Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), ISBN: 978-0253006219

Despite what the title might suggest, Colin Koopman's *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* is not simply another commentary on Foucault's methodology, its intellectual context, or the standard trope of philosophical problems rehearsed in much of Foucaultian scholarship. Rather, Koopman sets for himself the ambitious task of dissolving a series of theoretical impasses that have stymied critical social theory for the past thirty years, not by reducing any one system to the other, but by sketching the outlines of a new form of critical inquiry that marries the best of Foucaultian genealogy, Deweyan melioristic reconstruction, and Habermasian universality. In an attempt to achieve this end, Koopman makes no apologies in deploying a method of "appropriationist" historiography, one he admittedly adopts from Foucault, advocating that one "take from [a thinker] what you can use and feel no guilt in dropping the rest" (121). Considering this disavowal of theoretical fidelity, it is certain that Koopman's book will rile at least a few who are faithful to the figures that he creatively appropriates. Nonetheless, the impressively large body of literature from which Koopman draws and his exacting scholarship should allay any concerns that this book is anything less than rigorous in making the case for this potentially rich collaboration.

The bulk of Koopman's book consists in demonstrating that Foucaultian genealogical critique, properly understood as "problematization," is not incompatible with "normative programs of reconstructing the present." To establish this, Koopman first argues that genealogy is best interpreted as an expansion of archaeology rather than as an abandonment of it. While archaeological investigation into discrete epistemes marked by discontinuity and rupture provides insight into the contingency at work in our historical practices, archaeology alone cannot offer a critical position by which we might be able to intervene and transform our present since it wins contingency at the cost of rendering the historical connection between the past and the present unintelligible. By tracing out the transformation of "historical conditions of possibility of our present ways of doing, being, and thinking" (1), genealogy couples the contingency of historical formations with their specific emergence, thereby enabling their possible transformation. Genealogy thus allows Foucault to move from an historical inquiry that lacked critical purchase to a form of culture critical philosophy that could act as "a hinge between philosophy and politics."

In order to further clarify the specifically Foucaultian method of genealogy, Koopman juxtaposes it to the genealogies of both Friedrich Nietzsche and Bernard Williams. The distin-

guishing characteristic of Foucaultian genealogy is its success in avoiding the fallacious errors that mar these other genealogical methods. Insofar as Nietzsche and Williams attempt to employ genealogy in an explicitly normative manner, attempting to prove that the present *ought* to be different than it is, these two genealogies are rendered susceptible to charges of committing the genetic fallacy and ultimately of undermining their claims. Nietzsche uses genealogy to subvert Christianity and Williams uses genealogy to vindicate truth. Foucault, however, more modestly employs genealogy to demonstrate that the present need not be the way that is. Foucaultian genealogy thus provides resources for critique without itself functioning as a tool of normative assessment.

Having established the place of genealogy in Foucault's work and distinguished it from other variants, Koopman turns to explicating problematization as the fundamental concept unifying Foucault's work. According to Koopman, problematization is a dual-dimensional concept that designates both the objects and the acts of genealogical inquiry, which themselves each have two senses. As objects of inquiry, problematization refers in one sense to the ways in which the emergence of new practices can render problematic previous practices that no longer operate effectively and in another sense to the ways in which the deficiencies of previous practices present themselves as a problem to be addressed. As an act of inquiry, problematization both clarifies past problematizations that have enabled the development of present practices as well as intensifies our concern with those problematizations that continue to inform our present ways of constituting ourselves (100). As Koopman rightly emphasizes, Foucaultian problematization is a unique contribution both to philosophy and history since problematizations do not function as fundamental explanatory units. For this reason, neither the emergence nor the transformation of a problematization has the force of necessity. Instead, Foucault provides a compelling account of how complex sets of practices contingently intersect to form the conditions of the possibility of new practices.

Armed with problematization as the conceptual key to unifying Foucault's work, Koopman considers himself in a position to put to rest the long-standing debate regarding whether or not Foucault engages in a form of Kantian transcendental critique. According to Koopman, there is only one general sense of critique in Kant: an inquiry into and explication of the conditions that make possible. This generalized critique can be carried out in specific forms. Thus, Koopman contends that transcendental critique, as an inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of a synthetic *a priori* knowledge of objects, is only *one* specific form of critique since we find in the late Kant inquiries into the conditions of possibility structuring human history and political possibility (115). Granting Koopman this less than substantiated reading of Kant—as he himself admits this is a bigger interpretive claim than he can deal with in this book—allows him to read Foucault as an heir to and transformation of the Kantian critical project. On this account, "Genealogy enables us to investigate the conditions of the possibility of the present without referring these conditions to either a pure realm of the transcendental or a pure realm of the empirical" (108). Koopman thus claims on this tenuous foundation to have closed the debate on the question of the transcendental in Foucault.

