Foucault Studies

REVIEW ESSAY

Genealogy, Cryptonormativity, Interpretation

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Michel Foucault pioneered a fertile approach to social criticism whose full potential is still being discovered. Of all the Paris '68 generation of French theorists, Foucault best managed to navigate a path that yielded rich empirical insights while still maintaining a sharp normative bite. Without advertising the move in so many words, he turned away from critical modalities that depend on a privileged standpoint or fixed normative standard, towards one that opens up new vistas on our ideas and practices from within. In spite of these rich insights, however, Foucault often struggled to articulate exactly what he was doing. His mode of proceeding was intuitive rather than systematic, so its significance was often something that he could only grapple with in retrospect. These efforts to make sense of his own project often problematize more than they clarify; though as Foucault taught us, such problematization itself can be a profound insight.

In *Genealogy as Critique*, Colin Koopman takes up the task of puzzling out the rich potential of Foucault's work where Foucault left off.[1] Koopman benefits from a distance in time and perspective that Foucault did not share, exploring the challenges posed by genealogy and probing methodological issues that Foucault approached only intuitively or obliquely. Koopman puts the idea of problematization front and center, issuing an important corrective to those who ignore this central aspect of genealogical thinking. Most importantly, he reads Foucault as developing novel forms of critique, ones that dissolve barriers between theory and practice by entering into the archive with a very different sensibility. This approach provides critical insight on the present by delineating lines of connection, disruption, possibility, and closure in our relation with the past. Koopman's sensitive readings of Foucault emphasize how different this critical ethos is and difficult it is to characterize. He captures the vibrant force of these innovations in many ways, but nowhere better than in this quotation of Foucault describing his own project:

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[1] Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

> I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgment but signs of existence….[2]

In other words, Foucault dreams of setting aside forms of criticism that rely on articulate criteria and pregiven standards in favor of one that embraces the ineffable richness of life itself.

With this goal in mind and caught up in Foucault's infectious spirit, I will join the project of methodological clarification that Koopman has so ably initiated. Specifically, I will try to flesh out what it means in social criticism to "multiply not judgment but signs of existence." I take this to mean, at least in part, an interpretive confrontation with actual events and practices, rather than imposing some form of normative judgment on them from above. To make sense of that idea, I will enter into dialogue with Koopman and Foucault about (1) the normative character of genealogy and (2) the prospects of reconciling it with other modes of criticism. This will provide the basis for a broader argument about genealogy's critical capacities, focusing in particular on (3) its interpretive character and (4) its deployment as a critical *practice*, in contrast to a set of philosophical meta-positions or methodological doctrines.

The virtues of cryptonormativity

Koopman argues against many of Foucault's critics—Nancy Fraser, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty chief among them—that Foucault does not have normative problems or normative confusions. Fraser sees Foucault as lacking a consistent basis for criticism: "Because he fails to conceive and pursue any single consistent normative strategy, he ends up with a curious amalgam of amoral militaristic description, Marxian jargon and Kantian morality. Its many valuable empirical aspects notwithstanding, I can only conclude that Foucault's work is normatively confused."[3] Habermas takes up this line of criticism and situates the problems diagnosed by Fraser in a broader view of Foucault's failures. Among these, in his estimation, is a lack of self-reflection about the historical contingency of Foucault's own forms of critique and a lack of normative distance from the practices it criticizes.[4]

In effect, Fraser and Habermas up the normative ante on Foucault, claiming that he needs a carefully articulated basis for criticism, then criticize him for failing to meet that standard. Koopman responds by arguing that Foucault is not normatively ambitious in this sense and his focus is instead on problematization.[5] For Koopman, this means not just a denaturalization of taken-for-granted truths, but more importantly the ability to show how and why they were taken for granted in the first place. I think this is right, and Koopman's focus

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[2] Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 192; quoting Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 323.

[3] Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 17-34, at 31.

[4] Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987), 266-293.

[5] Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 87-98.

on problematization is a large contribution of his work. Indeed, we can imagine that Foucault might turn Fraser's and Habermas's charge on its head: normative "clarity" simply multiplies judgment while negating signs of existence; in contrast, what looks like normative confusion can be an appropriate response to the teeming multiplicity of existence itself.

