

Foucauldian postmodern theory of Power: A challenge to Western Metaphysics

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Abstract

The postmodernism is a term that has been defined in relation to modern. The critics have defined the term in various ways. But one feature common to all the definitions is that postmodern is suspicious about notions used in Western Metaphysics. The ideas put forth by Derrida, Lacan and Foucault turn upside down the very ideas of Western metaphysics such as continuity and reason. In short the philosophy of Derrida and history viewed by Foucault raises doubts about long standing belief in man as a stable and unique entity, reason as guiding principle of the progress of humanity and continuity of history. The postmodernism is a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism and a general suspicion of reason. In western metaphysics from the days of Plato to present day reason is considered as guiding principle of humanity. The most of the philosophers think that reasoning and rationality are keys to Man's emancipation. For them reasoning is the capacity to draw logical conclusions from new or existing information, with the aim to seek the truth. Foucault in his works whom gave new perspectives of Power/knowledge that raises questions about stability and permanence of the concept like reason and truth. For Foucault concepts like identity, sexuality and normality are historical construct.

Key Words: Postmodern, Power, knowledge, Reason, suspicion, Foucault

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The individual is the product of power.
-Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault, the French postmodernist, has been hugely influential in shaping our understandings of power, leading away from the analysis of actors who use power as an instrument of coercion, and even away from the discreet structures in which those actors operate, toward the idea that 'power is everywhere', diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' Power for Foucault is

what makes us what we are, operating on a quite different level from other theories.

Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. Instead it is a kind of 'metapower' or 'regime of truth' that pervades society, and which is in constant flux and negotiation. Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of

knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth':

Power is also a major source of social discipline and conformity. In shifting attention away from the 'sovereign' and 'episodic' exercise of power, traditionally centred in feudal states to coerce their subjects, Foucault pointed to a new kind of 'disciplinary power' that could be observed in the administrative systems and social services that were created in 18th century Europe, such as prisons, schools and mental hospitals. Their systems of surveillance and assessment no longer required force or violence, as people learned to discipline themselves and behave in expected ways.

Foucault was fascinated by the mechanisms of prison surveillance, school discipline, systems for the administration and control of populations, and the promotion of norms about bodily conduct, including sex. He studied psychology, medicine and criminology and their roles as bodies of knowledge that define norms of behaviour and deviance. Physical bodies are subjugated and made to behave in certain ways, as a microcosm of social control of the wider population, through what he called 'bio-power'. Disciplinary and bio-power create a 'discursive practice' or a body of knowledge and behaviour that defines what is normal, acceptable, deviant, etc. – but it is a discursive practice that is nonetheless in constant flux .

A key point about Foucault's approach to power is that it transcends politics and sees power as an everyday, socialised and embodied phenomenon. This is why state-centric power struggles, including revolutions, do not always lead to change in the social order. For some,

Foucault's concept of power is so elusive and removed from agency or structure that there seems to be little scope for practical action. But he has been hugely influential in pointing to the ways that norms can be so embedded as to be beyond our perception – causing us to discipline ourselves without any willful coercion from others.

Foucault's recurring lesson is that the nature and limits of the *thinkable*, both in theory and in practice have changed more often, more radically and more recently than science - be it philosophy, astronomy or sociology - tends to assume. The concepts such as normality or sexuality, and our identities are historical constructs. He created the term genealogy to reveal discourse at the moment it appears in history as a system of constraint upon the subject. And he introduced the term 'episteme' to articulate the concealed or 'underground' pattern or structure which *allows* thought to organize itself and creates, or appears to create, historical change. Each discernible historical period has its own episteme which limits the totality of experience, knowledge and power as it is thinkable in that period, and how it consequently governs the boundaries of scientific thinking in that period. Foucault was aware of its insufficiency - an inability to account for the way in which one scientific episteme shifted to another, or how two epistemes overlapped.

Rejecting the Enlightenment concept of ultimate truth or truths about human society, Foucault denies the search for such truth as a path to intellectual or political freedom. For Foucault, Enlightenment was the grand project to propagate and legitimate political power of 'reason'.

Foucault's work is an outcome of attention to history, not in the traditional sense of the word but in attending to what he has variously termed the 'archaeology' or 'genealogy' of knowledge production. That is, he looks at the continuities and discontinuities between 'epistemes' (taken by Foucault to mean the knowledge systems which primarily informed the thinking during certain periods of history: a different one being said to dominate each epistemological age) and the social context in which certain knowledge and practices emerged as permissible and desirable or changed. In his view, knowledge is inextricably connected to power such that it is often written as power/knowledge.

