

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Siisiäinen, Lauri

Title: Critical Inquiry and/or Art of Critique: Koopman's Genealogy as Critique

Year: 2014

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Siisiäinen, L. (2014). Critical Inquiry and/or Art of Critique: Koopman's Genealogy as Critique. *Theory and Event: an online journal of political theory*, 17(1).
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v017/17.1.siisiainen.html

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Siisiäinen, L. (2014). Critical Inquiry and/or Art of Critique: Koopman's Genealogy as Critique. Theory and Event: an online journal of political theory, 17 (1). Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v017/17.1.siisiainen.html

Critical Inquiry and/or Art of Critique: Koopman's *Genealogy as Critique* Lauri Siisiäinen (bio)

Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013. \$30 (paper) pp. ISBN-10: 025300621X ISBN-13: 978-0253006219

1.

As we know, the amount of literature interpreting or commenting on Michel Foucault's thought is immense. To borrow Foucault's own terms, it easily happens that a new work on Foucault disappears into the continuous, anonymous "murmuring" of Foucault-literature. First of all, Colin Koopman's recently published book, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*, is distinguished by its ambitious objective. It is to reconstruct and illuminate, in a rigorous as well as synaptic or synthesizing way, the coherent nucleus of Foucault's critical, *genealogical method*. Also, the goal is to illustrate how Foucault applied this method in practice in his more concrete, historical interventions.

One of the undeniable merits of Koopman's treatise, which makes it stand out, is erudition. Koopman is not content in going through the generally known and recognized "major works" of Foucault (this is all too commonly the case in Foucault literature). Koopman attentively examines and synthesizes, e.g., an array of Foucault's self-reflective meditations, scattered here and there in essays and interviews, ranging from the earliest to the very last ones. By exploring Foucault's numerous remarks on the orientations and aims of his thinking, Koopman obtains a rich body of evidence to back his methodological-synaptic view. It is much more convincing than, dare I say, what we find in the average Foucault commentary. In this material, Koopman's reading moves dexterously back and forth, perceptively tracing the cross-temporal references in Foucault's texts. To compare, certain studies on Friedrich Nietzsche's style, strategy, and *art of writing* have successfully utilized similar tactics.

The grand thesis in Koopman's volume, one that is cogently demonstrated, is that we *can* find in Foucault something we may legitimately call *genealogical method*. In the general understanding of "method," it is a coherent set of general-level, conceptual assertions, procedures, and rules of analysis. A method can be applied in the inquiry of particular cases, which is at the same time both enabled as well as oriented and delimited through its adherence to the method. To put it briefly, Koopman's methodological reading divides Foucault's textual corpus according to a two-level model of scientific inquiry: At one level, we have the method-developing Foucault (from archaeology to genealogy), and at the other level, we have the applicative or applied Foucault, who realizes and follows the basic, general insights of the methodological Foucault.

To summarize, what Koopman identifies as the core of Foucault's genealogical method is, first, the fundamental statement *that* our existence is conditioned (allowed and restrained) by conditions of possibility that are historically emergent and contingent, but also capable of becoming inert. Second, there is the even more important enunciation, concerning *how* it is that our existence is conditioned historically and contingently. The conditions of our present existence, and of *any* present existence in *any* possible present, are generated and composed by a dynamic complex of different sorts of vectors of practices, as these intersect (power, knowledge, etc.).

Albeit Koopman insists (correctly) that Foucault denied his having intended to construct a general theory of power, it is still the case that in Koopman's own exposition, the genealogical method *is*, first and foremost, a general-theoretical construction. The method of genealogy consists of general, if not universal, if not ontological assertions on the contingent, complex, historically emergent and

conditioned nature of existence as such. Then, these general assertions orient our empirical, concrete genealogical studies and analyses (as they did with the ones conducted by Foucault's himself) of any particular cases, situations, contexts, and phenomena. To recapitulate: Even though Koopman (248) stresses that he does not mean by method an "aprioristic theory that can determine practice in advance," it still appears that we are left with a depiction of genealogy as a theoretical method, that is, as a general-level discourse to be applied, deployed, and followed in concrete empirical inquiries.

