

# Materialist Deconstruction, Anticolonial Geographies, and the Limits of Genealogy: An Interview on *Counter-History of the Present*

GABRIEL ROCKHILL INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER PONCE DE LEÓN

**ABSTRACT:** In this wide-ranging interview, Gabriel Rockhill discusses his most recent book, *Counter-History of the Present*, in the broader context of his research to date on aesthetics, politics and history, as well as its relationship to important interlocutors like Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir. He explains the similarities and important differences between genealogy and counter-history, and he elucidates how his work performs a materialist deconstruction that contests the idealist logocentrism operative in purely textualist modes of interpretation. The interview also develops an account of “radical geography” that calls into question culturalist spatial imaginaries, which plague certain forms of decolonial theory that diminish or efface social stratification and class conflict. The discussion thereby contributes to the development of a new model for critical social theory with an internationalist perspective, which seeks to weave these conceptual innovations into a rigorous and radical materialism.

**KEY WORDS:** materialism, deconstruction, anti-colonialism, genealogy, counter-history, Marxism, democracy, Eurocentrism, French theory, decolonial theory

**Jennifer Ponce de León:** In your most recent book, *Counter-History of the Present*, you challenge Jean-François Lyotard’s well-known thesis in *The Postmodern Condition* that our age is characterized by an incredulity regarding metanarratives. Specifically, you argue that, in order to present

capitalism as the necessary end of history, neoliberalism promulgates a developmentalist model of history that, ironically, echoes the very same determinist, teleological, and inevitable historical logic that it attributes to, and decries in, vulgar Marxism. Against this scurrilous repackaging of the Marxian metanarrative, you insist on reworking the conceptual coordinates of history in such a way that the very logic of “ends” and “beginnings” is called into question. You also argue that such a reworking is a necessary antidote to the rampant compression of what you call the geographic and stratigraphic dimensions of history, which collapses ‘the present’ into simplistic master concepts. Beginning with your criticisms of Lyotard, could you explain why you argue that it is ultimately necessary to reject the historical logics that underlie conceptual claims about the characteristics of a period?

**Gabriel Rockhill:** Although he would later problematize this thesis, Lyotard claimed in *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979, that “narrative knowledge” had undergone a fundamental transformation. In the modern age, grand narratives had developed that were eschatological, totalizing, linearly organized around an Idea to come, and purportedly objective in laying claim to the true nature of historical developments. He pointed in particular to the Hegelian metanarrative of world spirit and the Marxist grand narrative of emancipation as forming a theoretico-practical duo. These developmentalist historiographies, in the present “postmodern age,” have lost their power according to Lyotard. Although he remained skeptical of historical causality, he referenced certain factors that have contributed to this incredulity regarding metanarratives, such as the technological advancements of the postwar era, the intensification of liberal capitalism, and the elimination of a communist alternative.

*Pace* Lyotard, I argue in *Counter-History of the Present* that the ruse of history has done unprecedented work in our conjuncture, redeploing the historical order of vulgar Marxism—which is not to be confused with Marx’s own writings—in a grand neoliberal farce. Economic determinism, teleology, and historical inevitability (which are all hallmarks of the vulgar Marxist historiography purportedly refuted by what Margaret Thatcher brazenly called “the crusade of popular capitalism”) have been integrated into an historical imaginary in which the Market determines the course of history, the totality of world-historical events is henceforth organized around the sole and unique end of the so-called freedom of free trade, and history is naturalized as an inevitable process of politico-economic “development” to which *There Is No Alternative* (TINA). A specter, I therefore contend, is haunting neoliberal globalization: the specter of the very same vulgar Marxism that was purportedly refuted by history, and more specifically by the history of laissez-faire economics and its pseudodemocratic accoutrements. What Lyotard missed, we might say, is that if neoliberal capitalism vociferously repeats the mantra

that “Marxism is dead,” it has, at one and the same time, cunningly recuperated and redeployed a vulgarized form of Marxist historiography. Echoing Marx’s own famous paraphrase regarding the supposed failure of revolution, it is as if neoliberalism’s declaration of the death of Marxism can only be fully understood by recognizing its fundamental contradiction (which has multiple meanings): “Marxism is dead—long live Marxism!”

This is only one aspect of my critique of Lyotard’s thesis, however, because the book proposes a double gesture. On the one hand, it elucidates and materially deconstructs what is arguably the dominant historical and political imaginary of our conjuncture, which presents the world as increasingly unified in a single global order in which technico-economic progress proceeds in lockstep with the beatifying march of democracy. On the other hand, however, it calls into question the historical order undergirding this imaginary, and in particular what I call “epochal thought,” or the presumption that history naturally divides itself into distinct ages that can each be summarily captured within a single container concept, meaning a notion—such as “globalization,” “the digital age,” “the democratic era,” or “the postmodern condition”—that conceptually delineates the fundamental properties of each *Zeitgeist*. In materially deconstructing the very notion of a *spirit of the times*, this metaphysical notion *par excellence*, I propose an alternative historical order that takes into account three dimensions of history (chronology, geography, and social stratification) in such a way as to foreclose the very possibility of there being a single age or present moment, because history is recognized as the site of multiple and shifting battlefields. For counter-history, there is no spirit behind the material play of historical forces.