Foucault never assumes that any of our concepts or ways of understanding the world, including ourselves, is universal or perfectly stable through time. Investigation reveals that even the most basic features of our ways of thinking are historically formed, that there was a time before our particular way of thinking existed.

'Nothing in man, not even his body, is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self recognition or for understanding other men.'⁽¹⁾

Foucault's work on madness, medicine, the formation of social sciences and sexuality is designed to show what we take for granted as simple truths about the nature of human bodies or societies embedded in complex and historically contingent systems of perception. For him, the 'Laws of history' are not universals but, just postulates, which like all ways of perceiving the world, are subject to change. Changes occur because of shifts in power arrangements and these are understandable

in retrospect; they are not scientifically predictable.

By demonstrating the historicity of so many of our assumptions about ourselves, Foucault claims that there are no universals or constants in human experience. In order to understand his concept of tradition it is essential to study some notions, Foucault talks about such as *archaeology*, *genealogy*, *discourse*, *episteme*, and *power/knowledge*.

Bentham's Panopticon is, for Foucault, an ideal architectural model of modern disciplinary power. It is a design for a prison, built so that each inmate is separated from and invisible to all the others and each inmate is always visible to a monitor situated in a central tower. Monitors will not, in fact, always see each inmate; the point is that they *could* at any time. Since inmates never know whether they are being observed, they must act as if they are always objects of observation. As a result, control is achieved more by the internal monitoring of those controlled than by heavy physical constraints.

Foucault is influenced by Nietzsche's concept of power. The conception of power refers not only to the obvious forms of domination and control, but also to a whole range of much more subtle forms of the attainment of mastery and supremacy. 'Power', for Nietzsche, is fundamentally a matter of the imposition of some new pattern of 'ordering relations' upon forces not previously subject to them. Nietzsche also claims that frustration in the attempt to achieve one sort of power commonly leads to the development of another or of alternate forms of competition in which power is both differently won and differently measured.

Power works through discourses and discursive formations. In its policing of 'abnormal' behaviour, the power of the human sciences derives from what they claimed to be knowledge; it derives from their claims to expertise. Such a cluster of claims to knowledge is what Foucault calls a 'discourse'. To be more precise a discourse is a loose structure of interconnected assumptions that makes knowledge possible. Power is a key element in discussions of discourse.

Foucault's sense of power as capacities animated in relations rather than an abstract force possessed by individuals is a revolutionary one.

' It power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produce discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body. '⁽²⁾

All of the knowledge we have is the result or the effect of power struggles. Thus power, knowledge and discourse are interrelated to each other.

Foucault is poststructuralist though he denies any labelling. Post-Structuralism is deeply subversive. It deconstructs all those binary oppositions that are central to Western culture. In deconstructing those oppositions it exposes false hierarchies and artificial borders unwarranted claims to

knowledge and illegitimate usurpations of power. Its focus is on fragmentation, on difference, and on absence rather than on the sameness, unity and presence that are so pervasive in the way one thinks about oneself and the culture one is part of. The interrogation of power on a wider scale is implicit in Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism, the belief that language gives us access to truth. Michel Foucault initiated the interest in power and its workings. He wrote books on the history of psychiatry, the origin and rise of clinical medicine, then evolution of biology and economics, the emergence of modern prison system, and other important social developments that find their origin in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the so called Enlightenment period. Foucault seeks to expose the way power was at work in the seemingly 'objective' vocabularies and diagnostic terms developed by the various branches of the human sciences as these emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century. For Foucault, these new sciences which included psychiatry, criminology, medicine and biology are deeply repressive. They impose definitions upon one that one might want to reject.

Power is not something that one person or group holds while others lack it; power exists only in relation, only in 'exercise'. Thus, power relations are always reversible or alterable, which means that the institutions and dominations they support are always vulnerable. Freedom is an ever-present feature of power relations. Power needs resistance in order to prove what it is. Power relations have intensified due to innovations in technologies of power. The process of 'normalization' is a technique to maintain power relations. Normalization is

the most basic and ubiquitous form that power takes in the modern world. In his last works, Foucault takes up the question of how people constitute themselves as ethical beings. His focus in these works is sexuality and sensual pleasure. Sexual identities (heterosexual and homosexual for example) are not natural kinds but are rather social phenomena constructed in response to shifts in power arrangements in the nineteenth century. The fact that sexual identities and other important features of one's existence are historically contingent does not mean, however, that one can change them at will. 'Historically constructed objects of knowledge are not illusions. They are reality, since reality itself is historically emerged. As one understands oneself and one's society as historically contingent, makes it possible to think differently. Foucault, therefore, is interested in what he calls an 'aesthetics of existence', self overcoming or self-creation as a way of life. He says 'one has to create oneself as work of art'. He advocates perpetual openness toward the future, toward possibilities and differences as one's style one's existence in accordance with the values and practices one defines at a given moment as beautiful or best. This self-stylization he regards as a kind of self-discipline which he calls a 'practice of freedom'. It can counter disciplines imposed upon one by the forces of normalization that pervade one's society.

