

Michel Foucault

Genealogy, Power and Knowledge

Foucault was not a theorist in the conventional sense, rather his work comprised a series of interventions into political, sociological and philosophical debates about madness, the birth of the human sciences, medicine, sexuality, punishment, ethical practices, and so on. In this lecture we will examine:

1. Foucault's conception of genealogy
2. his account of power
3. his investigation of the ways in which we are rendered subjects
4. the idea of biopower

Genealogy

One finds in Foucault a different conception of social criticism from that found e.g. in Habermas's work. For Foucault criticism is a matter of doing 'effective history'/genealogy - tracing how things have become as they are in order to usurp their naturalness (Foucault also writes of this as conducting problematisations of the 'historical apriori' of possible experiences). Criticism is a matter of 'making facile gestures difficult', it does not need to consist in discovering authentic self-other or self-self relations beneath or beyond power (as e.g. in Habermas's idealised account of language); in this sense genealogy is 'diagnostic', it 'refuses the blackmail of the Enlightenment' – that one must be for or against it. Therefore, while both Habermas and Foucault address Kant's question 'what is Enlightenment?' they provide very different responses to this question.

Analysis of power

We can grasp Foucault's account of power by counterpoising it with liberal, Marxist and psychoanalytic conceptions of power. Liberal conceptions of power as oppressive of a prior freedom, Marxist notions of power as exploitation and psychoanalytic ideas of power as repression all share assumptions about the nature of power: power is possessed by a subject (sovereign, bourgeoisie/state, psyche/civilisation); power is negative (it oppresses, dominates and represses individuals and/or classes); power and truth are opposed or mutually exclusive (all accept the claim that the truth will set the subject free).

Foucault claims that these conceptualisations of power, far from enlightening us as to the functioning of power, act to obscure the operation of power in modern societies. By positing that we can step outside power by revealing truth, these forms of discourse institute other forms of power. Foucault reverses each of the assumptions noted above (power as possession, as negative and as opposed to truth):

- (i) power is not possessed but exercised, not a possession that can be captured but a set of relations within which subjects are constituted;
- (ii) power is productive, it produces subjects, our conduct is conducted by being constituted as specific sorts of subjects (e.g. psychiatric discourse on schizophrenia);
- (iii) power and truth are co-productive, power produces 'domains of reality and rituals of truth' (e.g. dreams and the psychoanalytic encounter).

The subject

Foucault demonstrates that power and knowledge are mutually productive in our constitution as specific sorts of subjects. He suggests three major sets of practices that organise subjects in distinct ways.

- (i) dividing practices eg forms of binary classification (such as the exclusion of lepers from cities)
- (ii) scientific classification eg the generation of forms of knowledge and practice concerned with the assignment and distribution of individuals as part of a population (as in the quarantining of plague victims).
- (iii) subjectification eg the ways in which individuals turn themselves into subjects (through confession, psychoanalysis and so on)

Foucault ties these three lines of analysis of the formation of subjects to the operation of modern forms of power in the idea of 'biopolitics'.

Biopolitics

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality Vol 1* (1979) Foucault develops the term 'biopolitics' to describe the general form or rationality of modern power. Biopower is described as 'power over life' (1979: 143). He suggests that it is a secularisation of the Christian concern with the pastoral relationship, a relationship in which certain individuals, by virtue of their special qualities (closeness to God, scientific expertise) can lead others to salvation.

Biopower combines two axes:

- (i) one centred on the individual body as a machine to be made useful through discipline, an 'anatomo-politics of the human body';
- (ii) the second focused on the supervision and regulation of the species body, a 'biopolitics of the population'.

These together form two poles of the organisation of 'power over life' (1979: 139).

These two axes of power produce new forms of knowledge:

- (i) the close examination of individuals and development of individual case histories;
- (ii) the development of statistics relating to the population, demographic patterns, etc.

Foucault argues that these individualising and totalising forms of knowledge make possible and operate through panoptic and confessional technologies as institutional sites for the emergence of the 'sciences of man'. What is distinctive about biopower is that it exhibits a concern with enhancing life and is bound up with the development of the modern state in its attempt to manage and enhance its strength. Foucault elaborates these ideas in relation to the example of the panopticon.

Bentham's design for the panopticon is a plan for a penitentiary in which individual cells radiate out from a central tower. Each cell houses one inmate who is permanently visible to the guard in the central tower; the prisoner cannot tell whether he is being observed at any one moment and therefore is induced to be self-policing. Here abstract or general techniques of power combine with techniques for the control, supervision and correction of individuals; power is linked to the formation of capacities, the training of individuals. These techniques developed in localised institutions with specific concerns, e.g. controlling the workforce, punishing prisoners, training in schools. Such institutions function as observatories (of individual behaviour and performance) and as laboratories (facilitate the development of techniques of correction, reform, training).

Such institutionalised techniques make possible a certain kind of knowledge of the individual, a knowledge based on norms. This knowledge is gained by observation, ranking/normalising judgement and through techniques of examination. Normalising knowledge refers both to the individual and to the whole - the individual can be ranked according to the population norm, this norm is generated by aggregating individuals' attributes along particular dimensions (e.g. height, intelligence, morbidity, etc).

Modern societies are thus organised simultaneously through general laws and through the operation of forms of normalising knowledge and the training/disciplining of individuals according to those norms. We are simultaneously figured as juridical equals and as the subjects of normalising supervision and intervention. In this way Foucault suggests that modern political rationalities combine two distinct models of political community: the city-citizen game and the shepherd-flick game. Their combination is, according to him, what makes our societies truly demonic.

Assessment

Genealogy can be considered a way of gaining critical distance on the present without positing an ideal against which to measure the present, as operating a form of immanent criticism. Against this Habermas accuses Foucault of 'crypto-normativism', of wanting to practice criticism but of failing to provide a normative framework for such criticism, and thus of being unable to answer the question 'why fight?' What weight does this criticism have?

Foucault's analyses suggest that sovereign/juridical conceptions of power as repressive force miss much about the ways in which power operates productively. We've seen that he makes two sorts of claim about power:

- (a) a methodological claim that power is exercised, productive, and entwined with knowledge;
- (b) an historical claim that modern power is articulated through the human sciences and the disciplinary practices produced and sustained through such forms of knowledge.

What is disclosed by adopting this conception of power?

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