It is in this sense that my critique comes full circle. It is not only that I contest Lyotard’s proposed container concept of the postmodern condition. It is that I call into question epochal thinking, with its rampant logic of “beginnings” and “ends,” by proposing an alternative historical order that decisively parts ways with the metaphysics of time. In this regard, it is very important to my argument that the reign of the dominant historico-political imaginary mentioned above has by no means gone uncontested. On the contrary, it has been attacked on many fronts, and my book proposes an intervention that aims at conceptually consolidating these attacks and thereby making an important contribution to what would be called in French their *force de frappe* (striking power).

**JPL:** The type of critical historiography that you advocate for will surely call to mind, at least for many of your readers, Michel Foucault’s understanding of genealogy (or perhaps Jacques Rancière’s appropriation thereof). Indeed, in one of your earlier books, *Radical History and the Politics of Art*, you argue that Foucault’s distinction between a theory and an analytic of power should be generalized to other phenomena like art and politics. This is one of the ways in

which you develop your argument for a “radical historicism,” which maintains that all of our most cherished concepts, values, practices, and representations are historical through and through (without therefore being historically determined). Yet, at the same time, your approach in *Counter-History of the Present* seems markedly different from Foucault’s because of your rejection of epochal thinking, your insistence on radical geography, and your resolutely anticolonial critiques of Eurocentrism. How, then, would you explain the relationship between genealogy and counter-history?

**GR:** Foucault’s writings, as well as more generally French epistemology and materialism, have been extremely important for my own research. One fundamental contribution of this work has been the conceptual inversion operative in the formulation of what I call a *history without objects* or an *intransitive history*. Instead of beginning with the assumption that there are natural objects—such as madness, science, punishment, or sex—that *have* a history, Foucault contributed to turning the world on its head by beginning the other way around and recognizing that all of the “objects” that exist are actually only transitory formations in the flow of time. This means, for instance, that there is no madness *in general*, as he explained in his early work, but only “madness” in the Renaissance, “madness” in the Classical Age, and so forth. In other words, there are not stable objects that *have* a history, in the sense of a continuous development, but rather it is history that *has* objects insofar as it begets them, transforms them, and destroys them over time.

Jacques Rancière has made one of the most significant contributions to extending this materialist history without objects by applying it to aesthetics. Indeed, he admits himself that his project is inspired by Foucault and could be described as a genealogy of literature, and of aesthetics more generally. This is because, among other things, he categorically rejects the idea that there is some metaphysical entity such as art in general, that functions as a transhistorical object whose history could be told through a developmentalist or continuist narrative. Instead, he outlines three competing regimes of “the arts”—the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic—which have radically different understandings of what “art” is (to such an extent, in fact, that the category is only really operative in the aesthetic regime). It is true that he distances himself from Foucault’s tendency to rely on sequentialist narratives, which are characterized by major epochs divided by discontinuist caesurae, insofar as the regimes persist across time once they emerge, and they very often come into conflict within the same era. However, his fundamental orientation is the same as Foucault’s, insofar as he applies the latter’s version of objectless history to the arts.

My own work has been deeply marked by this Foucauldian-Rancièrian heritage, and I have sought to rigorously conceptualize, generalize and draw out all of

the far-reaching consequences of what I call radical historicism. This has meant calling into question the limits to historicization that nonetheless arise in their respective projects. They both share, for instance, the dominant metaphilosophical axiology of a certain tradition of French theory, which systematically valorizes difference, dissensus, heterogeneity, and a long chain of sister concepts over and against their opposites. This conceptual polarization, which presents itself as having a moral and political charge that has never been rigorously demonstrated, frequently operates as an extrahistorical framework that organizes their work. In articles like “Is Difference a Value in Itself?” which was translated into English in *Interventions in Contemporary Thought*, I have subjected this uninterrogated metaphilosophical matrix to materialist historical critique. I have done the same with Rancière’s formalist and largely ahistorical understanding of politics, which in many ways constitutes the antipode of his intransitive history of “the arts.”

Regarding genealogy more specifically, I have recently completed a long article (forthcoming in *Theory & Event*) that details both the similarities and the significant differences between genealogy and counter-history. Using Foucault’s famous reading of Nietzsche—which is ultimately a magnificent misreading—as a heuristic lens, I examine the ways in which the historical order operative in genealogy is incapable of escaping specific forms of origin discourse. This is due, in part, to the streamlined, and largely Eurocentric, historical narratives of structural inversion that Foucault wants to tell, and more generally to the lack of a more complex, constellational cartography of the geographic and stratigraphic dimensions of history. He succumbs, time and again, to the historical compression—and thus homogenization—of space and society. This is discernible, in microcosm, in his reading of Nietzsche because he is so intent on framing his discourse as the originary moment of a genealogy without origins (which he would later shift back to Kant, and thus to the standard watershed moment in his writings around the French Revolution), that he invents a moralizing distinction between a “good” and a “bad” origin—*Herkunft* and *Ursprung*—that is simply not operative in Nietzsche’s text.

