

## Toward a Counter-History of the Present

Definierbar ist nur das, was keine Geschichte hat.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

We hear from nearly all sides that we are living in a global era in which a technico-economic network increasingly joins together the four corners of the globe, and democracy imposes itself as the necessary condition for political life. Rapid technological and economic development would seem, according to certain people, to go hand in hand with the triumph of democracy, as if they mutually reinforced one another. Some have even come to proclaim the end of history, thereby striving to surreptitiously recuperate, by perverting its fundamental meaning, a certain Marxian discourse. Yet it is not at all necessary to go to such lengths in order to be caught within the same historico-political imaginary.<sup>1</sup> Independently of ideological orientations, historical common sense induces us to conceive of our age as one in which the world has become truly global, new technologies have been veritable game-changers, and the idea of democracy reigns supreme.

However, this image of a global age, as advanced as it is civilized, is far from going without saying. Is it legitimate, for instance, to speak of globalization while one-sixth of the world's population is living in slums—which are sometimes cut off from national and international modes of governance, as well as from many forms of networked communication—and global wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of an infinitesimal

minority of elites?<sup>2</sup> Is it true that we live in a new era of technological development, even though less than half of the global population (43.4 percent) has regular Internet access?<sup>3</sup> Can one honestly speak of a consensus on democracy when many states that consider themselves democratic have been openly hostile to democratic politics around the world (the American government, which prides itself on being the global showcase for democracy, has endeavored to overthrow more than fifty foreign governments, the majority of which had been democratically elected)?<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, such an image of the present not only seems dubious, but can also be dangerous. What is more, the close ties that it maintains with the dominant political imaginary recall colonial historiography in more ways than one.

This is not to suggest in the least, of course, that this historico-political imaginary is absolutely hegemonic and ubiquitous, nor is it to insinuate that there are no forces that have been actively resisting it. On the contrary, it is but one imaginary among others, although it is arguable that it has sought to forcefully impose itself as the only option, striving to definitively capture and frame our common understanding of the contemporary world. An expansive, cross-disciplinary, and international constellation of critical work has, in various ways and from motley vantage points, highlighted some of its important failings and distortions. Moreover, political praxis, in a significant number of different settings, has cultivated—with remarkable success in certain instances—alternative practices of collective world making, rival technological ecologies, and modes of governance more worthy of the reputation of the name *democracy*.

One of the objectives of this book is to contribute to these movements and this constellation of radical critique, which ultimately aim at reconfiguring the contemporary process of collectively forging a cosmos. By undertaking an investigation that would need to be qualified as untimely, it lodges a deep and systematic challenge to this widespread vision of the present. In order to do so, it focuses on the intertwining relationship between three key concepts: globalization, technology, democracy. This ensures it a precise angle of analysis, especially because they form a relatively coherent ensemble.<sup>5</sup> Yet this approach should not suggest that such notions sum up, on their own, the predominant historico-political imaginary of our conjuncture. The concepts of terrorism, security, the international community, productivity, or austerity—to cite but a few

examples—are equally important and deserve to be examined in turn. Fundamentally, what I am interested in is the construction, circulation, and reception of a certain image of the present, and the concepts chosen constitute only three points of entry among others.

The second objective of this book is to forge theoretical tools allowing us to approach the problematic of contemporary reality from a completely different perspective. The counter-history undertaken here does not consist in proposing an alternative history from the same basic phenomena or from the same historical logic or order. It is much rather a question of breaking with the epochal thinking of the dominant historical imaginary by demonstrating that it is impossible to reduce history to its sole chronological dimension, since there is always a geography of the present and a variable experience of “contemporary reality” depending on social strata and points of view. The most prevalent historical imaginary tends to blur or obscure such differences by imposing a single hegemonic image of time on the totality of the world, which has considerable political, social, cultural, ethical, psychological, and economic consequences.