When Koopman turns to discuss Foucault's latest works, however, he comes to a different conclusion. Evaluating the "Hellenistic" period of the 1980s when Foucault was reflecting on ancient Greek practices of the self, Koopman argues that Foucault does need some kind of normativity to bring this work into connection with the present and enable it to criticize contemporary formations of subjectivity.[6] This becomes the basis for a project of reconciliation on Koopman's part: he seeks to enhance Foucault's critical capacities through a fusion with strands of critical theory and pragmatism. Here I want to embrace Koopman's earlier line of argument and use it to chasten his later one. That is, I believe that Foucault does not need extra normative resources and should not be persuaded to go looking for them. I think the problem with Foucault's later work is not one of normativity, but simply that it is relatively remote from important areas of contemporary concern. His work on governmentality has launched a thousand research projects, while the Hellenistic work on the government of the self, which developed out of the same root in Foucault's thinking, has not. Governmentality proved a flexible and insight-producing way to think about a multitude of practices, but particularly the inner logic of institutional power, social reform, and the social sciences. In this sense, it has shown to be widely useful in ways that contrast with the later Hellenistic works. What matters is not just the normative force of a given interpretive paradigm, but the broader view that it opens into the history of the present.

Having said that, I differ with Koopman, on one hand, and Fraser and Habermas, on the other, about the normative import of genealogy. In contrast to Fraser and Habermas, I see Foucault's work as normatively subtle, which is to say not confused in any bad way. I believe that it possesses an appropriate and rather novel form of normativity, though I also agree with Koopman that it is not "normatively ambitious." Foucault's work is normative in a rich and fertile sense that escapes many of the problems of the more muscular, demanding, and non-contextual forms of normativity that Habermas and even Fraser seem to want. Its normativity is not articulated in propositional validity claims, as Habermas might require. Instead it is subtle, implied, and often concealed—a genre we can approvingly call *cryptonormative*. This name recognizes its tendency to travel unrecognized within practices of interpretation and explanation. It can be quite effective even if—and perhaps, precisely because—it is not thematized as such. It shows us important things about our own practices even though we might be at a loss to explain exactly how it does so.

To see the positive side of Foucault's cryptonormativity, it is worth remembering the extent to which his genealogies are interpretive enterprises. Interpretive choices are constantly being made in the assemblage of a genealogy: what is important, how various elements should be related to one another, and what problems might be revealed by foregrounding particular texts and passages. I think that Foucault is particularly subtle in tuning these interpre-

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[6] Ibid.,, 204-216.

tive and descriptive parameters to resonate with our shared background culture. This is not explicit and likely not intentional, but it makes his works particularly profound and effective.

Foucault is especially adept at a delicate, interpretive, intuitive use of background normativities. He draws on them to problematize and suggest without saying, claiming, or arguing. This method possesses a power and subtlety that is missing in more heavy-handed attempts to derive normativity. Those approaches fall flat because of what Koopman rightly calls their "normative ambitions," while Foucault relies on an art of writing and thinking that is based on a participant-observer's expert knowledge of the points of leverage that lie within our contemporary culture. His critical practice makes subtle use of critical resources within the horizon in which it operates, generating forms of contextually-appropriate critique out of their own context.

Irreconcilable differences

Now let me return to the Koopman's idea that Foucault's work could be strengthened by reconciling genealogy and reconstruction. I have already claimed that Foucault's work can stand on its own, normatively speaking, but it is worth engaging with Koopman's proposal to see whether it might nonetheless produce some gain. Foucault's genealogy is put forward as a potential partner for Habermasian reconstruction, with pragmatism also weighing in on the reconstructive side. Koopman makes various moves to bring the two sides together, arguing for a more-normative Foucault, trying to nuance the sense in which Habermas invokes universality, and suggesting a division of labor between backward-looking genealogy and forward-looking reconstruction.[7] I share his interest in such a reconciliation, but I also think that he underestimates some of the problems that lie there, particularly on the side of critical theory.