This article, like the others that I have written on Foucault, contests his model of discontinuous history because it relies on drawing lines in the sands of time by inventing dramatic beginnings and ends, as if history could be pristinely divided into distinct eras. At the same time, it also calls into question the central role of streamlined moral narratives and the very logic of genealogical inversion, which Foucault inherits from Nietzsche, insofar as they inevitably require forms of historical compression that constrict and simplify the geographic and stratigraphic dimensions of history, thereby constructing sleek Eurocentric narratives in which “everyone thought it was one way, but it’s actually the opposite (or nearly).” Finally, it questions the political relevance of genealogy by reminding the reader of Foucault’s preference for individual moral emancipation, in which “true liberation

means knowing oneself [*la véritable libération signifie se connaître soi-même*],” over and against collective political movements aimed at radically transforming the reigning socioeconomic order.<sup>1</sup>

**JPL:** Could you say a bit more about the political stakes of counter-history and how they relate to your criticisms of Foucault and Rancière? Why do you see genealogy as being more bound up with moral and ethical concerns than with collective politics? Do you see Rancière’s conceptualization of politics as nonetheless providing resources that you do not find in genealogy, or is it equally problematic for remaining too formalist, and thus ahistorical? More specifically, the long chapter in *Counter-History of the Present* on democracy seems to come out of your earlier critique of Rancière’s *The Hatred of Democracy* (2005). Is this indeed the case and, if so, what are you rejecting in his account of democracy?

**GR:** Let me say, first and foremost, that counter-history is dedicated to contesting the reigning historical imaginary insofar as it is part and parcel of a *political* imaginary. The temporal order governing our collective sense of what has happened, what is occurring now, and what might be possible in the future is a political order. Counter-history seeks to foreground and elucidate this *politics of time*, while at the same time constructing an alternative historical order that both maps and enhances the cracks and fissures in the temporal encasement of the current political order. This does not only mean opening up a future horizon of possibility in which we are not simply destined to perpetuate neoliberal capitalism until it leads us to the *true end of history*, at least for us, meaning the veritable end of our world through the destruction of the biosphere. It also implies shattering the dominant understanding of the current order in the prevailing imaginary, according to which the egalitarian, anticapitalist Left has definitively lost. By shedding light on the innumerable fractures and interstices in which autonomous collectives and activists are *already* building a new world in the shell of the old, counter-history mobilizes a counter-politics of time perhaps best illustrated in a work like Raúl Zibechi’s *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements*. Finally, this political counter-history also radically transforms our understanding of the past, liberating us from the reigning imaginary in which the progressive march of liberal history seamlessly repurposes the colonial *civilizing mission* as the *technico-democratic mission* of neocolonial hegemony.

Regarding Foucault and the politics of genealogy, it is important to point out the discrepancy between his status in the Anglophone world and his concrete political engagements. Although he has the reputation of being a political radical, which is surely based in large part on the cult of personality around his work and his *enfant terrible* image, his actual political statements and actions are often explicitly opposed to programs of collective socioeconomic and political transformation.

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He says as much himself in a 1978 interview where he criticizes the women's and gay liberation movements, and describes himself, in opposition to those involved in student and worker protests, as a nonactive rebel invested in "silence" and "total abstention."<sup>2</sup> Like many of his self-descriptions, he does not shy away from fictional embellishment, and this is not perfectly accurate, of course. However, it does capture one central aspect of his work, which is an investment in ethical and individual issues of the *care of self*, which often take precedence over collectivist politics and the *care of society*. He discreetly but diligently follows Nietzsche in taking his distance from organized anticapitalist politics (with a few notable exceptions), and his public political stances are frequently closer to the problematic "antitotalitarian" positions of François Furet and André Glucksmann (whom he defended) than to the resolutely anti-imperialist and anticapitalist orientation of figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Frantz Fanon. Moreover, his affiliation with the uprisings of May 1968 is unjustified for two important reasons. He was primarily in Tunisia at the time and was not involved with the events in France, to begin with, although he did admit that the Tunisian student movement around the same time did inspire him. Secondly, as Didier Eribon has demonstrated, he was actually directly involved in developing the university reforms in France that are considered to be one of the important sparks for the student uprisings. If anything, then, he was on the opposite side of the barricades in 1968.

In contesting the dominant historico-political imaginary, counter-history does not steer away from its confrontation with capitalism. But it is also dedicated to a counter-history of the anticapitalist Left that takes on the sham narratives constructed by Furet, Glucksmann, and other media darlings of their ilk. There are many versions of these narratives, but one of the dominant ones maintains that, if Marxism sounded good in theory, it failed miserably in practice, and it ultimately collapsed in a grandiose Stalinist suicide that paved the way for a renewed belief in democracy and capitalism. Trying to radically alter the latter would thus inevitably lead to a bloodbath of the worst possible sort. Instead of collectivist projects of socio-economic transformation, then, we should invest in reforming the system in place and altering our personal relationship to it.

I am summarizing in broad strokes, of course, and it would take some time to dissect these narratives and demonstrate how they operate to produce the blackmail of the Gulag, which consists in affiliating anyone invested in anticapitalist collective organizing with a commitment to a slippery slope that leads—magically but inexorably—to death camps. For the purposes of this discussion, I would simply like to highlight two important points. The first is that the rich material history of anticapitalist and anticolonial struggles can in no way be reduced to Stalin. The revolution that he was involved in was extremely complex, and he was by no means the only actor. Moreover, there are innumerable other Marxian-inspired attempts to throw off the shackles of imperial capitalism. Collapsing all of these

rich, multidimensional histories into a reactionary soundbite does not do justice to the material struggles and the multiplicity of agents and agencies involved (including the extensive foreign meddling in *all* of the communist experiments, beginning with the 13,000 American troops deployed in the USSR in the summer of 1918). Secondly, it should not be lost on us that this soundbite serves to spread an ideological virus, and that Foucault played a role in perpetuating it, in part due to his lack of interest in the anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles that were happening before his eyes. As I detail in an article I published last year in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency, who were tracking the French intelligentsia's shift away from the resolute critique of Western imperialism, identified Foucault as a major asset in the mid-1980s.

