Ways of Doing Genealogy: Inquiry after Foucault
A Group Interview with Verena Erlenbusch, Simon Ganahl, Robert W. Gehl, Thomas Nail, and Perry Zurn

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Photo of Nancy Prison Revolt, 1972, by Gerard Drolc.

I. FOUCAULT INSPIRES INQUIRY BECAUSE… ↑

Colin Koopman: Each of you is not only an avid reader and scholar of Michel Foucault's work, but you all also have found various exciting ways of putting Foucault to work on some of the problems of our historical present. This raises a number of methodological questions that appear deceptively simple, but that actually provoke all kinds of interesting philosophical issues. I want to begin with a first question in this general vein of methodology. What do you find to be the most promising element in Foucault's writings in terms of provoking your own researches and inquiries? How do you undertake, or envision, the process of putting this Foucauldian element to work in your own research?

Perry Zurn: I can start. Perhaps the piece I find most intriguing about Foucault's work is its performance of curiosity. For me this is a sort of consternating invitation. What really motivates all his work, he says, is curiosity—the sort of curiosity by which one ends up far afield of one's footholds. There are resources here for intellectual pursuits. Curiosity prompts me to ask the very biggest of questions and permits me to fall unapologetically down the rabbit hole of the banal. For it, I take risks of content and of structure. But I also see tremendous support here for political imagination. What does it look like to live curiously as a political actor? When I think about the world I am working for, the world I want to help create, how brave am I being? How creative? How honest? And how tamed? Foucault knew a thing or two about struggling with these questions.

Verena Erlenbusch: For my work, the most promising aspect of Foucault's work is its unsettling of concepts and practices we take to be settled. It does so not in order to reveal them as false and correct them, but in order to make them problematic and urgent. Foucault himself insisted that one aim of genealogical analysis was to complicate matters in order to make easy solutions impossible. I find this insight most productive with regard to phenomena we seem to understand perfectly well, about which we don't usually think long and hard, and to which we have a set of accepted, perhaps even obvious responses. Terrorism, the body, race, miscegenation, and rights are some of the phenomena I have explored or hope to investigate in the future. My aim is to make them problematic through critically interrogating how they function in a network of historically evolving social practices.

Robert W. Gehl: Related to *how* Foucault goes about unsettling familiar ways through his histories of the present, I greatly admire his attention to detail, to documents and statements. If the history of the present is about remembering what is forgotten, then to do genealogical work is to keep remembering back through time. This requires hunting for statements or ideas that in their own context were taken for granted or full of assumptions. Those sorts of previous statements can tell us a great deal about how we got to where we are, but the difficulty is that because they're taken for granted, they tend to be suppressed. This is especially a problem in studying the genealogy of technology, since the accepted relationship to technology is to highlight and hype what's new and ignore underlying assumptions. This also relates to a second aspect of Foucault's work I find compelling: the idea of the "history of the present." I like to ask, "What makes it possible to think this way?" In cultural studies, we're taught to ask, "why this; why now?" These sorts of questions compel us to start with our current moment and start working backwards, tracing ways of thinking, practices, and objects back through time. Why is this practice, idea, or technology knowable now? What sorts of practices or ideas does it suppress or silence? How did those practices or ideas or technologies come to be suppressed or silenced?

Simon Ganahl: I try to learn from Foucault's original way of writing histories of knowledge. Apart from his conceptual tool-box, it's important for me to take his empirical findings about thought in modern cultures seriously and to build on them. To this I would add a second dimension, namely Foucault's notion of experience. This term plays a major role in all of his books. I try to see my studies as ways to transform myself and, in my current research project, I want to explore mediality as a modern field of experience.

Thomas Nail: I would give a similar, but also slightly different, style of answer. For my research, the most promising element of Foucault's work is his "transcendental empiricism": the idea that objects and relations form immanent historical regimes like sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power. This notion, as I interpret it in Foucault, is neither the study of merely empirical history nor the study of absolute metaphysical or subjective transcendentals. In transcendental empiricism, there are empirical objects, but there are also relations that organize them. The relations do not transcend the objects, but are immanent to them. Foucault's method has helped me to see that one cannot study one without the other. So from Foucault, I take the idea of "transcendental empiricism," but use it instead to understand "regimes of social motion" as they emerge and coexist throughout areas and themes of history not dealt with by Foucault himself.

