

## MICHEL FOUCAULT "NIETZSCHE, GENEALOGY, HISTORY" (1971)

Rather than seeking to describe the history of a concept (e.g. goodness) in terms of a linear development (76), thereby reducing its entire history and genesis to an exclusive concern for utility" (76), Foucault argues that each concept has a genealogy or history, an uncertain path of emergence, that can be traced, albeit not without difficulty. Rather than seek the telos of a particular concept, genealogy (Foucault's term for the activity by which one traces a genealogy) "must record the singularity of events outside of any monstrous finality" (76). The goal is not to trace the evolution of a concept, but to "isolate the different scenes where they engage in different roles" (76). In this regard, genealogy opposes itself to the search for origins (77).

Foucault derives his notion of genealogy from Nietzsche, especially the latter's The Genealogy of Morals. He argues that English translators of Nietzsche mistakenly use the same term origin to translate several different German words which each stress something different. Sometimes, Nietzsche uses the German word *ursprung* which denotes a particular essentialist conception of origin. The pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*) (78) of anything is an

attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities. . . . [T]his search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to that which was already there. . . . However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is something altogether different behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in piecemeal fashion from alien forms. (78)

For example, he argues, the concept of liberty (78) is an invention of the ruling classes and not fundamental to man's nature or at the root of his attachment to being and truth (78). Similarly, the truth is usually conceived of as something which can be unveiled or revealed, knowledge as a form of recovery. In fact, the truth is that history of errors which has "hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history" (79).

In short, a genealogy of values, morality, asceticism, and knowledge will never confuse itself with a quest for their origins (80) but will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning (80). The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimera of the origin (80). The history of any concept consists in the concrete body of a development . . . and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin (80).

Foucault argues that the true objective of genealogy (80) is not *ursprung* but the terms *entstehung* and *herkunft*, also terms used by Nietzsche, which are also translated somewhat inaccurately as origin. *Herkunft* is, he notes, the

equivalent of stock or *descent*; it is the ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by the bonds of blood, tradition, or social class. The analysis of *Herkunft* often involves a consideration of race or social type. But the traits it attempts to identify are not the exclusive generic characteristics of an individual, a sentiment, or an idea, which permit us to qualify them as Greek or English; rather, it seeks the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel. Far from being a category of resemblance, this origin allows the sorting out of different traits. (80-81)

Wherever unification (81) or coherence (81) are thought to exist, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning--numberless beginnings, whose faint traces and hints of colour are readily seen by a historical eye" (81).

Genealogy does not seek to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things" (81), or to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present (81) which it continues secretly to animate (81) by imposing a "predetermined form on all its vicissitudes (81). Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people (81). Rather, it attempts to "follow the complex course of descent (81) by maintaining passing events in their proper dispersion" (81) by identifying the "accidents, the minute deviations--or conversely the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations that give birth to those things that

continue to exist and have value for us" (81). What genealogy reveals is that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (81). Tracing the descent of a concept in this way is not tantamount to the acquisition (82) of a heritage (82) or of a possession that grows or solidifies (82). Rather, it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath (82). Genealogy does not consist in an erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile, it fragments what was thought unified, it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (82).

Genealogy as an analysis of descent (83) is, Foucault argues, situated within the articulation of the body and history (83). The body--and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil--is the domain of the *Herkunft*. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience (83). It is "totally imprinted by history" (83); it is an "inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)" (83). It is the "locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration" (83).

If *herkunft* indicates descent, *entstehung* denotes *emergence*, the moment of arising (83). Just as it is wrong to think of descent in terms of an uninterrupted continuity (83), emergence should not be thought of in terms of the final term of a historical development (83) or culmination. New developments may appear as a culmination, but they are merely the current episode in a series of subjugations" (83). Punishment, for example, has had other purposes than merely setting an example (83). Punishment has served a variety of needs--revenge, excluding an aggressor, compensating a victi, creating fear (83). Where metaphysicians set about placing present needs at the origin (83) in order to convince us of an obscure purpose that seeks its realisation at the moment it arises (83), genealogists seek to reestablish the various systems of subjection (83), the hazardous play of dominations" (83). The emergence of a concept is always the product of the eruption (84) of forces, the struggle these forces wage against each other (84). Goodness, as Nietzsche claims, is a concept which has more to do with the energy of the strong or the reaction of the weak (84) and from whose conflict it emerges.