Rancière has been much more explicit regarding his rejection of capitalism. However, his trenchant critique of Althusserian Marxism did lead him, at times, to take certain positions that are close to those of Foucault. Although neither of them, to my knowledge, have had a sustained *Auseinandersetzung* with the major authors of the anarchist tradition, most likely because it is almost systematically ignored in the academy, there is a clear strain of libertarian or individualist anarchism in their work. When Rancière returns, again and again, to the example of Gabriel Gauny and describes his act of gazing out of the window while he is planing a floor as an act of emancipation, it is difficult not to see this as akin to Foucault's definition of liberation as individual self-knowledge (which becomes personal aesthetic experience in the case of Rancière).

You are absolutely right that the long final chapter of *Counter-History* grew out of my earlier critique of Rancière's book *The Hatred of Democracy*, and an ongoing debate that I have had with him on this subject. He presents democracy as a synonym of politics proper (*la politique*), meaning that he understands it as an intermittent interruption of the given police order in the name of equality. This is a formal definition of democracy (and politics), and a very wide gulf separates it from the material histories of the concept and practice of democracy. This is what allows him to peremptorily declare that there is a hatred of democracy in the contemporary era, which actually means that there is an animosity toward *his* formal conceptualization of democracy. If you look at material history, however, one of the striking features of our conjuncture is the overwhelming ubiquity of praise for democracy, however it might be defined, and Rancière's own discourse participates in this rampant democratophilia.

By undertaking an intransitive history of "democracy," I dissolve this fetishized value-concept into a history of struggle. I demonstrate, for instance, that a similar consensus regarding democracy also existed between approximately the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, but that the common-sense values were quite simply the opposite. Rather than democracy being the name for the *ne plus ultra* of politics, regardless of how it is specifically defined, it

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was understood as a threatening form of mob rule that needed to be contained. This leads to a material deconstruction of the nationalist imaginaries of Western nation-states, which claim that they were founded as democracies, when they were actually established as oligarchic republics that were openly hostile to people power. In fully developing this intransitive counter-history and taking on the origin myths of democracy in the ancient Greek world, I thereby oppose to Rancière's theoreticist postulation of the "true form" of democracy, a materialist analysis of an immanent concept-in-struggle.

**JPL:** How is what you call a *history without objects* or an *intransitive history* related to what you have been referring to as *materialist deconstruction*? I know that Jacques Derrida supervised your Master's thesis. Has he been another important source of inspiration in the way in which you have theorized and practiced counter-history? Would it be an overstatement to say that counter-history is a form of deconstruction?

**GR:** Derrida's work has indeed been important to me, but in a very different way than the writings of Foucault and Rancière. I should say that, in general, I actively repudiate the standard models of social relations that tend to codify how we relate to major thinkers. The choice is usually between either being a sycophantic acolyte, or indulging in unbridled parricide. Rather than simply being *for* or *against* a particular thinker or tradition, however, I have always sought to cultivate a nuanced and multifaceted hermeneutics that teases out various aspects of particular bodies of work in such a way that it is a matter of developing theoretical projects rather than simply celebrating or denigrating individual thinkers. The *variegated hermeneutics* of counter-history thereby refuses the opposed, but ultimately united, bull horns of *hagiographic hermeneutics* and *demonological hermeneutics*.

Regarding deconstruction, it is true that *Counter-History of the Present* proposes a radical anti-essentialist critique, which is discernible in the intransitive history of democracy that I just mentioned insofar as the central claim is that there is no such thing as "democracy itself." This also applies to temporality because in developing an alternative historical order in which geography and social stratification play a central role, one of my claims is that there is no "present" in general. This is, we might say, a metaphysical abstraction. Instead, there are variable experiences and apprehensions of the current "conjuncture"—by which I mean a specific intersection between chronology, geography, and social stratification—that vary themselves across time, space, and society. Time cannot then be dissected into discrete units, each one with its characteristic spirit, which can be captured and explained by container concepts. The notion of a *Zeitgeist*, as the name itself suggests, is fundamentally metaphysical insofar as it presupposes that there is a unifying spirit (*Geist*) behind each given time (*Zeit*).

Nevertheless, there are profound methodological and praxeological differences between my counter-history of the present and Derrida's deconstruction of the Western metaphysics of presence. This is immediately discernible in the unspoken parameters of Derrida's theoretical practice. Unlike someone like Foucault or Rancière, for instance, he focuses, for the most part, on isolated canonical texts, which he proposes to analyse internally. He is not concerned in any serious or rigorous fashion with the material constitution of these texts, including how they were produced, circulated, or received across the three dimensions of time, space, and society. His implicit but persistent mantra of *sola scriptura* directs his philosophical acumen away from the material praxes and concrete institutions that have produced these purportedly isolatable texts. This was immediately visible in his debate with Foucault, which I have analysed in detail in *Logique de l'histoire* and *Interventions in Contemporary Thought*. Rather than engaging with the hundreds of pages that Foucault had written on the institutional matrices, state mechanisms, and social relations surrounding and transforming "madness" (or exploring this history himself), he focused on the few pages where Foucault discussed a canonical philosophic figure—Descartes—and indulged in what Foucault later criticized as the "little historically determined pedagogy [*petite pédagogie historiquement bien déterminée*]" of internal analysis, which teaches that there is nothing outside of the text.<sup>3</sup>