Koopman: These references to empiricism and empiricities raise another question I wanted to ask. How has Foucault

inflected these more empirical dimensions of your work? Or to put it differently, how has Foucault helped you conceptualize your relationship to your field site, your archive, or what otherwise might be your object of inquiry outside the standard menu of theoretical texts in the philosophical canon? And to add something further to this, which a few of you have already spoken to, let me refer to a question brought up last year at the 'American Political Science Association' meeting during an event organized through the Critical Genealogies Workshop. Andrew Dilts, one of our panelists, pointedly pushed us to clarify our thinking on this question: how should we, and how do we, choose our archives with an eye toward subjugated knowledges?

Erlenbusch: While I draw much methodological inspiration from Foucault, the empirical dimensions of my work, particularly my choice of archives, are actually defined in distinction from what I see as Foucault's Eurocentrism. While Foucault pays attention to questions of race and racism to an extent that has only recently begun to be fully appreciated [particularly with the publication of the *Society Must Be Defended* course lectures, C.K.], he nevertheless applied his analytic tools to and generated concepts from a Western-European context. Moreover, Europe's colonial past (and present) remains largely untheorized in Foucault's work. I believe that this lack of attention to the ways in which colonialism structures the contexts under investigation has an important impact on the concepts generated from genealogical analysis. In what ways are our concepts of madness, sexuality, discipline, biopolitics, and so on, internally structured by a disavowal of colonialism? What can attention to colonial and non-Western contexts teach us about these concepts? Are these concepts useful to consider in these contexts? If so, in what ways do they have to be modified? The importance of these questions not only shapes how I go about selecting an archive, but also determines whose voices, discourses, practices, and so forth are included.

Nail: This is an important point for me, too. I would say that in terms of choosing an archive, I think Foucault has been instructive to me mostly by what he has *not* done. Foucault himself even recognized later in his life that most of his work was a study of dominant power and not counter-power. In my own work, I have tried both to do an analysis of the dominant forms of power (as Foucault did for Western history), but also to study the forms of counter-power that emerge alongside them. The latter is decisively more difficult because history is so often written by the victors. The history of slave societies, maroon societies, communes, workers organizations, and other counter-powers has been systematically destroyed and rewritten—making it all the more important to gather and reinterpret what remains, and preserve what is currently being produced.

Zurn: My project with the largest empirical component is the two edited books on *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group or GIP). The first, *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, which I co-edited with Andrew Dilts, is a collection of critical essays on the legacy of the GIP. The second, *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970–1980*, which I am co-editing with Kevin Thompson, will be the first authoritative collection of GIP archival documents in English translation. Both of these books have involved deeply submerging myself in a particular historical moment, in a sea of names, dates, and places, as well as in the minutiae of prison regulations and individual stories. I have been challenged by the GIP's commitment (and Foucault's own insistence during this period) to attend to those most affected by any given system. Writings from prisoners are now integral to my course on punishment theory. And, when called to challenge theory with experience, I find myself consistently asking, "Whose experience?" With that said, I am struck by the pronounced disjunction between Foucault's activism with the GIP and his coterminous theoretical work in *The Punitive Society* and *Discipline and Punish*. When we work to "give the floor" to extra-traditional, experiential accounts, what is our accountability to those voices? What are best practices for integrating those voices into our scholarship? For me, this falls under the larger rubric of an ethics of curiosity.

Koopman: *If I can interject at this point, I am hearing in these comments an important issue concerning the relationship between the political and the practical in Foucault, which is of course also a relay for a crucial philosophical question of our times concerning the relationship between the critical and the empirical. How does one put genealogy as a critical stance into motion alongside the empirical material that, in Foucault's case at least, the*

genealogist seems to be obsessed with? Any comments on that?

Ganahl: In my case, it was almost the other way round: from the outset, my research in the history of literature and media was drawn to archival material (newspapers, photographs, administrative documents, popular science, etc.). So I got interested in Foucault's work because of its strong empirical foundation. His concepts prompted me, however, to see these materials not as documents of some absolute reality, but rather as heterogeneous elements of historical ensembles, of culturally contingent realities. This leads to a politics and an ethics of genealogy in that it makes us question how our experiences are structured and how they might be organized differently.

Gehl: This question deserves attention if only because data gathering is such intense work in its own right. In my work, I find a statement or idea, I trace it back. I look at a new piece of software, I try to hunt down old versions and run them. I run a script to download a mailing list archive. I see someone make a statement, I try to contact them to ask them what they mean. It's boring, it's tedious, it's necessary, and it's compelling, but it's not been an occasion for reflection just yet. Foucault gets me started on the "patient, gray, meticulous" work, but I don't imagine him over my shoulder at this stage. Maybe when I turn to analysis?

