

DISMISSING PROGRESS. RECONSTRUCTIVISM, CRITICISM, GENEALOGY¹

Elena Agatensi

Scuola Universitaria Superiore Sant'Anna di Pisa

INTRODUCTION

This article explores different approaches to genealogy. It inquires Honneth's reconstructive criticism with a genealogical reservation and Allen's problematizing genealogy. It compares these two cases with the characteristics of genealogy as outlined by Foucault to highlight the differences among reconstructivism, criticism, and genealogy. It considers Harcourt's reflections on the plurality of genealogical paradigms and challenges the usefulness of dismissing the idea of progress.

This article also aims to explore different approaches to the genealogical method to dismiss the concept of progress. The starting point is Amy Allen's 2016 work, *The End of Progress*, namely the analysis of the link between normative foundation and progress and the goal of decolonizing Critical Theory. If post- and decolonial thought has questioned and rejected the idea of historical progress as Eurocentric and imperialist, many of the most prominent exponents of the Frankfurt School, including Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst, continue to affirm the ineliminability of progress. Although they use different strategies to argue for these theses – as Allen explains at length

¹ This article is part of the project 'Beyond Workism and the Work-Centered Society. A Gendered-Oriented Theoretical and Historical Inquiry into the Vocabulary of Social-Political Inclusion' (PRIN 2022 PNRR – P2022N8YKE, CUP E53D23020210001 – NextGenerationEU).

– they agree that progress, development, and modernity are indispensable for formulating and sustaining normative claims. Allen refuses this view and suggests following instead Adorno and Foucault (which she calls “Adorno’s Other ‘Other Son’” (Allen, 2016, p. 163). In conclusion, she identifies several instruments for decolonizing Critical Theory, including the notions of unlearning, epistemic humility, and metanormative contextualism.

The latter, that is contextualism about normative justification, as a position in moral epistemology, reveals us “the contingency of our beliefs and normative commitments and showing us the ways that those beliefs and commitments have been contingently made up of complex relations of power, domination, and violence” by the “method of problematizing genealogy” (Allen, 2016, p. 209).

The term ‘genealogy’ is used in various ways by some authors of the Frankfurt School, by Allen, and by Foucault, who draws inspiration from Nietzsche. Therefore, in the following lines, we inquire into a case where it is used as a “corrective” and an example where it is “corrected” by certain attributes, to conclude with the most prominent features of the genealogy outlined in Foucault’s *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*.

In the first case, we focus on Honneth, who seeks to mitigate his contention that we need a robust account of historical progress to secure the normativity of critical theory by suggesting a reconstructive critique with a “genealogical reservation” (Honneth, 2001, pp. 3-12). In the second one, the genealogical method is specified by the addition of an adjective, such as in Allen’s “problematizing genealogy”.

Another example of this strategy is the book by Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie, titled *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (2022). This work introduces what they call a “critical genealogy” of current social movements advocating for abolition and Black lives. Our aim is not to “impugn types of genealogy or typecast critical philosophers.” Instead, the question is whether these clarifications about genealogy help us reject the idea of progress. For example, Harcourt (2024), in his essay *On Critical Genealogy*, affirms that sometimes “the genealogical work of demonstrating how a particular way of life has become dominant [...] can itself become oppressive” (p. 170), meaning that it can “sometimes feel overbearing, as if there’s no way out and no way forward” (p. 170).

Building on Harcourt’s concern, he considers it “urgent that we now knock on those genealogies to determine which are hollow and which are robust – which discourage, and which encourage action. It is time for us to do, not just genealogical work, but *critical genealogical work*” (Harcourt, 2024, p. 170). This kind of remark is punctual and useful, because it reminds us that “at its best, genealogy involves a practice of critique

and praxis that [...] leads to action” (Harcourt, 2024, p. 171). And yet, we can note that expressions such as ‘critical genealogy’ or ‘problematizing genealogy’ disregard the distinction between genealogy and criticism, and in doing so, they do not allow us to grasp the specificity of genealogy, which could help us to dismiss the idea of progress.