In preserving, with few exceptions, the traditional object of philosophic study within the modern theoretical practice of so-called continental philosophy (which is the Western canon), as well as its standard methodology of internal analysis, Derrida developed an intellectual practice that is centered on *logos*. Moreover, the latter largely operates according to principles that are not subject to the variability of material phenomena, and the conceptual distinction between what is the case *in principle* and what exists *in fact* is at the core of Derrida's project. Ultimately this means that there is a form of logocentrism and idealist essentialism that haunts Derridian deconstruction. Since this is a bold claim that would need to be diligently elucidated, let me provide a concrete example of what I mean by taking a case that I have analyzed in great detail in *Logique de l'histoire*: his interpretation of Descartes, which relies on the *principle* according to which language is antithetical to madness. Derrida advances this claim by appealing to what is "inherent in the essence [*essence*] and very project of all language in general [*de tout langage en général*]," and by isolating a few sentences in the *Meditations* from Descartes's other writings, as well as from their entire material conjuncture (which is replaced by the spectral *Zeitgeist* of Western metaphysics).<sup>4</sup> He thereby overlooks the patent fact that Descartes argues, across his entire corpus, that we can only know if a being is mad if he or she provides material signs of madness. The use of language is one of the primary ways in which this is done, and Descartes emphatically asserts that we can only know the mad are mad *if they speak or show other material signs of*

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*madness*. Indeed, a “close” reading of the *Meditations* reveals—in contradistinction to the idealist, logocentric principles that spectrally govern Derrida’s interpretation—that the mad *only do one thing in the Meditations*: they speak! In the famous line debated by Derrida and Foucault, Descartes uses a single verb to describe the activities of the mad: they assert (*asseverent / assurent*) things that are obviously false, and moreover, they do it firmly and constantly (*constanter / constamment*). In other words, the mad *only speak* in the *Meditations*, and this is precisely how we know that they are mad according to Descartes. Derrida’s principled opposition between madness and discourse, meaning the abstract universal law of the essence of logos, which is inscribed in the omnipresent specter of Western metaphysics, does not allow him to read these material traces, regardless of how close his reading purports to be.

By “materialist deconstruction,” I mean the act of diligently dismantling, through concrete analysis, the essential natures that purport to govern history. This can include concepts and practices like “madness” or “democracy,” as we discussed above, but it is also the case for the essentialization of time through the postulation of a *Zeitgeist*, as well as monolithic abstractions like “Western metaphysics.” It decouples, if you will, the anti-essentialism of deconstruction from its logocentrist idealism by mobilizing materialist modes of investigation against the spectral history of the purported governing principles of “Western thought” (thereby deconstructing deconstruction). Its materialism must not, therefore, be understood in terms of a simplistic opposition between the suprasensible and the sensible, mind and world, form and matter, and so forth. On the contrary, my own work is very much dedicated to overcoming structural binaries of this sort (which is another aspect of its debt to Derrida). Far from being a brute empiricism or positivism, then, materialism is a self-reflexive mode of engaged and anchored cultural analysis that meticulously studies specific phenomena as theoretico-practical manifestations.

**JPL:** *Counter-History of the Present* provides concepts, arguments, and methodologies that are very pertinent to some of the central concerns of fields within the tradition of anti-imperialist thought, including postcolonial and decolonial theory, as well as subaltern studies. I am thinking, for example, of how subaltern studies aims to reckon with what you theorize as the stratigraphic dimension of history and its implications for historiography as well as for questions of governance; or how thinkers working in subaltern studies and decolonial thought have also endeavored to deconstruct the idea of a singular temporality. Your book provides tools for thinking the spatial dynamics of history that, conceptually and methodologically, are a powerful weapon against the myriad ways in which Eurocentric logics have dictated accounts of history, development, modernity, etc. This resonates with some of the central contributions of critical development

studies, world-systems theory, and postcolonial theory, which have shown how uneven geographies of accumulation have produced different, but intrinsically related, social formations across space, and how these relations affect the production of ideologies, discourses, and identities. One of the challenges for thinkers working in traditions of anticolonial and anti-imperialist thought is to avoid uncritically reproducing the categories and historical and spatial frameworks of master discourses, e.g., their developmentalism, their ways of carving up space, the binaries and identities they have imposed. It seems to me that the theoretical model you offer—and specifically, your argument that counter-history necessarily entails a counter-geography and a counter-sociology—provides tools for materially deconstructing and getting beyond these imposed models, and for developing complex accounts of historical phenomena where difference can be accounted for at many scales, as can interrelations between what are otherwise made to appear as isolated phenomena. Could you elaborate on these aspects of your argument and what you think the intellectual and political stakes are of your call for a counter-geography and counter-sociology?

**GR:** Counter-history proposes a radical geography that parts ways with the assumption that there is a single, universal background space in which any and all activities can be situated. Following the work of Henri Lefebvre and others, it recognizes that space is a sociohistorical product, whose very construction and organization is a political project, and the same is true of time, as we have seen. It thereby rejects the unidimensional conception of neutral space that flattens it into a static set of naturalized geographic relations.