Koopman: We began by discussing what is most exhilarating or stimulating in Foucault's work. But nobody is perfectly provocative. What do you experience as the most frustrating aspect of Foucault's methodological apparatus? What do you constantly find yourself stumbling up against, worrying about, or failing to understand how to make use of? What do you do in the face of this difficulty?

Nail: Related to some of what we were talking about earlier, I often worry that Foucault starts his historical studies way too late (i.e., the 18th century). Even when he goes back to the Greeks he leaves out thousands of years of important social history. And his histories are almost always geographically restricted to Europe. This results, in my opinion, in a failure to uncover some very important historical and geographical *dispositifs*. Furthermore, he does not give us an accurate picture of the *mixture* of the different *dispositifs* through history, so it ends up looking pretty linear at times as if modernity can be described in terms of an epochal series of shifts from sovereignty to discipline to bio-power (even though he says it's not linear in this way in *Security, Territory, Population*). In the face of these difficulties, I have tried to begin my historical studies earlier, expand the geographical scope, and show some of the mixture of regimes—even though this is an admittedly tall order.

Zurn: For my part, it concerns precisely what I mentioned previously as my main inspiration from Foucault. For as much as I find curiosity an invitation, it's also a source of unending frustration. How does one actually do it? How does one become curious? Or practice curiosity? It's not as simple or as romantic as it sounds. First of all, curiosity has already been harnessed, directed, primed. It has been encoded in our bureaucratic forms, marbled into our manners, and predetermined by those things we cannot help but see. To practice curiosity in Foucault's sense would be precisely to work against its institutionalized modes; that is, to combat some patterns and habits with others. But which ones? And why? Second (and this is where Foucault is less helpful), in some of my more honest moments I wonder how much flights of curiosity are the purview of privilege. Living in the grip of marginalization, one's curiosity is often hard, cold, and quick. How can I survive this moment? How can I navigate this violence with the least damage to those I love? How can I steal a ream of time in which to meet those faces that instantly break with recognition? When I endorse curiosity as a political practice, I am forced to confront what that assumes about the practitioners of curiosity.

Erlenbusch: My most persistent frustration in doing genealogical work arises from a set of epistemic questions and problems. First, there is the problem of what anthropologists call incorrigible positions. These are unrecognized assumptions that correlate with a particular epistemic standpoint or cultural system. When we sort archival data into categories, how do we make sure that this categorization isn't shaped by our own unquestioned assumptions and axioms? And how do we recognize and make explicit these assumptions? Second, as Arlette Farge discusses in *The Allure of the Archives*, the problem of incorrigible positions is exacerbated by the fact that the archive is already

organized into series. How do we select a series? How do we resist the constraints of archival categorization on our perception of the material? Third, there is the problem of recognizing the limitations of our system of thought. How do we know that its limits are reached? When does a particular set of data fit into existing categories and when do we need new categories? While I don't think these questions can be definitively answered, I have found it helpful to rely as much as possible on categories given by the archive. Here is an example. During the Algerian Revolution, militants of the National Liberation Front (FLN) engaged in practices that created a situation of highly visible and unverifiable power. These are characteristics of what Foucault describes as a disciplinary system, but the practices of FLN militants do not easily map onto the practices Foucault associates with discipline. The militants themselves describe their practices as counterattack. Preserving this term not only aids conceptual clarity, but also preserves the voices of those whose knowledges have traditionally been subjugated.

Ganahl: For me, it's similar. I'd say I experience frustration with Foucault's non-methodology. Foucault is not at all a systematic philosopher. I see him as a historian driven by philosophical questions, his concepts emerge from archival studies. I really like that, it's one of the main reasons I'm attached to his work. It can be really frustrating, however, to realize that even main concepts like 'statement', 'discourse' or 'archive' are not properly defined in his writings.