Firstly, we consider Honneth’s (2007) reconstructive criticism with a genealogical reservation. This formula implies that it is the concrete customs of our present which constitute the standards for evaluating our form of life. Thus, the risk of teleologism, still high in the idealistic model, should be corrected by the genealogical reservation, that is, a sort of precautionary principle that reminds us of the hiatus between an ideal and its realization.

The reservation, however, is a principle introjected into the Enlightenment project, within which the genealogical critique does not problematize the Enlightenment account of reason or its implications; furthermore, it does not delegitimize reason as such, which was precisely the focus of Nietzsche’s use of genealogy (Nietzsche, 2017). As a result, the power of criticism to tend towards ideal goals is formally safeguarded.

Once the normative competence of reason is reaffirmed, the capability of criticism to tend towards ideal objectives can be maintained, and if combined with the reconstructive approach, a circularity arises. This circularity lies in the fact that the criteria for judging reality are found within it, but are compelled to confirm it because of the value still attributed to reason, namely, the justification of institutions and habits.

If, on the one hand, the intersection of these two models causes a theoretical short circuit at the level of justification, on the other hand, their connection reinforces them in their political consequences. We refer to the idea that the alleged superiority of the modern Western vision is rationally proven and can be universally extended, and that there is a linear progress within which everything is encompassed, from regressions to conflicts, a line on which one can move forward or backward, but that, anyway, points towards a precise direction from which there is no escape.

Indeed, Honneth (2007) outlines a conflict-ridden, discontinuous, yet unstoppable historical learning process that has nothing to do with genealogy. The fracture that characterizes the latter is the emergence of qualitative differences, a decentralization that shatters existing values and creates irreconcilable tensions between ethical systems.

Instead, in Honneth’s vision, discontinuity (Honneth, 2007, p. 16) concerns domination and is considered an obstacle to the stadial process; thus, it should be excluded from history. Since the latter is seen as a development, Honneth must find an antidote to discontinuity: events which “touch on the ‘interests of humanity’, can no longer fall into oblivion with respect to the species’ learning capacity. The result is that, like stages

or degrees, they mark a progress in the process of a future emancipation of humanity that is irreducible” (Honneth, 2007, p. 17).

We can conclude that the genealogical reservation has nothing genealogical about it. Indeed, genealogy maintains “passing events in their proper dispersion”; his method “is to identify the accident, the minute deviations [...] the errors, the fails appraisals [...] it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accident” (Foucault, 1977, p. 146). On the contrary, Honneth confirms and reinforces concepts such as universality, species, and humankind. Either way, these categories need the idea of progress to claim emancipatory aims. To make it clear, the reference to all humanity needs and supports a strong stadial view of history, and hence the account of progress.

Secondly, we analyze a case that helps elucidate the relation between criticism and genealogy. We refer to the definition of the term ‘genealogy’ by the adjective ‘critical’ or ‘problematizing’². In Allen’s work, problematizing genealogy is a method that shows us “how our normative commitments are entangled with relations of power and domination” (Allen, 2016, p. 205). It is also, as she clearly states, “a way of inheriting the normative perspective of the Enlightenment in the dual sense of taking it up while simultaneously problematizing and decentring it” (Allen, 2016, p. 205).

Foucault, too, as Allen emphasizes, underlines in *What Is Enlightenment?* “the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation –one that simultaneously problematizes man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject– is rooted in the Enlightenment” (Foucault, 1997, p. 312). But there is a divergence in the way genealogy’s specificity is conceived in relation to the Enlightenment.

According to Allen (2016), “in order to realize the normative legacy of the Enlightenment fully, we need a different sort of relationship to our history, one that is neither subversive nor vindictory, but rather problematizing” (Allen, 2016, p. 121). What is implied in this categorization³ becomes evident when Allen states that “critical theory

² The expressions “critical genealogy” and “problematizing genealogy” – formulated by Harcourt and Allen respectively – answer to two different needs: the first is to distinguish, in a context in which the adjective genealogical has become hegemonic, those works that really “augmented and directly invigorated our activity” (Harcourt, 2024, p. 172). The second is to differentiate a certain kind of genealogy from what is called vindictory or subversive genealogy. It seems to us that these specifications reveal a fear of renouncing certain categories that the genealogical approach necessarily breaks down, not as ‘subversive’ but as such, namely a method that renounces the search for the origin.

