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On possibilising genealogy

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ABSTRACT



In this paper, I argue that the vindicatory/unmasking distinction has so far prevented scholars from grasping a third dimension of genealogical inquiry, one I call *possibilising*. This dimension has passed unnoticed even though it constitutes a crucial aspect of Foucault's genealogical project starting from 1978 on. By focusing attention on it, I hope to provide a definitive rebuttal of one of the main criticisms that has been raised against (unmasking) genealogy in general, and Foucauldian genealogy in particular, namely the idea that Foucault's genealogical project lacks normative grounding and is therefore ultimately incapable of telling us why we should resist and fight against the mechanisms of power it nevertheless reveals in an empirically insightful way. This conclusion, I argue, is mistaken because it conceives of Foucauldian genealogy exclusively as an unmasking or problematising method, whereas I claim that Foucault's genealogical project possesses a possibilising dimension that provides his work with *sui generis* normative force.

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I

In recent years, genealogy – a narrative describing how a certain belief, concept, value, or practice came about or might be imagined to have come about – has increasingly become central to debates in both analytic and continental philosophy. In analytic philosophy, genealogy has been employed as a 'state of nature epistemology' (Kusch and McKenna 2018) to explain the emergence of concepts and values such as knowledge, truthfulness, or testimonial justice (Craig 1990; Williams 2002; Fricker 2007, 2008). In continental philosophy, in contrast, following Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy has been posited as a possible basis for social and political critique (Visker 1995; Geuss 2002; Saar 2007;

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Koopman 2013). In either camp, the use of genealogy has so far been essentially motivated by the need to reassure or foster ‘anxiety’ as to the epistemic or socio-political validity of our beliefs, concepts, values, or practices (Srinivasan 2019). In other words, genealogy has been used either for *vindictory* aims, to show that if certain features of a concept originated with the concept, they are essential to it and should not be questioned; or for *unmasking* (or *debunking*) aims, to show that if a belief or practice emerged in a contingent way or, worse, as a consequence of ignoble historical events, they should be criticised if not straightforwardly abandoned.¹

In this paper, I argue that this binary distinction has prevented scholars from grasping a further dimension of genealogical inquiry. While scholars such as Colin Koopman (2013) and Amy Allen (2016), building on Foucault, have already defended an alternative approach that they call ‘problematising genealogy’, I suggest that they too have missed a crucial dimension of genealogy, one I call *possibilising*. This dimension has passed unnoticed, even though it constitutes an essential aspect of Foucault’s genealogical project from 1978 on, when the notions of ‘counter-conduct’ and ‘critical attitude’ were first coined (Foucault 2007, 2009; on this point, see Lorenzini 2016). A few years later, it is through genealogy that Foucault explicitly connects the latter notion to his analysis of ancient *parrësia*: ‘In analysing this notion of *parrësia*, I would like also to outline the genealogy of what we could call the critical attitude in our society’ (Foucault 2019a, 63). For Foucault, a genealogy of the critical attitude is neither vindictory nor (purely) unmasking or problematising, but has an essentially possibilising dimension: it allows us to ‘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’ (Foucault 1984a, 46, emphasis added). This ‘possibility’, far from just being abstract, is to be thought of in terms of the elaboration and practice of concrete forms of counter-conduct in the present (Davidson 2011). Thus, although genealogy does not legislate the specific *content* of these possible counter-conducts, it does define their *form*, since each aims to criticise and destabilise a given power/knowledge apparatus that still governs (certain aspects of) ‘our’ conduct today.

But who is this ‘we’? In this paper, I argue that Foucauldian genealogy provides us with an answer to this question, one that, however, is not and cannot be situated prior to the genealogical endeavour: by retracing the

¹The vindictory/unmasking distinction was coined by Williams (2002) and then widely used in the literature (see e.g. Hoy 2008; Koopman 2013; Srinivasan 2019).

emergence of past counter-conducts against a given power/knowledge mechanism which is still operative (albeit transformed) in the present, the genealogy of the critical attitude contributes to making the ‘formation of a “we” possible’ (Foucault 1984d, 385, emphasis added). This is what I call the ‘we-making’ dimension of possibilising genealogy.

By focusing attention on possibilising genealogy, I hope to provide a definitive rebuttal to one of the main criticisms that has been raised against (unmasking) genealogy in general, and Foucauldian genealogy in particular. It has been argued that Foucault’s genealogies are at best capable of emphasising the historically contingent origins of concepts and practices such as disciplinary control and punishment (Foucault 1995, 2015a), sexuality (Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986, 2018), or truth and truth-telling (Foucault 2013, 2014a) – concepts and practices that, moreover, are inextricably enmeshed in relations of power from the start. However, these genealogies are not considered capable of giving us any indication as to ‘what we should do’: should we reject these concepts and practices, or at least try to change them? And what *new* concepts and practices should we elaborate? Most importantly, why bother at all, since according to Foucault – it is posited – power is everywhere, and thus escaping from it is ultimately impossible (Taylor 1984)?