We come across one of the most significant insights in Koopman's book, consequential for our understanding of Foucault, when he scrutinizes the continuities and differences of archaeology and genealogy. Koopman substantiates, very plausibly, that it is not a matter of some sort of incongruity between these two. Instead, genealogy of power-knowledge relations *supplements* archaeology of knowledge, while also preserving its vital notions, that is, historical condition of possibility, or in Koopman's favored terms, *problematization*.

What was lacking in archaeology and what genealogy adds, is the complex interplay of different kinds of vectors of practices and formations (knowledge *and* power, etc.). Together with the former, genealogy introduces a sense of *time* and *temporality*, of historical emergence, transition, and event. Concomitantly, Koopman (30-44) contends the familiar, simplifying claim that Foucault's overarching venture was to dismiss the issue of time and temporality (the phenomenological-existential theme) and to prioritize space. Koopman makes a salient point, suggesting that we should heed in Foucault's critical method of genealogy the role of time/temporality, perhaps akin to the Deleuzian (and before that, one might add, Bergsonian) idea of temporal difference, repetition, becoming, and continuity. The question of the specific, critical as well as "pragmatic-political" role of temporality and temporalization - or, as Foucault also said, of "*eventualization*" - in the functioning of Foucault's genealogical equipment is such an intriguing one, that I only wish it had been given some more room in Koopman's work.

In all, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* is a welcome contribution not only for Foucault scholars, but also for those who strive to clarify what Foucaultian genealogy is about, in order to use it in novel ways in concrete studies and analyses. Koopman masters well the non-chronological - or perhaps one could say self-consciously anachronistic - strategy of reading, which shifts between Foucault's texts from different periods. The textual evidence mobilized is expansive and suffices to support the weight of the argument.

2.

Koopman's bold, synaptic endeavor provokes certain questions as well. Is the somewhat harmonious image of Foucault's thinking selective, and does it leave out of view certain heterogeneous, but noteworthy veins in Foucault's intellectual biography? Underscoring the methodological consistence in Foucault's thinking, Koopman lays a lot of stress on a number of introspective statements that Foucault made during the final years of his life. In these, Foucault looks back in time to elucidate the aims and motives that have guided the course of his intellectual history. However, if we explore the whole myriad of such remarks, where Foucault is reflecting on his own path of thinking, we discover other strains as well, diverging from the ones emphasized by Koopman.

We can observe on some occasions, Foucault himself is not portraying his thinking in terms of continuity and consistence in aims and methods. Instead, he sees his own thinking, his own "work," as an event of self-creation or self-transformation, of becoming other and different from oneself, and of self-dismantling one's proper self-identity as a thinking, analyzing, and inquiring subject. This self-transformative notion of thinking and "working" appears to have more affinity with *artistic* work of creation than with the modern image of scientific, and even more precisely, social-scientific inquiry. If there is continuity and consistence, it is the paradoxical one of persistent, artistic differing. Koopman (192-193) does briefly point out the existence of such *poetic* or artistic self-understanding of thinking/thinker in Foucault. Yet, this point is quickly left aside. Hence, in what follows, I would like to accentuate this artistic-poetic image of thinking, and its differences from the methodological-scientific model.

Essentially, this self-portrait that highlights the radical self-transformation, self-problematization, and self-refutation in the eventual unfolding of thinking, is not easily compatible with the scheme of inquiry, which progresses in a continuous and coherent fashion from the pinning down of general-level method (principles, rules, conceptual schemes, procedures, tools of analysis, etc.) to their concrete, empirical application. Alas, it is not possible in this review to delve into a comprehensive and detailed treatment of this topic. To flesh out, I can only propose a short discussion of a couple of "cases" picked from Foucault's *œuvre*.

