

## BOOK REVIEW

### READING ELDEN'S *MAPPING THE PRESENT*

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**Elden, Stuart, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History*, London, Continuum, 2002. ISBN: 0826458475**

It is true that the issue of 'affinities' between Heidegger and Foucault remains 'relatively unexplored'. It is not the case however that the existence of a relation between the two thinkers has gone unnoticed in the literature. What has been missing is the analysis of how the work of the two thinkers might have been related. Thus the question is not to point out the existence of a relation but to specify the 'mode' of relation. This is exactly what Stuart Elden has attempted to do in his excellent study.

There are several key concepts that might constitute the focal point in arriving at an understanding of any affinities between the two thinkers, such as the concept of freedom, truth, subject, space and time etc. However, Stuart Elden has explored the relationship between (perhaps) the two greatest figures of twentieth century Western thought through the relatively neglected concepts of time and space.

According to Elden's narrative Heidegger, and Foucault following him, reconceptualise space and time in wholly non-Cartesian terms. The Cartesian conceptualisation of space and time in narrow mathematical terms, as aggregates of points and instants respectively is replaced by a non-mathematical, more prosaic (primordial?) and experiential understanding of space and time. Space and time are now conceived experientially and poetically rather than in mathematical terms. The notion of experience (and Elden does not make that notion sufficiently clear)<sup>2</sup> is not to

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Stuart Elden for his very helpful comments on an earlier version of this review. Thanks are also due to Robert Young for his help with the final draft.

<sup>2</sup> This may not be simply a 'fault' of interpretation but also the 'evidence' of how and to what extent Phenomenology still haunts the thought of both Heidegger and Foucault [especially in Foucault's introduction to Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* where he uses such terms as lived experience and lived space etc. quite frequently, cf. Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger Foucault and the Project of A Spatial History*, (London: Continuum Press, 2001) 117.]. The dual meaning inherent in the term 'originary experience' widely used by Heidegger and to a lesser extent by Foucault might relate to this and have aggravated the complexity of the problem.

be thought of here in (solely) existential terms, but should be understood ontologically.<sup>3</sup>

Heidegger and Foucault not only reconceptualise space and time but they also point towards a new way of relating space and time. Space and time are no longer seen in exclusive terms. Space and time are now seen as two related poles of being, the oft-mentioned space-time. According to Elden, Heidegger develops a new conception of space and time that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of space and time towards a notion of 'spatial' time and 'temporal' space. In Elden's words, "Place is historical: history is platial".<sup>4</sup> It has been argued since the eruption of the so called modernity/postmodernity debate that while modernity consisted in giving priority to time over space, postmodernism reverses this by giving priority to space over time.<sup>5</sup> Elden convincingly dismisses such naive binary oppositions. It is not simply the question of giving priority to space over time. What defines the new way of thinking inaugurated by Heidegger, and carried to new peaks by Foucault, is the question of conceptualising space and time anew and to think of them not exclusively but in relational terms. The new way of thinking inaugurated by Heidegger is relational through and through. As Heidegger writes: ". . . time and space are . . . more originary; and ultimately, they are time-space, which is not a coupling of time and space but what is more originary in their belonging together"<sup>6</sup>.

This leads us, according to Elden, to a new conception of history, which is no longer to be seen as an assemblage of events in linear sequence but as spatialised history, a history which uses space not merely as an object of analysis but rather as a tool of historical analysis. While Heidegger confined himself to the reconceptualisation of space and time and their new relation through engaging with thinkers from past and present, Foucault actually wrote spatial histories. Elden undertakes a sustained and, at points, original analysis of Foucault's three key works (*Histoire de la folie*<sup>7</sup>, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *Discipline and Punish*)<sup>8</sup> to demonstrate this. His analysis of *Discipline and Punish* especially is noteworthy as it reads the book not in terms of a history of the prison, but

<sup>3</sup> It is indeed very difficult to keep track of this subtle and very important difference in Heidegger and Foucault. One possible way to distinguish between the 'existential' and 'ontological' conceptions of experience is to conceive the former as 'subjective' experience, while the latter as experience 'of' 'subject' [or more precisely the experience that a subject go through]. Although this distinction readily presents its own difficulties it does go some way to 'convey' the meaning of this difference. Still another way to further clarify the difference might be to conceive 'existential' sense of experience as pertaining to the level of *connaissance* while the ontological sense of experience as falling within the field of *savoir*. While on the level of 'subjective' and hence existential experience, the subject remains the same; on the level of the experience 'of' subject that is on the ontological level 'subject' itself undergoes a fundamental transformation.

<sup>4</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 91.

