

Prospectus for the international workshop

13.12. - 15.12. 2007

Genealogische Praktiken: Transdisziplinäre Kartographie eines Denkstils / *Genealogical Practices: Transdisciplinary Cartography of a Style of Thinking*

I. Questions about the agency and topicality of genealogical practices

What are genealogical practices doing? What are we doing with them? How are they doing what they do? Who is their agent? And how can we learn more about their relationality?

Investigating the agency of genealogical practices is not only interesting for historians of the Middle Ages or for those who want to trace noble lineages – it's a question of major concern for contemporary life. Genealogical methods are an established part of the scientific canon in such diverse disciplines as history, medicine, anthropology, biology, and law, to name but a few. They are used to trace pathological features through the course of generations, to visualize the theory of evolution, to explore kinship structures, and to legitimize relationships. Beyond scientific and academic institutions, genealogical practices play a crucial role in private ancestry research; in government decisions on migration policies, social benefits and medical aid; in citizenship laws and in inheritance legislature. In short, one can generally find such practices wherever questions of origin are asked, claims for power and inheritance are raised, wherever politics of memory and identity are to be installed or (cultural) legacies are to be refuted or defended.

Yet even though genealogical practices seem to be ubiquitous and robust, they are also shadowy. Sarah Franklin, in her new book on the history and practices of cloning, draws upon this ubiquity, simultaneously noting that genealogy might be seen as one of the “most important, but vague and undertheorized terms in contemporary critical thought”. Obviously one encounters specific difficulties when researching genealogical practices. These difficulties, as well as the above-mentioned questions about the agency of these practices, will be the subject of our workshop.

II. Investigating genealogical practices

Genealogical practices are characterized by a fair amount of contradiction. Although they appear to be permanent and continuous throughout history, genealogical practices actually demonstrate an enormous mutability, flexibility, and variability. As part of modern genetic research these practices have been subject to diverse interpretations: whereas recent investigations in German cultural studies are convinced that genealogical practices are constantly geneticized and incorporated into and dominated by biology and genetics, anthropologists and social scientists like Sarah Franklin, Rayna Rapp, and Jeanette Edwards were able to demonstrate that even in central modern biomedical techniques like prenatal screening a tendency towards a degenicization of genealogy can be seen. The development of biotechnologies such as cryoconservation, cloning, and certain assisted reproductive technologies, as well as their tendencies to undermine unidirectional temporalities and the hierarchical orders of genealogical systems, even raised hopes for a postgenealogical era. This development, however, can also be understood as an attempt to use technological progress to get rid of genealogical practices, thought to be historically-discredited and discriminative.

One of the main functions of genealogical practices consists of ordering, classifying, ranking, and categorizing. Whereas they are extremely powerful in their strategies of inclusion and exclusion, in drawing boundaries and clarifying ambiguous situations, it seems to be much more difficult to create similar clarity and order in the analysis of the activity of genealogical practices themselves. It appears difficult to investigate these practices from an external position, as we are all of course smack in the middle of them. However, indeterminacy also affects other aspects of genealogy. Franklin points out that by following genealogical practices one is being led in “unpredictable directions” and can end up anywhere. Thus the experience of indeterminacy is supplemented by thickness and equivocality.

Also striking is the hybridity of genealogical practices. Neither clearly related to either the realms of ‘nature’ nor ‘culture’ they are interwoven with the patterns of both. Their presence and their effectiveness are often not easily identifiable. For example, knowledge and knowledge production in academic contexts are largely structured by genealogical practices. We are often unaware of how and how much they actually organize academic education. Ways of knowing, the transfer of knowledge and the establishment of traditions of knowledge, i.e. by academic schools or families, are deeply saturated by these practices. Research method, subject, and perhaps even the matrix of our knowledge production are all hardly distinguishable from one another. Therefore it is difficult, maybe almost impossible (as of now) to understand genealogical practices within the normal scientific analytical framework or with a critical approach which isolates the phenomenon from its background. By asking critical questions about the frontier ‘beyond’ genealogy, one often ends up captured by the very same practices again. Do traditional analytical and critical methods actually suffice for investigating genealogical practices? It would rather seem that they have a tendency to evade all kinds of scientific distancing such as the formation of critical concepts or the construction of theories.

III. Concept of the Workshop

Our workshop intends to look for other possible methodological approaches with which to explore genealogical practices. In their book ‘A Thousand Plateaus’ – a passionate argument against genealogical practices and structures – Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between two different modes of knowledge production. One of them they call ‘itinerary’, (pursuing). Instead of observing and measuring phenomena from the riverbank – as is usually done in science – one tries to get as close to the research subject as possible, finding oneself in the river, exposed to the drift, carried off by one’s experience to swim. What kind of methods and attitudes are important for this mode of knowledge production?

To answer this question, the workshop will use methods of description, comparison and iteration. Various case studies from the history of science and cultural history, from anthropology and science studies will not be scrutinized in the service of a superior thesis (such as geneticization or degeneticization) – rather, by reversing the hierarchy between theory and practice the importance of the material itself will increase.

By focusing on the notion of practice and in-depth description, the network of genealogical practices can unfold. Putting data side-by-side and arranging case studies in an interdisciplinary order will make it possible to recognize various patterns among the ordinary ingredients and products of genealogical practices such as gender/sex, kinship, family, order, memory, inheritance, classification ...

An introduction into the theory and practice of cartography, certain cartographic exercises (such as an ‘open space’ for the circulation of material), and a roundtable discussion are all aimed at linking the different case studies. The structure of dual comments from a historical

and from an anthropological perspective on each paper will further interweave the data. These different modes of “inner- and inter-collective thought circulation” (Ludwik Fleck) should help us follow the mobility of genealogical practices on their way through different times, spaces, and disciplines.

Can we recognize other patterns by their recurrence in the material? What kinds of shifts result from iterative procedures? Can we really reach more general conclusions on genealogy by moving around, or is it better to look for a safe haven from which to apply our critical thinking? Will we achieve a better understanding by further condensation and sharpening of the movements and patterns we have already managed to identify? Could it be, that one possible answer to our questions rests in the iteration itself, in the “re-syllable” and not in the “post-syllable”?

By setting up the workshop in this way, we hope to create a provisional map of genealogical practices. Following the considerations of Deleuze and Guattari, the aim of this map won't be to fix and secure special forms of genealogical practices and assign them to specific coordinates, but rather to function as a ‘marauder’s map’, a diagram/graph of possibilities which might be able to cope with the essential mobility of genealogical practices and their roaming across times and disciplines.