



ARTICLES

“White” and “black” genealogy. Affirmative and pejorative histories of values in Taylor and Foucault

Genealogia “branca” e “preta”. Histórias afirmativas e pejorativas de valores em Taylor e Foucault

Genealogía “blanca” y “negra”. Historias afirmativas y peyorativas de valores en Taylor y Foucault

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Abstract: The subject of the present article is the contrasting genealogical approaches of Charles Taylor and Michel Foucault in understanding the socio-constitutive role of self-interpretations and world interpretations in shaping social reality. While Taylor’s genealogy underlines moral aspirations and contradictions of modernity, Foucault’s genealogy uncovers the power dynamics and constraints inherent in these aspirations. My proposal is a “gray” genealogy that integrates both perspectives and allows for a nuanced understanding of modern socio-historical conditions and the exploration of viable alternatives. The case of autonomy and authenticity in the context of social acceleration illustrates how Taylor’s and Foucault’s genealogies can be applied to critique contemporary society, denoting the relevancy of a combined approach enabling a more profound and balanced critique of modernity.

Keywords: Social criticism. Methodology. Genealogy. Modernity.

Resumo: O tema do presente artigo são as abordagens genealógicas contrastantes de Charles Taylor e Michel Foucault na compreensão do papel socioconstitutivo das autointerpretações e das interpretações do mundo na formação da realidade social. Enquanto a genealogia de Taylor destaca as aspirações morais e as contradições da modernidade, a genealogia de Foucault revela a dinâmica do poder e as restrições inerentes a essas aspirações. Minha proposta é uma genealogia “cinza” que integre as duas perspectivas e permita uma compreensão diferenciada das condições sócio-históricas modernas e a exploração de alternativas viáveis. O caso da autonomia e da autenticidade no contexto da aceleração social ilustra como as genealogias de Taylor e de Foucault podem ser aplicadas para criticar a sociedade contemporânea, mostrando a relevância de uma abordagem combinada que permita uma crítica mais profunda e equilibrada da modernidade.

Palavras-chaves: Crítica social. Metodologia. Genealogia. Modernidade.

Resumen: El tema del presente artículo son los enfoques genealógicos contrapuestos de Charles Taylor y Michel Foucault para comprender el papel socioconstitutivo de las autointerpretaciones y las interpretaciones del mundo en la configuración de la realidad social. Mientras que la genealogia de Taylor subraya las aspiraciones morales y las contradicciones de la modernidad, la genealogia de Foucault desvela las dinámicas de poder y las limitaciones inherentes a estas aspiraciones. Mi propuesta es una genealogia «gris» que integre ambas perspectivas y permita una comprensión matizada de las condiciones sociohistóricas modernas y la exploración de alternativas viables. El caso de la autonomía y la autenticidad en el contexto de la aceleración social ilustra cómo las genealogias de Taylor y Foucault pueden aplicarse para criticar la sociedad contemporánea, denotando la relevancia de un enfoque combinado que permita una crítica más



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Palabras clave: Crítica social. Metodología. Genealogía. Modernidad.

The socio-constitutive role of (self-) interpretations

Charles Taylor, Michel Foucault,² and other modern social theorists such as Jürgen Habermas or Anthony Giddens are united by the conviction that self-interpretations and world interpretations, i.e., discursively conveyed conceptions about *what exists* in the world, *what matters*, and how individuals are positioned facing their fellow human beings, society, and the “cosmos,” are constitutive for the subjects and in each case generate social reality.³

Forms of knowledge, forms of identity, and social institutions are, according to this conviction, closely correlated, in particular, because and by determining how ethical, political, and epistemological *problematization of the world* takes place: what can one know and how can one obtain the relevant knowledge; what can one strive for socially and politically and how can the aspired to be realized; How should one “lead” oneself and what are the aims and threats of this self-guidance? Subjects are thus constituted, in particular, by the way they become *a problem* for themselves. The authors mentioned above, therefore, share the view that social reality is never absolutely given but is itself always already an interpretation or a (partially materialized) expression of coagulated interpretations.

My thesis is that Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor are still in tune with each other on three other crucial points:

(1) The subjects and socio-political realities produced in such a discursive-interpretive manner are historically contingent; they constitute holistic forms of life in which the forms of knowledge (epistemology), politics (exercise of power), and subjectivity (ethics) mutually constitute and rein-

force each other. Different cultures or eras are thus characterized by distinct, interlinked languages, practices, epistemologies, and institutions.

