



# SINGULARITY, GENEALOGY, PROBLEMATIZATION. ON FOUCAULT AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL \*

Sandro Chignola  
Università di Padova

I will briefly examine the direct relationship Michel Foucault (1971, 1978a, 1978b, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984) establishes with the Frankfurt School through key texts I consider decisive. This confrontation emerges from several interviews conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as in a significant lecture on the meaning of critique, delivered at the *Société Française de Philosophie* on May 27, 1978. Notably, this lecture was omitted from the *Dits et écrits edition*; it is less widely known. My talk aims to reaffirm the logic of Amy Allen's (2016) approach in her book while problematizing some of her conclusions.

For Foucault (1982b), the term *rationalization* is “dangerous”, just as calling reason to «trial» is «sterile». From Kant (1784) onward –a point he makes explicit– the problem of limiting power and critiquing domination becomes the hallmark of modern thought. This is significant given the persistence and relevance of his reference to Kant's text. Foucault (1982b) finds the use of the word “rationalization” both unnecessary and dangerous, specifically because it perpetuates a link between morality and socio-political structures<sup>1</sup>. For Foucault (1983), this involves the interplay between rational and

---

\* Text presented at the Workshop «*The End of Progress*», SSSA, Pisa, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025. I thank organizers and participants. Special thanks to Annagiulia Canesso, Pierpaolo Cesaroni, Anna Loretoni, Marco Solinas.

<sup>1</sup> M. Foucault, *À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique : un aperçu du travail en cours*, (1983), now in: M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, Édition établie sous la direction de D. Defert et F. Ewald avec la collaboration de J. Lagrange, Paris, Quarto Gallimard, 2001, vol. II (1976-1988) [= DE2], pp. 1202-1230, p. 1211.

irrational, guilt and innocence, all of which are fixed by the judgment of legitimacy on which critical thought relies.

On the other hand, he is also worried about the notion of “progress” as an overarching, global, and unilinear process; or, in Allen’s (2016, pp. 13-14; Foucault, 1982) terms, as a “fact”. Furthermore, Reinhart Koselleck (2004)<sup>2</sup> shows that between the late eighteenth and the second half of the nineteenth century, historical science came to see the future as future past. The future became fully determined by the premises conditioning its development. Thus, rendering it foreseeable within the emerging centrality of the social sciences.

Regarding the dangers associated with *rationalization* and the idea of a dialectic of Enlightenment as a trial of Western reason, Foucault (1982b) distances himself from the Frankfurt School, calling for “another way” to analyze power (Chignola, 2025). However, what I find most significant is that, in other Foucauldian texts, this distance is not framed as an outright opposition. Rather, it delineates their relationship more precisely, particularly regarding the definition of critique. Foucault (1978a) himself explicitly describes this relationship as “fraternal”<sup>3</sup>.

Once again, the Enlightenment – reconsidered through the lens of Kant – represents a crucial issue. Foucault (1978a) credits the Frankfurt School with drawing attention to the problem of the Enlightenment and to the interplay between reason and power. This is particularly important in relation to the Frankfurt School’s analysis of the relationship between science and technique, between *épistème* and *techné*. This same relationship resurfaces in the analytics of structures of French historical epistemology and its potential for political radicalization. French epistemology introduces the theme of ruptures that punctuate the history of knowledge. German theory – more directly tied to the issue of modernization and shaped by its constitutional history’s relationship to domination – reasserts the centrality of the Enlightenment, even within French philosophy. This “chiasm” between Germany and France, oscillating between views on knowledge and powershifting, is highlighted by Foucault as:

1. An indispensable premise for addressing the problem of an ontology of actuality.
2. An equally essential foundation for “desubjectifying” [*désubjectiver*] philosophy and rearticulating it in a historical-genealogical sense.
3. A key premise in the analytics of power, highlighting that the structures of rationality function not only as mechanisms of subjugation but also as “pure singularities”

<sup>2</sup> See: Chignola (2025).