All of this leads Koopman to the conclusion that the purpose of Foucault's work is to equip "us with a reflexive relationship to those contingencies that make us who we are such that we can begin the long and hard labor of transforming those remarkably stable structures

to which we find ourselves subjected" (145). In other words, Foucault's genealogies invite the work of reconstructing our present. According to Koopman, this interpretation allows us to forge a sensible link between Foucault's middle and late works. We can read Foucault's later work as problematizing the practices of freedom and power in modernity, where the relation between freedom and power is cast as a game of exclusion. Foucault's later work, in which he advocates transgression, experimentation, the aesthetics of existence, bodies and pleasures, and self-creation is, Koopman argues, simply an attempt to think differently than, and out of, the conditions of possibility of the present. However, according to Koopman, Foucault's later ethics are ultimately deficient. While genealogical critique is an effective tool for understanding the emergent conditions that structure our present, Foucault's ethical responses leave much to be desired since they fail to provide normative resources such that we can distinguish between better and worse ways of transforming our present. In other words, Koopman praises Foucaultian genealogy for its ability to locate practices open to transformation, but criticizes it for its failure to provide us with any serious resources for undertaking those transformations.

Though Foucaultian ethics is less than satisfactory, Koopman claims that this is not a failure on the part of genealogical critique itself, but rather an idiosyncratic quirk of Foucault's own research interests (215). The major thrust of Koopman's characterization of genealogical critique as problematization is to demonstrate that there is no reason *in principle* that genealogical critique is incompatible with normative reconstruction. Thus, there is no reason in principle that we cannot *supplement* genealogical critique with other normative resources to form a richer method of critical inquiry. Coupled with his reading of the general form of critique in Kant, Koopman thereby justifies his "appropriationist" integration of genealogy, pragmatism, and critical theory, claiming that they can function together "synergistically." Since critical theory does not champion "universals that come stitched into the fabric of metaphysical reality," but rather offers a conception of universality as *universalizability*, in which historical universals arise out of the contingent processes of universalization, there is also no reason in principle that either pragmatism or critical theory preclude genealogy's commitment to contingency (257). Thus, as Koopman puts it, the critical-diagnostic aspects of genealogy fit with the critical-anticipatory aspects of pragmatic critical theory. In this way, Koopman envisions a new form of critical inquiry in which we delegate "to genealogy the project of historical problematization and to pragmatist critical theory the project of future reconstruction" (268).

Koopman makes considerable strides toward achieving the two primary aims that he sets for himself. First, he provides a convincing case for reading "problematization" as a critical concept that unifies Foucault's *oeuvre*. In doing so, Koopman provides an exacting account of precisely what genealogy is, what makes it a distinct practice, how it functions, and to what uses it is best put. To this effect, Koopman fashions a precise methodological tool that enables future philosopher-historians to undertake genealogical analyses more adeptly and effectively. Second, having so explicated genealogy, Koopman sets the stage for creative new ways to employ it, especially ones that no longer remain tethered to the worn-out debates that have dominated the field of Foucault scholarship for the past several decades. To this extent, Koopman provides a compelling case for why, and more importantly *how* genealogy can be deployed in tandem with other forms of critical inquiry.

Admirably, Koopman is trying to work around the worn criticisms that Foucaultian genealogy fails as a form of socio-political critique, since it offers neither a positive program of action nor a negative principle of resistance. Koopman's strategy in navigating these criticisms is to treat Foucault's genealogical method as distinct from his late work on ethics. This allows Koopman to make the claim that while genealogy is itself necessarily non-normative, there is no reason *in principle* that Foucault could not have offered us more robust normative resources and thus that there is no reason *in practice* that we cannot combine genealogy with pragmatic critical theory. However, when it comes to the very question of the absence of normativity in Foucault's late ethics, rather than explicitly addressing this issue at the level of methodological commitments, Koopman sidesteps the question entirely by deferring to Rorty's claim that "perhaps" Foucault never got around to offering an acceptable ethics and that his non-normative late ethics can be attributed simply to quirks of his personage, his research project, and that "it did not quite capture his attention" (214). Here, Koopman seems to be operating under the assumption that if there were a reason in principle that Foucault could not provide a normative ethics, this would preclude the possibility of genealogy being coupled with other normative resources. Yet, this seems far from obvious. Perhaps it is the case that Foucault's methodological commitment to a non-foundational ontology, i.e. problematization, does in fact preclude him from advancing normative commitments, but it is not clear how this would countermand Koopman's project. Koopman does not address the fundamental question of whether or not this has implications for an "appropriationist" use of genealogy, a question that seems quite essential to his project. This book thus may leave one wondering whether the debate on the status of normativity in Foucault has been settled, and more importantly, whether one needs to settle that debate in order to make use of genealogy coupled with other normative practices.

Overall, *Genealogy as Critique* makes a significant contribution to Foucaultian scholarship specifically and to the field of critical social theory in general. Koopman's book should be of equal interest to those doing work on any number of issues in Foucault as well as in genealogy, as he not only resolves a number of interpretive issues, but also provides a new and most useful interpretive perspective through which to approach the Foucaultian *oeuvre*. More importantly, it is refreshing to read a book attempting to strike out a bold new direction for critical social theory rather than remaining mired in old debates.

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