

Analysis of foucault's views on power and subjectivity



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Power and subjectivity have a complex relationship. In order to understand the two, it is important to analyse Foucault's position on these themes individually. This essay will utilise a primary text of 'The Subject and Power' by Michel Foucault to gain insight into Foucault's perspective and position on these themes. The relationship between power and subjectivity will be discussed demonstrating the ways in which these concepts correlate. A secondary text, 'The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault' will be consulted to provide a coinciding perspective that further develops the argument.

Power is expressed by Foucault in 'The Subject and Power' as actions upon other actions. He focuses on the term power as relationships between partners and the various way power is exercised (Foucault 1982 p. 789). In 'The Subject and Power' Foucault states that power relationships must have 'the other' or the follower, the person the power is being exercised on, this person must acknowledge and maintain this position in order for a power relationship to be evident (Foucault 1982 p. 789). This power relationship, although controlling, must incorporate the concept of freedom as Foucault states in 'The Subject and Power' that power is only exercise over free subjects, where an individual is able to behave or react in a series of different ways instead of being physically forced such as slavery (Foucault 1982 p. 790). Although this freedom plays a vital role in power and power relations, these two concepts are contradictory as Foucault believes that freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised, yet freedom is a condition for the exercise of power, furthermore freedom is a precondition and must come first for power to be exercised (Foucault 1982 p. 790).

Foucault states in 'The Subject and Power' that power relationships are not relationships of communication although communication does always have a way of making someone act upon something but is not always the source of power (Foucault 1982 p. 786). Foucault discusses the nature of power, separating it from violence stating that violence does not constitute the basic nature of power (Foucault 1982 p. 789). Kelly (2009 p. 57) discusses that Foucault in 'The Subject and Power' allows that violence is often a feature of power relations, but one may argue that Foucault no longer identifies violence as a requirement of power. The feature of violence in power can be linked to forms of power that focus on social, religious or ethnic domination, these forms of power such as domination, exploitation and submission influence resistance against power. Foucault in 'The Subject and Power' discusses a new economy of power relations which focuses on the forms of resistance to different forms of power and states that in order to understand power relations one must understand the resistance and opposition to forms of power (Foucault 1982 p. 779). This opposition to forms of power leads to power struggles which has the main aim of attacking the form of power not so much institutions of power, groups or class, this form of power is immediate, these struggles make individuals who they are, they create individual subjectivity.

Subjectivity is expressed by Foucault in 'The Subject and Power' as containing two meanings, firstly to subject someone else by control or dependence, and secondly bound by one's own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge. These meanings are both suggesting a form of power which subjugates an individual (Foucault 1982 p. 781). Subjectivity is found in close

relation to power as Foucault states six power struggles in 'The Subject and Power' whereby the main purpose of these struggles are to fight a form of power that makes individuals subjects by marking one by their own individuality, categorising them, imposing laws of truth which one must recognise and others must recognise as well (Foucault 1982 p. 781).

Foucault states in this text that all forms of subjection are a consequence of economic and social phenomena, forces of production, class struggle and ideological structures which mould how the subjective idea is formed (Foucault 1982 p. 782). In reviewing a secondary text of 'The Political Philosophy of Michael Foucault', the constitution of the real subject in respect to power is questioned, Foucault provides his own term for this named "subjectivation" which is defined as "the process by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more exactly, of a subjectivity, which is obviously only one of the given possibilities for organising self-consciousness" this concept focuses on the fundamental elements that makes a subject Kelly (2009 p. 87).

Foucault states at the beginning of 'The Subject and Power' that his goal has not been to analyse power but to create a history of modes which humans are made subjects (Foucault 1982 p. 777). It has been identified that Foucault believes humans equally place significance on power relations as they do with production, therefore these two concepts are closely related as individuals as subjects are influenced by power relations and their subjectivity is influenced and somewhat determined by power.

Power is related to subjectivity specifically through the power struggles
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mentioned in 'The Subject and Power'. These power struggles arise from resistance in power relations, as Foucault uses a series of oppositions to power as examples such as men over women and parents over children. These six power struggles influence the way in which individuals think and feel. As stated by Foucault in 'The Subject and Power', these struggles are not confined to particular economic or political form of governments, they aim to target power effects, these are 'immediate' struggles that individuals focus on denouncing power that is closest to them without looking for a solution in the future. They are struggles with subjectivity and the status of the individual, they address an individual's right to be different, while on the other hand also constrains individuals to their own identity and attacks things that separate the individual from others. They are in opposition to effects of power that struggle against the privilege of knowledge, these struggles all revolve around the question of 'Who are we?', These power struggles make individuals who they are, these forms of power struggles are creating subjectivity for each individual (Foucault 1982 p. 780). Since the sixteenth century there has been a new form of political power and structure known as 'the state' which ignores individuals and focuses on class or groups among citizens instead (Foucault 1982 p. 782). These types of struggles include forms of domination, exploitation and submission whereby an individual is subjugated by these forms of power, which therefore promotes individuals to revolt against these submissive forms of power.

In utilising the text of 'The Political Philosophy of Michael Foucault', Kelly (2009 p. 89) states that Foucault uses his text 'Society must be defended' in order to provide a point of view in which subjects are entirely the effects of

power, and Foucault states that we shouldn't be asking subjects how and by what right they consent to being subjected but showing actual relations of subjection. Kelly (2009 p. 89) elaborates stating that 'subjects are creating themselves like pearls around the foreign particles of power'. This is important in the relation between power and subjectivity as power relations themselves demonstrate subjectivity and provide influence to individuals on their role and behaviour in the relationship.

Power relations are identified as situation in which human subjects are placed in regularly. Foucault suggests a new economy of power relations which applies resistance of power and the ways in which this forms subjectivity for individuals through roles and behaviours in power relations. The human being, as a subject plays a vital role in power relations, as for power to be exercised, subjects must know their specific position in the relationship. As Foucault states in 'The Subject and Power' there must always be "the other" by which power is being exercised on and this subject must know their role and maintain this for the duration in order for power to continuously be exercised. This also draws on the aspect of freedom which relates power to subjectivity through human subjects requiring an aspect of freedom in order for power to adequately be exercised. Foucault discusses that power is only exercised over free subjects, where an individual is able to behave in a variety of ways in the power relationship as mentioned previously in Foucault's position on power and power relations. Foucault's position on power and subjectivity tie in closely to one another and both of these two themes are interdependent.

Throughout the text ' The Subject and Power', power is discussed in a variety of ways but focuses on demonstrating the ways in which this power and power relations develop and relate to human subjects and their subjectivity. In utilising the secondary text of ' The Political Philosophy of Michael Foucault' this perspective of the interdependence and close relation between these two themes is evident also.

Reference List:

- Foucault, M 1982, ' The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* , vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 777-795.
- Kelly, M 2009, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*, Routledge, New York.