<sup>3</sup> «ce problème qui nous rend fraternel par rapport à l’École e Francfort» (Foucault, 1978a, p. 45).

whose positivity establishes contingent and always reversible relations, since, for Foucault (1978a), power is never exercised in a unidirectional or global manner.

For Foucault (1978a), the Kantian approach to the problem of Enlightenment identifies two key points. The first one concerns the connection between thought and the historical present, which establishes the modern critical «attitude» of thought. The second point is crucial for configuring what Foucault (1978a) calls critique, which addresses the relationship between power, truth, and the subject. This relation is defined within the processes of governmentalization that Kant helps delineate, but Foucault presents them in reverse. He begins with mechanisms of de-subjectification that, on the side of the governed, challenge their relationship to power and truth at every level.

These two points allow Foucault (1978a) to deconstruct the Enlightenment as a historical figure or ideal type of rationalization: instead, he reinterprets it as a «matrix» with multiple entry points. This «matrix» processes changes in the relationship among truth, power, and the subject over time.

Foucault (1982b) also claims that these occur within strategic games that are inevitably expanded by the irreducible resistance, which keeps them in tension. The «chiasm» with Frankfurt's theory leads to a fragmentation of the relationship between rationalization and domination, between knowledge and power. The displacement of the analysis toward strategic games, where rationality or knowledge acts as a «revolving door». This offering has a certain power grip, thereby allowing the possibility of an overthrow (Foucault, 1982a).

Beginning with his reading of Kant's (1784) text, Enlightenment is the term Foucault uses to describe the connections between archaeology (the plane of knowledge and the discontinuity of the structures of rationality), genealogy (the plane where knowledge is linked to its power effects), and strategy (the analytical plane where the exercise of power emerges as an agonistic game, resistible and reversible) (Foucault, 1982b). For Foucault, this connection defines the main purpose of his work: to historicize and fully politicize philosophy. It also affirms his inherent claim to the immediate political responsibility of thought. This political responsibility does not mean normativism or the invocation of universal principles of justification. Instead, it operates within the "field of immanence of pure singularities" (Foucault, 1978a). Here, the power games are treated as Wittgenstein treats language games: within the realm of «everydayness» and surface, "eventualizing" and problematizing their political conditions of emergence (Foucault, 1978b). This sets genealogical work in motion in different fields, whose relevance is defined by the conflicts that arise and run through them.

It seems to me that a problem arises here: it is certainly true that for Foucault, freedom is always possible and, therefore, it operates as a device of futurization. However,

freedom, understood as an essential part of the unfolding of the power relation and as that which holds it in tension, does not pertain to the normative sphere or only to modernity's achievement, but rather to the dynamics of power relations. For Foucault (1978a), the Enlightenment is a «matrix» in the sense that the power-truth-subject schema can be used to analyze *any* configuration between freedom and power, or between subjectification and modes of subjection.

In my view, this is a decisive point for understanding the overall meaning of Foucault's work and the significant distance that separates him not only from critical theory but also from much of the contemporary philosophical-political discourse. If, as Foucault famously stated, knowledge is not meant to understand but to take a position, “pour trancher”, as he writes (Foucault, 1971), then the central problem of philosophy is to accept that there is no such thing as an outside to power games. There is no position of detachment from actuality on which one can settle a critical gaze. It is impossible to call history, even that of Western rationalization, before the tribunal of reason. Nor is there a progressive direction in which to resolve the material contradictions that make history a permanent battleground.

An ontology of actuality means recognizing that every historical present is an event. Eventualizing history [*événementialiser*] – that is, treating it as a series of discursive singularities and dissolving its continuity into a set of blocks that correspond to strategic, multiple-entry games – is necessary to undo the idea that the present we belong to, and not just the future, is given to us as a *fact*. On this point, I am in complete agreement with Amy Allen (2016). Foucault (1984) inherits the question of the Enlightenment from the Frankfurt tradition, but emancipates it from the history of Western rationalization. With Kant, this question of the present and its event is grasped in its singularity (Foucault, 1984). It becomes the «matrix» that allows us to repeatedly address, at every moment in history, the connection between power, truth, and subject as a strategic game in which domination and freedom confront each other.