<sup>5</sup> See for example David Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Elden, *Mapping the Present* 56.

<sup>7</sup> Elden bases his analysis on the unabridged French original as against the abridged edition (*Madness and Civilisation*) available to English readers.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Elden, *Mapping the Present* 120-150. This is apart from his introductory chapter on Foucault (93-119), which defines key Foucauldian concepts such as archaeology, genealogy, limit experience, episteme, *techné*, *dispositif*, historical ontology, and defines the Foucauldian project of *Mapping the Present* in terms of these concepts.

as a history of the modern soul.

How far has Elden been successful in relating the two thinkers or showing crucial affinities between them? As far as showing parallels in interests and structural affinities are concerned, I think he has shown quite amply and successfully that these exist. He seems to me also to be right in selecting space and time as crucial terms to explore the relation between the two thinkers. However, when it comes to specifying the ‘howness’ of the relation and pinpointing the ‘causal’ links, he has not been very successful, although he leaves ample material for anyone willing to explore the issue further. I will confine myself to pointing towards a few key points, which I believe need to be thought anew.

The notion of *Augenblick* (and the related *Einblick*) is important for Elden’s strategy for finding a fundamental (primordial?) link that relates Heidegger to Foucault. Through this crucial Heideggerian notion Elden points towards the notion of time as the moment “where future and past collide in the present, as the temporality of the moment”.<sup>9</sup> According to Elden the Heideggerian notion of time as *Augenblick* can be linked to Foucault’s history of the present. In two ways at least. The notion of *Augenblick* portrays time in terms of the moment, now and here (the present) and not in terms of past or future. Of course the ‘now’ here is a richer ‘now’ than the ordinary ‘now’ in the sense that it ‘contains’ in it both the past and the future in the same fashion in which the notion of ‘present’ is now reconceptualised to incorporate both past and future (Elden quotes Heidegger as saying that “eternity *is* in the moment”).<sup>10</sup> The second reason is that the notion of ‘moment’ also points towards the spatial side of the present, what Elden calls “the double meaning of present, the temporal and spatial signifier”.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Elden, because Heidegger reconceptualises the notion of time as ‘the moment’, i.e. as the present in both a temporal and spatial sense, he paves the way for the Foucauldian notion of the history of the present as the history of the ‘now and here’.

This reading makes sense to a certain extent. However, the analogy cannot be stretched too far. Foucault’s history of the present certainly partakes in the Heideggerian notion of time as ‘the colliding moment of past and future’ in the sense that he rejects romantic history (history based on past) and teleological history (futuristic history) and conceptualises the present in terms incorporating both past and future. However, one should bear in mind that, for Foucault, there is no single unique present as there is no single unique past or single unique future. Therefore, there are potentially innumerable histories of the present, as there are innumerable (possible) pasts and futures. Foucault sees the present moment, the finitude that encircles us, as “not an

<sup>9</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 49.

<sup>10</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 45 Heidegger’s emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 46. I have left out in this summary Elden’s important claim that Heidegger develops his notion of time as *Augenblick* in the context of his reading of Nietzsche (see Elden, *Mapping the Present* 44-49). Overall in the book Elden’s claim is that Foucault’s Nietzsche is a Nietzsche mediated by the Heideggerian reading. Important though they are I have not touched on these historical and biographical issues in my review (cf. Elden, *Mapping the Present* 10-13, 49-62, 79-80, 102-103 and 111-112).

end, but the curve and knot of time in which the end is beginning".<sup>12</sup> But there are as many (possible) ends as there are (possible) beginnings. Thus the question of 'our' present arises here. Which present out of the innumerable (potential and actual) presents is 'our' present?