(2) Moral or at least normative conceptions about what matters in each case (scientifically, politically, ethically), what goods, ideals, or norms of normality are aspired to, and what must consequently be avoided, combated, or suppressed play a decisive, and perhaps paramount, role for the quasi-hermeneutic constitution of social reality, in politics and for subject formation.

(3) (Self-) interpretations in this sense are not only articulated, doctrinaire ideas or theories, but they are also directly embedded in institutions and practices. For example, even in a *supermarket*, only those who know and internalize modern concepts of the subject, of rational choice and society can move appropriately. In fact, constitutive self-interpretations can even be understood as inscribed into the human body; they become “habitualized” in the sense of Bourdieu (1977): in the way we walk, sit, sleep, laugh, and talk – or how we throw a ball⁴ we always carry expressions of who we think we are and how we place ourselves in relation to the social and material environment.

The double task of genealogy

Both authors further agree that an important, even central, task of social research – or more specifically, of political theory – is the “genealogical” reconstruction of the (sometimes quite inarticulate) constitutive ideas and ideals for the respective own – in our case: the Western modern – life-form. For Foucault, as for Taylor, an adequate understanding of social and political reality requires an explication or visualization of the hidden modes of action, and often also of the contradictions of the dominant self-interpretations of society and, above all, of the guiding norms, core values, and concepts of the good. In short, speaking in phenomenological terms: For both

² This is a revised and extended version of my article “Weiße” und “schwarze” Genealogie: affirmative und pejorative Wertgeschichten bei Taylor und Foucault (Rosa 2012), translated by James William Santos (Universität Erfurt, Thüringen, Deutschland) and Emil A. Sobottka (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil), revised by Justin Kopek.

³ See for example Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman (1991).

⁴ Very insightful on this: Iris Marion Young (1980).

authors, the reconstruction of the dominant modes of *being in* and *being to* the world is a core requirement for the social sciences.

Finally, and there the accordance ends, the two thinkers are also in agreement that one can only recognize the outlines of the holistic life-form of Western modernity by means of a historical-genealogical reconstruction; that is, methodologically one has to delve deeply into the history of modern ideas, mentalities, and institutions to make comprehensible how we (as subjects brought about by these interpretations) have become what we are and what it means to be "modern." Without historical intellectual, subjective, and institutional theoretical analysis, it is impossible for us to recognize the peculiarities and limitations of our own worldview, or more precisely: of our own *mode of being in and to the world*. The limits of a holistic paradigm can never be seen from within but only through a historical-genealogical analysis of contingencies and alternatives. However, the purpose of this genealogy, which can also be understood as a sort of "archaeology" in the sense of a historical-ideological excavation, is quite different for Taylor and Foucault,⁵ which is why they fundamentally part ways with regards to the question of *why we should do genealogy*. Therefore, I would now like to examine the two resulting types of cultural-historical-political genealogy separately.

The sources of the self: Charles Taylor

Taylor is convinced that human life, individually and collectively, is always defined by the fact that it is guided by an idea of the good.⁶ *Which* idea or *which* good de facto an actor or a community follows is historically variable. According to Taylor's view, goodness can be a god or even the Platonic idea of good, the Kantian idea of reason,

or Rousseau's conception of nature, and it may also be that for an age, a combination of several constitutive goods is the guiding force. But only a "moral map" (cf. Taylor 1988) determined by such goods allows social actors individually and collectively to make decisions and really lead their lives. Such a contoured moral map lists "mountains" in the sense of desirable states and behaviors and lows or "valleys" in the sense of injurious, harmful, avoidable states and behaviors. It not only defines a "moral" horizon in the narrow (deontological) sense, but it is a comprehensive cognitive-evaluative map insofar as it not only determines the good and the bad but also indicates which phenomena in the world exist at all, their relevancy, and how they relate to each other. Epistemology and ethics are always intertwined in the horizon of a socially constitutive self and world interpretation.⁷