To date, the most influential articulation of this line of criticism is found in Nancy Fraser (1981, 1985) and Jürgen Habermas (1981, 1990), who famously claim that Foucault’s genealogical project lacks normative grounding and is therefore incapable of telling us *why* we should resist the mechanisms of power it nevertheless reveals in an empirically insightful way. This conclusion, I argue, is mistaken because it conceives of Foucauldian genealogy exclusively as an unmasking method, whereas Foucault’s genealogical project also encompasses a possibilising dimension. By this I mean that it aims not only to demonstrate the contingent nature of our concepts and practices by revealing the power dynamics that presided over their establishment (unmasking genealogy), nor exclusively to make them *problematic* once again (problematifying genealogy). Crucially, it also aspires to show that each power/knowledge formation has already been contested by multiple forms of counter-conduct which are ‘normatively significant’ for us (Jaeggi 2009, 73) because they concretely embody the possibility of no longer being, doing, and thinking what we are, do, and think. Thus, by highlighting that the genealogy of the critical attitude is intrinsically coupled with the other genealogical inquiries that Foucault undertook, I aim to provide a more convincing argument in favour of the thesis that his work possesses (*sui generis*) normative force.

My argument proceeds as follows. In Section II, I show that the main responses to Fraser and Habermas's criticisms of Foucauldian genealogy marshalled by scholars sympathetic to Foucault have fallen short, because each fails to grasp the possibilising aspect of his project. In Section III, I construe Foucault's genealogy of the critical attitude as a possibilising method that lies at the heart of his philosophical and political endeavour. Finally, in Section IV, I explore the analogies between Benjamin and Foucault's respective conceptions of history, and argue that they both contribute to the constitution of a political 'we' that encompasses the vanquished – or the 'infamous' men and women (Foucault 1979) – of the past, thus generating a normative commitment for us to carry on their struggles in the present, albeit in different forms.

II

It has been observed that the so-called 'Foucault/Habermas debate' has received disproportionate attention in the past thirty years, given that it never ultimately took place and is thus essentially a product of the scholarly literature on these thinkers (Allen 2009; Schmidt 2013). In this section, I will therefore refrain from attempting to reconstruct the debate as it would or should have happened. Instead, I will argue that the form this debate has taken in the secondary literature demonstrates how critics and apologists of Foucault alike have so far failed to grasp the possibilising dimension of his genealogical project, and with it its specific normative force.

In addressing Foucault's writings in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas argues that 'genealogy is overtaken by a fate similar to that which Foucault had seen in the human sciences': since genealogy claims for itself the 'reflectionless objectivity of a nonparticipatory, ascetic description of kaleidoscopically changing practices of power', it cannot but end up taking the form of 'the *presentistic, relativistic, cryptonormative* illusory science that it does not want to be' (Habermas 1990, 275–6). Foucault's unmasking genealogies aim to be purely descriptive and value-neutral, but instead, according to Habermas, Foucault draws on them in order to express judgments that rest on masked, and therefore illegitimate, normative assumptions. More precisely, Habermas argues that the aim of Foucault's 'theory of power' is to show that 'the meaning of validity claims consists in the power effects they have' (279). Consequently, Foucault's genealogical project is ultimately self-defeating, since if it succeeds 'it must destroy the foundations of the research inspired by it as

well' (279). If the truth claims associated with Foucault's genealogies of power/knowledge amounted to no more than their effects on its adherents, 'the entire undertaking of a critical unmasking of the human sciences would lose its point' (279).² Indeed, no difference whatsoever could then be traced between discourses in power and counter-discourses, for they would both be 'nothing else than the effects of power they unleash' (281). Therefore, according to Habermas, Foucault's genealogical inquiries cannot be critical, because they cannot claim to fall outside the reach of Foucault's all-encompassing 'theory of power'. As a result, genealogy should not be conceived as critique, but 'as a tactic [...] for waging a battle against a normatively unassailable formation of power' (283) – a tactic that is ultimately unable to tell us why one should fight against power, so pervasively conceived.

In short, the nucleus of Habermas's criticisms of Foucault consists in casting doubt on the normative validity of his genealogical method, suggesting that it cannot help but be self-defeating. In analogous fashion, a few years before, Fraser had already argued that Foucault's views fall prey to 'normative confusions' since they claim to be at once value-neutral and politically engaged, and yet lack grounds to articulate why struggle is preferable to submission, and why domination should be resisted (Fraser 1981, 283; see also Fraser 1985).