A counter-history calls into question the very idea of a sole and unique present that would everywhere be the same, and that one could define with a single concept or set of uniform defining characteristics.<sup>6</sup> It does not, therefore, propose an opposite history of contemporary reality that would quite simply reverse a conventional conception of our conjuncture in order to show the inverse. It does not mobilize dialectical machinery, and it does not play a simple game of antagonism or reversal. The argument in this book is not that we need to simply invert our current understanding of the world in order to reveal the truth, nor is it that all of the phenomena that have been foregrounded by the dominant imaginary do not exist in the least or are simple illusions. In *countering* a particular schematization of contemporary reality, it specifically *counters* the historical order that underpins it. This double counter-history does not limit itself, therefore, to calling into question alleged historical positivities—so-called incontestable givens—but it strives to modify the very logic that has produced them. This implies diligent and delicate work on the ways in which history has been historically constituted as a practice that frequently relies on a unidimensional conception of space and privileges a very specific form of chronology (often Eurocentric and anthropocentric). Counter-history counters history, then, in the precise sense that it

mounts a relentless struggle against its own proper historicity, which is to say against the historical constitution of the unquestioned givens of certain ways of doing history. In other words, instead of simply proposing another history, counter-history aims at changing the very meaning—and direction—of history and narrative (*le sens même de l'histoire*), in all senses of these terms, and at thereby modifying the field of possibilities.

Counter-history seeks to retool historical methodology in such a way that history itself becomes a multidimensional phenomenon. This means that its temporal dimension is thought in relationship to both its spatial and social dimensions. Rather than history operating in terms of a largely linear, chronological development, it is geographically and socially distributed in various ways. Instead of proposing, then, one more master concept—such as postmodernism, the digital age, the era of empire—to purportedly capture the unique nature of the present, a counter-history begins by deconstructing the very idea of “the present” (which itself is most often defined ethnocentrically, thereby projecting “our present” onto the rest of the world). In this regard, as we shall see, a counter-history is necessarily a counter-geography and a counter-sociology.

The notion of a phase proves itself to be particularly important to this project. Unlike an epoch, an age, or a historical time period, a phase is always distributed in a precise manner across time as well as in space and in society. It develops via historical metastases, which is to say variable rate transformations that are unequally spread over social space-time. This is one of the starting points for outlining the rudiments of an alternative logic of history that is capable of sketching, from specific sociohistorical bracing points, the broad lines of a historical conjuncture. By conjuncture, we must not understand a homogeneous space-time or an epoch susceptible to being enclosed within a single container concept, if it be the notion of globalization, that of the ascendancy of new technologies, or that of the triumph of democracy. A conjuncture is a specific meeting point between the three dimensions of chronology, geography, and sociality. If a conjuncture can be mapped, at least up to a certain point, this is not because there is some spirit of the times by which history ends up subjecting itself to the power of the concept. It is because it is possible to propose topological captures, meaning fallibilist cartographies anchored in particular perspectives. For the act of calling into question a widespread image of the present and the historical order on which it

depends is not equivalent to giving up on the challenge of thinking the contemporary. On the contrary, it is an attempt to clear an untimely path toward a historical order allowing us to propose a completely different organization of our conjuncture. It is very important to emphasize in this regard that the topological captures proposed below obviously do not claim to lay hold, once and for all, of the true nature of our time. These are instead interventions in specific force fields that are consciously part of a social epistemology. Indeed, what we call historical truth is actually an issue at stake in social struggles, and it would be naive to believe that there is a level playing field in this area (what is more, the criteria of analysis and judgment are equally at stake in these battles).

This philosophical investigation into the structuring of historical time is inseparable from a concrete examination, which draws on a number of disciplines, of the *modi operandi* of the three key concepts indicated above. In each case, it is a matter of resituating these notions in the framework of the social, economic, and political practices that have shaped them. Lodging a challenge to Jean-François Lyotard's famous diagnosis in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), according to which our epoch is the age of the end of grand narratives, this book aims at demonstrating that one of the most powerful historical imaginaries of our conjuncture still houses massive schemas of temporal organization purporting to grasp the meaning and direction of the story of time (*le sens de l'histoire*). It is not simply a matter of showing that the grand narratives of the past are still going strong, but rather of inquiring into their reconfiguration in the contemporary conjuncture. I am particularly interested in the curious destiny of the historical logic of Marxism, which was—if we are to believe Perry Anderson—the principal grand narrative criticized by Lyotard. For we are witnessing today, at least within certain sectors, an insidious recuperation of vulgar Marxist historiography (not to be confused with what Marx himself wrote) by a certain discourse of contemporary liberalism.