He asks,

"How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning?" ...How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it

occupy in each type' of discourse, what functions can it assume and by obeying what rules?" ⁽³⁾

Foucault conceives genealogy as a historical ontology of how human beings constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge, as subjects acting on other subjects and as moral subjects. The subject is historically created. Foucault's work is engaged in analyzing the various ways that human beings are transformed into subjects, whether subjects of knowledge, of power, of sexuality, or of ethics.

Foucault, in his works such as *The Order of Things* [1970] and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1972] wants to focus on the more abstract institutional processes at work which establish something as a fact or as knowledge. He is not interested in what is known at any one period but rather in 'the material conditions of thought' that is, the processes which led to certain facts being known. Nietzsche in his 'Beyond Good and Evil' argues that when the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle.

Michel Foucault argues that power is immanent in all social relations and that all social relations are relations of power, whether in a family or in the layers of government and other social institutions. Like many other post-structuralist, Foucault's line of thinking is influenced by the German Philosopher, Nietzsche who believed that there are no grounding truths; history and experience are fragmented and knowledge is an expression of the 'Will to power'.

Foucault exposes the fact that all disciplines, be they scientific, legal, political

or social, operate through a network of self legitimizing power and knowledge. He further maintains that power/knowledge functions in a way that makes its version of truth obvious to its participants. The claims of objectivity are impossible in a domain in which truth itself is always a discursive construct. Raman Selden says, 'people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim. Ultimately, man finds in the things nothing but what he himself has imported into them.' It is not enough to speak the truth; one must be 'in the truth.'

The circular relationship between power and knowledge is established in Foucault's genealogical critiques of the human sciences. Having emerged within the context of relations of power, through practices and technologies of exclusion, confinement, surveillance, and objectification, disciplines such as psychiatry, sociology, and criminology in turn contributed to the development, refinement, and proliferation of new techniques of power. Institutions such as the asylum, hospital or prison functioned as laboratories for observation of individuals, experimentation with correctional techniques, and acquisition of knowledge for social control.

Modern power is a 'relational' power that is 'exercised from innumerable points,' is highly indeterminate in character, and is never something 'acquired, seized, or shared'. There is no source or centre of power to neither contest, nor are there any subjects holding it; power is a purely structural activity for which subjects are anonymous by-products. Consequently, Foucault conducts an 'ascending' rather than 'descending' analysis which sees power as

circulating throughout a decentred field of institutional networks and is only subsequently taken up by larger structures such as class or the state. Foucault calls his approach an 'analytics', rather than a 'theory' of power. The latter term implies a systematic, unitary viewpoint which he seeks to destroy in favour of a plural, fragmentary, differentiated, indeterminant, and historically and spatially specific mode of analysis.

One must begin with the micro-mechanisms of power—the everyday influences that affect people in their daily lives—how the mechanisms of power are 'invested, colonized, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc.'

The claim for a neutral, objective pursuit of knowledge that culminates in truth independent of the pursuit and exercise of power is an illusion. The separation of truth from power is suggested by the nature of physical science as the model for all science. When we turn to the human (social/behavioral) sciences, however, the relation between truth and power becomes much clearer. Power and truth are interchangeable:

'Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who charged with saying what counts as true' ⁽¹¹⁾

Truth is produced under the control of political, cultural, and economic dominating forces.

Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. ⁽¹²⁾

According to Foucault, the process of normalization or adherence to social norms is internalized in us through the mechanisms of disciplinary power. Foucault's rejection

of modernism follows in important ways from his views that our selves are social constructions and that truth is an expression of political power. As a result, there is no objective account of reality to be gained through the exercise of reason. Thus Foucault deconstructs the metaphysical myth of reason by his postmodern approach to power. It is power/knowledge that decides everything through discourse via episteme. Even the very notion of truth is a construct and not something eternal or stable.

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