Koopman's attempt to make Habermas more congenial to genealogy focuses on the role of universality and universalization in Habermas's work. However, I do not see this as the normative fulcrum of Habermas's reconstructions nor the principal challenge to reconciliation. Habermas's primary interpretive presupposition is not universality or context-transcendence but the logical and articulate consistency of practices, the extent to which they do not contradict themselves in a philosophical sense. He tries to elucidate the "necessary" or "unavoidable" presuppositions of communicative and political practices.[8] He reconstructs them with "systematic intent," arriving at what he calls *rational* reconstructions.[9] These are the aspects of Habermas's work least congenial to genealogy. They cause him to prejudge the implicit structure of practice and the normative contents that might be found there. As a result, his reconstructions are charged with his own interpretive presuppositions and lack the open-ended commitment to contingency that genealogy, in its best moments, promises. This genre of reconstruction does not seem reconcilable with genealogy. Habermas imposes too many

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[7] Ibid.,, 228-241, 252-270.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 106; Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, edited by Maeve Cooke (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998), 367.

[9] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* I, 66-67, 196-7.

limiting presuppositions on interpretation to be consistent with Foucault's looser interpretive strategy of letting the archive speak for itself.

(Parenthetically, Foucault's obsession with power often becomes a similarly question-begging interpretive presupposition. His work on governmentality in the late 1970s constituted a move away from this *fil conducteur* and breathed fresh life into his research program.[10] In this sense I disagree with Koopman's assertion that governmentality is overemphasized in Foucault's legacy.[11])

Interpretation as critique

I am sympathetic to the idea of bringing together the best aspects of genealogy and reconstruction, so I would like to suggest a different strategy for undertaking that project. It emphasizes the ways in which genealogy and reconstruction are each interpretive enterprises that explore the origins, connections, inner logic, and significance of our practices. The works of Foucault and Habermas share this simultaneously interpretive and reconstructive character.

Foucault's genealogies are interpretive and reconstructive in the sense of piecing together related chains of practices and exploring their interconnections, epistemic assumptions, and the ways they constitute conditions of possibility for one another. Consider, for instance, the careful *mis-en-scène* of *Discipline and Punish*: the graphic public execution of Damiens the regicide, subsequently contrasted with the banal, bureaucratic rules that Léon Faucher devised to regulate the conduct of prisoners.[12] These vivid examples establish two poles of an interpretive space in which Foucault locates various other texts and events. They define a broader field of possibilities that makes plausible his assertions about the changing nature of domination, also adding a frisson of normativity to his indictment of power's modern forms. As bad as the spectacle of torture was, Foucault implies, contemporary power has its own horrors.

These qualities of Foucault's work are frequently overlooked. Few commentators focus on the difficult interpretive choices and the points of tension and negotiation that go into interpreting a set of practices. In short, they do not investigate what is actually involved in the practice of genealogy. Foucault was well aware of these issues. He was a public intellectual in a unique and profound sense, constantly reflecting in public on the problems and significance of his own work. His interviews and occasional writings show an acute awareness of the hesitations, reversals, frustrations, and fertile confusions that shaped the assembly of his genealogies.

I think Koopman tends to downplay these problematics within Foucault's own practice of writing and interpretation. He generously defends Foucault against criticisms, but often by emphasizing the continuity and harmony between different phases of his career. A confrontation with this material, for instance that assembled in the *Dits et Écrits*, would help to reveal

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[10] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

[11] Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 149ff.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3-7.

some of the rough texture of genealogical writing.[13] Accompanying this, a concrete, problem-oriented investigation of exactly how one *does* genealogy—not based on exegesis of Foucault, but taking genealogy more generally as a practice—would go a long way towards highlighting the sense in which genealogy is a reconstructive and interpretive practice.

Symmetrically, Habermas practices interpretation with good instincts but a heavy hand. He is dedicated to exploring the inner logic of practice through reconstruction, but in a way that narrows the scope of interpretation by emphasizing rationality and non-contradiction. When Habermas frees himself from these strictures, as he sometimes does in his engaged political writings (the so-called *Kleine politische Schriften*), he can be a subtle interpreter of contemporary practices.[14] These works rely less on front-loaded theoretical concepts that have a systematic role in Habermas's philosophy, and more on a sensitivity to the particulars of the events and practices under discussion. The ethos of this work is more Foucauldian, but with interpretive insights derived from Habermas's extensive knowledge of political structure and social dynamics.