The first chapter of this book is dedicated to this central problematic, which it proposes to dissect by concentrating on a concept whose hour of glory corresponds to the moment in time at which neoliberalism rose to power (and to the perceived—but altogether relative—decline of Marxist discourses and practices): globalization. Invented, in principle, in order to take into account a series of phenomena generally judged to be new, if not inevitable and all-powerful, this concept allowed for a prodigious

rehabilitation of three vulgar Marxist commitments. Summarizing in broad strokes, without the nuances that will be required below, we could say that this recuperation has replaced communism by “popular capitalism” (Margaret Thatcher) while preserving the essentials of Marxian historiography: (i) technico-economic determinism forcefully returns in the form of a Market—and the march of technologies—that imposes its laws in such a manner that we are obliged to follow them, whether we like it or not; (ii) the teleological conception of history is reinvented, and the totality of the past is henceforth organized around a linear trajectory of technico-economic progress leading to a sole and unique end: the so-called democratic freedom of free trade; (iii) the inevitable structure of history reappears in the inescapable and allegedly natural growth of modern technologies and of the neoliberal politico-economic order. This leads to the conclusion that a specter is haunting globalization, the specter of the very same Marxism that has supposedly been so often refuted by history, and more precisely by the history of so-called popular capitalism. The purported death of Marxism with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of globalized neoliberalism has actually led to its phantom persistence in the very historical framework undergirding the reigning understanding of the present. Paraphrasing Marx’s own famous paraphrase, in a repetition inciting us to pay more attention to the cunning repetitions of history, we might say that the contradictory mantra of globalization is “Marxism is dead, long live Marxism!” This paradox is not, however, a simple logical contradiction to be pointed out or celebrated as the *aporia* fragmenting our contemporary situation. It has formidable concrete effects insofar as it encourages the passivity of citizens before the inescapable forces of the presumed natural course of history while casting a shadow over those responsible for our supposed common destiny, thereby carefully preserving the status quo. It is therefore necessary to remind ourselves that globalization is not an undeniable and inevitable fact, nor is it a simple, deceptive illusion. It is an *idée-force*—a central forceful idea—anchored in a set of concrete practices that participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the construction of a world-image. This chapter draws to a close, then, by sketching out a critique of this world-image that consists in demonstrating, among other things, that “the world” varies considerably according to space and social strata, which is particularly well illustrated by the ravages and discontents—to use Joseph Stiglitz’s

expression—of so-called globalization. It also insists on all of the rifts that have weakened, for quite some time already, this world-image, not to mention all of the forms of resistance and revolution that abound a bit all over “the world.” It is of the utmost importance, in this regard, that what is called globalization has been accompanied by vast and diverse alter-globalization struggles.<sup>7</sup>

