role of history within Foucault’s thinking. If his goal is to offer an immanent critique of his own present, and if that present is itself structured, at least in large part, by what he calls History, then of course Foucault will have to proceed historically (albeit in a radically different way than that pursued by traditional History). But the privilege given to history in his methodology will in some sense be a contingent privilege, a function of the shape and structure of our own historical *a priori*. Indeed, Foucault talks about the role of history in his work in precisely this way in the same 1967 interview just cited. As he puts it:

It’s true that history holds a privileged position in my inquiry. The fact is that in our culture, at least for several centuries now, discourses are linked in a historical fashion. . . . That is why in studying an ensemble of theoretical discourses concerning language, economy, and living beings, I didn’t try to establish the *a priori* possibilities or impossibilities of such knowledges [*connaissances*]. I tried to do a historian’s work by showing the simultaneous functioning of these discourses and the transformations that accounted for their visible changes.²⁷

²⁵ Quoted in Davidson, *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, 2.

²⁶ Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” 293.

²⁷ Foucault, “On the Ways of Writing History,” 292.

However, Foucault continues, and this is the really crucial point:

But this doesn't mean that history has to play the role of a philosophy of philosophies here, that it can claim to be the language of languages, as was thought by a nineteenth-century historicism that tended to endow history with the law-giving and critical power of philosophy. If history possesses a privilege, it would be, rather, insofar as it would play the role of an internal ethnology of our culture and our rationality, and consequently would embody the very possibility of any ethnology.²⁸

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me return to the question with which I began: is Foucault a historian or a philosopher? I hope that by now we can see that this question is framed in such a way as to radically miss the point and import of Foucault's work. This is so for (at least) two reasons. First, if history is the flip side of the empirico-transcendental doublet, and if this doublet is what structures modern philosophy through and through, as Foucault argues in the "Man and his Doubles" chapter, then modern philosophy cannot really be separated from the problem of History. To do philosophy—at least, to do philosophy in modernity, where Foucault repeatedly situates himself and his own work—means, necessarily, to engage with the problem of History. Thus, Foucault cannot simply be a philosopher full stop, because one cannot be a philosopher working at the edges or limits of the modern historical *a priori* without also being in some sense a historian.

Second, approaching the question from the opposite direction, if Foucault's aim is to offer an immanent critique of the modern historical *a priori*, and if that *a priori* is structured by the twin organizing principles of Man and History, then conducting such a critique will require taking up historical methods and transforming them radically from within. As Foucault put the point in a well-known passage from his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," History can become genealogy "only by being seized, dominated, and turned against its birth. . . . It is necessary to master history so as to turn it to genealogical uses. . . ."²⁹ Viewed from this point of view, however, if history has a privileged place in Foucault's work, it is only because History has such a privileged place in our culture. In this sense, Foucault cannot simply be a historian either. Philosophy and history are, in his work as in the modernity

²⁸ Foucault, "On the Ways of Writing History," 292–93.

²⁹ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 2*, 369–91, at pp. 384–85.

that he aims to critique, inextricably intertwined. Thus, there can be no question of an either/or choice, philosopher or historian.

In closing, allow me to suggest that a better way to understand Foucault—the early Foucault included—is as a critical theorist engaged in an immanent critique of his own historical present. This critique aims to generate a kind of immanent transcendence by tracing lines of fragility and fracture in our historical *a priori*—fault-lines within our own subsoil—and using those fault lines to open up a gap between ourselves and our historical *a priori*, to allow us to see it as a historical *a priori*, to make the visible visible. This gap or space of immanent transcendence is what also enables us to think and do otherwise; it is, in other words, the space of freedom. It is this critical project that determines Foucault's relationship to history and to philosophy. Even if the project is motivated by a kind of philosophical aim, this aim already presupposes a specific conception of philosophy as a historically situated enterprise, as the attempt to think the present, or to capture one's own time in thought. But insofar as our present is, for Foucault, distinctive in that it is structured through and through by History—that is, in that our historical *a priori* is both historical and Historical—this critical project also requires a radical rethinking of history, one that demands not only that we do history without Man, but also that we do history without History. And it is precisely because many contemporary critical theorists working in the tradition of the Frankfurt School have yet to fully let go of History³⁰—particularly the idea of reconstructing history as a cumulative learning process or a growth in rationality, an idea that Foucauldian archaeology rigorously brackets—that this aspect of Foucault's work, his historicization of History, represents his greatest contribution to critical theory.³¹

³⁰ I argue for this point more fully in Allen, *The End of Progress*, chap. 1–3.

³¹ I am grateful to Jasmine Wallace, Benjamin Randolph, Nicole Yokum, and the participants at the Spindel Conference for their insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. Special thanks to Nicole Yokum for expert research assistance as well.