Gehl: It's also similar for me. I often face the problem of the difficulty of articulating minute details and specific statements with larger historical and cultural shifts. In other words, how can we say that one isolated practice helps set the conditions for large-scale social practices? What are the connective threads between a previous practice and a current way of thinking? Moreover, how does one demonstrate that these threads exist? Is it a matter of preponderance of evidence, or is the burden on presentation of evidence? If it's the former, data collection could be endless. If it's the latter, I had better improve my writing! This problem is analogous, it seems to me, to questions of emergence—that is, put together a collection of individuals and you get a society. But how does the atomic become the social? Likewise, how does an overlooked statement or practice become a large historical shift? What I do in the face of this shift is enjoy the anxiety, make it my friend, and keep studying, since I have the privilege to do so.
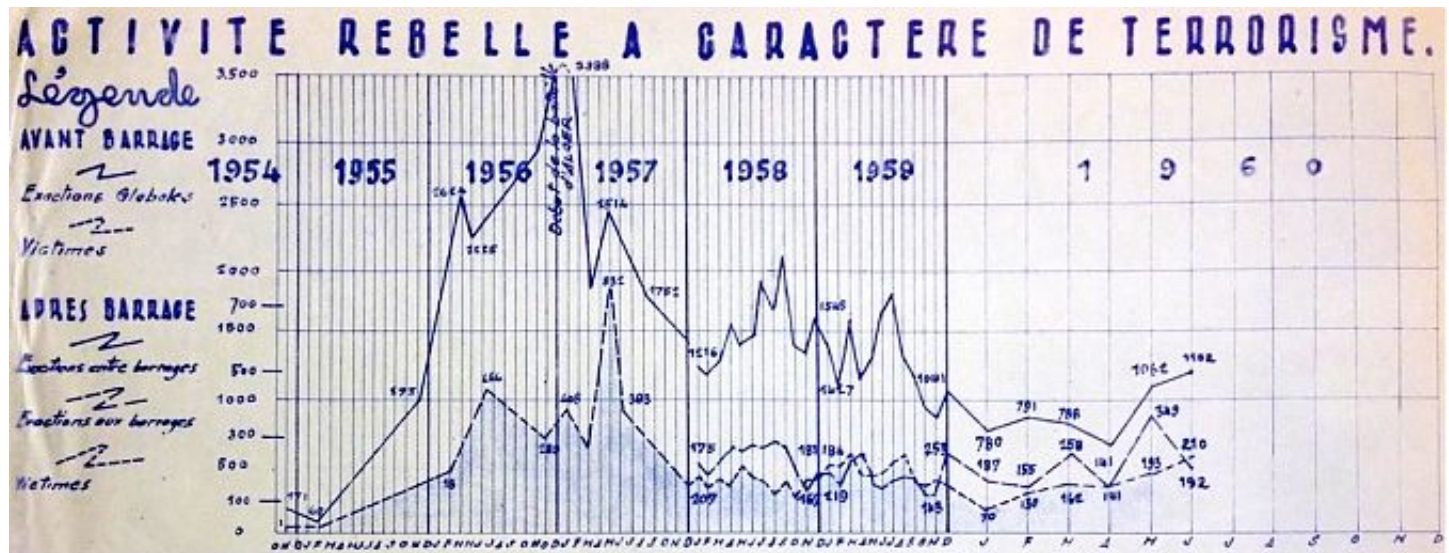
The graph measures the effectiveness of the French military tactics of counter-terrorism during the Algerian Revolution (Source: Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, photo by Verena Erlenbusch).

II. FOUCAULT AND LATOUR, FOUCAULT AND DELEUZE, FOUCAULT AND… ↑

Koopman: In some of what I am hearing from a few of you I am reminded of the work of Bruno Latour. More and more theorists today seem prepared to acknowledge a unique complicity between Foucauldian genealogy and Latourian actor-network theory. That said, there is actually surprisingly little work devoted to this connection between these two great French theorists of the last fifty years. Instead we still find ready comparisons of Foucault with, say, Derrida.

That can be productive, but what about Foucault and Latour? Do any of you have in mind a connection between more recent work in science and technology studies and Foucault's own lineage as a philosopher and historian of science?

Gehl: Definitely. I have learned much from Latour's work. I also greatly admire John Law, Annmarie Mol, and Susan Leigh Star, who all have done a great deal of work fleshing out actor-network theory. These scholars take their objects seriously; they take their objects apart to trace how objects become present to us by silencing other things; they have thought a great deal about the oscillations between simplification and complexity. Because they are agnostic about causes (that is, they don't assume that the social, technical, or natural is determinant in the last instance), they are committed to rigorous work to explore how power and action flow through networks of people, objects, and processes.