³ Allen, 2016, p. 166: “I sketch out the distinctive alternative methodology for the philosophy of history that can be reconstructed from the work of Adorno and Foucault. This methodology weaves together vindictory and subversive genealogies [...] in service of a distinctive genealogical aim: a critical problematization of our present historical moment. This problematization [...] has a normative point, namely, the fuller realization of the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment, in particular, the norms of freedom and respect for the other”.

starts from the basically Hegelian metanormative contextualism is perfectly compatible with the kind of moral-political universalism that Habermas and others hold so dear” (Allen, 2016, p. 43).

Even if there is a significant difference with the position of the last exponents of the Frankfurt School, as Allen explains in *The End of Progress*, we can see how she tries to safeguard a future-oriented notion of progress. Allen writes, “the normative principles and ideals on which we rely in our judgments about what could or would count as progress in the future may rest on a contingent foundation, but they are no less powerful for that” (Allen, 2016, p. 43).

In Foucauldian thought, precisely because of the genealogical method, we cannot find the idea of a distorted or incomplete realization of the Enlightenment that needs correction. This correction, as happened in the dialectical approach, remains in Adorno. Genealogy is not aimed at saving the account of progress, nor is it a future imperative, and it is not declined in normative terms.

We do not intend to claim that genealogy *per se* requires the renunciation of certain concepts as if genealogical methods were defined in contrast to the use of specific categories. However, juxtaposing ‘genealogy’ with methods such as metanormative contextualism, which aim to reaffirm the validity of normativism and a forward-looking conception of progress, could blur the distinction between genealogy and criticism.

If we assume that “anyone with a critical theoretic bone in their body, who conducts historically inflected critique, refers to their work now as ‘genealogical’ rather than simply as ‘historical’” (Harcourt, 2024, p. 168), Harcourt’s focus on the type of genealogy that “leads to action” (p. 171) becomes understandable. Nevertheless, even if we consider Allen’s work as capable of inspiring action and changing perspective – in short, a truly critical thinking – we aim to take a further step and examine what remains at stake in this expression (and in similar ones like “critical genealogy”⁴), of the genealogical method.

Only if we take the distinction between criticism and genealogy and keep in mind that genealogy has to do with the dismissal of origin and the renunciation of a moral criterion that clearly shows us the positive or negative value of every single genealogy, can we approach the crucial point, namely, the destitution of the idea of progress. Instead,

⁴ For example, Harcourt, *On Critical Genealogy*, and Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, xiii-xiv: “We frame this book as a critical genealogy rather than a manifesto, one that emphasizes how important it is to trace political lineages [...] Our work proceeds genealogically to address subjugated histories of organizing that must inform and strengthen our present mobilizations [...]. And we contend that genealogies should always be questioned, because there is always an unacknowledged reason for beginning at a certain moment in history as opposed to another, and it always matters which narratives of the present are marginalized or expunged”.

critical thinking subjects historicized reason to a rational overthrow that illuminates the rationality deployed at the liminal edge of physiological and pathological exercise. In this process, it reaffirms the normative competence of reason even as it denounces its pathology. It seeks to straighten out reason, to find true life in a false one, and in doing so, it does not really give up the search for origin.

According to Foucault, Nietzsche “challenges the pursuit of the origin (Ursprung) at least on those occasions where he is truly a genealogist” (Foucault, 1977, p. 142). The search for the origin attempts to grasp the exact essence of the thing, to find what was already there, because it leads us to believe that at the beginning of things, we can find what is most perfect and essential. In contrast, the historical beginning is discordant and accidental. And, finally, since it is understood as the place of Truth. As Foucault (1977) writes,

The origin [...] always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation. (Foucault, 1977, p. 43)

This ineliminable character of genealogy explains why it moves differently from criticism. Genealogy works within a space of time in which to redesign linearities, fractures, threshold points, fractal geometries, and to chase on the plane of non-original forces, but of descent and provenance. As Foucault suggests, “we can give the name ‘genealogy’ to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (Foucault, 2003, p.8).