As such, emergence designates a place of confrontation (84), or rather a non-place, an "interstice" (83) since the "adversaries do not belong to a common space" (83). The only drama ever staged in this non-place of emergence is the endlessly repeated play of dominations: the domination of certain men over others leads to the differentiation of values (85). History is the process of assigning meanings and values by force. Domination of some by others is what generates such ideas as liberty. History is not the progressive replacement of violence by the rule of law and social harmony (universal reciprocity [85]), but the progression from domination to domination (85): "humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules" (85). The successes of history belongs to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, . . . render inert their meaning, and direct them against those who had initially imposed them (86).

Interpretation is not the "slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin" (86) of a concept but the forcible application of the will to knowledge: the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game" (86). The development of humanity is a series of interpretations (86) the history (86) of which it is the role of genealogy . . . to record (86): the history of morals, ideals and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life, as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations . . . must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process" (86). A historical sense (87) which avoids a supra-historical perspective (86) and whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself (86) can become a privileged instrument of genealogy if it refuses the certainty of absolutes (87).

The historical sense implicit in genealogy is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous; it proffers a "dissociating view" (87), rather than a unified view, which disperses events; 'effective history' is historical (in time) rather than extra-historical. It perceives mutability rather than constancy, discontinuity rather than a continuous development or a teleology. There are no constants: neither man nor his body can serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. "History becomes 'effective' to the extent that it introduces discontinuity into our very being" (88) by dividing our

emotions, dramatising our instincts and multiplying our body. Effective history (i.e. an approach to history in which there is consciousness of the myriad effects that history has) uproots the traditional foundations of the self. It treats not treaties, reigns or battles but the "reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it" (88). The forces that prevail in history are haphazard, they do not "manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention" (88). The world is a "profusion of entangled events" (89), not an "ultimately simple configuration" (89) where events possess "essential traits" (89), "final meaning" or "initial and final value" (89). This is because, despite our yearnings to the contrary, there are no "profound intentions" (89) or "immutable necessities" (89). All we have is merely "our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (89). Effective history focuses less on lofty epochs etc. than on the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion. It does not serve as the handmaiden of philosophy, recounting the necessary birth of truth and values, but rather demonstrates that all historical knowledge is necessarily perspectival, grounded in a particular time and place and corresponding to specific attitudes and interests. Nietzsche dismantled history and its products, turning it to anti-Platonic purposes.

Arguing that history as a discipline emerged, not insignificantly, in nineteenth century Europe: the land of interminglings and bastardy, the period of the man of mixture (92), Foucault contends that the three Platonic modalities of history (93) celebrate history as reminiscence or recognition (93), history as continuity and representative of a tradition (93), and history as knowledge (93). By contrast, the man with historical sense (93), the new historian, the genealogist (93-94) offers a version of history that is respectively parodic, directed against reality (93), dissociative, directed against identity (93), and sacrificial, directed against truth (93). What Foucault offers is a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory (93).

Firstly, the parodic and farcical use (93): where traditional historians supplied the Revolution with Roman prototypes, romanticism with knight's armour, and the Wagnerian era was given the sword of a German hero (93), the new historian / genealogist recognises all this for what it is--a masquerade (95)--and pushes it to its limit (94): it will no longer be a question of identifying with the solid identities of the past, but our unrealisation through the excessive choice of identities (94). Taking up these masks, revitalising the buffoonery of history, we adopt an identity whose unreality surpasses that of God (94). This is because the identity which we attempt to support and to unify under a mask (94) is itself only a parody (94).

Secondly, the systematic dissociation of identity (94): where the goal of the traditional historian is the "continuities of soil, language and urban life in which our present is rooted" (94), the goal of the genealogist (the goal of so-called effective history) is not to rediscover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation" (95); its goal is not to "define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return" (95) but to "make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us" (95); it gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language (95) in order to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, marked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity" (95). The new history does not discover a forgotten identity, eager to be reborn, but a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis (94).

Thirdly, the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge (95): where Platonic notions of history trust in a neutral, objective concept of truth, genealogists contend that the various forms of scientific consciousness (95) are aspects of the will to knowledge (95). Genealogical knowledge is violent towards those happy in their innocence, those "effective illusions by which humanity protects itself" (95). All "knowledge rests upon injustice" (95) because "there is no right . . . to truth or a foundation for truth" (95). No knowledge can detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to the demands of reason" (96) and "tied to the affirmation of a free subject" (96).

In conclusion, genealogy is involved in the decisive cutting of the roots (96), the rejection of traditional attitudes of reverence (96), the liberation of man by presenting him with other origins than those in which he prefers to see himself (96). As a result, it is no longer a question of judging the past in the name of a truth that only we can possess in the present, but of risking the destruction of the subject who seeks knowledge in the endless deployment of the will to knowledge" (97). The critique of past

injustices through the truth held by men in the present must give way to the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge.