

Genealogy and Critical Posthumanism

Stefan Herbrechter

Genealogies are about ancestors, lineages, progeny and the knowledge they produce. They are historical in the sense that they trace past developments to investigate how ‘things’ have become the way they ‘are’ (or, at least, were at a certain time). In the humanities and social sciences the concept of genealogy is mainly linked to both Nietzsche and Foucault. One can say that while Nietzsche’s genealogical approach is focused on morality (cf. *Genealogy of Morals*, 1887), Foucault’s genealogies (e.g. *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1976), *The History of Sexuality* (1976ff)) focus on the social and historical production of systems of knowledge, power and discourse. What both, Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s use of genealogy, share is the idea that through critical and genealogical investigation what has hitherto been regarded as obvious, natural or unchangeable can be revealed as constructed and as the result of historical and political selection. Neither Foucault nor Nietzsche are, however, interested in uncovering absolute truths or origins but are instead interested in the processes of knowledge production they involve. While for Nietzsche, truth famously was a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms”,¹ Foucault is primarily interested in the (human) subjectivities that specific discourses and social practices afford.² According to Foucault, individuals are subjected to power by mechanisms of control and dependence that are closely aligned with identity and self-knowledge, which means that they are subject to processes (i.e. “techniques of the self”) that involve identification and embodiment or indeed resistance to them, and which are *not* necessarily seen as coercive but rather as “choice”.³

The discursive knowledge that is inevitably perspectival, historically and culturally situated – and thus specific – recruits and positions subjects for whom this knowledge is supposed to *make* sense. Foucault is therefore specifically interested in the processes of legitimation as well as in their disruptions, discontinuities, contradictions and exclusions in order to create possibilities for an articulation of alternative, ‘subjugated’ knowledges. Consequently genealogy is about transformation and change (cf. Nietzsche’s call for a ‘revaluation of all values’)⁴ provoked by ‘denaturalisation’ (cf. also Roland Barthes’s sense of ‘myth’).⁵ Nature is here taken in an essentially modern and humanist sense as essence and thus stands in clear opposition to culture and the idea of ‘social construction’.⁶ A genealogical approach is therefore necessarily *critical*⁷ in the sense that it questions accepted truths, institutional power, strong notions of identity, normality and reality, by emphasising the power struggles that have led to their establishing and legitimation. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for counter-memories and alternative narratives. In short, by stressing historical contingency genealogies begin to show alternative possibilities of how ‘things’ could have been otherwise or might still develop differently in the future.

This genealogical approach has been very influential in transforming the theory and practice of historiographies that are often associated with *new historicism* and *cultural materialism* or *postmodernism* more generally. Genealogy,⁸ however, is not an interpretation of the past through a present-day perspective. Its aim instead is to produce ‘histories of the present’, or ‘effective histories’ that starts with contemporary problems or current issues.⁹ Writing history is here understood as a process of producing power-knowledge that is based on selection and exclusion, narrativisation and emplotment, and subject-positioning. Genealogy is an analysis of the specific connections of subjectivity, truth, knowledge and power, i.e. the ‘discursive formations’ at work in historiography and its legitimation.¹⁰

Foucault expressed himself on genealogy and its method in various places. Probably the most important text in this respect is his 1971 essay, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, Critique',¹¹ in which he follows Nietzsche's critique of history as the (metaphysical) search for truths and origins. Genealogy, Foucault says, 'does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity' (81), but, instead, "seeks to re-establish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning but the hazardous play of dominations" (83) that constitute the "history of humanity" (i.e. "the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic if life" (86). This genealogical method produces effective histories in the sense that "it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself" (88).¹² In his interview "On the Genealogy of Ethics" Foucault indicated three possible domains for genealogy that remain pertinent for a critical posthumanism: "First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents" (351).¹³

The main motivation for this genealogy of "Genealogy", as part of the online *Genealogy of the Posthuman*, is to maintain a connection with Foucault's (and Nietzsche's) use of the concept and to reflect on the importance of *critique*. In fact, one of the main reasons why critical posthumanism understands itself as *critical* is precisely because of this affinity to a genealogical understanding of critique. As Foucault explains, critique is "genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think".¹⁴ Genealogies are critical precisely because they "operate as denaturalizing critiques of ideas and practices that hide the contingency of human life behind formal ahistorical or developmental perspectives".¹⁵ For Foucault more specifically, "genealogies are usually histories of present subjectivities, for their critical impact depends on people still being immersed in the beliefs and practices that they denaturalize".¹⁶ It is in this sense that critical posthumanism understands itself as a critical denaturalization of (liberal) humanist subjectivity or as an "ongoing deconstruction of humanism".¹⁷ In doing so, genealogy and critical posthumanism both "explore the conditions of possibility of contemporary beliefs and practices" and "uncover the historical contingencies that made it possible for people today to think and act as they do".¹⁸ Genealogical critique understood in this way aims to open up "novel spaces for personal and social transformation" by loosening the hold on us of "entrenched ideas and institutions; it frees us to imagine other possibilities" – which is precisely what the "figure" of the posthuman signals (e.g. for Rosi Braidotti),¹⁹ namely a counter-memory to the humanist tradition of anthropocentrism. In this sense, importantly, "genealogy is history oriented toward the future".²⁰