If, on the one hand, Harcourt (2024) affirms that “the different types of genealogy – vindictory, debunking, problematizing, and possibilizing⁵ – should be understood *not* as competing or mutually exclusive modalities” (p. 174, p. 176), then on the other hand, we must question whether a broad discussion on attributes makes us lose focus on the methodological specificity of genealogy.

⁴ Harcourt, 2024, p. 176: “In an article titled ‘On Possibilising Genealogy’ published in 2020, Lorenzini offers a compelling answer and way forward, one that avoids the dual pitfalls of the two dominant responses, namely that either genealogy is not normative and we must adopt a non-foundationalist approach, or that it is internally normative and advances particular values like autonomy or freedom. Lorenzini demonstrates convincingly that both conventional responses are ultimately inadequate to the challenge and proposes instead that Foucaultian genealogy is “normatively significant” and has “normative force” in a unique way: it creates a framework within which the readers form a sense of community and develop political commitment to continue the struggle”.

These various genealogical approaches often seem to decide *a priori* whether they want to be debunking, critical, or vindictory toward their object. Yet this is already a disavowal of the genealogical method. Indeed, the genealogical approach does not define its relationship with its object in advance; it does not decide *a priori* if the roots it seeks are obscure or noble. Its only fixed point is the understanding that “the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys” (Foucault, 1977, p. 139).

According to Harcourt (2024), “Foucault never chose his objects of study in a non-normative or value-free way” (p. 171). This sentence makes an equivalence that is not taken for granted and that we want to challenge: the overlap between non-neutrality and normativism. Certainly, Foucault is not “neutral” (who could claim to be?); indeed, he always asserts his situatedness, but why should this mean that his work follows a normative approach? The very fact of considering any thought that does not vindicate a normative label as hypothetically incapable of taking a position is precisely what distinguishes normative approaches from genealogy.

We suggest that Foucault’s choice not to argue in normative terms should not be underestimated. He speaks of critique, of genealogy, of Enlightenment, of optional ‘rules’ (which, it is worth remembering, are different from ‘norms’), but not of a normative approach, and does not use terms such as ‘contextualism’ or ‘metanormative’ since he is not concerned with justification.

Thus, the proposal is to take genealogy’s core seriously, which, in our opinion, leads us beyond normativity. It implies that the rejection of the status quo passes through an ethical positioning, formed by decentralization, exceeding, and discarding. The subject and the struggle are always situated, and the ‘position’ has a moral connotation; in this sense, genealogy allows us to reject the teleological conception of history also because it is willing to give up universalism. As Foucault (1977) writes,

The subject who speaks, who says ‘I’ or ‘we’ cannot, and is in fact not trying to, occupy [...] the position of a universal, totalizing, or neutral subject. In the general struggle he is talking about, the person who is speaking, telling the truth, recounting the story [...] is inevitably on one side or the other: he is involved in the battle, has adversaries, and is working toward a particular victory. (p. 52)

Moreover, Foucault illustrates that the continuous transition between what is and what might otherwise have been does not pertain to a learning process or to an axial vector that serves as a reference but is the outcome of an uncertain and never-ending

battle: genealogy is precisely the reconstruction of this battle, which shows us how no apparatus (dispositif) can be considered as natural or necessary.

References

- Allen, A. (2016). *The end of progress: Decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Davis, A. Y., Dent, G., Meiners, E. R. & Richie, B. E. (2022). *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. Haymarket.
- Foucault, M. (1977). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*. Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997). What is enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*. New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*. Picador.
- Harcourt, B. E. (2024). On critical genealogy. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 24, 167–185. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-024-00715-y>
- Honneth, A. (2001). Reconstructive social critique with a genealogical reservation: On the idea of critique in the Frankfurt School. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 22(2), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.5840/gfpj200122223>
- Honneth, A. (2007). The irreducibility of progress: Kant's account of the relationship between morality and history. *Critical Horizons*, 10(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851607X184541>
- Lorenzini, D. (2020). On possibilising genealogy. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 67(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1712227>
- Nietzsche, F. (2017). *On the genealogy of morality and other writings*. Cambridge University Press.