That is why Taylor assumes as his task to reconstruct the moral map, the core values of modernity: He uses reconstructions of intellectual history and of the history of mentalities to show how our conceptions of the good, our ideas of what matters, have evolved and changed. He tries to work out how an Enlightenment-rationalist map has mixed with a romantic-expressivist one and how both are partly overlaid by older theistic, Christian ideas of the good.⁸ Only when we dig up again, what really matters to "us", according to Taylor, do we know what we are suffering from in the modern age and how we can correct it. He, therefore, wants, as he says, to "bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit" of modernity (Taylor 1989, 520): His aim, in line with the communitarian thinkers, is to articulate the moral ideals and ethical aspirations of Western modernity, to show its tensions and contradictions, and above all, to confront them with the increasingly "blindly" independent practices

⁵ Interestingly, Michel Foucault has described his own approach both archaeologically and genealogically (cf. on this point Reckwitz 2021): "Archaeological is the perspective, in that it reconstructs historically specific knowledge systems that make certain subject positions conceivable and practicable at certain historical times. [...] Genealogical is this perspective on the subject's history, by focusing on the specific conflict constellations in which at a given time historical forces are formed and stand against each other, constellations of random occurrence, random confrontation and not infrequently also the random output." Taylor and Foucault agree in the dimension described here as *archaeological*, but in *genealogy*, as will be shown, they differ considerably.

⁶ Taylor has most extensively articulated his conception in the first part of the *Sources of self* (1989); see in detail: Hartmut Rosa (1998).

⁷ On this, see also Hartmut Rosa (2019, 110–144).

⁸ For the latter cf. now also Charles Taylor (2007).

and institutions of modernity, in order to gain a conducive criterion of criticism and correction.

It is precisely this that I would like to call an affirmative “white” or “positive” genealogy:⁹ Its aim is to reconstruct the scales of value historically and the guiding conceptions that are constitutive to/ for us, our conceptions of *what really matters*, and thus to rescue them and bring them in position against an inadequate social practice, against a “runaway world” – to use a formulation of Anthony Giddens (2003) that points in the direction of the theory of acceleration (Rosa 2013). With the help of a white genealogy in the sense of Taylor, we should and can find out who “we” really are and where “we,” individually and collectively, really want to go.

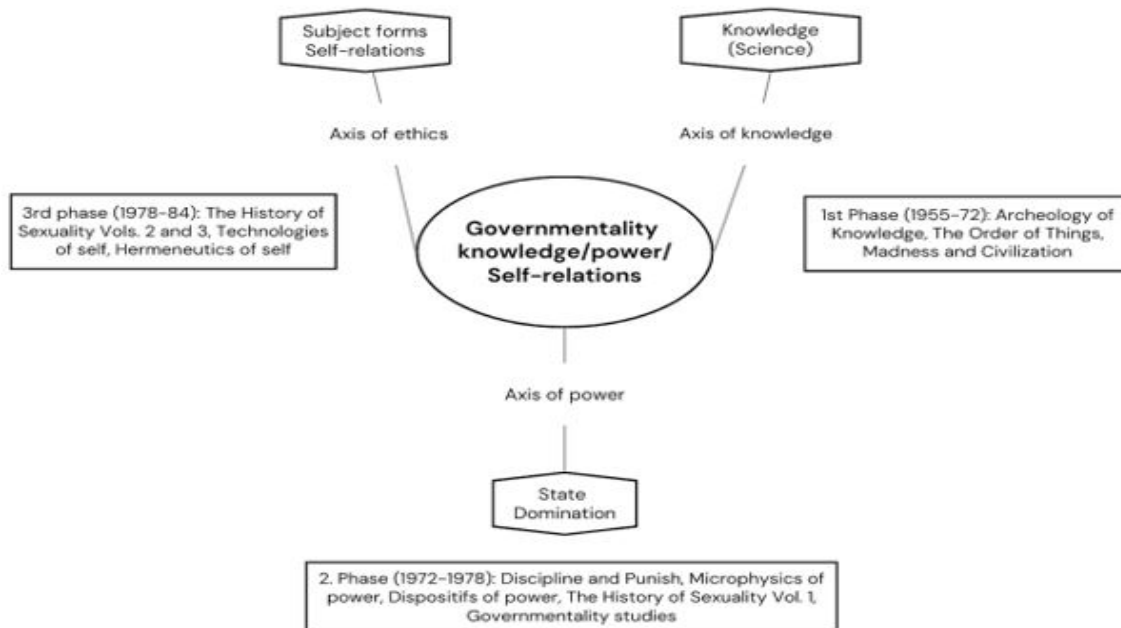
Incidentally, it seems important to point out here that this does not necessarily entail anti-pluralistic implications: it is quite possible that our individual and group-specific maps may differ and, therefore, produce divergent genealogies. In fact,

Taylor tries to make this explicit in his research, when he pits rationalist-naturalist conceptions of the good against romantic-expressivist ideals.

