Foucault, Michel (1926 – 1984)

Summary Article: Michel Foucault
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Historian of ideas Michel Foucault (1926–84) has realized a reputation that has spread far and wide from both his native France and disciplinary specialism. Foucault’s writings inscribe a wide arc, encompassing early contributions to epistemological debate, such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; specific studies of psychiatry, medicine, and prisons; and the history of sexuality, which he was working on when he died of AIDS in 1984. Foucault became something of a celebrity intellectual, in common with any number of other Parisian intellectuals before him, and the fame of his scholarship, as well as the notoriety attached to his private life, attracted attention. More than 30 years later, his work remains influential and has had a considerable impact on “critical” and “discourse” scholarship, especially on power. At the core of his writings was an influential and innovative conception of power, which, unlike most other contemporary writers on the topic, was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's “genealogical” approach.

**Foucault's Theory of Power**

Foucault's work on power is scattered, although *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, provides a good introduction; while G. Kendall and G. Wickham's work provides a good guide to his approach. M. Haugaard divides his work into three distinct preoccupations: archaeology, genealogy, and the care of the self. Rather than three distinct approaches, these represent different emphases that are more or less predominant at different stages in Foucault's work. Although in his late discussion of governmentality, he seeks to bring these different accounts into a pattered relation with each other, there are nonetheless distinct emphases. Power does not become an explicit concern in Foucault’s work until the genealogical phase of its development with *Discipline and Punish*, in which he introduces his view of power as productive, creative, and much closer to a conception of “power to do things” rather than “power over people.”

Here, the concern is less with power as something that is distributed, so that some have it, or have more or less of it than others, but instead the concern is with how the techniques and practices of power are normalized into ways of being in, and thinking of, the world that we share discursively, and which methods structure conduct in the world—including resistance to these techniques and practices. Such resistance merely serves to demonstrate the necessity for the further application or refinement of those techniques and practices, so that in the future, resistance will be overcome. Power feeds on its failures to achieve the ends that those who yield it desire. In fact, failure is its most essential ingredient, as it continually demonstrates to the elites of power the necessity of the power that they yield so imperfectly.

Foucault teaches us that rather than being a resource that can be held or exercised—a capacity inanimate, but potential—power is inseparable from its effects. The focus for analysis is the play of techniques, the mundane practices that shape everyday life, structuring particular forms of conduct, and more especially structuring the ways in which people choose to fashion their sense of self, their dispositions, and those devices with which they are shaped and framed. Foucault refers to the apparatus (dispositif) of power as a heterogeneous ensemble consisting of phenomena such as discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures,

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scientific statements, and philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions. Power works not only in the commonly conceived negative or prohibitory way but also through shaping how subjects (want to) conduct themselves, a point that he makes most clearly in his analysis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon.

The Panopticon was an architectural structure designed around a central tower, a watchtower. Surrounding the tower were a number of cells, illuminated by back windows that allowed light through. From the tower, any observer could be all seeing, but unseen. By the simple expedient of moving through 360 degrees and peering through an aperture, the seer could see, but not be seen. These spatial arrangements were designed to generate a certain sort of subjectivity, with a specific technology of the self, in those under observation: They knew that they could be subjects of surveillance at any time but did not know if and when they were. Consequently, they were induced to perform their tasks in accord with whatever was regulated; in this way, they could be seen to be observant. Initially conceived as a factory system in Russia by Bentham's brother Samuel, the Panopticon was widely adopted in prisons, asylums, libraries, and other contexts of ordering. In the case of the Panopticon and its extensions into modern workplaces through technologies such as closed captioned television, people are induced to regulate their behavior and actions in accord with idealized representations that are institutionalized in specific contexts.

Power unfolds in three ways. In the first unfolding, the subject is constituted as a particular being in relation to others—an enterprising worker, for instance; second, the subject is constituted in relation to those social bodies or populations defined in relation to authoritative categorizations—the official employee of the month, for instance; in the third unfolding, the subject constitutes knowledge of itself, in relation to itself and in relation to others—the employee as coach and mentor. These are rarely pure forms, but instead a complex mixture of articulations that, together, form specific local regimes of governamental—how power is constituted locally in specific organization settings. Power produces truths—which is why, occasionally, epochal and seismic shifts occur, some more perceptible than others, in what is taken to be true: As power shifts, so do those truths held to be self-evident. Discourses drift and shift in ways that are shaped by changing axes of power relations. Discourses are always in permanent dispute; there is no meta-discourse of everyday life. The tactical polyvalence of discourses indicates the unstable, contingent articulation between knowledge and power in discourses, marking possible displacements and reutilizations. Some discourses may become taken for granted as necessary aspects of (thinking about) being. Hence, part of the task of analysis is to provide an understanding of how the ways of thinking and conceptualizing the world that have become normalized are possible. What are the grounds of what passes for reason in any given epoch? And what concordance and dissonance does this buried history prepare?