Much ink has been spilled trying to either strengthen Fraser and Habermas's line of criticism (McCarthy 1994), or to defend Foucault's genealogical inquiries. In the latter case, two main strategies have been deployed. First, scholars have argued that Foucault's genealogies of power/knowledge, and his philosophical-political project more broadly, are consistently non-foundational: far from being normatively confused, they are perfectly coherent in their non-normative endeavour (Brown 1998; Tully 1999; Han-Pile 2016; Kelly 2018). Second, scholars have claimed that Foucault's philosophical-political project is in fact normative, but disagree on how it should be cashed out: either Foucault's conception of freedom or autonomy, variously characterised in terms of self-transformation or self-determination, *does* constitute the normative grounding that Fraser and Habermas demand (Kelly 1994; Patton 1994; Oksala 2005; Allen 2009, 2016; Tiisala 2017;

²See also Habermas (1986): '[Foucault] contrasts his critique of power with the "analysis of truth" in such a fashion that the former becomes deprived of the normative yardsticks that it would have to borrow from the latter' (108). Earlier in the book, Habermas addresses an analogous criticism to Nietzsche, who 'owes his concept of modernity, developed in terms of his theory of power, to an unmasking critique of reason that sets itself outside the horizon of reason' (Habermas 1990, 96). For a response to Habermas's criticisms of Nietzsche, see Geuss (1999, 1–28); for a critical discussion of Habermas's reading of both Nietzsche and Foucault, see Biebricher (2005).

Mascaretti 2019), or Foucault has strong normative commitments, but ones of a different form than what Fraser and Habermas would likely accept (Flyvbjerg 1998; Ashenden and Owen 1999; Butler 2004). Bridging these two camps, some scholars have also tried to combine Foucault and Habermas's views, arguing that they are closer than they might seem (Honneth 1991), or even complementary (King 2009; Koopman 2013).

While entering into the details of these debates is outside my scope in this paper, I want to emphasise that virtually every scholar sympathetic to Foucault, knowingly or not, ends up conceding to Fraser and Habermas a strategically crucial point: genealogy aims first and foremost to open up a space of freedom, but it is not its task to fill such a space nor even to commit us to do so. That is, genealogy unmasks the fact that our beliefs, concepts, and practices, far from being natural and necessary, are historical and contingent; hence, by denaturalising everything that presents itself as ahistorical and universal, it opens up new possibilities for action, as well as for personal and social transformation (Flyvbjerg 1998; Owen 1999; Saar 2002; Bevir 2008; King 2009; Srinivasan 2019). However, the potential of genealogy to open up these new possibilities is construed as intrinsically non-normative. As Hoy (2008) efficaciously puts the point,

Genealogy recognises [...] that it does not change the world, but it does prepare the world for change. By disrupting the fatalism resulting from resignation to the inevitability of oppressive social institutions, genealogy frees us for social transformation, even if it does not tell us precisely what to do or where to go. (282–3; see also Prinz 2018, 25)

The work undertaken by (Foucauldian) genealogy is thus conceived as, at worst, *parasitical* (Honneth 2001, 7) and, at best, merely *preparatory*. By revealing 'historically constituted objects' to be 'historically contingent and therefore changeable' (Allen 2016, 195), genealogy 'free[s] us from captivity to a picture or perspective' that constrains 'our capacity for self-government' (Owen 2002, 216), but it does not commit us to take advantage of the 'sense for the non-necessary' it thus creates (Saar 2002, 217). Its emancipatory effects, albeit enormously important, are conceived as a mere potentiality that always stands in need of actualisation.

Scholars such as Koopman and Allen have attempted to delineate more precisely the specificity of Foucault's genealogies, yet the same conclusion applies. Aiming at 'critically investigat[ing] the conditions of the possibility of the practical exercise of [our] concepts' (Koopman 2013, 18), what they call 'problematizing genealogies' are different from both vindicatory genealogies *à la* Bernard Williams and unmasking genealogies *à la* Friedrich Nietzsche (60). In Koopman's view, Foucault's genealogical project aims

to make our concepts and practices problematic once again, thus facilitating social and political transformations in the present by revealing how they have been constituted and concretely exercised, as well as how they became a problem in the first place (on this point, see also Erlénbusch-Anderson 2018, 163–8). But although this view more convincingly explains how genealogy can make transformation possible, diagnosing the ‘limits of the present’ (Koopman 2013, 85) and thus concretely preparing the ground for the work of ‘transgression’ and ‘experimentation’ (164–5),³ it still holds, with the rest of the literature, that genealogy does not commit us to anything in particular, since it does not possess any normative force *per se*.