The limits of the self: Michel Foucault

For Michel Foucault, on the other hand, we find the reverse thrust: He also believes that values and norms are constitutive of the power and self-relations of modernity, and he also wants to reconstruct them in their historical becomingness. But he certainly does not intend to re-establish them as binding standards; rather, he believes that the articulation of their historical contingency, their violence, and the arbitrariness of their formation and working out will, in a certain sense, delegitimize them.¹⁰ He assumes that genealogies will deprive those ideas and the legitimated institutions and practices – supported by these ideas – of their largely invisible, habitual binding nature.

Figure 1 – Michel Foucault: one project – three phases, three axes of social criticism



Source: Authors' elaboration.

⁹ On the idea of an affirmative genealogy cf. also Hans Joas (2009).

¹⁰ Paradigmatic for this: Michel Foucault (1977, 146): "to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; 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 accidents."

Foucault reconstructs the "order of things" and the discourses about sexuality, subjectivity, and truth, and the corresponding practices of discipline, punishment, and normalization to reveal the blind spots in the holistic formation of knowledge, power, and subjectivity (Fig. 1) and thus seeks to make visible its limits and its biases. His hope is to open up thereby ways to overcome them, possibilities of transgression, in order to let at least momentary alternative forms of power, knowledge, discourses, and forms of being appear. While Taylor's genealogy ultimately aims at a (modern) *re-centering* of the subject, Foucault is conversely concerned with its (postmodern) *decentration*.

If one recognizes by means of their historical reconstruction or deconstruction that the conceptions of values and norms that are constitutive of the own self-understanding are historically contingent, Foucault assumes, they lose their normalizing and legitimizing force and obligation, and their transgression becomes possible; alternative modes of being in and to the world become possible. Constitutive, productive power effects – in contrast with repressive ones – are ultimately only visible on the path of their historical reconstruction.

This insight is certainly worth considering in a time that is politically dominated by the "Tina principle" (*there is no alternative*), a time in which, as Fredric Jameson notes, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to think of a viable alternative to the current capitalist individualism (Jameson 2009, 50).

Hence, as Taylor reconstructs in order to give back the motivating power to the moral sources, Foucault reconstructs to deprive these sources of their legitimating force and to inspire their transgression. Accordingly, we can call this a pejorative "black" or "negative" genealogy.

The socio-moral effects of historical genealogy

The central interest here, however, is the ques-

tion of why Taylor and Foucault differ so radically in the assessment of *the effect* of their respective genealogies: Why is Taylor firmly convinced that his reconstruction of the sources of the modern self will give those same sources new powers of persuasion and impact, while Foucault also irrevocably assumes that his genealogy will delegitimize these sources, rob them of their liability and lack of alternatives, and ultimately weaken them? Quite obviously, both authors assume that the "stories" narrated by them take due account of the historical reality, i.e., the stories do not reproduce it as deliberately distorted or one-sided. Hence, the core question is this: *What effect is to be expected from a historical genealogy of our (value) sources of thinking, acting and willing?*

An answer to this can only be found, in my opinion, if one discovers that the two authors do *not* intend to tell the same story of these sources: Taylor seeks to narrate the history of the modern self as a *story of the search for the motivating good* ("struggle for the good"); as a story of continual articulation, failure, and re-articulation of ethical and aesthetic ideals, while Foucault wants to tell our story as a history of power effects and repressions, of violence and errors. The Frankfurt social philosopher Martin Saar has recently formulated, in his approach, an "operating manual" for the compilation of effective (black) genealogies. It reads as follows:

Tell me the story of the genesis of my self-understanding using the word power (or related words such as strategy, dispositive or interests, subjugation, exploitation, benefit) in such a way that I, by listening, do not want to be anymore as irrevocable as I believe to be, and while listening understand by myself that I do not have to be that way either (Saar 2007, 170).

If subjects see themselves as constitutively bound up with "sources of the good," then they feel "genealogically confirmed" in their self-understanding. On the other hand, if they recognize themselves as the contingent product of historical power struggles, then the desire awakens

for alternative ways of being.¹¹ This, of course, suggests that both types of genealogy could and eventually *should* complement one another: *Only when I learn to understand myself as both, a product of power effects and as a result of culturally determined ways of striving for the good, can I perhaps decide what is worth preserving in myself and my social environment and what seems worth changing.* Obviously, this hope of synthesis is far stronger rooted in the Taylor-Hegel tradition than in the Nietzsche-Foucault line.