Let us take a closer look at one particular text - to be sure, not among the most commented ones of Foucault - where the artistic or aesthetic, rather than scientific-methodological modality of thinking, is illustrated in a detailed way. In an essay published in 1982, dedicated to his friend, composer-conductor Pierre Boulez, Foucault highlights the importance of Boulez's musical thinking or musical analyses, intertwined with the musical practices of composition and conducting. Boulez has provided an exemplar, for Foucault along with many others, on a certain practice of historical thinking.¹

Boulez's exemplar exposes thinking as an activity that is constantly *making possible*, constantly *opening possibilities* "to do something else than what he [i.e., the thinker] was doing."² Thinking nurtures the potential to deviate from pre-given course, to become different, which means also, to detach from any pre-established methodological or theoretical form consisting of rules, principles, conceptual settings, and dispositions. This potential extends also to the rules generated by thinking for itself in a self-legislative manner, also/even for the ones constructed in archaeological and genealogical terms, we should infer.

Yet, this does not mean that the activity of thinking would simply, and in a naïve fashion, deny or neglect the existence of rules. Foucault pays homage to Boulez precisely for showing that thinking, and historical thinking more precisely, is an activity that is capable of "*breaking the rules in the act that realizes them*,"³ in other words, actualizing rules, but through this same activity also problematizing, challenging, subverting, and changing the rules-in-actualization. Hence, thinking discards the rules, the laws, the norms, and the conceptual schemes of their status as founding, "sovereign requirements." What is jettisoned is the binary, on one hand, of general theory-method, and on the other hand, the instrumental application and technical "know-how." Instead of the straightforward move of application, in the figure of thinking endorsed here by Foucault (following Boulez) we are rather dealing with an activity with a *curving movement*. In this movement, the concrete application turns back into, and against the theoretical-methodological basis in order to destabilize its schemes and matrices, including those of archaeology and genealogy as well.

3.

We might choose the second case to discuss here from a much more generally known late work of Foucault, which plays an important role in Koopman's book too. In Foucault's final *Collège de France* lecture courses - the context being now his rereading of Plato's 7th Letter - Foucault again ponders over the dynamic character of philosophical thinking and knowing. To put it concisely, what Foucault wants to tease out from Plato's letter, is the following insight: Philosophical thinking and knowing is an activity, which does not fit into *any* of the established, conventional models of knowledge. The naming of objects does not equal philosophical knowledge, nor does visual-pictorial representation. Furthermore, not even linguistic definition of concepts, and not even the apprehension of a thing's qualities give us true knowledge of the thing's being.⁴

In other words, philosophy is something quite different from what may be indicated in the common sense (still today) as general-level, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological cognition, that is, concept-definition and construction of conceptual schemes. Neither construction of concepts, nor their application into concrete empirical cases passes the test of true knowledge. What we need, Plato maintains in Foucault's reading, is a radically divergent, dynamic notion of thinking and knowledge. My intention here is not to assess the accuracy of Foucault's interpretation, but independently of that, I believe the following passage is worth citing in some length:

The fifth form of knowledge, it is the one that will allow us to know the thing itself [*la chose elle-même*] in its proper being [...] So, one can form it via the *comings and goings* [*le va-et-venir*], the *rising* and *descending* along the four other degrees of knowledge, and through

the instruments that characterize the other forms of knowledge. It is in that way, by rising from the name to the definition, from the definition to the image, and from the image to *epistemē* [i.e., the apprehension of thing's qualities], then by *descending*, then by *going up once again*, it is thus that one arrives at the fifth form of knowledge to grasp the being itself [...] of the things that one wants to know [...] And when that soul [...] has practiced what Plato calls *tribē*—in the strict sense, *rubbing/friction*—it is in this manner that the knowledge of what reality is in its very being will be possible [...] the knowledge of what reality is in its being as such is only possible through *tribē* (rubbing/friction [*le frottement*]) of the modes of knowledge *against one another* [...]⁵

