

REVIEW ESSAY

On Left Kantianism: From Transcendental Critique to the Critical Ontology of the Present

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Colin Koopman's *Genealogy of Critique* is critical theory at its best: informed by incisive intellectual reconstructions, guided by immanent critique, and aiming at practical transformations that speak to our unique historical challenges. This book is a superlative contribution to the contemporary problematic of what it means to be modern in the age of genocides and suspect universalisms. Let me, however, lay out why I think Koopman's work is a unique contribution to philosophy in general and what I will call the "Kantian Left" more specifically. First, Koopman has articulated in a sophisticated and persuasive way why we have to begin to think of genealogy, as a critical method, rather than a school or current, in terms of three distinct uses or applications: vindication, subversion, and problematization. By disaggregating these three ways in which genealogy maybe deployed, Koopman allows us to place different thinkers within a common horizon of the application of a method while allowing us to see their merits and demerits. Thus, we can see more clearly how Nietzschean genealogies are subversive, how Habermasian genealogies are vindicatory (although not always, as I will point out later), and how Foucauldian genealogies are problematizing. But the typology is not simply about offering cartographies of contemporary philosophy, but about deepening the reach and sharpening the uses of genealogy as a method that, to use Foucault's language, illuminate the ontology of our present.

Second, Koopman's book is a first class contribution to the Foucault literature. The book, however, is neither an academic exegesis, nor an attempt to offer a reconstruction of Foucault's work as a body of thinking. Koopman offers a reading of Foucault's work through the lens of the role of problematics and problematization in his thinking. I think that Koopman has made very judicious use of the advantageous position in which he has been placed by coming to Foucault in a time in which we have access to three elements of his corpus: his numerous interviews, his restored published works, and his Collège de France lecture courses. Koopman demonstrates why a lot of the literature that conditioned the reception of Foucault's work in the 70s and 80s was hobbled by a partial and skewed view of Foucault's philosophical laboratory. By deftly overlaying and parallel readings of these three different sorts of 'texts', Koopman shows us how Foucault was ceaselessly concerned with questions of method as he explored different archives or *problématiques*. At the same time, Koopman restores to Foucault's preoccupation with method the towering figure of Kant: from his second

dissertation—the translation of Kant’s *Anthropology* and its long introduction—to his last courses at the Collège de France on the *Courage of Truth*.

Third, Koopman’s book will become a new point of departure for a fruitful dialogue among pragmatism, Frankfurt School inflected critical theory, and Foucauldian genealogy. The last two chapters of this book are surely some of the best programmatic critical theory I have read in a while. The aim in these chapters is not to see why one tradition is less aporetic than the others, or why one has more theoretical virtues than the others. As Amy Allen put it in her review of the book: “...Koopman proposes an ambitious methodological reconciliation of Foucaultian genealogy with pragmatist critical theory in which the former fulfills the backward looking, diagnostic task of articulating our most pressing problems and the later fulfills the forward looking, anticipatory task of suggesting possible responses to those problems.”¹ Indeed, Koopman is not engaged in a zero-sum calculus in which putting down a theory is the gain of another. Instead, he is oriented by a method that aims to produce readings that allow us to move forward with our problems, rather than get caught in games of scholasticism of exegetical purity and faithfulness. Koopman has cleared a wide swath of philosophical underbrush that will allow us to fruitfully move forward by using the best that genealogical problematization, emancipatory reconstructions, and practical engagements have to offer us as we face our distinct challenges in the age of globalizations and cosmopolitanisms.

Since there is so much that I agree with Koopman, so much so that I don’t think there are points on which I would want to criticize the book, I want to lay out a couple of concerns about how we may move forward with the kind of agenda that Koopman has put on the table. These concerns are clustered around three pivots: Kant and Foucault, Kant and Temporality, and critical theory and the diagnostics of the pathologies of reason. Let me begin with the first pivot.