However, both thinkers agree that without a reconstruction of institutions, ideals, and of the history of mentalities, the realization of one's own social-constitutive structure of value and ideas is not possible, limits cannot be exploited, and real alternatives to the concrete historical situation cannot be thought of. Only when one can see how constitutive convictions have become historically entrenched and institutionalized, and thus 'naturalized', it becomes possible to recognize their inherent contradictions and possible pathologies and to think of alternatives.

Social criticism based on the history of mentalities

Interestingly enough, the socio-political goals of both authors are, in the end, quite similar to each other insofar as both approaches are concerned with the substantiation of a critical social science or a social critique. Perhaps this reveals that both shared the common heritage of the Enlightenment tradition: While Taylor tries right away to use the central values and ideals of the epoch of Enlightenment as still effective and thus, as it were, culture-effective sources of morality for a critique of existing conditions, Foucault (2005) derives from the Enlightenment the claim and the ethos of *transgression*, of going beyond the existing and towards alternative modes of thinking, acting and being. Consequently, with Taylor, it is possible to show how modern society

is in the process of undermining and missing its own moral foundations and aspirations and that it creates legitimacy crises in the sense of crises of alienation of "frightening proportions,"¹² while Foucault works out the historical questionability and the inner power permeated relations within these aspirations. Taylor takes the moral map of modernity as the basis and tries to criticize and correct with it the institutional-practical aberrations of society, while Foucault questions the map itself and thus also opens up the possibility that not, or not only, the practice but (also) our deepest sense of self-interpretation is what has to be corrected.

An example: autonomy, authenticity, and acceleration

I would like to explain this complex context in brief with an example: In my opinion, it is easy to demonstrate that the self-propelling processes of modernization, in particular, their imperatives of growth and acceleration, increasingly come into contradiction with the most fundamental normative principles and basic aspirations of modernity (cf. in detail Rosa 2005).

I fully agree with Taylor, Habermas, Peter Wagner (1995), and others that there is such a thing as a "normative" project of modernity, the core of which may hold – or as its constitutive good may be considered – the ideal of individual and collective *autonomy*: According to that, a guiding value of modernity is the conviction that we as individuals and as political communities can and should be able *to determine for and by ourselves how we want to live*, that we should not be hindered by tradition and scarcity, by church or king, to change, form and shape our history, our society and our way of life. As a complementary ideal comes the more romantic-inspired idea of *authenticity*: For modern subjects, it is not only important to live autonomously in the sense of (somehow) *self-determined*, but also to be able

¹¹ Correspondingly, Foucault wants to "dissipate" our identity, "systematically dissolve" it, and transform it into irreconcilable discontinuities (cf. 1977).

¹² Charles Taylor (1985, 50: 1979, 90): "Alienation arises when the goals, norms or ends which define the common practices or institutions begin to seem irrelevant or even monstrous, or when the norms are redefined so that the practices appear a travesty of them."

to express in their (self-determined) way of life what they "really" want to be and can be according to their innermost predispositions, wishes, and opportunities. Democratization, individualization, and liberalization are then the guiding concepts with which the historical changes associated with these ideals can be described.

The modernization processes favored, perhaps even set in motion by such ideas which I attempted to reconstruct in my book on social acceleration as *processes of optimization, increase, and acceleration*, initially supported and fostered those two aspirations: Acceleration in the sense of more efficient economic production and scientific-technical progress and of a dynamization of the social structures, for example, has opened up new and larger individual and collective margins of self-determination and provided the resources for a genuine ("authentic") self-determination. Without a successful economy, without scientific progress, and without a dynamic, changeable social structure, there is nothing to shape politically, and even the idea of an *individual way of life* gains its modern meaning historically only then and there, where there is indeed dispositional scope in everyday practice (cf. for example Zaretsky 2005).

But in late modernity, as I have tried to show in my book on the matter, the acceleration forces and constraints have, in some ways, outgrown those ideals. For example, the need for ceaseless economic growth has left the impression that there hardly ever exist political acting spaces and alternatives – political parties differ mainly in terms of how to stimulate growth, which has nothing in common with genuine political autonomy. The Tina principle in the struggle for competitiveness is certainly the opposite of (political) autonomy.