In this context, philosophy abandons the task of justification traditionally assigned to it. Instead, it challenges the stability of the present and supports its destabilization. Building on this understanding, genealogy is an inherently and immediately political task, insofar as the relevance of the archives and problems to be studied is determined by what continually reopens and expands the relationship between freedom and power: power that is not a “thing” or an intention, but “action upon action”, or more precisely, *re-action* upon action or conduct. Specifically, what Foucault refers to, drawing on analytic philosophy, as “games of power” [*jeux de pouvoir*], are serious singular games that history can address in terms of positivity or emergence. These games must be

approached within the field of immanence, where goals and strategies, truth and knowledge, power and resistance are always exposed to the randomness of praxis, which either accommodates or revokes their “government”.

In my view, it is highly significant that Foucault reclaims the semantics of government. This move frees his analysis from the formalism inherent in the term “power” and from its uncritical association with the modern state's constitutional process. Government, as seen in his earliest analysis, is orienting living relations. The central concern is precisely its acceptability or resistibility. The reality of government is shaped by what makes it inherently *problematic*. The Foucauldian terms “problematization” and “eventialization,” as genealogical tasks, must be understood within this framework.

Power has no outside: its process defines the field of immanence where knowledge and truth relate. However, this does not suggest that power controls all reality. Rather, it highlights that power is always exposed to the risks of its performative capacity to impose order.

“Je ne cherche pas à dire que tout est mauvais, mais que tout est dangereux,” Foucault (1983) once stated. And: “Si tout est dangereux, alors nous avons toujours quelque chose à faire” (Foucault, 1983, p. 1205). In other words, there is always something to do. This is true both on the level of individual responsibility — since all of Foucault’s works are driven by problems of the present and aim to trace genealogies that challenge its definitiveness — and on the level of collective responsibility, which emerges when the processes of government subjectify the position of the governed. In this regard, I would like to highlight a point that aligns closely with Amy Allen’s (2016) approach. From Foucault’s perspective, Adorno’s (1964) statement, “progress occurs where it ends”, can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it involves breaking free from the teleological patterns of the philosophy of history. This teleology supports the process of institutionalizing the social sciences within the modern state. On the other hand, it reopens history to the event, both within and beyond each singular configuration of the “power game”.

Foucault’s approach is not just a political philosophy. It is a deliberate *political use of philosophy* that employs history as a terrain for revealing blocks of intelligibility and positive singularities that correspond to real battlegrounds. He refers to them as “fictions historiques”: not as restitutions of meaning inherent to the objectivity of the historical process. Instead, they explore how knowledge, truth, and power emerge and relate to one another, but as inquiries into the logics of emergence that shape their connections. These processes structure the relationship between practices of subjection and practices of liberation (Foucault, 1978a)<sup>4</sup>.

To undertake the “genealogy of problems” is not merely to “problematize” in the conventional sense of critique. Instead, it is to approach reality as a *heterogeneous, multiple-entry system*. One where each access point corresponds to specific operations and domains, none of which can neutralize the element of randomness that destabilizes the exercise of power or, in terms of Foucault (1983), the exercise of government. The genealogist’s research agenda is dictated by the present, by struggles, conflicts, and resistances that function as “chemical catalysts”. These make visible power relations that would otherwise remain unnoticeable (Foucault, 1982a, p. 1044). For this reason, Foucault defines critique, in what seems to me an obvious reference to Weber, as an “attitude”, as an ethos, as a «vertu». This critique demands both obstinacy and “courage”. At stake, in the Kantian text, are the tasks of what Foucault (1978a) calls a “philosophie à venir” or “philosophy to come” (p.36).

