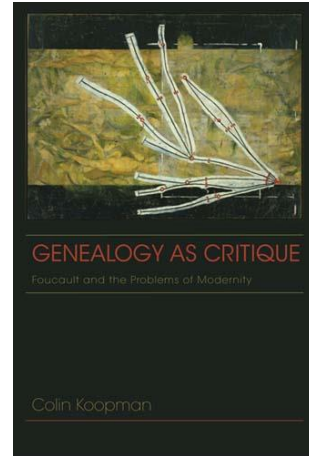


Colin Koopman, **Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity**, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013, 368 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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In **Genealogy as Critique**, Colin Koopman traces the contours of Foucault’s critical method of genealogy, presenting it not as a catch-all term for approaching history as a nonhistorian, but rather as a method of inquiry valuable to many fields, including communication, cultural studies, history, and sociology. As have many others who have commented on Foucault’s methods (notably Nicolas Rose, Paul Rabinow, Ian Hacking, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, and Michael Mahon, among others), Koopman argues that Foucault was engaged in “histories of the present.” However, where Koopman diverges from much of the commentary on Foucault is in his careful articulation of the method of a history of present within a larger intellectual framework that Foucault saw himself working in: namely, that of Kantian critique. Moreover, Koopman’s careful analysis of Foucaultian method opens up a space for *normative* interventions based on Foucault’s work, specifically in a methodological mix of American pragmatism, Habermasian critical theory, and Foucaultian genealogy. The question of intervention has always haunted engagements with Foucault, since Foucault was often loathe to make prescriptions that addressed contemporary problems.



With Koopman’s analysis in hand, we use Foucault’s method to trace the conditions that we find ourselves in and then move to nuanced, meaningful interventions in contemporary politics. Koopman’s work is exceptionally useful to students and scholars who want a method to use to consider contemporary objects and problems as the most visible elements of long-standing historical and social contingencies in addition to finding ways to shape (or, as Foucault might put it, refuse) these contingencies and thus make new futures.

Foucault’s Genealogy as Kantian Critique

Koopman’s claim that Foucault was self-consciously continuing Kant’s critical project might at first seem far-fetched (setting aside that this is also found in assessments by scholars such as Paul Rabinow, Michael Mahon, and Christina Hendricks), but the claim is supported by Koopman’s exhaustive reading of 80 of Foucault’s works, including archival sources, as well as evidence drawn from Kant’s major and minor works. The conclusion Koopman draws is that Foucault accepted Kant’s program of critique, that is, the attempt to trace the limits of thought. But whereas Kant largely sought *transcendental* limits to thought, Foucault aimed to trace the *historical* conditions that limit what is thinkable.

This is the heart of the genealogical method, a method of cultural critique:

Characteristic of this form of philosophical practice is a reflection on conditions of possibility of contemporary cultural, social, political, and ethical problems. Cultural critique for the genealogist does not, or at least need not, take the form of taking a position or assuming a side in present debates. Rather it takes the form, at least primarily, of articulating the conditions of possibility of the fraught debates in which we find ourselves enmeshed. Cultural critical philosophy takes the form of the articulation and intensification of the problematizations central to our fragile cultural formations. (p. 26)

Koopman's keyword here is "problematization," which is the naming and intensification of the conditions of possibility we find ourselves within. Foucault's problematizations are well-known: discipline, biopolitics, and heteronormativity. Indeed, the concepts that Foucault developed in response to his genealogical method are so pervasive that they are often "applied" to whatever phenomenon critics face, a practice Koopman derides as "biopower-hunting" (p. 6). Against this, Koopman argues that Foucault's concepts are not the most valuable part of his work; instead, we should value Foucault's method of patient inquiry into the various historical threads and practices that appear in the form of problems. Such genealogical work

tracks complex histories of alliance, support, and reinforcement that facilitate the production of spaces of practical possibility. The point is not to discern how the intentions of those in the past effectively gave rise to the present, but rather to understand how various independently existing vectors of practice managed to contingently intersect in the past so as to give rise to the present. (p. 107)

This is, as Koopman argues, history, but "history written with a question mark" (p. 143).

From Problematization to Reconstruction

"History with question marks" brings us to a key question: that of normativity. The biggest contribution of *Genealogy as Critique* involves the debates about Foucault's normativity. "Contrary to the accusations of countless critics," Koopman argues,

it is time to recognize that Foucault's genealogy enables rather than disables normative critique. This is so, however, not because genealogy itself supplies us with norms, but because genealogy can effectively be wielded as one part of a broader critical ensemble that looks both backwards into history and forward into futurity. (p. 140)

As Koopman demonstrates, Foucault's genealogy is never normative; rather its value is as a machine that dissociates assemblages such as discipline and sexuality, showing how they became stabilized—and thus showing us how they might be destabilized and transformed. However, Koopman argues that Foucault gives us little guidance in terms of how to transform these assemblages.

Thus, Koopman provides two potential—and seemingly unlikely—ways forward after genealogy: The American pragmatism of Dewey and the critical theory of Habermas. Koopman links Dewey and Habermas to Foucault via their shared programs of Kantian critique. He then lays out how Deweyian

pragmatism can provide normative "reconstruction" to meliorate the problematizations that Foucaultian genealogy articulates and intensifies. In this pairing, genealogy diagnoses problems, and pragmatism anticipates and works toward solutions.

The link between Habermas and Foucault is, of course, harder to make, since the former disparaged the latter and many of both philosophers' followers fell in line in subsequent debates. The argument centers in part on the incompatibility of Habermas' normative commitment to universality and Foucault's rigorous commitment to contextualism. Koopman squares this circle by defending the articulation of contingency and universality (rather than necessity and universality) through a concept of "universalization," "the project of extending our achievements to every possible context in which they might work" (p. 256). Such extensions can be horizontally transcendent, but they are so because they take a lot of work to be taken up from one context and placed into others. Once that work is done, they appear universal since they work across contexts. Thus, they are transcendent in a historical, contingent sense rather than an eternal one. With this conceptualization in hand, Koopman's Kantian link between Habermas and Foucault holds. With both philosophers seen as engaging *contingent* (even if universalizable) conditions of possibility, it is a rather simple matter to suggest that Habermas' Kantian normativity can be added to Foucault's Kantian genealogy in a potent mix of problem and response, genealogy and reconstruction. Koopman does not close the door to other normative approaches. It is here that Koopman's work is very open to additional normative programs. One that immediately leaps to mind is the normative approach of the field of cultural studies, oriented as it is toward (potentially) universalizable norms of social and economic justice. Foucaultian genealogy can open up a social problem as something we can intervene in; cultural studies can proceed with a principled set of (difficult) prescriptions from there, while mindful of the complex contingencies that genealogy documents. In this light, Koopman's warning against easy solutions links up well with Stuart Hall's famous assertion that there are "no guarantees." Both problematization and solution must always operate on one another. We must work very hard to trace the complex, specific, contingent, historically conditioned contours of power and freedom, and we must work just as hard coming up with experimental solutions to such problems. We work toward translating the results of such experiments across contexts and thus creating political change, but in so doing we become aware of new problems that require genealogical inquiry. As Koopman shows us, Foucaultian genealogy—a highly empirical social science of problematization—can be a powerful tool to begin, and sustain, this process.