However, late modernity's impositions to incessantly dynamize and flexibilize equally undermine the possibilities of realizing an autonomous or authentically felt lifestyle: Life plans must be designed and continually changed to meet the ever-changing social demands to be able to survive in a highly dynamic environment and to remain competitive. As life individually as well as politically turns out to be more and more un-

foreseeable and uncontrollable, the normative project of modernity – autonomy and, perhaps, authenticity – has become incompatible with the increasingly autonomous acceleration dynamics of the modernization process (see on this Rosa 2020).

A Taylorian, "white genealogy" critique of this social condition could consist of proving in detail how far and in which points late-modern acceleration constraints are incompatible with the moral map of modernity, which forms of alienation, which social pathologies emerge from it, and which needs, but also which possibilities of correction, exist. The groundbreaker here remains the memory of the fundamental ideal: The free determination of one's own life form. It will help develop corrective options. Modernity's core problem, according to Taylor, is that in our social and political practice, we have forgotten and lost our moral map.

On the other hand, a critique of contemporary society based on Foucault's "black genealogy" would attempt to show that autonomy and authenticity are not the innocent ideals that now become "victims" of modernization: "Autonomy terror" and "compulsion for authenticity" are themselves instruments of power which impose a certain problematic self-relation on us and which at the same time have allowed the power of the modern state to become individualistic and totalitarian. From this perspective, the aspiration towards autonomy, control and domination in particular is exactly a core-driver of social acceleration (Rosa 2019, 414–424). Together, they at first legitimized the institutional disciplinary arsenal of modernity, keeping the acceleration dynamic going. Today, perhaps the late-modern dynamics of acceleration do open up completely new forms of subjectivity and political possibilities compared to the high-modern formation. Postmodern identity concepts, explicitly describing subjects as "players," "drifters," or "surfers," (cf. in detail Rosa 2005, chap. 9) on the one hand postulate a liberation effect that results from giving up wanting to retain control over our lives and seeking a chimeric core of our self. Kenneth Gergen, for

example, promises a happier, more fulfilling, successful, and better life in his book *The Saturated Self* (2000, 15), "if we only give up looking for a true and lasting self and instead simply try to exploit the opportunities that exist in each case." Something similar, writers such as Ulrich Beck (2007), Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri (2002) suggest, could come about if we gave up the idea of central political management and control and instead open the field to spontaneously organizing political agents. But on the other hand, as the aspiration towards autonomy, authenticity and control appears to become evermore futile and bound to fail for individual as for political actors, the neoliberal ideology and politics of giving them nevertheless full responsibility for their actions forces them to stick to these very ideals. From this point of view, the ideals of modernity, autonomy, and authenticity are *not the standards* of criticism but *its goals*.

Conclusion: The need for a "gray" genealogy

If one tries to conceptualize the possibilities and limitations of the two forms of genealogically-based criticism, then it seems obvious to me that social criticism should necessarily take both forms of genealogy seriously and try to combine them. Thus, a critical theory of the present should examine, on the one hand, what demands arise from our fundamental self-interpretations and world interpretations, which contradictions are immanent, and which deviations can be identified between the institutional reality and the moral map. On the other hand, it is also important to discover which constraints, power effects, and practices of normalization, exclusion, and subjugation are associated with the same map. The result, however, cannot consist in a mutual relativization of the two histories – the history of power on the one hand and the history of the pursuit of the good on the other – but should be a new history that, to some extent at least, can "sublate" the black and white genealogy by taking both

in their respective radical points seriously and recognizing their legitimacy. The "mode of operation" for such a "gray" understanding of genealogy could then be formulated as such: "Tell me the story of the genesis of my self-understanding as a series of power effects on the one hand and as a result of the pursuit of the good on the other hand in such a way that I, when/while listening, recognize which moments of myself seem to me worth preserving and which possibilities of overcoming or transgression arise for me with regard to the other moments." Only on the basis of such a conception of a "gray genealogy" of the present can we arrive at a 'Best Account'¹³ of our late-modern socio-historical predicament, and it is from here that the search for viable alternatives appears to me most promising.

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¹³ I have used this Taylorian term to elucidate my own methodological conception of social theory in *Late modernity in crisis* (cf. Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 95–158).

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Não se aplica

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