Consequently, I suggest that the arguments so far elaborated in response to Fraser and Habermas’s criticisms of Foucault’s genealogical method ultimately fall short. They too readily concede that Foucault’s genealogies do not possess any normative force, since they are structurally unable to tell us why we should fight against the mechanisms of power whose subjugating effects they nevertheless reveal. As a result, Foucauldian genealogy risks being reduced to a mere ladder to be kicked away once used. However, this conclusion is inevitable only if we continue to focus *exclusively* on the unmasking or problematising dimension of genealogy as Foucault conceived of and practiced it. While I do not want to deny that these two dimensions constitute essential aspects of Foucault’s genealogical inquiries, by emphasising a further dimension that I call *possibilising* I will be in a position to argue that Foucauldian genealogy possesses *sui generis* normative force. Although it does not tell us precisely what to do or where to go, it creates a concrete political framework for action (a political ‘we’) that commits us to resist the arbitrariness of the power/knowledge formations it reveals.

III

In order to bring out the *possibilising* dimension of Foucault’s genealogical inquiries, we need to shift our focus somewhat from the *exclusive*

³See Foucault (1984a):

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered [...] as an attitude, an *ethos*, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and *an experiment* with the possibility of going beyond them. (50, emphasis added)

On this point, see also Hoy (2008): ‘Genealogy’s ability to unmask power relations is [...] an effective means for writing the kind of critical history that can lead to experimentation and transformation’ (294).

attention scholars have paid to the issue of genealogy *as* (a form of) critique. This narrowness of scholarly focus has obscured the crucial role that the genealogy of critique (or better, of the critical attitude) plays in Foucault's work starting from at least 1978 – and, as I will argue, even before this date, albeit implicitly. The crucial turning point is Foucault's 1978 lecture, 'What Is Critique?', in which he undertakes a philosophical and political operation that most commentators have overlooked. By 'playing' one Kant (of *Was ist Aufklärung?*) against another Kant (of the *Critiques*), Foucault radically redefines the critical project so as to take it up on his own terms.

If Foucault concurs with a long tradition in thinking that the question of critique, at least in its modern sense, was inaugurated by Kant, he dissents from it in arguing that such a question in fact originated in Kant's text on the *Aufklärung* rather than in the *Critiques* (Foucault 2007, 47–50). He thus shifts the question of transcendental critique towards what he calls the 'critical attitude' (44), raising the issue of the relations between knowledge and power out of a certain 'individual and collective' *ethos* defined by the 'will not to be governed' quite so much (67). As a result, the epistemological-transcendental question 'What can I know?' becomes a 'question of attitude' (67), that is, an ethico-political question, and critique is redefined by Foucault as 'the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth' – a movement that aims at the 'desubjugation of the subject [*désassujettissement*] in the context of [...] the politics of truth' (47).

Far from aspiring to elaborate a critical *theory*, then, Foucault's project focuses on the analysis of a series of concrete critical *attitudes* – and does so genealogically. Indeed, a specific kind of critical attitude, that is, *parrësia*, constitutes the object of genealogical inquiry in Foucault's last lectures and seminars (Foucault 2010, 2011, 2019a). In *Discourse & Truth*, for instance, he defines *parrësia* as a verbal activity

in which the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relation to himself through danger, a certain relation to law through freedom and duty, and a *certain relation to other people through critique (self-critique or critique of other people)*. (Foucault 2019a, 45–6, emphasis added)

In fact, '*parrësia* has always the function of criticism [...] criticism of oneself, the speaker himself, or criticism of the interlocutor' (43). In other words, Foucault conceives of *parrësia* as a historical form, or better, a 'family' of different but interrelated historical forms, taken by

the critical attitude. And not only does he argue that 'Kant's text on the *Aufklärung* is a certain way for philosophy [...] to become aware of problems which were traditionally problems of *parrësia* in antiquity' (Foucault 2010, 350), but he also explicitly claims that, in analysing the notion of *parrësia*, his aim is to 'outline the genealogy of what we could call the critical attitude in our society' (Foucault 2019a, 63).⁴

This genealogical project, arguably the last one Foucault had the chance to undertake, has generally passed unnoticed.⁵ However, it is hard to downplay its relevance, since it extends far beyond the analysis of the notion of *parrësia* in Greco-Roman antiquity. Indeed, virtually all of Foucault's genealogical inquiries comprise important moments in which the focus is not on normalising or subjugating power/knowledge mechanisms, but squarely on critical attitudes or 'counter-conducts', that is, struggles 'against the processes implemented for conducting others' (Foucault 2009, 201). To name just a few examples:⁶

- (1) In the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, while retracing the genealogy of the subject of desire, Foucault refers to the 'angelism [*angélisme*] of virginity' (Foucault 2018, 193) as a form of counter-conduct that undermined the existing 'sexual social contract' (Brown 1985, 430; on this point, see Lorenzini 2019).
- (2) In his investigation of pastoral power as part of a genealogy of modern governmentality, Foucault focuses on five medieval counter-conducts: asceticism, communities, mysticism, the 'problem of Scripture', and eschatological beliefs (Foucault 2009, 204–14; see also Foucault 2007, 45–7, 2011, 182–3).
- (3) In his genealogy of modern psychiatry, Foucault attributes an important role to the phenomenon of 'convulsion' as both an embodied resistance to religious and medical practices of examination, and what would later become the 'neurological model of mental illness' (Foucault 2003, 212–27; on this point, see Jordan 2014).

⁴Foucault no doubt had methodological reasons to always refer to 'our' society, for which he has been widely reproached (see e.g. Stoler 1996). Indeed, as Saar (2002) rightly argues,

All genealogies have in common a structural reflexivity, a self-implication in the fact that whoever enacts a genealogical criticism does this by criticising aspects and elements [...] of his or her own culture or background. [...] Genealogical criticism is therefore always self-criticism. (236)

⁵With the exception of Folkers (2016) who, however, reduces Foucault's genealogy of critique to its mere problematising dimension and thus misses its specificity: 'Genealogy is not only a means of exercising critique, but also a way to reflect on critique', that is, a 'critique of critique' (4) that 'contributes to and expands the current problematisations of critique' (18).

⁶This list is not meant to be exhaustive.

- (4) In order to retrace the birth of the repressive juridical-political apparatus in France, Foucault devotes the first half of his 1971–72 lecture course at the Collège de France to the rebellion of the *Nu-pieds* in Normandy in 1639 (Foucault 2019b).
- (5) In his analysis of psychiatric power as part of a more general genealogy of modern disciplinary power, Foucault focuses repeatedly on the ‘insurrection of the hysterics’ and their struggle against the medicalisation of their bodies (Foucault 2006).
- (6) In the broader context of his genealogy of the relations between subjectivity and truth, Foucault refers to ‘militantism’ and ‘revolutionary life’, as well as the ‘artistic life’ in nineteenth-century Europe, as two of the main ‘supports’ of the Cynic scandalous mode of existence in the West (Foucault 2011, 183–9).
- (7) Foucault’s publication of the ‘dossier’ *Herculine Barbin*, a component of his genealogy of the modern notion of sexual identity, investigates how emerging medical strategies of normalisation aimed to impose a single, ‘true sex’ on everyone, but could nevertheless be contested by the experience of the ‘happy limbo of a non-identity’ (Foucault 1980, vii, xiii).⁷
- (8) In relation to his genealogical analysis of biopolitics, and more precisely the modern and contemporary medicalisation of life and death, Foucault famously discusses suicide as a form of counter-conduct (Foucault 2001b, 2001c; on this point, see Davidson 2011, 38).

We should of course add to these examples Foucault’s analysis of *par-rêsia*, the main ‘critical moment’ in his larger project of a genealogy of the modern subject (Foucault 2015b, 21), or better, of the relation between subjectivity and truth in the West (Foucault 2010, 42, 2011, 2–3, 2014b, 160–1, 2017). Indeed, as mentioned above, Foucault defines *parrêsia* as a critical ‘verbal activity’ predicated upon a relation between subject and truth that sharply contrasts with the way in which such a relation is construed in our (Cartesian) modernity (Foucault 2019a, 42; on this point, see Lorenzini 2017).

These forms of contestation and resistance are obviously very different from one another; not all are deliberate, organised, or effective. However, they all constitute significant moments in which (individual and collective) critical attitudes appear in the context of Foucault’s genealogical inquiries. This should not come as a surprise since, after all, one of Foucault’s crucial

⁷I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this example.

methodological principles is that ‘where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (Foucault 1978, 95). To be consistent with this principle, when revealing the role of historically constituted power/knowledge formations in the shaping of our current beliefs, concepts, and practices (and of our own selves),⁸ Foucauldian genealogy must also reveal the multiplicity of points of resistance that played ‘the role of adversary, target, support, or handle’ for the emergence and concrete functioning of those formations (95). As Foucault claims in 1983, the most fundamental objective of his philosophical-political project is to link together ‘the historical and theoretical analysis of power relations, institutions, and knowledge’ and ‘the movements, critiques, and experiences that call them into question in reality’ (Foucault 1984c, 374). Consequently, every genealogy that Foucault traces can also be read as a genealogy of the critical attitude. Far from being limited to the historical analysis of *parresia*, Foucault’s genealogical attention to critical attitudes runs through virtually all of his works of the 1970s and the 1980s.⁹