The above question (or rather questioning) brings us to the strategic intent of Foucault's work. Foucault's history of the present is a history of thought. As Deleuze puts it so beautifully "Thought thinks its own history (the past), but in order to free itself from what it thinks (the present), and be able finally to 'think differently' (the future)".<sup>13</sup> This is Foucault's historical ontology of difference. It is ontology and not epistemology (in the Kantian sense) because Foucault refuses to separate the question of thought from the question of being.<sup>14</sup> It is history because thought has history; thought has past, present and future. It is history of difference because thought thinks through thinking differently; difference is the very being of thought and very being of being as well! [In Hegelian terms 'the being of being' is nothingness, the nothingness which is the very basis of thought<sup>15</sup>]. It is also a history of difference because freedom is seen as realised in the possibility of difference, in the possibility of thinking, acting, seeing, and hence being different. Thus, history of the present is a history of thought. But this history of thought is strategically situated in the context of its 'own history', its 'own present' that is the history which it owns and to which it belongs. Thus in strategic terms Foucault's history of thought situates itself in the context of the history of Western thought (Elden quotes Foucault as considering Enlightenment as "our most "present past" [*actuel passé*]"<sup>16</sup> and Paul Veyne describes this in the following terms: "The future will eradicate our values; the past of their dynastyless genealogy has already shown them into question, but no matter: they are our flesh and blood, as long as they are our own present".<sup>17</sup> This is how Foucault delimits his pursuits by situating himself in the context of a particular and specific past, present and (particular possible) future(s).<sup>18</sup> Through this situation this history can only be dubbed as the *mapping of the present*, as Elden rightly points out. But the history of the present is *mapping of the present* not only because it is a situated history, it is *mapping of the present* basically and primarily because it is a strategic history, a history aiming at and situated in the context of the modern and Postmodern projects of freedom, what Foucault terms as "seeking to give a new impetus, as far and wide as possible to the undefined work of freedom".<sup>19</sup> Thus the project of *mapping of the*

<sup>12</sup> David Macey *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Vintage, 1994) 89.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze *Foucault* trans. Dean Hard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 119.

<sup>14</sup> And in this sense Foucault is certainly a Hegelian cf. only allusive but very interesting remarks in "The Discourse on Language" in Michel Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 235.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Hegel's *Phenomenology* esp. Introduction.

<sup>16</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 185n.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Veyne "The Final Foucault and His Ethics", trans. Catherine Porter and Arnold A. Davidson in Arnold A. Davidson ed. *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 226.

<sup>18</sup> Of course there can be more than one interpretation possible of this particular context but that is a different matter.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 46.

*present* is a project aiming to assess the strategic<sup>20</sup> possibilities inherent in the present. Elden has missed out this strategic side of the Foucauldian project, in my opinion, or at least it has not been sufficiently emphasised.<sup>21</sup>

More problematic moments in relating the notion of *Augenblick* to Foucault's project however are when Elden links present to *Dasein* and presence. It is worth quoting Elden in full here:

. . . the human in the point of this collision *is* its collision, the point of its collision, as *Da-sein*, *being-that-there*, being the moment, being as presence. The human in, *as*, the point of collision is simultaneously future and past in the present . . . Likewise, history too must orient toward the future with reference to the past, by becoming, just as the *Augenblick* is the authentic present, *a history of the present*. This history, of the present as presence is also situated. This is what will be meant by the *mapping* of the present.<sup>22</sup>

This is a rich and dense passage and there are several other similar passages throughout the book. It is unfortunate that Elden does not elaborate them. This is due to overemphasis of the book on interpretative matters, which leaves core conceptual formulations rather underdeveloped. Passages like this show how Elden glosses over certain crucial differences between Heidegger and Foucault in order to specify affinities between the two thinkers. To think of *Dasein* as the site (moment) of present by equating present with presence is, in my view, to misinterpret the Foucauldian enterprise. The notion of being as presence or *Dasein* as presence seems to me to be very un-Foucauldian. Such a reading of Foucault underestimates the extent to which Foucault's thought has been able to free itself from the shackles of phenomenology.<sup>23</sup> The fact that Foucault translated *Dasein* as *presence* obviously does not prove any thing. Also Elden's reference to Foucault's introduction to Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* in this context seems to me problematic, as this is Foucault's most phenomenological piece and not just his most Heideggerian one.<sup>24</sup> There is simply no 'middle term' available to link the notion of present to presence in Foucault. Thus it is a mistake to see Foucault's history

<sup>20</sup> Strategic in Foucault is all that is related to freedom. However, there are occasions (primarily in his journalistic polemics) where Foucault uses strategic in the sense close to the Habermasian usage of the term (see for example Michel Foucault, "Inutile de se soulever?" *Le Monde* May 11, (1979), reprinted in Michel Foucault *Dits et écrits*, vols I-IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) Vol. III: 790-794.

<sup>21</sup> This is due to reasons, in my opinion, that pertain to crucial differences between Foucault and Heidegger, the reasons I will be able only to touch upon briefly in the rest of the review.