Since the first chapter initiates a critical reflection on the alleged technico-economic and political development of our conjuncture, it already sums up in many respects the basic problematic of the book as a whole. The subsequent chapters prolong this analysis by deepening the inquiry into technology and democracy. The second chapter concentrates more specifically on three conceptual oppositions that tend to coordinate a significant portion of the contemporary debate on the technological changes that apparently characterize our age: historical discontinuity and temporal continuity, autonomy and heteronomy, technophilia and technophobia. In each case, it proposes to break with these theoretical coordinates in order to outline a different approach to the question of contemporary technologies. Instead of searching, for instance, for the umpteenth epochal concept, or entering into the wearisome controversy over the continuity or discontinuity of this or that social phenomenon, it relies on an alternative historical order to think differently about the current status of technologies, notably by taking into account the three dimensions of history: the vertical dimension of time, the horizontal dimension of space and the stratigraphic dimension of the social practices of each space-time. This chapter insists, at the same time, on the fact that technology is not an isolated or isolatable phenomenon, and that it is therefore neither autonomous nor heteronomous. It is always intertwined with diverse sociohistorical practices. It could even be said that there is no technology in itself. There are only embedded technologies, which are linked in various ways to diverse practices and material institutions. In any case, we must acknowledge that it is not possible to judge technology as a whole from a technophile or technophobe point of view. It is necessary instead—this is the final argument of the chapter—to develop circumstantial judgments that are attentive to the ways in which “technologies” are intertwined in complex force fields and to the fact that social phenomena do not have absolutely univocal meanings. All in all, the critique of the conceptual coordinates of a large part of the debate on

technology aims at opening channels for a new way of thinking technologies in our historical conjuncture.

The third chapter—which is by far the longest because it revisits and reframes various themes that traverse the book as a whole—raises a series of questions regarding the massive valorization of democracy in the dominant political imaginary, insofar as it is so categorical and absolute that it risks preventing any deep examination. A normative consensus imposes itself with such force in our conjuncture that it is extremely difficult to speak of democracy without assuming its intrinsic value, or even admitting that it is effectively the only legitimate form of government, if not the “end of history.”<sup>8</sup> There is no need to accept Francis Fukuyama’s demagogical thesis in order to be caught within the same political imaginary, as has been amply illustrated by the numerous critics of Fukuyama that have been content to play one form of democracy against another. In resisting this ideological pressure, this chapter thus proposes an untimely investigation that focuses on the ways in which democracy has become a value-concept whose normative force tends to subjugate its descriptive potential (to such an extent that the American government, for instance, can speak of its “democratic friends” while referring to some of the most repressive political regimes). In order to do this, it demonstrates that a veritable counter-history must be founded on a radical historicism, that is, the position according to which everything is historical, even if it is not reducible to strict historical determinants (as reductive historicism would have it). This allows us to distance ourselves from the prevailing political imaginary by resituating the obsession with democracy in the long history of political cultures. This chapter thereby sheds light on the historical contingency of the valorization of the concept of democracy, which is only approximately 150 years old (with important variations across space and social strata). It also insists on demonstrating the transformative power inherent in radical historicism insofar as it establishes the basis for a historical critique by denaturalizing the normative structures, affective networks, and intellectual givens of the contemporary conjuncture. It thereby resituates democratophilia in a triumphalist logic of history—in which we once again come across the notions of globalization and contemporary technology—that has imposed itself with formidable force over the last thirty years or so. Finally, it proposes to prolong the preceding analyses by elucidating the veritably political role played

by the various attempts to purify the political, notably by isolating it from its inscription in specific socioeconomic and cultural worlds. Instead of beginning with the question of the best form of government *in general*, a question that almost inevitably leads today to the transfiguration of actually existing democracy into an absolute good independent of context, this chapter concludes by asking whether it would not be better to inquire into the elaboration of political practices in the broad sense of the term, meaning the collective constitutions of common worlds of values, norms, representations, institutions, and practices.

In summary, this book does not simply correct an image of the present judged to be false, by disclosing once and for all the truth of our era. Instead, it breaks with the historical order subtending a certain understanding of the contemporary world and proposes an alternative approach to the question of the specificity of our conjuncture. This counter-history of the contemporary thus not only invites the reader to call into question a conventional image of the present-day world as being characterized by the definitive triumph of globalization, technology, and democracy. It draws on an important body of literature and highly significant alternative praxes in order to incite a profound interrogation into the theoretical structures and the sociopolitical and economic practices that both produce and favor such a world-image. This is in order to be able to develop other historical orders and political imaginaries, and in this way to regain control—as some have already done to a very great extent—over the construction of our common histories and narratives (*nos histoires communes*), and more precisely over the forging of historical meanings and directions (*de sens historiques*) other than those imposed upon us.