

Foucault's analysis of power



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For Foucault, ' knowledge ceases to be about liberation and becomes a mode of surveillance, regulation and discipline'. Examine this statement in relation to Foucault's analysis of power. The issue of ' power' is a topic which has perplexed not only many Sociologists, but certainly many scholars within the field of Philosophy, Psychology and indeed many others. The Sociologist most noted with this theory is Michel Foucault. Foucault gave a comprehensive and in depth analysis of power, which we will discuss later. However, before we do, we must look at the life of Foucault, as to gain a better understanding of his works.

Paul-Michel Foucault, a French Philosopher, Historian and Sociologist lived from October 1926- June 1984. He held the title ' History of Systems of thought at the notably prestigious College de France, as well as lecturing at the University of Buffalo and the University of Berkley, one of America's most famous institutions. He refused time and time again to call himself a post-modernist, although he was highly influenced by post-modernist thought. He is most publically recognised for his critical studies of Social Institutions, with particular emphasis on medicine, psychiatry and the human sciences. His work on Power, Knowledge and Discourse has become the topic of much discussion, and has been taken up by many other key thinkers. During the 1960's, Foucault was associated with the structural movement, however he tried to distance himself from this. He preferred to think of himself as a pupil forwarding the Enlightenment views of Kant, trying to show that a side about individual liberty could be applied to improve the Enlightenment theory.

According to Giddens, ' The study of power- how individuals and groups achieve their ends as against those of others- is of fundamental importance

in Sociology'. Classical thinkers, such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, placed importance on this theory, with Foucault building upon their foundations of theory.

Unlike many before him, Foucault saw power as not being concentrated in the hands of the few in one place. Foucault showed in his complex writings that power could be found in all social relationships and not just in the hands of States. However, much of his work is spent showing the ways in which the States exercise their power over the populations. For Foucault, power is ultimately linked with knowledge; they exist because of one another.

Therefore, the State's power then extends from the development of new types of Knowledge. With the emergence of these, society is able to collect more information about the population and thus control it better.

Power, however, whilst restricting people, can also enable them to do things. Power can also only operate if society has a certain amount of freedom, as society tries to restrict, people often try, and succeed, in slipping from its grasp.

Foucault's early work on Madness and Civilisation (1967) described how, by the Eighteenth Century, unemployment, poverty and madness started to be seen as social problems by the States. Before this, the mad were free from state intervention, and were allowed to wander as they liked in rural areas; or they were put to sea in 'ships of fools'. However, these became replaced with areas of confinement, such as madhouses, where they became isolated and separated from the rest of civilisation. According to Foucault, this was

due to the European culture with a sense of responsibility for these social problems. A duty of responsibility was formed for the mad.

However, by the 19th Century, these methods of separating groups was seen as being a mistake. New methods were developed to separate the different groups. Psychiatry began to take off, and became a new means by which to categorise people, for example, as being mad or suffering from some form of illness. As this happened, the discourse of the social sciences came to be involved in power relationships. Maden Sarup (1988) argued that the term discourse as used by Foucault, meant “ practices that systematically form the object of which they speak”. According to this then, the development of psychiatric theories created mental illness. It was a discourse used to control certain groups within the population. This technique became crucial in the State’s gradual development of administration. The term ‘ administration’ allowed monitoring and possible control over people and their behaviour. However, according to Foucault, it was not just a straight forward power held by the state. Rather, it allowed power relationships on an individual level, for example, between a psychiatrist and a patient.

In Foucault’s later work, ‘ Discipline and Punish’ (1975), he explored these themes in much more depth. Foucault begins with a very gruesome account of the public execution of Damians in Paris, 1757. He was, in today’s terms, tortured. However, Foucault makes the point that by the late 18th Century the use of public punishment began to dwindle. Punishment became private, rather than public, with the use of better, more efficient methods, for example, hanging. This also saw the implementation of more prison sentences. They obey a strict regime of work, sleep and education.

According to Foucault, these changes involved a shift in the practices of punishment. Before the use of prisons, the main focus of punishment was on the pain inflicted to the body. However, the use of prisons focused on punishing the soul. It was to do with a loss of rights now, for example the right to freedom. The almost guarantee of being caught was meant to deter people, rather than the fear of public humiliation which thus had failed.

This new method was intended to offer reformation rather than to make the offender suffer. There was, as Foucault made clear no absolute shift in punishment methods, as capital punishment was, as is, still practiced.

However, there was a definite shift to the latter method from the former. A change in what exactly was being judged also occurred. Before, it was the act being judged, whereas now it was the type of person they were.