Many of the standard spatial categories used to frame the contemporary world rely on this unidimensional conception, whether it be that of the nation-state and globalization, the West and the rest, the first and third world, or other such categories. I recognize that these can be pragmatically useful distinctions at times, as long as we use them as forms of *geographic synecdoche* that operate as heuristic simplifications of extremely complex phenomena. However, they ultimately obfuscate the complex multidimensionality of spatial relations, and they are often politically misleading. In the same way that *epochal thinking* presupposes a unidimensional conception of time and the existence of a unifying *Zeitgeist*, *regional thinking*—by which I mean the social compression of space into homogenous regions, whatever the scale may be—relies on a unidimensional conception of space. The latter is structured by what we might want to call, by neologistic extension, a *Raumgeist*, meaning a *spirit of space* that purportedly unifies everything within a particular locale. And just as counter-history parts ways with the metaphysics of time, so does its counter-geography bid farewell to the metaphysics of space.

Take, for instance, the example of the category “Europe.” To begin with, it should be recalled that this is by no means a natural, identifiable geographic

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region. Instead, it is a socio-cultural construct with a very specific history. Since we were just discussing Derrida's purported critique of Western metaphysics, we can take the case of how the category of the West or Europe is used in philosophy as a way of identifying a certain body of thought. The *Raumgeist* of "European philosophy" was only established and consolidated in the modern conjuncture, when its origin myth of Ancient Greece was produced, as well as its streamlined history of properly Western philosophy, through the work of the German Idealists and others. It is interesting to note, moreover, that this new cultural geography of European thought, which I examined in detail in *Logique de l'histoire*, was constituted and institutionally implemented at a moment in time when the emerging "European" nation-states were developing and intensifying their project of global imperial expansion.

The abstract category of Europe is, however, extremely misleading because of the ways in which it purports to unify a striated space-in-struggle. It lends itself to a culturalist geography that effaces social stratification, which is a point made poignantly by Simone de Beauvoir, when she trenchantly reminds us of how such a category functions. "In bourgeois language," she writes, "the word *man* means *bourgeois*. Europe, the West, that's the bourgeoisie of Europe, of the West, or more precisely, it's the Idea that the thinker of Europe, the West, forms of it."<sup>5</sup> All of those who actually inhabit the problematically delimited landmass of Europe—immigrants, refugees, the working class, the lumpenproletariat, and other masses of oppressed peoples—are filtered out. However, *they* are in many ways as much the victims of "European" domination and imperialism (by which we should understand *elite* imperialism) as its victims elsewhere in the world. It is, however, very often the case that the subalterns *within* "Europe"—the gypsies are an excellent example—are not even legible as such because they are rendered invisible by the catch-all category of Europe. A culturalist geography thereby smothers class stratification and confuses the relationship between those who are truly responsible for the crimes of "Europe," and those who are its victims. This confusion, without a doubt, serves the project of those in power, in very much the same way that the term *Anthropocene* subtly but inexorably displaces responsibility for environmental destruction from capitalists to the entire human population. Just as the word *Capitalocene* seeks to rectify this confusion, at least as much as possible within the confines of language, *elite imperialism* redirects the blame against all Europeans toward the primary culprits: the ruling class.

Unvariegated culturalist geography is also what allows for the simplistic and politically problematic reversals that are sometimes operative in certain academic versions of postcolonial or decolonial theory. Just as Europe or the West are sometimes condemned *en bloc*—thereby implicitly blaming the subalterns and the oppressed within these regions for the unremitting work of their oppressors—so do certain thinkers indulge in valorizing "the elsewhere" for its own sake

in an intellectual version of cultural tourism. In spite of what is often presumed within the diversity industry driving the U.S. academy, and powerfully diagnosed by Adolph Reed and a few others, it is not because someone is from a particular region of the world that they are oppressed or subaltern. Just as the West is not metaphysically unified in a *Raumgeist*, the same is true of “the rest.” Many of the leading luminaries in anticolonial thought and practice—and here I am thinking of anyone from W.E.B. Dubois and Frantz Fanon to Malcolm X—have pointed this out in great detail. One of the ways in which colonialism has operated is precisely through the production of socioeconomic stratification *within* the colonies, thereby fostering a local and “culturally invisible” comprador bourgeoisie that operates in harmony and complicity with the ruling-class elites from abroad. This is one of the reasons why Sylvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s unflinchingly anticolonial critique of academic decolonial theory is so important. She points out how the global political economy of knowledge creates pyramidal structures of power in which gate keepers in prestigious U.S. universities filter, sanitize, and coopt theory emanating from struggles from below: “we have cooptation and mimesis, the selective incorporation of ideas and selective approval of those that better nourish a fashionable, depoliticized, and comfortable multiculturalism that allows one to accumulate exotic masks in one’s living room.”<sup>6</sup>

It is arguable that the developmentalist historical narratives operative in the civilizing mission are to victor history what culturalist cartographies—including their nation-state variants—are to ruling-class geography. What better way to have people misrecognize their true allies and enemies than to have them blame Europe for their problems (instead of the elite ruling class) and celebrate rich, cultural patricians from “the periphery” as credentialed spokespeople for subalterns?

