

Foucault – power knowledge

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Foucault's theorisation of the power/knowledge relationship Foucault in theorizing the relationship between power and knowledge basically focused on how power operated in the institutions and in its techniques. The point is how power was supported by knowledge in the functioning of institutions of punishment. " He places the body at the centre of the struggles between different formations of power/knowledge. The techniques of regulation are applied to the body" (Wheterell et al. , 2001: 78) Power is the ability to control others or one's entity.

Accordingly it can be defined as a kind of strength or as an authority. There are various theorisations about the meaning of this term in sociology thus it would be hard to give a comprehensive definition. Is power a relationship? What kind of outcome does it produce? Can it modify behaviour and can it reduce the power of others? (Waters, 1994: 217) All of these questions can be answered in a different way. The point might be over whom and upon what can this power be exercised. Foucault frequently uses power and knowledge together in the phrase power/knowledge. He claims these two are inseparable.

A general expression exists which conjoins the two into " knowledge is power. " Foucault reverses the logic of this expression in arguing that possession of knowledge does not give one power but gaining power means having knowledge at the same time as " knowledge is already deeply invested with power" thus it is better to agree on " power is knowledge". (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 643) Knowledge can be expounded as the awareness of some fact or as a skill that the individual achieved or inherited.

In Foucault's interpretation both idea turned up in the analysis of the "Panopticon" and the "plague stricken town".

Being aware of the events happened somewhere is knowledge and this knowledge gives power to those whom got to know about that events although this knowledge could not have been acquired in the lack of power as there would not have been any opportunity to get into a position which allows the observation to get to know something. That is the basis of Foucault's idea about knowledge and power as oneness and the reason for why is important to think other about the "power is knowledge" and "knowledge is power" correspondence. Discipline and Punish (1975) is Foucault's best genealogical investigation. Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 643) At the beginning he describes a public torture which was a totally accepted form of punishment in the 18th century. Dramatically introduces the whole process without attitudinizing as those days public execution was a common event, the illustrated torture was as real as he presents it. As norms and attitudes changed in latter centuries public tortures has become not popular anymore, people were sentenced to go to prison where a completely different penalty system has been running. Foucault describes typical activities and every day life of the inmates.

The point of these two presentations is to show that the changes of methods of punishment correlate with cultural and social changes in the all-time society. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 648) In the second part he "draws a parallel between the aggressive mechanism used by plague-stricken cities in the late seventeenth century and Bentham's Panopticon which was intended

to be the model for the perfectly rational and efficient prison. ” (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 648) The point of these comparisons is to reveal how knowledge developed and how this development influenced the society.

As knowledge grows and becomes deeper the new understanding of the social and physical world “ generates new locations for the application of power”. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646) Foucault describes two old mechanisms which was widely used, the public execution as an old form of punishment and the actions against plague that emerged in a town. A new type of punishment became popular which aims to punish the soul not the body as it was common before. There is no more physical torture but torture of the soul.

These two old mechanisms alien to the latter methods: the usage of new strict rules that determines the prisoner’s life and the new method of control, the idea of the Panopticon which put surveillance from only one place forward. When plague turned up the old system followed the then methods of observation and surveillance, plague was everywhere thus the supporting power must have been mobilized. In this case “ power is mobilized; it makes itself everywhere present and visible; it invents new mechanism; it separates; it immobilizes” etc. o make people act as it was expected in these conditions (because of the plague almost every interactions must have been stopped in the interest of getting rid of the disease). (Foucault, 1975) The Panopticon instead of exercising power from several sides emphasises the importance and perfection of the surveillance focus from one place. The Panopticon is a building which has an annual part in the periphery and a

tower in the centre. Next to omitting little details its most important feature is the ability to see into every cells without being visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. ” (Calhoun et al. , 2007: 209) The consciousness of being watched make people put on their best behaviour, their best way of acting thus the inmates do not commit any further crimes as it usually occurs that could happen without being watched. The operation of this building gives the opportunity to work with less employees because only a few overseers necessary being in the tower to check all the cells continuously. This way only a few supervisors needed to control these employees thus it is more economical.

The supervision of the plague-stricken town would have cost a lot as a complex system ran which needed a big amount of labour force. As techniques develop and new forms of penalty system emerge costs become lesser. Knowledge grows and makes institutions more efficient as knowledge itself is efficient. “ As knowledge grows the techniques of discipline and surveillance multiply such that power takes on an ever-increasing number of forms. ” (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646) The question is if knowledge produces more power or comes from power. The major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. “ (Calhoun et al. , 2007: 210) Accordingly power is what is functioning all the time and knowledge could not be without presence of power. Although as Foucault (1975) claims: “ power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,

nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”.

Thus knowledge and power can not exist independently from each other. Bentham laid down two principles about power relating to the Panopticon: it must be visible and unverifiable. The inmates will constantly have before their eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which they are spied upon and must never know whether they are being looked, but they must be sure that they may always be so. (Calhoun et al. , 2007: 210) These two principles give the opportunity to exercise power over the prisoners. The other very important thing is that this system is not only successful in prison but in every kind of institutions.

Could be practiced in school or even in an office, people became successfully regulated by the power of vision. The idea of the Panopticon is a metaphor for the general presence of a new penalty system which is called the disciplinary society by Foucault. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 644) This society is disciplined by being constantly watched and punished by excluded them from normal society. Criminals and those whom do not follow the laid down rules are not punished in front of public anymore. There is no need to express power visibly to gain belief in it. Waters, 1994: 231-232) “

Panopticon surveillance has become so effective that individuals now sanction and normalize their own behaviour without any prompting, surveilling and disciplining themselves as if they were simultaneously the inmate and guard of their own self-produced Panopticon. ” (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646) What if that surveillance is not that effective and

something breaks the discipline? The whole system can lose its power when turns out that this observation is not accurate. Surveillance must be continuous all the time otherwise people lose their belief in the power of it.

Once someone realises that can commit an offence or just do something against the rules without being caught the whole system can be questioned. The best example for this is public cameras all over the streets nowadays, although people know that they are visible whatever they do still commit crimes and do unacceptable things. The offender can not be completely sure about being watched or not. The same situation prevails in a school or office where the employees and students know that they can be lucky and might be not watched.

If once punishment does not take place the individual can take under consideration the fact of being always watched thus disciplined behaviour is not guaranteed anymore. Foucault's genealogical investigation is about to look on how power/knowledge and forms of punishment changed during the past few centuries. " Until turn of the nineteenth century criminal deviance was controlled by public attacks on the offender's body. " (Waters, 1994: 231) Public execution was quite common in the 18th Century (although it is still ongoing even today in some countries), " Foucault identifies such punishments as political rituals". Waters, 1994: 231) Torture was the expression of power, presented how the offender is punished if commits an offence against the only sovereign power. This sovereign power was one " centralized authority, like a king". (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 643) According to Foucault punishment went through another two stages since

public tortures (which is the first stage). This form of punishment is considered unacceptable nowadays, but not because it goes too far, “ rather it is because punishment and the power that guides it have taken new, more acceptable forms. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 643) Punishment became invisible and kinder to the body, to be disciplined was the point rather than to be punished. The second stage of penal practices was based on surveillance and discipline what was aimed to harm the mind. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 644) Public execution can be considered as a terrible kind of punishment, but torture of the mind is the worst. Physical pain could have been unbearable during these public tortures but psychical pain over years and years is tougher as it has no end.

With the birth of prison power started to practice the new, less crucial form of penalty which may be more sinister than it seems. Foucault’s three stages can be distinguished by the time period when that form of punishment were popular, by the basis of authority/power was in power, and by the methods how these punishments were practiced. In the 18th Century, as it was mentioned before, the penalty system was leaded by a central authority which could have been a king or one single corporation of the government.

The method was a kind of “ public corporal punishment” that is in Foucault’s Discipline and Punish the public execution, the public torture. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646 Table 15. 2) In addition this torture took place in public. Later on among so many changes torture as a public spectacle disappeared. (Foucault, 1975) The second phase of punishment emerged in the 19th-20th Century when the basis of power was a decentralized institution. Methods

were based on surveillance and discipline like in Bentham's Panopticon or in the plague-stricken town. Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646 Table 15. 2)

Today, in the 21th Century we are in the third stage of punishment where there are multiple principles about the authority of the penalty system, multiple self-regulations exist and power is diffusive. The trend of the second phase is intensified in the third. " Power has become destructed and individualized", " disciplinary individuals" turned up. " No longer are social structures and specific institutions necessary for the exercise of power and the meting out of punishment. (Appelrouth and Edles, 2008: 646) In Discipline and punish Foucault analyses the ways how the offender is disciplined in different punishment regimes. In early times punishments were crude, " prisons were places into which the public could wander". (Wheterell et al. , 2001: 78) The latter form of regulation and power became private. Inmates were closed into prisons with an invisible system. Public could not see into these institutions anymore. Punishment became individualized and " the body has become a site of a new kind of disciplinary regime.

Of course this body is not simply the natural body which all human beings possess at all times. " (Wheterell et al. , 2001: 78) Knowledge determines this body, the knowledge about the offence and offender. " This body is produced within discourse ... the state of knowledge about crime and criminal, what counts as true about how to change or deter criminal behaviour... This is a radically historicized conception of the body. " (Wheterell et al. , 2001: 78) Foucault carried out a genealogical analysis of punishment and discipline.

This analysis, among others, was based on the power/knowledge relationship which was at least as altering as the forms of the penalty systems were showed in the historical review. Various techniques were used to punish and these techniques were influenced by the exercised power in one place one time. The perfect institution to practice power and discipline/punish offenders is the building of the Panopticon. According to Foucault this building is the answer for all questions turned up with other methods of punishment.

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