Ganahl: I too find Latour important. It is Latour who, along with Foucault, most influences my current research. He puts central aspects of a philosophy I like to call 'Fouleuzian' into sociological praxis. I see the actor-network, for example, as an operationalized version of Deleuze's 'agencement' [often translated as 'assemblage', C.K.]. And since Latour has combined the description of networks with an analysis of the specific types of connection that assemble the heterogeneous actors, his basic methodology comes very close to Foucault's notion of *dispositif*. So methodologically, Latour's recent *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* is quite important for Foucauldian scholars. Its metaphysical drift, however, is mostly unproductive speculation in my eyes. Moreover, I don't like that Latour blurs his intellectual traces: in large parts, his work is Deleuzian philosophy used for sociological research, but instead of acknowledging this legacy he makes an academic business out of it.

Nail: You mentioned Gilles Deleuze: he is for me the other transcendental empiricist. The less "ontological" *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* volumes are an important supplement to Foucault, for me. Deleuze includes prehistory in his historical analysis, he includes geographies outside the West, and makes resistance or counter-power conceptually and historically primary in a way Foucault did not. There are things to be gained here, as long as we maintain a healthy distance from Deleuze's less historical works.

Koopman: I sense a general nervousness amongst some of you about the more seemingly 'profound' or 'deep' moments of the theorists from which you are drawing. I am thinking for example of favoring Deleuze's more political-historical writings over his more ontological work, or favoring Latour's contributions to science studies over his more recent metaphysical forays. This way of shifting the balance also seems to me in keeping with Foucault. For in Foucault's case there are only the historical and political texts. There are no metaphysical texts which we have to separate off as a hangover of classical philosophy. No doubt many today would see the matter quite differently, and precisely Deleuze and Latour are invoked as motivation for recent ontological turns and speculative turns in the work of theory. So I find interesting the idea of attending to different contributions of their work, and turning to Foucault to help with that. But I also wanted to ask about other theoretical articulations and connections. Are there other philosophical, theoretical, or empirical traditions that help you set genealogy and archaeology into motion in your work? In other words, given some of the lacunae in Foucault's work that have been noted in the conversation, where else do you turn for resources?

Erlenbusch: Well, in my case, my training and background is in Political Science and Social and Political Thought, and within that especially Frankfurt School Critical Theory. While it is often said that Foucault and the Frankfurt School are incompatible, I find their critical projects strikingly synergetic. In particular, I draw inspiration from their shared views of the present as historical and their resistance to studying the past "as it really was." I also rely on resources in Critical Race Theory, Feminist Philosophy, and Post- and Decolonial Theory in order to ground normative implications that might be drawn from genealogical critique.

Zurn: For me this connects to what I was saying about the voices of, and writings from, those who are marginalized in or suffering within the spaces where our critical attention is directed. I mentioned the importance of the voices of prisoners in the context of a critique of the prison. I can offer another example. For years, I have worked with, for lack of a better term, diversity initiatives in higher education. These have been local, national, and international programs.

Some have focused on the discipline of philosophy specifically and others have addressed representation in the university more generally. Honestly, the students, staff, faculty, and community organizers I have worked with are some of my strongest inspirations. Their tenacity and their hope. Their bravery in the face of an often unwelcoming institution. Their commitment to collectively transform our political imagination. Each of these things is critical to the philosophical life. It is with and for them that I work to make philosophy open and answerable to marginalized experience. And use philosophical tools to address systems of inequality and social erasure.

South Korean army soldiers patrol along a barbed-wire fence near the border village of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea, on March 26, 2013 (photo credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon).

III. THE CRITICAL REUSE OF GENEALOGY TODAY FOR… ↑

Koopman: I want to conclude now by asking each of you to briefly describe a current genealogical, archaeological, or otherwise Foucauldian project in which you are engaged. What for you is the most important connection to Foucault within this project? And what for you is the most important break from Foucault there?

Gehl: I am currently researching various Dark Web/Dark Net technologies and trying to discover how they came to be. A major part of this must be a genealogy of media technologies. I am trying to trace how previous technologies, such as computer networks, encryption, search engines, and communication software, created the conditions of possibility for various Dark Web systems. Along the way, I am taking seriously a term used on the Dark Web again and again: "legit." Can Dark Web technologies be seen as the legitimate offspring of previous technologies? Or are they bastard technologies, illegitimate? How does legitimacy (in the sense of propriety) relate to legit (in the sense of authenticity)? I'm playing with "genealogy" in the double sense of Foucauldian genealogy as well as in terms of inheritance and the transmission of tradition over generations in technical and social practices. I am taking Foucauldian ideas such as conditions of possibility, problematizations, and practices seriously as I gather data. Where I'm breaking a bit with Foucault might be in that I'm taking the word "genealogy" slightly more literally and thinking about inheritance and legitimation through time. Where I'm breaking even more from Foucault is that I'm not going to relate everything I see to his categories of power (discipline, biopower, etc.). I suppose that's not breaking with Foucault so much as breaking with his concepts.