The project of counter-history is thus invested in forging tools for a counter-geography that dissolves the metaphysics of any *Raumgeist*, as well as a counter-sociology that brings to the fore stratifications and struggles that are irreducible to any *Sozialgeist* (spirit of the social). Philosophically, this means developing a radical cartography in which “space” is taken to be a complex, multi-dimensional, and socially negotiated phenomenon such that there are overlapping and intersecting spaces (linguistic, economic, political, and so forth), whose structural matrices are often different (language, capital, praxis, and so on), and that have fluctuating scales, while being socially variable, and hence requiring a social phenomenology to account for them. I have only begun this project in *Counter-History of the Present*, and it is perhaps most apparent in the opening chapter, where I demonstrate that the category of globalization functions neither as a neutral depiction of the real world nor as a pure, abstract invention. Instead it is a powerful *idée-force*, developed within the material conjuncture of rampant neoliberalism, that has sought to impose a historico-geographic imaginary in which *there is no alternative*. It is in this sense that I develop an argument to dis-

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mantle the *technico-democratic mission*, which has adapted and repackaged the historiography and geography of the civilizing mission for the so-called global era.

**JPL:** What would you say is at stake, politically, in this multidimensional radical geography for an anticolonial politics? How does this relate, moreover, to your critiques of the philosophy of difference?

**GR:** Counter-history proposes a multidimensional account that heuristically delineates different spatial dimensions and refuses to collapse all of them into a flat, unidimensional geography. It is possible to identify, for instance, economic stratification across the core and periphery that cuts across large geographic land masses, creating spaces within spaces. All of the work on uneven development and world-systems analysis has helped produce detailed accounts of socioeconomic polarization that traverse nation-states and geographic regions. One can also locate specific cultural spaces—in which “culture” is understood as something that one performs and recreates with others through communal action—that are unbounded by the standard culturalist geographies and their nativist accounts of identity. The methodological goal would not be one of situating all of these different spatial dimensions within one governing realm. Instead, it would be to develop alternative cartographies that demonstrate the extent to which there are multiple intersecting and overlapping spaces within each supposed locale. *Topography*, as I would like to understand it, is the art of mapping the spatial density of a site by detailing its various dimensions. It allows for *multivariant mapping* that uses a multiplicity of factors to situate elements in spaces that operate relationally.

Radical geography, which denaturalizes space, and multidimensional topography, which calls into question its reduction to one-dimensional geography, both contribute to overcoming the spatial binary of “here” and “elsewhere,” “the West” and “the rest,” and so on. This does not simply mean, although it often does, that the “elsewhere” is always already “here” (the Haitian Revolution, for instance, is part of the French Revolution, and vice versa). It means that there are overlapping and intersecting spatial strata, and that their relationally constituted cartography plays a significant role in social struggles.

This is important for anticolonial movements because one of the strategies of colonialism is to cultivate historical and geographic imaginaries that foster its perpetuation. As I briefly mentioned, *Counter-History* demonstrates how the historical imaginary of the civilizing mission has been transformed in the neoliberal conjuncture into the technico-democratic mission of spreading the purported freedom of free trade, along with technical “advancements” and sixty-second democracy, to “underdeveloped” countries (through the use of bombs and terror campaigns if the population does not spontaneously acquiesce to them). The manifest destiny of settler colonialism in the United States has likewise been

transformed into what we might want to call the *modernizing destiny* of global imperialism, where client states become the supposed beneficiaries of technocratic developmentalism in exchange for doing the dirty work of oppressing the local population for the benefit of the global elite. Establishing detailed cartographies of how exactly this works in individual cases is a crucially important undertaking because it allows us to identify the general infrastructural framework and the more local scaffoldings of colonialism, as well as weak points, interstices, and potential bracing points for transformation.

Materially deconstructing the dominant geohistorical imaginary can also serve to recast insurrectionary struggles against global capitalism. These battles are commonly presented as fragmentary and intermittent, and their very conceptual and terminological presentation subtly communicates their spatio-temporal circumscription to the unsuspecting listener or reader. The “Arab Spring” is a very clear example of this because it preemptively cordons off the events that it indexes by limiting them to a particular region and time, as if they were destined to be intermittent. The same is true, to take a slightly different example, of the ways in which the global Occupy movement was so often collapsed into the events at Zuccoti Park, thereby eradicating its expansiveness. This is one of the ways in which the very space and time of insurrection are divided and conquered. The last thing that the elite Establishment wants, of course, is a series of movements that are connected across disparate spaces and persist through time. It therefore strives to reduce transnational political organizing to fragmentary fireworks shot off by recalcitrant barbarians from isolated bunkers, thereby reducing global insurrections to ashes that quickly dissipate in the darkness. The political counter-imaginary that we need to cultivate, and that is already being developed, connects these various flashpoints, reveals how they feed off of one another, and facilitates the building of coalitions, creating constellations that span over the spatial and temporal divides of the dominant imaginary. This is the counter-historical imaginary of global uprisings that all feed into the revolutionary dismantling of the system of racial capitalism.