The dimension of Foucauldian genealogy that attends to critical attitude corresponds to what I call *possibilising* genealogy, insofar as it does not aim to ‘deduce from the form of what we are what is *impossible* for us to do and to know’, but to concretely ‘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’ (Foucault 1984a, 46, emphasis added; see also Foucault 1998, 449–50). Yet this overlooked dimension of genealogy is not reducible to the idea, emphasised by many commentators, that one of the main effects of unmasking or problematising genealogies is to open up new possibilities for action, since merely being able to do so suffices neither to say anything further about what these possibilities might be nor to commit us to undertake them. In contrast, Foucault’s genealogy of the critical attitude focuses on moments in which men and women *actually* tried ‘no longer being, doing, or thinking’ what they (were told they) were or had to do or think.¹⁰

⁸On the necessary connection between the unmasking of values and the debunking of the self, see Saar (2008) and Prinz (2018).

⁹It should therefore not be chronologically confined to the development of *modern* governmental mechanisms of power, as many scholars have argued (see e.g. Kelly 1994; Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994).

¹⁰This genealogy is not vindictory, since it (also) shows that critique, far from being universal and ahistorical, cannot exist unless embodied in a series of concrete and historically situated practices. Thus, the genealogy of the critical attitude possesses an unmasking dimension insofar as it does not ‘search for some “immobile form” [of critique] that has developed throughout history’, but reveals that ‘there is no essence or original unity [of critique] to be discovered’ (Davidson 1986, 224). As a result, it also possesses a problematising dimension in that it is a ‘critique of critique’, or a ‘metacritique’ (Vaccarino

This mode of genealogy is possibilising, therefore, insofar as it directly supports Foucault's 'hyper- and pessimistic activism': 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then *we always have something to do*' (Foucault 1997a, 256, emphasis added; see also Foucault 1997b, 291–2). Hence, this pessimistic activism is always coupled with a 'postulate of absolute optimism', since Foucault's genealogical analyses of mechanisms of power aim to allow 'those who are inserted in these relations of power' to

escape them, to transform them, not to be subjugated any longer, due to their actions, their resistance, and their rebellion. [...] I do not conduct my analyses in order to say: this is how things are, you are all trapped. I say these things only to the extent to which I see them as capable of permitting the transformation of reality. (Foucault 1991, 174, translation modified)

Far from being an abstract ideal, this postulate finds a concrete instantiation in the genealogy of the critical attitude: individuals in history have always been immersed in, and subjugated by, complex power/knowledge formations, but never entirely trapped, since they were always able to elaborate a multiplicity of specific, contingent, but *real* forms of counter-conduct. If it was possible for them, Foucault's argument goes, this suggests that it is possible for us as well.

However, the (political) possibilisation entailed by Foucault's genealogy of the critical attitude is concrete not only because it reveals the history of the constitution of power/knowledge apparatuses to include an at least equally relevant history of struggles and resistances, but also because it creates a political 'we' encompassing the vanquished of the past. As I will show in the next section, this political 'we' generates a normative commitment for us to give a new (and different) life to these struggles in the present.

IV

In his theses *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin defends a conception of (the writing of) history and of the relation between the present and the past that is immediately relevant for the account of genealogy that I advance in this paper. In the XVII thesis, Benjamin argues that 'thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well',

Bremner 2019), that is, a critical investigation of the conditions of possibility of the practical exercise of the concept of critique itself (Allen 2003; Folkers 2016).

and that when thinking ‘comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock’ by which it is ‘crystallised as a monad’; every monad constitutes, for the materialist historian, ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’ (Benjamin 2006, 396). Instead of writing history from the point of view of the victors, the materialist historian thus commits herself to writing it from the point of view of the vanquished, adopting the *discontinuous* perspective of their fights against oppression that interrupt the continuity of domination throughout history (Löwy 2018, 158). In other words, the materialist historian aims to produce, ‘in a moment of danger’, namely, ‘the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes’ and falling prey to their way of narrating history (Benjamin 2006, 391), a shock that gives a new life to past struggles fought by the oppressed classes. As a result, the materialist historian interrupts the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ of historicism (395), ‘blast[ing] open the continuum of history’ (396) and the concepts of progress and *telos* along with it (394–5).