Extenuating circumstances were now taken into account. The level of punishment now focused on the motivation behind the crime. As Foucault stated, “ The question is no longer ‘ has the act been established and is it punishable?’ But also: ‘ What is this act, what is this act of violence or this murder?’ To what level or what field of reality does it belong?” These questions could only be answered by a range of specialists, for example, psychiatrists and psychologists. Control became fragmented in this specialist knowledge. Foucault claims “ A corpus of knowledge, techniques, and ‘ scientific’ discourses is formed and becomes entangled with the practice of the power to punish.” Even as the state developed methods to control people, it gave power to the experts who had the knowledge, thus again proving the link between knowledge and power.

However, with the exercise of power and knowledge relationships, Foucault makes the important point that they are not entirely negative. There also exist positive responses to them. It can allow certain things to be achieved. The example Foucault uses is the motivation of workers to become better and improve the labour power that societies may require. Moreover, power is not something possessed by individuals, “ power is exercised rather than possessed”. Also, power can only be used when people have a choice about what to do; and Foucault makes the point that there are extremely few occasions when people will have no choice. Someone would be able to resist by possibly “ committing suicide, or killing the other”, (Foucault 1988). Therefore, it is always possible to resist those exercising power, the result, however, produces an element of uncertainty. Power has the ability to be reversed. He argues “...the fact that I am older and that at first you were intimidated can, in the course of the conversation, turn about and it is I who can become intimidated before someone, precisely because he is younger”, (Hindess, 1996).

In his work on discipline, Foucault again states that power and knowledge are inseparable, “ We should admit that power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is now power relation without correlative constitutions of a field of knowledge, now any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”. Thus, it becomes possible to resist the exertion of power by challenging the knowledge on which it was based. For example, a patient may question a doctor’s diagnosis, thus challenging the knowledge and overcoming the power of the doctor’s expertise. Because each implies the

other, power relationships can be seen in all aspects of society. They are not just seen between State and citizen relations, or between classes. Therefore, for Foucault, Marxism is too limited as it only focuses on the power relationships between classes. As the same, Pluralism only focuses on state exerted power. They are inadequate as they are too narrow, and fail to look at the everyday interactions of people and the commonly used discourses involved therein.

Foucault does not believe that power and knowledge is not exercised by the state alone; however that does not imply that he feels they are absent from the state either. Attempts are continually made by Governments and other bodies to control and manipulate behaviours. Sophisticated techniques can be developed to do this, although they are never entirely successful.

In his text, Foucault enters into extreme detail about the ways in which states oversee activities involving power and knowledge. He discussed the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's prison design, the Panopticon. It was never fully used, although pieces of the design were incorporated into prison construction. The main feature of this design was a central tower. It allowed the guards to see into any cell at any given time. Back lighting would mean they could observe without the prisoner's knowledge; thus forcing them to never misbehave, as they would never know if a guard was looking at them. They would have discipline enforced upon them.

For Foucault, discipline was an important feature for modern societies. Surveillance techniques, such as Closed Circuit Television, or CCTV, were used to observe people's behaviour in public places, thus encouraging a

strong regime of self-discipline. People then began to grow accustomed to control their actions, whether being observed or not, the fear was enough. Discipline therefore gives people the power to regulate their own behaviour. This is based on Foucault's notion that we all have a soul, and this can be manipulated. However, what Foucault calls a soul being manipulated, some may argue that it is, in fact, a psychological technique, thus taking the power away from the state and back to the expert psychologist. This notion is more effective, however, than simply inflicting pain. You do not punish the body; rather you produce docile bodies which pose no threat as they are self-disciplined.

Discipline plays an important in Governance, however it is also found in many other organisations, and is never truly successful. According to Hindess (1996), " the suggestion is, then, that we live in a world of disciplinary projects, all of which suffer from more or less successful attempts at resistance and evasion. The result is a disciplinary, but hardly disciplined society". For Foucault, government goes beyond the activities of state. The pupil who misbehaves or the patient who denies the diagnosis are as much a feature of modern societies as the docile body of a disciplined citizen.

In conclusion, Foucault's work provides significant insight into the nature of power. He succeeds in showing how power and knowledge are connected closely. He also shows how power is found in other social relationships other than what involves the government, and demonstrates how power is never likely to be absolute. Furthermore, he successfully shows how people will try to evade any exertion of power onto them. His work is much more subtly

done than the theory of some Marxists and Pluralists. However, it can be said that he fails to take into account the importance of some of these theories in relation to power. He neglects the view that power can be exercised in the field of economics, and also neglects the power that the military can exercise.

Moreover, Foucault at times seems to contradict himself. He claims that the Government's have an increased ability to surveil and regulate the citizens. However, he then says that power can be exercised when we have some freedom, and that resistance is impossible. These statements would seem to be at opposite ends of the pole. Furthermore, Foucault's definition is much different than that of, for example, the sociologist Max Weber, who asserts that power is exercised because we do not have freedom to act as we chose to do rather than as we are told to do. However, Foucault does certainly offer an alternative idea which is provocative in the field of research. He uses a very intriguing analysis of how States develop techniques of social control.