As I already noted, one of the virtues of Koopman’s book is how it has restored Kant to the heart of Foucault’s concerns with method. There is now a corpus of very exacting scholarship that has tracked Foucault’s debt to Kant, and in particular, Foucault’s avowed project of rethinking and rearticulating Kant’s method of transcendental critique into a historical ontology of the present and an ontology of our selves. Koopman has contributed generously to this literature. Still, I wonder if Koopman would not agree that we need to do more. What I mean is the following: there is now a general consensus that there are three different ‘stages’ in the maturation of Foucault’s work: the archeological, the genealogical, and the hermeneutical or ethical, but which I would call ‘critical ontology.’ Koopman argues that we should not see these stages as distinct moments, between which there are ruptures and radical shifts. Instead, Koopman argues that we see these different moments as modalities of emphasis that are held together by problematization. I would agree. Indeed, I would like to argue that we see Foucault as moving from the problematization of knowledge, to the problematization of domination, to the problematization of technologies of the self. There is a distinction between recognizing a general orientation, on the one hand, and shifts in how that orientation, or philosoph-

¹ The review appeared in the Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. Available on line at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/41851-genealogy-as-critique-foucault-and-the-problems-of-modernity/>

ical attitude, is directed to a set of problems. We could say the same about Habermas. Habermas has been doggedly faithful to his philosophical orientation. Yet, one can recognized how a certain orientation, or let us call it philosophical intuition, has undergone shifts. The Habermas of *Theory and Praxis* is both very different and yet tremendously familiar to the Habermas of *Between Facts and Norms*. We do not do a disservice to a thinker when we recognize that they changed their minds, and that in fact, they acknowledged that they changed their mind. I personally do not recall any moments when Foucault stated that he had changed his mind, although I recalled many moments when he gave a different account of what he was up to. In contrast, I do remember many occasions when Habermas has admitted having learned something new, and thus subsequently having had to change his views. In any event, we need to nuance how we see the coherence and consistency of a form of thinking, and how that form of thinking matured, grew more acute by focusing on different set of problems, and developed a more insightful language out of its own frustration with the limits of its autochthonously generated lexicon. Thus, in this spirit I would offer the following chart as a way to make sense of the shifts in Foucault’s philosophical orientation, which nonetheless should not be seen as ruptures.

From Archeology to Critical Ontology

	Archeology	Genealogy	Ontology/Hermeneutics
<i>History of Knowledge</i>	Form of Knowledge	Discursive practices	Forms of Veridiction
<i>History of Domination</i>	Norms of Behavior	Exercise of power	Procedures of governmentality
<i>History of Subjectivity</i>	Constitution of Subject	Forms of subjectification	Technologies of Self or Pragmatics of self

I offer the following citation as a warrant for this chart, but one can find numerous indications that this is how we can in fact chart Foucault’s work from the numerous methodological remarks one can find throughout Foucault’s lectures and interviews:

Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, an historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second an historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, an historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.²

² Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 2nd ed.), 237. However, if one reads the 80s Collège de France courses one will see that Foucault returns to this ways of making sense of his work.

Whether we agree on this mapping of Foucault's different problematizations is not as important as what it may allow us to ask about Foucault's relationship to Kant. Here I am reminded of a paper that Rorty once gave at the "Bay Area Heidegger" conference, in which Dreyfus, and Girard also spoke.³ Rorty spoke of three different moments of his engagement and reading of Heidegger. As many may recall, Rorty intended on writing a book on Heidegger, a project which he abandoned as soon as it had been announced. Rorty confessed that he had at first read Heidegger as a pragmatist, under the influence of Dreyfus's paraphrasing of *Sein und Zeit*, and David Hoy, who was around those early NEH seminars at Santa Cruz. This is the Heidegger we find in Rorty's collection of essays *The Consequences of Pragmatism*. Then, Rorty confessed, he began to read Heidegger as a historian of philosophy, as the soothsayer of the end of metaphysics and the advent of ontology. This is the Heidegger we find in the essays from the eighties, especially those we find in the first three volumes of his collected essays.⁴ Then, Rorty began to read Heidegger as the poet of self-transformation, as a thinker in the tradition of Nietzsche, Emerson, and Foucault. This is the Heidegger we find in those text that come after *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.⁵ In the same vein, Foucault, could be said to have read Kant in three different ways. The point is not a fastidious scholarly one, namely whether Foucault misread or changed his mind about Kant, but rather the point is about how his different problematizations bear the trace of a changing reading of Kant. Yet, I am not convinced myself that there are three distinct Kant's in Foucault, for as Koopman notes, Foucault's Kant of the commentary on the *Anthropology* shares many resemblances with the Kant of the *What is Enlightenment?* and *What is Critique?* Here, however, we have to immediately note that Foucault was particularly preoccupied, or dare we say obsessed, with the late Kant, namely the Kant of the philosophy of history, which is also linked to his anthropology, and his cosmopolitan political philosophy. So, we could say, comparing Rorty and Foucault, that while Rorty kept reading different Heideggers, Foucault seemed to be always returning to the late Kant, the one that remains more interesting and generative to us today, and surely for the foreseeable future in which cosmopolitan right remains both an imperative and a problem.