Foucault never explicitly refers to Benjamin’s theses *On the Concept of History*. On the only occasion on which he was asked if he would like to write the history of the vanquished, Foucault responded positively, but immediately raised two objections. First, he claims that this project entails a delicate methodological problem, because ‘the vanquished [...] are those who, by definition, have been prevented from speaking’, or those to whom ‘a foreign language has been imposed’ (Foucault 2001a, 390–1). Consequently, is it even possible to hear them or give them back their voice? Second, Foucault is unsurprisingly critical of the concept of class struggle, as well as of the idea more generally that power can be neatly characterised in terms of a war between two well-defined social groups: ‘Aren’t the processes of domination far more complex and complicated than war?’ (391). No doubt Foucault would also have objected to Benjamin’s seemingly clear-cut distinction between ruling and oppressed classes and his appeal to a (proletarian) Revolution,¹¹ as well as to Benjamin’s claim that every generation is endowed by the previous ones with a ‘weak messianic power’ (Benjamin 2006, 390).

Although Foucauldian genealogy is not to be confused with the peculiar kind of historiography that Benjamin advocates for (Lorenzini

¹¹Benjamin’s conception of the proletarian Revolution is nevertheless different from Marx’s. For Benjamin, such a Revolution can only ‘redeem’ the past by *interrupting* historical evolution rather than *completing* it: ‘Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption’ (Benjamin 2006, 402).

2018), there is one sense in which Benjamin and Foucault are much closer than one might expect. In Section III, I argued that Foucault's genealogical inquiries focus both on specific power/knowledge apparatuses, therefore necessarily tracing the history of the people who have been subjugated by them, and on the struggles engaged against those very apparatuses. For Foucault, the writing of genealogy, much as the writing of history for Benjamin, is thus never neutral nor merely descriptive. Both hold that reflection on history generates specific political commitments. While for Benjamin 'the present is brought into a state of crisis that demands action, by its transformed relation to the past' (Friedlander 2012, 168), for Foucault the genealogical method calls on us to recognise our own subjection and realise that we are part of the same history of the 'infamous' men and women of the past (Foucault 1979): like them, we are enmeshed in complex power relations – relations that they have endured, but also fought. Thus, much like Benjamin, Foucault writes history (in the form of genealogy) in order not to anachronistically make the past present again,¹² but to produce a sense of political commitment towards the vanquished, or better, the subjugated men and women of the past – a commitment to carry on their struggles, albeit in a different form, in the present.¹³

At this point, one could ask: who exactly counts as 'vanquished'? Marxism provides Benjamin with an easy answer: the oppressed classes, and in particular the proletariat. But what about Foucault? Is his genealogical project able to rule out the problematic idea that a possibilising genealogy could also legitimately be written, for instance, by neo-Nazis claiming that they are fighting for the vanquished German Nazis of the past century?¹⁴ The answer to this question is to be found, I argue, in the specific kind of 'we' that possibilising genealogy helps to create. Indeed, genealogy's capacity to instil a sense of political commitment in its readers relies on the constitution of a specific 'we' as a *trans*-historical (and not *supra*-historical or *ahistorical*) subject of resistances. As Butler (2004) rightly remarks, while Fraser and Habermas postulate the existence of a stable, known, and agential 'we' when asking the question 'What

¹²For one of Foucault's clearest criticisms of the idea of the 'ideology of the return' and of 'a historicism that calls on the past to resolve the questions of the present', see Foucault (1984b, 250).

¹³Consequently, the possibilising dimension of Foucauldian genealogy cannot be found in fictional genealogies nor in any other fictional narrative, including novels, even though Foucault was also highly interested in the transformative powers of fiction (see e.g. Foucault 1977, 1991, 32–42). Putnam (1976) interestingly claims that literature allows us to imagine other possible ways of life, but Foucauldian genealogy is about *real* lives and *actual* struggles (Foucault 1979, 79). Its ethico-political force is therefore different, and much stronger, than the one connected to fictional narratives.

¹⁴I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this kind of objection.

should we do?’ or ‘Why should we resist?’, Foucault refuses to appeal to any stable and predetermined ‘we’. This refusal, however, is not to be interpreted as a rejection of all possible forms of ‘we’. On the contrary, Foucault claims that the problem is ‘to make the *future* formation of a “we” possible’ (a ‘we’ that ‘would also be likely to form a community of action’), because ‘the “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result – and the necessarily temporary result – of the question’ (Foucault 1984d, 385; on this point, see Revel 2015, 53).