<sup>22</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 49 emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: interviews and other writings 1977-1984* ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988) 22.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Elden, *Mapping the Present* 115-117. It is no surprise that Foucault's retrospective comments on his relation to this earlier introduction of the Binswanger's work occur with the specific reference to the problematic conception of experience employed in that work: "To study form of experience in this way-in their history-is an idea that originated with an earlier project, in which I made use of the methods of *existential analysis* in the field of psychiatry and in the domain of "mental illness". For two reasons, not unrelated to each other, this project left me unsatisfied: *its theoretical weakness in elaborating the notion of experience*, and its ambiguous link with a psychiatric practice simultaneously ignored and took for granted" Foucault, *Foucault Reader* 334, emphasis added.

of the present as a history of presence, or for that matter to read Heidegger's history of presence as history of the present in the Foucauldian sense. *Dasein* is not the site of truth in Foucault's conception. Foucault's history of present is not a history of presence, a history of the manifestation of truth. Foucault did write histories of (the production of) truth, but his history of present is not a history of the 'flash of the truth'.<sup>25</sup> According to Foucault there is no 'vision of truth' available to us.<sup>26</sup> Thus Foucault's history of the present is not primarily about truth, it is primarily about freedom<sup>27</sup>. And that is the reason why the notion of authenticity is so alien to the Foucauldian enterprise. The notion of 'authentic present' would have been anathema to Foucault.<sup>28</sup> No present is more authentic than the other, since no present involves *presence*. There is no certitude, no truth underlying and securing any present. That's why every present is dangerous, and every history of the present as a history of thought is inherently a 'perilous' exercise.<sup>29</sup> And here lies the crucial distinction between the Heideggerian and Foucauldian enterprises that Elden in my opinion has overlooked.<sup>30</sup> As Veyne remarks: "Foucault's originality among the great thinkers of our century lay in his refusal to convert our finitude into the basis for new certainties".<sup>31</sup> The notions of authenticity and present as presence are means to reintroduce such now 'unwarranted' certainties. This ultimately boils down to two entirely different conceptions of time and ultimately two different conceptions of being that are articulated by Foucault and Heidegger. Commenting on Foucault's notion of man as historical being, Agamben writes that

<sup>25</sup> See Elden, *Mapping the Present* 75.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *Foucault Reader* 54.

<sup>27</sup> I do not want to underestimate the importance of truth in Foucault however. What I want to emphasise by the above formulations is the fact that Foucault takes the problematic of truth in the context of freedom and not vice versa. Or to put it differently the truth and related will to knowledge become problematic for Foucault only in the context of freedom. This is manifested in two different ways Foucault problematises the notion of truth. On the one hand, Foucault tries to limit the concept of truth from within. Veyne reports him as saying that "the great question according to Heidegger, was to know what was the ground of truth; according to Wittgenstein, it was to know what one was saying when one spoke the truth; "but in my opinion" he added-and I am quoting his exact words, for I jotted them down-"the question is: how is it that there is so little truth in truth?" [*d'où vient que la vérité soit si peu vraie?*"] Veyne "The Final Foucault and His Ethics" 231, emphasis in the original. What Foucault was telling Veyne was something he had iterated several times before. Hence in an earlier interview contrasting his own view to that of sceptics he said, "... it seems to me that for the sceptics, the ideal was to be optimists knowing relatively little about things, but knowing what they knew in a very secure and unimpeachable way. Instead, what I am aiming for is a use of philosophy which may enable us to limit the areas of knowledge" Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* 254. This leads us to the second way in which Foucault tries to problematise the notion of truth. Foucault sees the 'will to knowledge' or 'will to truth' as part of the problem, the ways in which our 'will to truth' produces the effects of power (which is the explicit theme of Foucault's *La Volonté de savoir*). In later work he speaks of delinking growth of capabilities from the effects of power they produce (see Foucault, *Foucault Reader* 32-50).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Foucault, *Foucault Reader* 351.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970) 328.

<sup>30</sup> I do not say this in a critical manner because Elden's concern is to look after affinities so he naturally ignores and at times overlooks crucial distinctions.

<sup>31</sup> Veyne "The Final Foucault and His Ethics" 5.

“man is not a historical being because he falls into time, but precisely the opposite; it is only because he is a historical being that he can fall into time, temporising himself.”<sup>32</sup> Foucault’s conception of history of ontology can thus be differentiated clearly from the Heideggerian project of historicizing ontology.<sup>33</sup> According to Foucault historicizing ontology is no solution exactly as historicizing subject is no solution. What is required is to account for the constitution of ‘different ontologies’ and ‘different subjects’ within the historical field.