A subsidiary set of preoccupations have to do with a possible line of reading Kant that is opened up with Foucault's project of detranscendentalizing Kantian critique as an inquiry into the condition of possibility of certain problematizations. As I just noted it is important to note that Foucault's engagement with Kant towards the end of his life is focused on the late

³ See chapter seven, "Richard Rorty and the Riddle of the Book that Never Was" in Martin Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 211-229.

⁴ See Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth; Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others; Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress; Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Paper, 1998); then there is the 1990 essay "On Heidegger's Nazism" that presents a version of his three different readings of Heidegger. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 190-197.

⁵ That narrative is based entirely on my notes and recollection. I was there. Later I asked Rorty for the manuscript of this talk, and he dismissively said that they were just talking notes. I defer to Woessner who did the archival work.

Kant, the Kant from the 80s and early 90s. This is the Kant that gave us the historical-political-legal notions of history with a cosmopolitan intent and the autoaffection of humanity through moral critique and political action. We should not forget that Kant's *Anthropology's* full title was *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which meant that Kant was interested in how a description and analysis of our natural being would be the grounds for a transformation of our relationship to ourselves, which could and would lead to the transformation of our being. This raises the question: Is it possible to read Kant himself as moving away from transcendental critique to historical critique, and thus, to be able to argue that Kant himself had instigated the mutation of the former into the latter in his late work? We have before ourselves two agendas: one would be to parse out Foucault's Kant, and then, a second, to discover this other Kant that Kant himself had begun to fashion; a Kant that is closer to us than we suspect⁶. These two agendas would go under the rubric of what I called "Kant and Temporality," for it seems to me that after having read Koopman, what genealogies do is to render luminously clear how the work of critical problematization is possible only within time and out of time, in order to generate another time. Problematizations problematize time itself as the horizon within which we take critical distance from ourselves in order to project other selves.

I will now turn to the third pivot of a cluster of concerns that I think Koopman allow us to see more clearly, but which I did not see explicitly articulated in his text. Koopman is urging us to read problematizing genealogies and critical reconstructions as complementary and not incompatible or exclusionary methodological strategies. I think Koopman rightly sees the use of 'reconstruction' as a means to deflate the excessive transcendentalist claims of the Habermas of the late seventies and early eighties. As we know, Habermas has been caught in a theoretical skirmish in which he is staking out his own de-transcendentalized foothold. On one side, he has Karl-Otto Apel, his old philosophical ally, accusing him of performative contradiction for appealing to the reconstructive sciences in order to make fallible and more contingent the argumentative competencies of modern subjects. On the other, he has the systems theorists, like Niklas Luhmann, who challenge Habermas on his historical materialism and pseudo commitment to social systems analysis; and then on another corner you have third generations critical theorists, like Tom McCarthy and Seyla Benhabib urging him to talk more about the contextual invocation of context transcending validity claims whose normative validity is only made evident in that very context of application; and then yet in another corner you have Rorty, who thinks the best in Habermas can dispense and do without appeals to transcendence or transcendentality. I think Koopman's re-articulation of reconstruction as a means to introduce contingency in the generation of universalizability offers a productive agenda. I would suggest that what Koopman allows us to see is that there is a distinct tradition of constructivist universality that can be named the "Kantian Left"; that is, a Kantianism that is not interested in universalism or universality as that which is to be discovered, by aiming above or below, to that which diachronically cuts across all claims eternally, but that is

⁶ Here I have in mind Pauline Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Robert B. Loudon, *Kant's Human Being: Essays on his Theory of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

instead interested in universality as a project, as something that is invented or made, from within time.⁷ Left Kantians are interested in how universality is generated from within the temporality of reason as iterations of claims that may be universalizable. *Left Kantians are constructivist universalists*. That is, left Kantians don't discover universality, they fashion it from within time, from out of the contingent conditions in which we practice freedom and enable new forms of being free. Left Kantians operate with the following maxim, one that was beautifully articulated by Georges Canguilhem: "It is in the nature of the normative that its beginning lies in its infraction."⁸ Universalizability is predicated on the recognition that claims to universality are revisable, and they are revisable in light of their failure in the present. We recognize a normative order when it is violated.