Philosophical activity of thought, the *real of philosophy* (*le réel de la philosophie*), is not (of course) empirical, nor is it simply theoretical or methodological. It transpires *between* these given modalities of cognition, between these levels of knowledge, while also relating the levels with one other. As the result, a dynamic interplay is instigated, one in which the levels mutually impact one another. Adopting and revising the term coined by Plato, Foucault characterizes this relational dynamics of thinking as *rubbing or friction*. This indicates that in the relationship forged between the different modalities and stages of cognition, there is discord, strife, opposition, and resistance at play.⁶

Moreover, the continuous movement of thinking is not univocal; that is, it is not progressive ascension, step by step, from the concrete towards the abstract, from the lower towards the higher, or from the theory or method towards their empirical application. Thinking moves back and forth, up and down, in the frictional dynamics. In this figure of thinking, the progress towards true knowledge cannot take place without recurrent regressions. Admittedly, in the encounter with Plato, Foucault leaves somewhat implicit the significance of the figure of "rubbing/friction" for his own thinking more broadly. Still, there is nothing either that allows us to rule out the possibility of certain endorsement.

Above, we have shortly and only very preliminarily examined two parallel occasions, in which late Foucault approaches thinking as an activity with a curved or circling line of movement. Furthermore, in both cases, thinking-activity possesses a self-subversive and self-transformative dynamics that does not fit easily into the hierarchic as well as univocal setting of theoretical-methodological and empirical-applied levels and practices. If possible here, we could of course search for more textual evidence to demonstrate the pertinence of this thread for Foucault. We could also show how it is manifested "in practice," when Foucault's concrete, historical analyses self-consciously deviate from, turn back against, and dispute his anterior, methodological reflections in archaeology and genealogy. When this occurs, it is impossible to locate any clear-cut division separating Foucault's methodology from its application by Foucault.

My aim is not to debunk the overall legitimacy and success of Koopman's engagement with Foucault. To reiterate, Koopman's volume has indisputable merits, both as a contribution to Foucault scholarship, as well as more extensively, in clarifying and systematizing genealogy as a method of critical inquiry. I have just attempted to remind the reader that, besides, we can find another, different portrait of thinking/thinker in Foucault, and that we have no reason not to take this portrait as seriously as the one that Koopman carefully excavates. Using the pivotal terms of Koopman, we ought to keep in mind also the real "genealogical" tensions, complexities, emergences, and unstable transitions operative in Foucault's thinking.

The germane questions are: Should we (and to what extent) read Foucault's texts as enunciations belonging to the discursive formation of modern, scientific inquiry? Or should we, instead, read them as discursive events whose logic is radically different from the modern, scientific, and more particularly, social-scientific form of inquiry? The answers are anything but self-evident. Thus, it is a bit surprising that Koopman does not raise such issues, considering that he is otherwise very diligent in addressing and countering a range of different readings of Foucault. More articulate self-awareness of the decisions and limits of focus and orientation - that is, more *self-problematization*, to embrace once again Koopman's key concept - would have only made the project still more compelling. In the end, the irreducible diversity in Foucault's thinking, transgressing the borders of disciplines and even discursive genres alike is undoubtedly one of the things that make him a source of continuous fascination and debate still today.

Lauri Siisiäinen

Lauri Siisiäinen (Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä) is currently an Academy of Finland Postdoctoral Research Fellow. His research has focused on the intersections

between political theory, arts, aesthetics, and perception. He has dealt with these topics in the monograph *Foucault and the Politics of Hearing* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2012), as well as in articles published in journals including *Foucault Studies*, *Theory & Event*, *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History, and Feminist Theory*. Lauri can be reached at lauri.m.siisiainen@jyu.fi

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Pierre Boulez, l'écran traversé," in *Foucault: Dits et écrits, II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Quarto/Gallimard, 2001), 1038-1041.
2. Foucault, "Pierre Boulez, l'écran traversé," 1041, emphasis added, my translation.
3. Foucault, "Pierre Boulez, l'écran traversé," 1041, emphasis added, my translation.
4. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres. Cours au Collège de France, 1982-1983* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2008), 226-236.
5. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 232-233, emphasis added, my translation.
6. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 226-236.