Critical posthumanism proceeds genealogically in the sense that it contextualises and investigates the *figure* of the posthuman and *discourses* on posthumanism by placing them within "theoretical and philosophical developments and ways of thinking within modernity".²¹ Its aim is to denaturalize the "human" (its exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, its "nature"); in so challenging the legitimation (the power-knowledge apparatus) of humanism, it seeks out discontinuities and counter-memories from which to tell the story of the human and its others differently. While this is undoubtedly a political stance, critical posthumanism's *raison-d'être* is ultimately ethical – it is motivated by *care* – care for the human *and* the nonhuman alike. In this sense, "whoever cares about the humans and their past, present and future might want to critically engage with humanism's anthropocentric ideology".²² Critical posthumanism is genealogical as well as critical because it begins with a current

problem, an urgency – the insistence of the “posthuman” in all its forms. Its objective is to write effective histories that would do justice to “the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling that arises once you start taking the idea of ‘postanthropocentrism’ seriously ... and to think the ‘end of the human’ without giving in to apocalyptic mysticism or to new forms of spirituality and transcendence”.²³ It is, in fact, the desire of the posthuman that is both the subject and object of critical posthumanism’s critique as it unfolds in the entries of this online resource hosted by the *Critical Posthumanism Network*. The online *genealogies* it hosts – texts that of course due to their brevity and variety cannot possibly emulate the archaeological precision and the genealogical extent of Foucault’s work – are nevertheless critically genealogical in tone and spirit. Collectively and cumulatively – and this is the advantage of a collaborative online platform – they identify, track, analyse and critique different manifestations of the desire of the posthuman and thus constitute the beginning of a systematic and comprehensive but necessarily open-ended resource that tracks “our” past, present and future posthumanisations. It is in this sense that it performs a *Genealogy of the Posthuman*.

¹ The full quotation from “On Truth and Lies in the Extra-Moral Sense [1873]”, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 46-47, runs: “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are ...”.

² Foucault explained, in “The Subject of Power”, that the main objective of his work was to “create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 2013 [1982]: 208).

³ In “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”, Foucault speaks of “techniques of the self” in connection with sexuality (in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 340, 369-70). Also relevant in this context are the phrase “moral technologies” which Foucault uses in discussing Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* (*Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 276) and the notion of “apparatus’ [*dispositif*]” which he defines as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions ... the apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (“The Confession of the Flesh”, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194-228). Both notions are important for critical posthumanism and will be discussed in a separate entry on Foucault. See also Giorgio Agamben’s *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2009).

⁴ An idea that Nietzsche put forward in *The Antichrist* (1888), see *The Portable Nietzsche*: 568ff.

⁵ See Roland Barthes in “Myth Today”, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993 [1957]), 109-159.

⁶ Critical posthumanism, while remaining committed to a critique of essentialism, is nevertheless also aware of the different “politics of nature” (Latour’s phrase) that are at work in social or cultural constructivism and conservative discourses on “human nature”. In both cases the ‘true’ nature of nature is missed, or ‘othered’ so to speak; see the forthcoming genealogy on Haraway and her use of Latour’s notion of “naturecultures”.

⁷ See the forthcoming separate genealogy on “critique and critical posthumanism”.

⁸ This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Foucault’s notion of “archaeology” and its relation to “genealogy”. The best way to understand both notions is probably of them functioning in some form of synergy as Foucault explains in *Power/Knowledge*: “If we were to characterise it in two terms, then ‘archaeology’ would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and ‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play” (85).

⁹ On the notions of “effective history” and “history of the present” see Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1994), and David Garland, “What is a ‘history of the present’? On Foucault’s Genealogies and Their Critical Preconditions”, *Punishment and Society* 16.4 (2014): 365-384.

¹⁰ For an extensive discussion of the practice of historiography see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹¹ In *The Foucault Reader*, 76-100.

¹² Foucault's insistence on the *embodied* nature of subjectivisation and his genealogical investigations continue to play a central role within critical posthumanism and will be investigated in a forthcoming genealogy on "embodiment".

¹³ In *The Foucault Reader*, 351. Critical posthumanism significantly extends and challenges the remit of Foucault's framework by including analyses of nonhuman forms of agency and subjectivity.

¹⁴ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", *The Foucault Reader*, 46. In this context, see also chapters 1 and 2 of my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁵ Mark Bevir, "What is Genealogy?", *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008): 263.

¹⁶ Bevir, 272.

¹⁷ Neil Badmington, "Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism", in Badmington, ed., *Posthumanism*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 1-10.

¹⁸ Bevir, 272.

¹⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

²⁰ Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (New York: SUNY, 1992), 82. For a more detailed analysis of genealogy as critique also see Mahon, as well as Martin Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik: Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2007) and Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

²¹ Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, vii.

²² Herbrechter, 3.

²³ Herbrechter, 3.