There are resources within Foucault to advance the agenda of Left Kantianism, especially if we engage his work on his teacher and mentor Georges Canguilhem⁹. Reading them jointly allows us to make the following distinctions: norm, normality or normativity, and normativeness. Let me expand. To set or assign a *norm* is to attempt to impose on any given order a standard. Norms set straight, or alleged to give us a sense of how that order should look when right, when normal. Norms decipher for us the normality of an order. But this means setting norms is imposing on an order a certain kind of necessity. *Normality* is the imposition of a view of an order performing, living, or working in accordance with that imposed necessity. As Canguilhem notes, the concept of the norm, as was here described, cannot but be polemical. A norm is an invitation to a debate about why it imposes its form of necessity on a given order. Normality as the orchestration of norms, of certain types of necessities, then become a cacophonous protestation about why we now conceive a certain order in that way. Canguilhem writes:

Unlike a law of nature, a norm does not necessitate its effect. That is to say, a norm has no significance as norm pure and simple. Because we are dealing with possibility only, that possibility of reference and regulation which the norm offers leaves room for another possibility, which the norms offers leaves room for another possibility, which can only be its opposite. *A norm is in effect the possibility of a reference only when it has been established or chosen as the expression of a preference and as the instrument of a will to substitute a satisfying state of affairs for a disappointing one.*¹⁰

⁷ Here we ought to think of the Austro-Marxists, see Tom Bottomore (ed.) and Patrick Goode (tans.), *Austro-Marxism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), see also Mark E. Blum, *The Austro-Marxists 1890-1918. A Psychobiographical Study* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985). And, the fantastic little book by Oskar Negt, *Kant und Marx: Ein Epochengespräch* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2003)

⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, translated by Carolyn R. Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 242

⁹ See the entry on Georges Canguilhem in the massive and extremely useful *Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, edited by Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 580-587.

¹⁰ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 240. Italics added. We should also consider what Canguilhem writes about norms in chapter six, "The Normal and the Pathological" in his *Knowledge of Life*, translated by Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 121-133.

Left Kantians in fact are also guided by what the last sentence in the Canguilhem citation underscores. A norm makes sense only against a horizon of meaning or what we may take as what counts as universality. In other words, Left Kantians are interested in *normativeness*, the ability of a society to generate new norms that project or impose a new necessity on the social order, while recognizing that that norm can be violated or its performance may lead to an infraction, which will require that new norms be deciphered and invented. The dialectic between norm and normativity is what generates normativeness. I think this is what Foucault implied when he wrote:

The fact that man lives in a conceptually structured environment does not prove that he has turned away from life, or that a historical drama has separated him from it—just that he lives in a certain way, that he has a relationship with his environment such that he has no set point of view toward it, that he is mobile on an undefined or a rather broadly defined territory, that he has to move around in order to gather information, that he has to move things relative to one another in order to make them useful. Forming concepts is a way of living and not a way of killing life; it is a way to live in a relative mobility and not to immobilize life; it is to show, among those billions of living beings that inform their environment and inform themselves on the basis of it, an innovation that can be judged as one like, tiny or substantial: a very special type of information.¹¹

Left Kantians are inspired by the vocation of forming concepts for the sake of new orders of normativity. They are in the task of calling forth new norms. They are interested in normativeness that is augured by the failure, error, and violation of norms.

Now, let us assume that we agree with all of this, what happens with that part of Frankfurt School critical theory that talked about the pathologies of reason, the colonization of the lifeworld by the systems level, and what happens to the normative notions of progress. We know, for instance, that Habermas moved to reconstruction and the discourse of pathology precisely to both circumvent and remedy the aporetic of thinking of reason as reification, in the way that Lukács and Adorno thought. As Habermas made it explicit in both *Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, in order to circumvent the aporias into which rationalization *qua* reification would lead to, we needed to talk about contingent processes of rationalization as process of learning and competencies acquisition. This allowed Habermas to talk about ‘pathologies’ in the process of rationalization, in which the rationalization from one value sphere irrupted or colonized another value sphere. The theoretical importance of this shift is that it allowed critical theory to retain a normative ground from which to criticize ‘pathological’ as opposed to ‘healthy’ process of rationalization. Here, as promised at the beginning, one would have to interject that Habermas’ recent work on “post-secular” society is motivated precisely by the use of genealogy as problematization in the sense that Koopman suggests, in as much as Habermas is concerned with diagnosing a faulty and pathological self-understanding of contemporary Euro-American society that requires that we link rationalization to secularization. The concern here, then, is what happens

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Life: Experience and Science” in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 465-478.

to the role of 'pathology' and 'colonization' as we moved deeper into de-transcendentalized critique and historical reconstruction? I would anticipate that problematizations do the job that 'pathologies' of reason aimed to do, without incurring the price of excessive transcendentalist claims. The discourse of pathologies is at the service of normativeness. It is a powerful tool in the tool kit of Left Kantians.

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