The notion of ‘authentic present’ amounts to epistemologising the “ontology of present”. An epistemological enterprise (in the Kantian sense) consists in separating the contingency of being from the (presumed) certainty of thought and providing certitude to our ‘contingent’ existence. Thus it purports to impart value to contingent existence by situating it in the context of the universal, the unchangeable. However, since Nietzsche, the West knows that it has lost its claims to such an enterprise. Foucault refuses to separate the questions of thought from the question of being. Foucault and the tradition of historical epistemology to which he belongs, deny “that there is an irreducible epistemological divide between the order of thought and the order of reality.”<sup>34</sup> According to Foucault, thought is inherently uncertain and contingent and hence the impossibility of the epistemological enterprise (in the Kantian sense) after this realisation. Foucault does not try to reintroduce that lost certainty in the name of an epistemology disguised as ontology. What Dreyfus and Rabinow have noted regarding Kant in reference to Foucault also remains true regarding Elden’s Heidegger:

On Foucault’s reading Kant was modern but not mature. He heroically faced the loss of human action in a metaphysical reality, but he sought to reground it in epistemology . . . . Kant’s heroic break with the natural law and the cosmic order, far from opening up the possibility for diversity, shifted the debate to the search for the structure of human finitude which would provide universal norms of human action.<sup>35</sup>

Elden in my opinion overlooks these different conceptions of ontology and their corresponding relation to the epistemological enterprise working in Foucault and Heidegger respectively. This is shown by his attempt to find parallels in the Heideggerian distinction between ontological knowledge and ontic knowledge with Foucault’s notions of *savoir* and *connaissance* and claiming that the former is about ontological knowledge while the latter corresponds to ontic knowledge. Elden links ‘ontological’ with being in general and ‘ontic’ with being in particular.<sup>36</sup> This distinction may be relevant to Heideggerian concerns, however it is not the main thrust of Foucault’s distinction between ontology and epistemology. Unlike Heidegger, who is

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben *Infancy and History* trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993) 99.

<sup>33</sup> Elden, Mapping the Present 99.

<sup>34</sup> Nikolas Rose (1998) “Life, reason and history: reading Georges Canguilhem today” *Economy and Society*, 27 no. 2 & 3 (1998): 154-170, 163.

<sup>35</sup> David C. Hoy ed., *Foucault: A critical Reader* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 118.

<sup>36</sup> Elden, Mapping the Present 22.

concerned with the distinction between ontology and ontic, Foucault is mainly concerned with the difference between ontology and epistemology. Thus when Foucault uses the term ‘ontology of present’ he is mainly contrasting it to an epistemological enterprise, while when Heidegger uses the term ‘ontology’ he is concerned mainly with what he calls the question of being as such as opposed to this or that being. The question of being as such does not concern Foucault in my opinion. Thus to try to read Foucault through Heidegger on this point ignores this crucial issue. The generality does not necessarily make an enterprise, ontology, as the mere fact that one is searching for the conditions of knowledge does not make it (necessarily) an epistemology. Foucault’s point was that an enterprise aiming to arrive at the conditions of the possibility of knowledge (*savoir* or *connaissance*) should not be separated from ontology, since one’s way(s) of knowing, thinking and acting are crucially and essentially connected to and constitute, and are in turn constituted by, one’s way(s) of being. Thus when we know, we simultaneously constitute and are constituted by what we know. Any enterprise that separates the search for the conditions of the possibility of knowledge from the question of being (subject or object) is an epistemological enterprise in the Kantian sense and is rejected by Foucault. Foucault’s work is an endeavour to forge a new relation between ontology and epistemology by pointing towards the primordial relation between thought and being. And this is the crucial link that joins Foucault’s enterprise of archaeology and genealogy as a single whole, as two poles of the same exercise.<sup>37</sup>, a point that Elden makes sufficiently clear.<sup>38</sup>

Having noted a few critical points above, I must emphasise that Elden’s book is not just about the issues broached here. It is a rich and complex book, which is at once an interpretation of Heidegger and Foucault, an argument for the importance of Heidegger for understanding Foucault and a forceful case for the claim that Foucault’s Nietzsche is a Nietzsche mediated by Heidegger. According to the study it is Heidegger’s Nietzsche who had a decisive impact on Foucault. It is also a study, which stresses the importance of the “general question of the relationship between space and history”.<sup>39</sup> At the same time there is considerable material to be found on Nietzsche, Kant and Holderlin among others. It is an amazing book in the sense that it can handle such a variety of topics, and thinkers and issues and so many layers of argument in a concise, readable and yet immaculate manner. Stuart Elden is a master of brevity. The main body of the book is supplemented by nearly fifty pages of notes and an excellent bibliography that will be of great help to those who want to pursue the issues of their interest further, leaving the book accessible to the ‘general’ reader. The chapters on Foucault and Heidegger can form excellent introductions to both thinkers in their own right.

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<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *Foucault Reader* 46-50.

<sup>38</sup> See Elden, *Mapping the Present* chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> Elden, *Mapping the Present* 2.