I believe it is at this interpretive level, in which contemporary cultures and practices can be criticized from an internal, cryptonormative perspective, that Habermas and Foucault most fully come together. Each has unique interpretive resources, but they are consistent and synergistic with one another. If my intuitions are correct, most of the problems of reconciling genealogy and reconstruction would be sublated in practice if we follow the interpretive refiguration I have described. To see this, we need to think about the work that goes into making genealogies and reconstructions—how these forms of interpretation are actually accomplished. This results in a new critical and interpretive enterprise that explores the inner architecture of practices. It would extend the interpretive modalities that Foucault and Habermas have established, rather than reconciling two sets of meta-theoretical commitments with one another. In this mode we don't particularly care whether either Foucault or Habermas would endorse the final product. It is improvised from methods and interpretive insights that they have outlined in the course of doing their own work. The overall concern is a successful and insightful interpretation, rather than faith to any particular philosophical oeuvre. Here I am operating in the spirit of Koopman's own eclecticism, what he calls "a retail combination" of aspects of genealogy and reconstruction, though following a rather different path.[15]

Turning back to Foucault, we would need to look more closely at how genealogy actually works, thinking of it as a practice rather than as a modality of philosophical reasoning. In particular we want to be aware of the interpretive ambiguities, points of hesitation, the constructed character of the narrative, the importance of narrative styles, and the mixing of differ-

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[13] Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits, 1954-1988*, 4 vols., edited by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

[14] Habermas's *Kleine politische Schriften* currently number twelve volumes with various titles, published by Edition Suhrkamp. The most recent is Jürgen Habermas, *Im Sog der Technokratie*: *Kleine Politische Schriften XII* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013). I extend this line of thought further in Kevin Olson, "Deliberative Democracy," in Barbara Fultner (ed.), *Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen Press, 2011), 140-155.

[15] Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 222.

ent voices to avoid premature closure. In this view genealogy is problematic as well as problematizing. It produces a more open-textured, self-aware genealogical narrative.

Here I think some of Habermas's criticisms are instructive. In addition to complaining about Foucault's cryptonormativity, Habermas also remarks on the interpretive strategies of Foucault's various works. He says, "one could show in detail how Foucault simplifies the highly complex process of a progressive problematization of internal nature into a linear history."[16] More broadly, he accuses Foucault of a "tendency toward a leveling of ambiguous phenomena."[17] He also criticizes Foucault for failing to interpret the practices he examines from the perspective of those participating in them, a "first-person perspective."[18] Regardless of how on-target these charges might be, they voice an important concern with the assembly of genealogical narratives. They focus on the interpretive choices being made, the way one tells a story and sees meaning and coherence in a set of practices. Habermas argues for an expanded interpretive palette, for a less constrained perspective. This is somewhat ironic, given his own proclivities towards linear history and interpretive heavy-handedness. Nonetheless, his remarks set a worthwhile agenda for both thinkers, one that we would do well to follow.

Genealogy as critical practice

In outlining this alternative form of reconciliation, I ultimately intersect with some of Koopman's own ideas. In *Genealogy as Critique* he describes a tantalizing future project, a genealogy of American liberalism. The project will include:

> the transition from federalism to nationalism, the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism, the emergence and consolidation of scientific methods harnessing tools of probability, the complex racism of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, an increasing participation in colonial and imperial domination overseas, and the increasing dissemination of unifying venues of publicity such as broadcast media (Hearst's newspapers, commercial radio) and new forms of commons (Olmsted's public parks).[19]

This is a brief glimpse of an exciting agenda. Even as a sketch of a future project, it forcibly illustrates an important insight: we can gain only so much from Foucault, Habermas, and others in thinking about historically inflected, epistemically sophisticated critical modalities. The best study of how to formulate genealogy as critique, I believe, is to engage in genealogical research while thinking about that practice in a self-critical, self-reflexive way. As Foucault phrased it so well, this is the best way to multiply not judgment but signs of existence. Putting interpretive insights into practice is the ultimate proof that genealogy as critique is more than an abstract sketch of philosophical reconciliation. This is the vision, I believe, that can best light fires, listen to the wind, catch the sea foam in the breeze, and scatter it again.

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[16] Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 292.

[17] Ibid., 291.

[18] Ibid., 292-3.

[19] Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 106.

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