In his later work, Foucault used the notion of governamental to connect the idea of government with that of mentality. He was pointing to a fusion of new technologies of government with a new political rationality. Governmentality refers both to the new institutions of governance in bureaucracies and to their effects. These effects are to make problematic whole areas of government that used to be accomplished through the public sector, seamlessly regulated by bureaucratic rules; now, they are moved into calculations surrounding markets. Foucault defines government as a specific combination of governing techniques and rationalities, typical of the modern, neoliberal period. As the designs of government change, so do the mentalities of those who administer and are subject to them. If the Weberian bureaucrat valued ethos, character, and vocation, the contemporary neoliberal bureaucrat is

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expected to be enterprising.

Critiquing Foucault

Feminists often saw Foucault's work as an overly generalized account of power. If power does not concern questions of sovereignty, and if sovereignty needs to be overthrown as a prime mover for power analysis, if power comes from everywhere, if power is neither an institution nor a structure, then power seems so diffuse that it cannot be pinned down, dissected, and used in analysis of specific structures of domination, such as those of patriarchy. There have been several developments of his ideas in feminism. Judith Butler, in 1997, used the distinction between “power to” and “power over” to demonstrate how each conception hinges on a different conception of the human subject. The theorists who stress “power over” assume that subjectivity is already there in a pre-given form, whereas the theorists who stress “power to” see it as producing subjectivity. The former corresponds to notions of patriarchal power subjecting gendered relations to its pattern, whereas the latter indexes a notion of subjection as subject-making embedded in discourse.

Foucault focuses on big schemes, whether they are great men's grand designs, such as Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, or overarching discourses that are said to determine a society's “regime of truth.” Consequently, Foucault's account of power is that it is so general and diffuse in its effects that it is indeterminate and empty, almost akin to socialization as a catch-all category. Because Foucault's power lacks any “other,” anything that is outside and opposed to it, such as freedom or autonomy, some state of being opposed to being subordinated or dominated, it is seen as utterly nihilistic, a position that is often met with the critique, “How can it be true that there is no truth?” It is not that Foucault does not acknowledge truth; rather, he does not acknowledge a single truth. He does not privilege any one version of truth over another; rather, he recognizes that different social systems or cultural regimes will have versions of truth that reflect the regime's historical constitution of knowledge. Where there is power, then, the appropriate questions to ask are: How is this power possible? and How are power relations arranged? Not taking a transcendent position, Foucault would not expect power arrangements everywhere to partake of some essential quality, but instead to be contingent on the effects of local struggles in specific fields and arenas of power.

Steven Lukes suggest that in everyday practice, power will be contested for three types of reasons. First are for practical reasons: We need to know who can exert power on us and whom we can exert power on. Second are moral reasons: Denial of the power to have done something is tantamount to a denial of responsibility; in other words, one cannot be held responsible for things over which one has no control. Third, we use power in everyday life for evaluative purposes: where people are rendered powerless to better their conditions because of the actions of others—whether specifically intended or targeted or not—through the structural arrangements they design (e.g., a shifting balance of citizenship versus consumer rights in a society, or tilting state provision of things like education and healthcare increasingly into the laps of consumers, rather than holding them to be rights of citizens)—then power is palpable. Things could be otherwise; different choices could be made, and different designs would have different consequences. Foucault evades these three uses of power, according to Lukes.

The problem, according to Lukes, is that Foucault is too much in thrall to Nietzsche. Because truth is contingent on regimes of power, one cannot make judgments about the relative merits of forms of life; because power is inescapable, one has neither practical inclination nor moral responsibility to liberate...
oneself, or others, from particular instances of it. Moreover, he produces far too strong an account of power in works such as *Discipline and Punish* because he confuses design with efficacy: The Panopticon may have been a fiendish design, but it was not that widely used. For Lukes, Foucault’s views seem much like old-fashioned sociological functionalism, with their accounts of the centrality of the socialization process. Power in Foucault becomes so general that it is virtually indistinguishable from socialization. Thought of in terms of the sociology of work, it would invite analysis of every practice used formally or informally to shape the sense of self as an employee and a person that organizations deploy.

**See Also:**

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