The question, then, is whether this “philosophy to come” can be resolved into a renewal of critical theory. Allen’s (2016) approach is highly valuable in this regard. This is particularly in light of Foucault’s (1982a, p. 1097-1099, 1982b, p. 1053, 1984b, p. 1545-1546) distancing himself from Habermas. However, the issue remains: Is such a renewal sufficient? Beyond the «epistemic humility» required to decolonize its reconstructive paradigm and curb its ethical-applicative tendencies, a further step may be needed. This step would involve an act of “unlearning” (Allen, 2016). It would move beyond its own canon and assume responsibility for the present that calls upon us.

Against this backdrop, put bluntly, the issue is not the project of modernity, its possible fulfillment, or the normative claims of philosophy. Rather, it is the forms and practices of domination, racialization, exploitation, and everyday violence. These fracture the present, making it asynchronous with itself. To think the contemporary means *to set one time against another*.

This asynchronicity –continually reinforced by contradictions that cannot be dismissed as historical residuals, since they are *precisely* what enables today the reproduction and expansion of the capital’s operations (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019)– must be acknowledged to take a position. For me, this means problematizing the status quo while simultaneously choosing a side in the struggle between freedom and power.

Building on this, after all, this is what critique means for Foucault. Moreover, I am not sure to what extent this perspective can be reconciled with a critical theory that, as I believe Allen (2016) also suggests, has long taken a completely different path.

It is not critical theory but historical materialism that Walter Benjamin (1991) himself invokes. He does so in a sense not too far from Foucault's when he writes:

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chignola (2018).

No document of civilization is not at the same time a document of barbarism. Moreover, just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism also taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist, therefore, dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain<sup>5</sup>.

Given this, I wonder if our task today is not similar: moving from what, in the present, threatens the very possibility of the future.

## References

- Adorno, T. W. (1964). Fortschritt. In H. Delius & G. Patzig (Eds.), *Argumentationen. Festschrift für Josef König* (pp. 1–19). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Allen, A. (2016). *The end of progress: Decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1991). Über den Begriff der Geschichte. In R. Tiedemann & H. Schwepenhäuser (Eds.), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Bd. I, 1, pp. 691–704). Suhrkamp.
- Chignola, S. (2018). *Foucault's politics of philosophy: Power, law and subjectivity*. Routledge.
- Chignola, S. (2025). Dal «progresso» allo «sviluppo». Il momento francese e la scienza della storia (1820–1840). *Filosofia politica*, 39(1), 59–74.
- Foucault, M. (1971). Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits I, 1954–1975* (pp. 1004–1024). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1978a). Qu'est-ce que la critique? (Critique et Aufklärung). *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 84, 35–63.
- Foucault, M. (1978b). La philosophie analytique de la politique. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 534–552). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1982a). Espace, savoir et pouvoir. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 1089–1104). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1982b). Le sujet et le pouvoir. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 1041–1062). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1983). À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique : un aperçu du travail en

---

<sup>5</sup> «Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein. Und wie es selbst nicht frei ist von Barbarei, so ist es auch der Prozeß der Überlieferung nicht, in der es von dem einen an der andern gefallen ist. Der historische Materialist rückt daher nach Maßgabe des Möglichen von ihr ab. Er betrachtet es als seine Aufgabe, die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten» (Benjamin, 1991, pp. 696–697).

- cours. In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 1202–1230). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Qu'est-ce que les Lumières ? In D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 1498–1507). Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1984b). *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté*, in D. Defert & F. Ewald (Eds.), *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (pp. 1527–1548). Gallimard.
- Kant, I. (1784). *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 12, 481–494. Reprinted in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Akademie-Ausgabe, Vol. 8, pp. 33–42). Berlin: de Gruyter, 1923.
- Koselleck R. (2004). *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Times*. Columbia University Press.
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2019). *The politics of operations: Excavating contemporary capitalism*. Duke University Press.