Ganahl: My post-doctoral research project is highly influenced by Foucault's work. First of all, its main aim is to examine mediality as a modern field of experience in the Foucauldian sense—mediality as a spectrum of possible experiences, established in modern time-spaces. Moreover, the specific *dispositifs* of mediation that I analyze are rooted in Foucault's work: reason is used in sovereign signs, life is captured in examining gazes, and voices are raised in governed transmissions. However, where do I need to go beyond Foucault? Firstly, I want to describe media as material actors in mediations. This is a question that Foucault didn't see clearly (or that he wasn't much interested in). Secondly, I need to make plain that non-humans act as much as humans do. Latour prevents me more than Foucault from seeing experience merely in anthropomorphic terms. Thirdly, after decades of criticizing modern institutions we should start to rebuild them. Which strategies respond to which needs? Can these needs be organized in different ways? What are viable alternatives?

Zurn: I am investigating the practice of bathroom segregation (by race, gender, ability, familial status, etc.). This is a genealogical project insofar as it takes a commonly accepted practice, traces its changing conditions of possibility, attends to the formations of power-knowledge that undergird it, and explores other thinkable (or as yet unthinkable) configurations of social waste-management systems. The biggest break with Foucault in this project is my willingness to consider structural claims about purity and impurity (offered by thinkers like Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, and María Lugones) as complementary analytics.

Nail: I have just published a "history of the present" on migration, *The Figure of the Migrant*, and I have another project forthcoming on borders called *Theory of the Border*. Both books trace four major historical regimes of social motion during their dominant period of emergence in Western history. The connection with Foucault is that I begin with two defining features of modern social life, migration and borders, and then trace the historical conditions for the emergence of this present moment. The methodology is transcendental empiricism. There are two important breaks from Foucault. First, my history is much broader and includes prehistory as well; whereas Foucault does not consider prehistory. Second, my history focuses on material and kinetic formations, whereas Foucault's is on power and discursive formations.

Erlenbusch: I'm currently exploring the historical conditions of possibility of contemporary terrorism. The project is genealogical in that it examines evolving social practices and political constellations that both permit and require specific conceptions of terrorism and particular practices of violence that are identified as terrorism. I also draw on Foucault's discussion of modern racism. Based on an investigation of the French Revolution, late-imperial Russia, the Algerian Revolution, and the War on Terror, I show that *dispositifs* of terrorism enact normalizing racism in rather different and contextually specific ways. I break from Foucault's eurocentrism in my choice of sites of investigation. I believe that a consideration of non-Western contexts and attention to colonialism has important consequences for genealogical analysis and the concepts it generates. I also attempt to complement genealogy with a normative stance, for which I draw on resources in critical theory broadly construed. Taking seriously the commitments of genealogy, however, the ameliorative strategies I propose are limited to clearly circumscribed, local, and historically specific contexts.

Notes on Contributors:

Verena Erlenbusch is Asst. Prof. of Philosophy at the University of Memphis. She has published articles on Foucault, terrorism, and political philosophy. She is presently working on a genealogy of terrorism. Along with Colin Koopman, she is co-organizer of the Critical Genealogies Workshop.

Simon Ganahl is habilitation fellow (APART) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, currently based at UCLA (Germanic Languages and Digital Humanities). He is co-editor of the **foucaultblog**, and head of the digital mapping project *Campus Medius* . His latest book is: *Karl Kraus und Peter Altenberg. Eine Typologie moderner Haltungen*

(2015).

Robert W. Gehl is Assoc. Prof. of Communication at the University of Utah. He is the author of *Reverse Engineering Social Media* (2014) and numerous articles. He is presently working on a critical theory of the Dark Web, a genealogy of software engineering, and (with Maria Bakardjieva) an edited collection on online bots.

Thomas Nail is Assoc. Prof. of Philosophy at the University of Denver. He is the author of *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015), *Returning to Revolution* (2012), and other work. He is currently working on a critical theory of the border.

Perry Zurn will be Asst. Prof. of Philosophy at American University beginning in Fall of 2017 following a postdoc at the University of Pennsylvania from 2016 to 2017. He is the co-editor (with Andrew Dilts) of *Active Intolerance* (2015), and the author of a number of articles on Foucault and translations of his work.