

Marking Time: on the anthropology of the contemporary

Paul Rabinow

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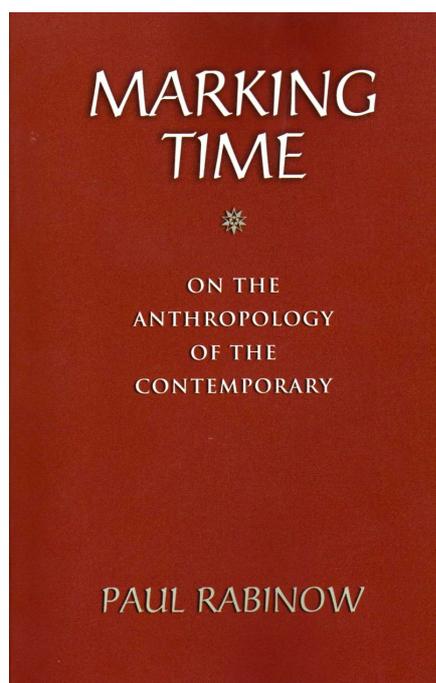
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The expression *Marking Time* evokes a variety of meanings. In this book, Rabinow sets out to explore three possible senses: an interval between actions; a performative space, like the intermission in a composition; and the possibility of an anthropology that combines these aspects as part of an inquiry into the practices and forms exemplifying the contemporary world. *Marking Time* provides a continuation to the books *Anthropos Today* (2003) and *A Machine to Make a Future* (2005), in which the author developed some of the concepts that ground his proposal for an anthropology of the contemporary.

Marking Time is the result of Paul Rabinow's research between 2003 and 2006, a period in which he focused primarily on changes in the domains of biotechnology in the post-genomic era and experiments in alternative methods of inquiry and knowledge production in anthropology. Given the myriad of topics and objects of study generated in the zone between anthropology and the biological sciences, his initial challenge was to compile a collective research agenda, a project achieved with the consolidation of the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory, based at the University of California (UCLA-Berkeley).

It was also during this period that Rabinow began to work with Robert Brent, director of Berkeley's Molecular Sciences Institute (MSI), a US centre of excellence in genomic and computational biological research. His work at the Institute was designed to accompany the initiatives of Brent and his team relating to biosafety in the emerging field of synthetic biology. Rabinow argues that the challenge for an anthropology of laboratory spaces is, precisely, to apprehend the implications of these new



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technoscientific developments and their potential resonance in other areas of knowledge and aesthetic expressions responsible for testimonies and nuances that, taken as a whole, reveal the contours of the period in which we live. Or perhaps an interval, intermission, in which we can glimpse the diverse faces of our contemporary world, revealing its relations through an experimental and essayistic form of writing more concerned with inviting the reader to see in a different way to what we, so-called moderns, usually separate into distinct areas of knowledge – areas that have become incommunicable due to their autonomization, turned in on themselves and their peers.

From laboratory spaces to the works of German painter Gerhard Richter, Paul Rabinow looks to show that an anthropology of the contemporary must be attentive to the reconfigurations experienced by *anthropos*, *bios* and *logos* – that is, to the forms and practices that ground our understanding of the notions of *man*, *nature* and *knowledge* in today's modernity. Assuming a posture inherited from philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow seeks to offer the reader descriptions that are not trapped by the need for an explanation, but, on the contrary, leave openings for other possible interpretations of the phenomena under analysis. In sum, a good description dispenses with any emphasis on an *a priori* explanation.

In the 'Introduction,' the reader encounters a definition of what Rabinow understands by contemporary: "a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical" (p. 2). However, the term contemporary refers not just to a period but primarily to its emergent processes, which pose anthropology the challenge of (re)assessing the applicability of its theoretical-methodological arsenal, as well as its own forms of producing knowledge. Consequently, anthropology here is not taken as a human science dedicated to the study of *culture* or *society*, but as a field of reflection that looks to apprehend the connections involving its objects of study in a particular period.

If *Marking Time* is neither a traditional monograph nor (exclusively) a collection of essays, it could be said to comprise an attempt to take anthropology itself as an object: in other words, an anthropological exercise on anthropology, looking to problematize its concepts, theories and methods in response to some of the most significant technoscientific developments of our era. This aim in mind, Paul Rabinow asks: how do we characterize an anthropological inquiry? (p. 6). The author immediately cites the book *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), by John Dewey, noting the legacy left by the work for the pragmatist and nominalist tradition among the human sciences. In his view, the failure to attend to the temporality of studied phenomena has caused us to make the mistake of evoking a timeless mode of thinking in which the singularities of ethnographic contexts are subjugated to the primacy of supposedly universal concepts and theories.

In the following chapter, 'The Legitimacy of the Contemporary,' the author examines some of the implications of the research into human genome mapping and sequencing, taken as events that have (also) unleashed a substantial epistemological reformulation in the human sciences. Since this time, he argues, we have been faced with task of revising the foundations of modernity and its fields of knowledge, given that the majority of our most cherished notions, such as *nature* and *society*, have been contested by scientific advances and by the redefinition of the contemporary meanings of *socius*. As a result of science's innovations, the boundaries between animals and human beings, the organic and inorganic, culture and nature have begun to collapse. This has prompted the need to 'complexify' the examination of our contemporary social relations, increasingly mediated by science and technology, refuting both an 'antiscientific metaphysics' (typical of creationism) and a 'demonology of technology.' This, though, doesn't stop Paul Rabinow from problematizing the fact that contemporary biotechnology and genetics approaches the 'body' in a form that fragments it, transforming the body into a potentially discrete, knowable and exploitable reservoir of molecular and biochemical products and events. Due to this tendency towards fragmentation, there is literally no conception of the person as a whole underlying these specific technological practices. In the author's words, once man himself is in question, we must be capable of confronting two aporias: given the scale of these changes in the biological sciences, what *logos* is appropriate for contemporary *anthropos*? And how can this *logos* be formulated to enhance our capacities without simultaneously intensifying the kinds of unequal relations that mark our era? (p. 14). Re-reading some of the most influential philosophical propositions on the manipulation of human life, Rabinow compares authors such as Jürgen Habermas, Georges Canguilhem, Niklas Luhmann and Michel Foucault and shows how we live in a period in which the predominance of the 'excess' demonstrates the importance of inventing another way of doing politics, one capable of integrating what the city has divided: human affairs (*praxis*) and the management-production of things (*techné*).

I mentioned above Paul Rabinow's reading of John Dewey's. In the third chapter, we find a reinterpretation of the philosopher's proposition concerning *adjacency* as method. Adjacent in the sense of maintaining a close proximity to the object of study, but within an interval or point of symmetry converted into a zone of problematization. Rabinow contests the critiques made by post-modern anthropologists concerning the fictional nature of anthropology, defending both ethnography – as method and experience – and the validity of writing as part of doing anthropology. On this point, the reader is invited to accompany an interesting analysis of the works of Clifford Geertz and George Marcus, examined in relation to Rabinow's own research in the spaces of the Molecular Sciences Institute at Berkeley. His argument in favour of a *mode of adjacency* is equally revealed to be derived from his reading of Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari

(*What is Philosophy?* 1991), albeit duly inflected towards his own research interests. Here Rabinow's intention is not to import a philosophical reflection on transcendence or immanence, but simply to think of an analytic alternative in a form analogous to the philosophers in question – an alternative capable of apprehending potentialities and multiplicities and of creating a space of suspension in which reflection is combined with inductive reasoning rather than deduction. From processes, actors and practices to theory.

This being the case, a question arises: what mode of observation is suited to the concept of adjacency? This is the theme of the fourth chapter, where Paul Rabinow relates his experiments with intensive interviews conducted with different groups of actors in narrow fields of research. Opportunities in which he acts as an anthropologist and observer at the same time as he is observed by one of his collaborators, also an anthropologist – in other words, an anthropology of doing anthropology itself, which resulted in an interesting book also written in co-authorship, *A Machine to Make a Future* (2005). Subsequently, Paul Rabinow extracts the concept of *Bildung* from the work of the important German historian Reinhart Koselleck. In the process, he seeks to reinterpret the concept in terms of an ethos, distancing himself from the meaning transmitted to us by the German Romanticist tradition and its predilection for coming-of-age novels, recurrent in the literature of Goethe and Thomas Mann. Instead Rabinow asks: what *Bildung* would be appropriate to contemporary ways of life?

After introducing the question, Rabinow turns to essays by Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity* (1998), where the latter author considers the place and status of the future in modernity. The future appears as a contingent series of possibilities that demand decisions over what is to come in a context defined by the notions of risk, sustainability and security. For Luhmann, the most appropriate mode of observation for studying these contingent processes is, precisely, an anthropology of anthropology. That is, the *observation of the observers observing* (p. 57). This analytic dimension is combined with the premise that, like never before, the temporal continuity between past and present has given us a *presentified* way of life, trapped in a moment that is forever present. This explains our difficulty in producing an anthropology capable of proposing other games of reference, other cognitive devices.

An anthropology of the contemporary should be an anthropology of contingencies, the observation of the conditions of enunciation and discourses vying over the status of truth. If so, Rabinow writes, our challenge is like that of Thucydides, the celebrated Athenian historian: to manufacture a description that confers the dialogue of the actors concerned a primordial role in the composition of a contingency, a temporality and its effects. Thucydides sought, precisely, to comprehend what had happened over the long Peloponnesian War, writing about its events from an adjacent viewpoint, which provided him not with 'immediate' contact but with a relationship

'mediated' by processes, actors, practices and discourses, thereby remaining on the same contemporaneous level as the events.

The penultimate chapter continues this discussion with an examination of what Rabinow calls 'Vehement Contemporaries.' Here the reader finds a rich panoramic description of the place of morality and ethics in Western thought, spanning from the juridical framework instigated with the Roman Empire to some of the most recent controversies surrounding bioethics. The reconfiguration of notions of morality and ethics involved is connected to the thematics of authenticity, identity, artificiality, rhetorical strategies and even the capitalization of man, transformed into the target of scientific experimentation. A target too of the calculations and administrations by the State within the scope of what Michel Foucault labelled biopolitics. Indeed Paul Rabinow endorses the proposals of Foucault and Giorgio Agamben by pointing out that the 'ethics of care' in the area of medicine opened up a field of research that extends beyond the spaces defined by the intersection of politics and philosophy, medical-biological sciences and jurisprudence, blurring their boundaries.

The final chapter is devoted to the work of German painter Gerhard Richter and begins with an epigraph taken from Nietzsche: "to defend the new against the old and to link the old with the new" (p. 101). In this essay, the reader encounters a novel analysis on the work of Paul Klee, his observation of nature and intense search for forms and colours that *denature* it, creating an intervallic space that forms the locus of a production not content with the fidelity of the copy, transgressing observed reality in a network of virtualities and potentialities. Hence nature in process [*la nature naturante*] is more important for Paul Klee than the state of nature [*la nature naturée*] (p. 103). From Klee's paintings to the beings conceived in the domains of computational and synthetic biology, we can glimpse the emergence of new forms of life. In both cases, technique is indelibly merged with nature, artificializing it. And if we are used to the incessant development of artefacts and objects, why not modify nature? (p. 104). Altering nature itself through scientific techniques was precisely one of the pioneering aspects of the work of artist Edward Steichen who innovated by manipulating – for artistic purposes – plants such as delphiniums (*Delphinium gracile* DC) through the use of chromosomes from another, toxic plant, the autumn crocus (*Colchicum autumnale* L.).

Gerhard Richter is another artist inspired by a similar search: opposed to imitation or mimesis, he produces a photography made by other, *almost* natural means. His paintings and designs of aspects of contemporary life produce forms capable of affecting the public, provoking an emotional response. His work delimits an orthogonal relationship – proximal, distant, oblique, adjacent – with the theme in question in a dilemma that constitutes the relationship itself. This is why Paul Rabinow sees Richter as a contemporary experimentalist, a composer of images, lines and scenes who refuses to be a builder

of theoretical paradigms and frameworks. His images constitute a visual space, multifaceted and diverse, where a problematization of the contemporary is founded. His work 'marks time' in the sense that it operates in a connection between two terms, finding there, at the core of an indetermination, a line that traces a rupture rather than a reconciliation with the past and future.

Finally, Paul Rabinow associates Klee, Steichen and Richter with the term 'remediation,' which comprises the translation, reconfiguration and conversion of means and expressive forms, whether these are related to artefacts, bacteria, human beings or non-human organisms. One of the distinctive characteristics of the contemporary world, the author argues, is the *presentification* of a demand that we formerly projected into the future: the desire to improve our modes of existence, forms and expressions. While in *A Machine to Make a Future* (2005), Rabinow & Dan-Cohen considered the devices that produce the

future, in *Marking Time* the question returns to an inquiry into the conditions and implications of imprisoning the future in the present. The reader may even ask: do these two books, written within such a short space of time, actually share anything in common? There is indeed a convergence, or adjacency, as Rabinow would say. Both books are experiments conceived to provide descriptions of questions that traditional monographs are incapable of formulating, given their stylistic aversion to the 'indiscipline' of the essay form, given that experiments are designed to produce questions, not answers. Like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), writing, here, has nothing to do with signifying, but with measuring, mapping, promoting an assembly of measurable lines and velocities, even in regions still to come. A book thus transcribed neither begins nor concludes: it is forever in the middle, marking time within an *intermezzo*. 