Foucauldian genealogy, and more particularly the genealogy of the critical attitude, plays a crucial role in this process of ‘we-making’. Far from being given in advance, the ‘we’ is created in the course of genealogy itself, but the process can never be fully accomplished. This ‘we’ is thereby not to be understood in terms of a shared and fixed ‘identity’: it is never stable, never defined once and for all, but fluid, heterogeneous, multiple, and structurally open. In other words, Foucauldian genealogy refuses to utilise history in order to substantiate a ‘we’ that is already presupposed and fixed – a totalising ‘we’ that excludes all other possible ‘we’s. This is why a history of the past century written by neo-Nazis with a view to carrying on the project of German national socialism in the present (one that presupposes a fixed, totalising, and exclusionary ‘we’) could never be considered as an instance of possibilising genealogy.

Foucault’s genealogy of the critical attitude does not aim to ‘tell a single story that is true for everybody’ (Hoy 2008, 294); for instance, it refuses to interpret history in terms of class struggle and to consider the proletariat as the subject of such a history. Rather than postulating a single subject of history, a universal ‘we’ as the subject of an (ahistorical) critical attitude – as the horizon of intelligibility and normative foundation of critique – *each genealogy* constitutes a different, specific, but structurally open ‘we’: a ‘we’ made by all the men and women who endured and struggled against the particular power/knowledge formation delineated in the course of a given genealogy, and by those who, in the present, are carrying on or will carry on their fight. To avoid any misunderstanding, we should therefore talk of the constitution of a *multiplicity* of non-totalising and potentially overlapping ‘we’s that our genealogical inquiries (and our contemporary struggles) progressively populate with *real* men and women of different historical times.

Foucauldian genealogy aims precisely to show us that the power/knowledge mechanisms that men and women endured and fought against in the past are still at play in the present, albeit transformed: each of us is an integral part of one (or more) of these trans-historical

‘we’s that genealogy constitutes. Therefore, although not ‘normativistic’ – because it does not rely on ‘external normative standards’ nor measure reality ‘against an “abstract ought”’ (Jaeggi 2009, 73) – Foucauldian genealogy is ‘normatively significant’: by recounting a history that is still *ours* (a history not only of subjection, but also of contestation and resistance), it situates each of us within a (multiplicity of) ‘we’(s), each carrying with it, in an *immanent* fashion (Guay 2011), a political commitment to fight against a specific power/knowledge apparatus. This is the (*sui generis*) normative force that possibilising genealogy possesses.

V

Foucault once claimed that ‘the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger’ (Foucault 1997a, 256). This choice constitutes the prerequisite of any genealogical inquiry: how do we decide *which* genealogy to write? The answer to this question lies necessarily outside of (and *precedes*) the genealogical endeavour; it is linked to the ethico-political choice Foucault refers to (Saar 2002, 234). The answer to the question ‘What should we do?’, if we expect it to take the form of a perfectly defined strategy of action, also lies outside of (and *follows*) the genealogical endeavour; it is linked to another series of ethico-political choices. What I hope to have demonstrated in this paper is that, although it is not the task of genealogy to answer these two questions, and although Foucault refuses to adopt any Archimedean point as a normative grounding for critique, Foucauldian genealogy is nevertheless not merely descriptive nor value-neutral – or worse, normatively confused. Indeed, thanks to its possibilising dimension, it possesses the normative force that derives from the constitution of a concrete framework for action (a political ‘we’) that allows *genealogy itself* to answer the question ‘Why resist?’ by generating a sense of political commitment in its readers. Thus, although Foucault’s genealogies do not provide us with ready-made solutions for our current problems, nor do they tell us *precisely* ‘what is to be done’ (see e.g. Foucault 1998, 450, 2015b, 137–8), they nevertheless *do* tell us that *something* is to be done: they commit us to carry on, in one form or another, the struggle against the subjugating effects of the power/knowledge formations that still permeate our lives and whose arbitrariness they reveal.

By emphasising this so-far-overlooked dimension of genealogy, I also hope to have contributed to the rich contemporary debate on this method in political philosophy and more broadly. Fraser and Habermas’s

main criticism was that, if Foucauldian genealogies undermine any given normative position, then they also undermine any political objective they might have. Scholars sympathetic to Foucault have answered either by saying that Foucault's project is structurally non-normative or by locating a normative value (such as freedom or autonomy) beyond the reach of genealogy itself. I hope to have successfully shown that both of these strategies ultimately fall short. On the one hand, the very nature of Foucauldian genealogy entails that nothing is in principle exempt from it: freedom, autonomy, critique are all genealogisable. On the other hand, however, far from undermining all forms of normativity and thus being ultimately self-defeating, Foucauldian genealogy does possess *sui generis* normative force: it constitutes a concrete framework for action (a political 'we') aiming to instil in its readers a sense of political commitment – provided that we do not interpret either notion as universal or ahistorical, but as contingent, malleable, and historically situated.

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