This project is markedly different from what we might want to call *vulgar decolonial theory*, in which there is often a simple reversal of Eurocentric geographies, founded in part on a largely unquestioned value attributed to anyone from the periphery, independently of their social role and political practices. This approach usually rides the waves of particular intellectual trends within the theory industry, meaning that it is not necessarily as “otherwise” or “open to the other” as it purports to be. It is often a form of theoretical tourism that consists in searching for charming cultural gems in unchartered territories in order to bring them back home to the enthusiasm of one’s admiring colleagues in the academy. Moreover, these gems are almost always of a certain sort because there are crucial limits to how open many well-meaning academics will be to cultural alterity, and they

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will rarely embrace *truly other* cultural practices such as those labeled “(Islamic) fundamentalism,” “terrorism,” “female mutilation,” etc. (as Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have trenchantly pointed out). The commodification of cultural difference preselects and packages these differences in very specific ways, and we must not forget that this commodification has become a crucial and problematic feature of certain sectors of the contemporary “Western,” and particularly American, difference industry. At a certain level, it says more about “us” than about “them.” There is often, moreover, an intimate complicity between the politics of cultural difference and the ideology of consumerist differentiation integral to multinational capitalism. It is in this way that vulgar decolonialism functions in harmony with the diversity industry of the U.S. academy in its embrace of an obfuscating culturalist geography and its cultivation of consumerist approaches to difference over and against materialist mappings of the multidimensional cartographies of international class warfare.

**JPL:** What are you working on now?

**GR:** I am currently in the final stages of completing a co-authored book with my friend and colleague in Paris, Pierre-Antoine Chardel. Entitled *Manifesto for Socio-Philosophy: Toward a Renewal of Francophone Critical Theory*, it proposes to reignite the flame of Francophone critical theory at a moment when some have claimed, à la Bruno Latour, that it has burned out. We first met in the 1990s when we had the opportunity to study under some of the leading figures in French theory, including Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Étienne Balibar, and Alain Badiou. We share a common concern with the ways in which there is a powerful lineage of radical social critique in the Francophone world—running from Césaire, Sartre, and De Beauvoir to Castoriadis, Rancière, and Wahn-ich—that has severely suffered from the neoliberalization of higher education, the technocratization of the military-industrial-academic complex, and the resplendent return of speculative metaphysics as a dominant philosophic discourse (whose timing could not be a pure coincidence). Situating this lineage in a broad international dialogue with the Frankfurt School, radical feminism, ecological thought, the black radical tradition, critical technology studies, and anticolonial theory, we propose resources for developing a transnational critical theory for the twenty-first century whose radical edge has not been dulled by the professionalization protocols of the academy. The core of this program consists in theorizing, performing, and advocating for a unique form of theoretical practice, which we call *socio-philosophy*. The latter maintains that theory itself is a material praxis enmeshed in social relations, but it also insists on the power of theory to intervene in the social world and transform shared understandings of what is structurally possible in practice. Calling into question the distance that often separates philosophy from concrete material realities, this manifesto thereby

develops novel theoretical tools for both mapping and incisively intervening in the contemporary conjuncture, thereby renewing, radicalizing, and pushing forward the crucial project of an internationalized critical theory of society *in toto*.

My next single-author book, which picks up on and further develops some of the themes in *Counter-History of the Present*, offers a critical analysis of the war of ideas undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency and other American organizations in their vigorous attempts to decimate the radical Left and its dangerous ideas (judged to be too egalitarian and anti-imperialist). To this end, it examines the concrete but clandestine strategies used to influence the production, circulation, and reception of ideas by an organization that is judged by Hugh Wilford to have been one of the largest patrons of the arts and culture in the history of the world. It thereby calls into question the vision of the theoretical world as an autonomous sphere where thoughts are freely constructed and negotiated by individuals. In drawing attention to an intellectual war that is as vast as it is subterranean, this book proposes an anti-Platonic descent into the cave that is the obscure factory of ideas.

Relying on new material evidence, which largely escaped the so-called tribunal of history, this investigation proposes to reopen the file of the radical Left since WWII in order to examine whether the facts have been manipulated. According to the common sense view, the committed Left succumbed to a natural death because its grand utopian, and therefore unrealistic, aspirations drove it to try and forcibly impose, through various forms of Gulags, a world that is ultimately impossible, meaning a world beyond capitalism. Such a vision of history ignores, however, the brutal global offensive that has been waged against the very idea of an egalitarian society. Since this assault and the red purges have nevertheless been fairly well documented, my book focuses on a lesser-known aspect of this history: the colossal but clandestine work of the CIA and other allied organizations to delegitimize and crush the dangerous thought of a society emancipated from capitalism, by opposing to it a far more pernicious mode of thinking: the insidious thought that another world is impossible.

Far, however, from slipping into a conspiracy theory, or into the omniscient defeatism of embittered armchair academics, this book insists on the power of dangerous thought and the possibility of mobilizing it in the current conjuncture, as many are already doing. It thus proposes strategies to take back up radical social critique and revolutionary praxis, and the book's efforts to elaborate a counter-history of the cultural Left are part of this project. For it is by revealing the concrete forces that are at work in history, and by dismantling the illusion of the progress of ideas or the autonomy of thought, that I seek to demonstrate, at the same time, the extent to which intellectual struggles must be as practical as they are material. To respond to the criminal assault on the dangerous idea of equality, it is thus not enough to open a new trial to review the past, for it is also necessary to create alternative institutions, new communities of activists and cultural work-

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ers, unforeseen forms of praxis, in short, an entire culture of the radical Left. This book thereby aims to make its own contribution to such a social transformation by reinterpreting the century that has just passed, precisely in order to highlight new possibilities for the one that has just begun.

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## NOTES

1. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, 678.
2. *Ibid.*, 670.
3. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, 267.
4. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 54.
5. de Beauvoir, “La pensée de droite, aujourd’hui,” 1539.
6. Rivera Cusicanqui, “Reflection,” 104.

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