

Foucault, Discourse, and the Call for Reflexivity

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Abstract:

Foucault's early investigations on discourse lead to the conclusion that it is not only necessary to look at the sources and formation of knowledge, but also to recognize how knowledge formation is controlled by certain inherent rules that grants, privileges and marginalizes other knowledges. Foucault reminds us that instead of blindly accepting the illusion of objectivity we must rather interrogate the position and status of the enquirer and the author within the collective circle of competence and credibilities, the assembly to whom he is addressing his discourse, and the power vested within these positionalities. These elements, according to Foucault, create and re-create a web of rules, that are summoned, whenever the need arises, which regulate what is to be accounted as those within the true.

Key words: discourse, truth, knowledge, power, nondiscursive domain, reflexivity

Introduction

In December 2, 1970 in his inaugural lecture in one of France's premier institution of learning, the *College de France*, Foucault made it clear that it is not only necessary to look at the sources and formation of knowledge, but also to recognize how it is controlled by certain inherent rules that grants, privileges and marginalizes other knowledges. He also made manifest that we suspend the illusion of objectivity and interrogate the position and status of the enquirer and the author within the collective circle of competence and credibilities, the assembly to whom he is addressing his discourse, and the power vested within these positionalities. These elements, according to Foucault, create and re-create

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a web of rules, that are summoned, whenever the need arises, which regulate what is to be accounted as those within the true. These normative elements suggest that there is a politics of knowledge and representation. Michel Foucault fomented a new mode of analysis and criticism that exposes this politics. He has spawned an analytical approach which is out of step with the well established paradigms of enquiry and, at a certain degree, his analysis was strategically a resistance to the rationality that accompany these traditional paradigms.

The present paper tries to provide a brief sketch of this interrogation by unfolding certain themes in Foucault's texts and the attitude of reflexivity¹ implicit therein. This attitude of reflexivity tenaciously questions the very rules and traditions to which he himself was subjected.²

Discourse

The turn toward the analysis of discourse³ in the late sixties and early seventies mounts the first of a series of interrogations that

¹ James Bernauer in his essay, *Foucault's Ecstatic Thinking*, examines Foucault's whole project and assess the line of thinking which animates Foucault's work. He notes that Foucault has always been engaged in a thought that challenges the very ground from which he thinks, an ecstatic thinking which historicizes one's thought, knowing, and the pursuit of knowledge. He writes: "the impact of that thought on his readers is to make them acutely aware as seekers or claimants of truth, to appreciate the sources and consequences of such searches and claims." See James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 72.

² According to Bernauer, Foucault was well aware of the situatedness and historicity of writing as an intellectual engagement and its role in self-formation: "The ethical substance of his treatise puts forward a domain for analysis which overcomes the theory- practice dualism. It is composed, not of institutions, theories or ideologies but practices, the discursive and extra-discursive relations that are operative in a culture's program for the conduct of intellectual pursuit, of practical action and self-constitution" (*ibid.*, 68).

³ "A discourse is a collection of statements (frequently, though not exclusively, a body of texts) unified by the designation of a common object of analysis, by particular ways of articulating that object, and by certain connections, especially regularity, order, and systematicity. . . . What unites these texts is the forms of knowledge they produce about their object of study. . . . and the power

strategically poses the challenge to the dominant paradigms of inquiry.⁴ It also exposed the idiosyncrasies which, to Foucault, made them problematic, and forge a different tact to address problems that rose within these traditional paradigms. The turn can also be considered as one among many phases of concerns that would preoccupy Foucault in his philosophical career. One such major interest was to bring to the fore the notion of stylization of one's life, that philosophical activity need not be confined to the academe, and that the unity of writing and self-formation can also extend to realm of the political. Concrete and specific political concerns that Foucault tried to espouse and engage were advocacies of unpopular sections of society, such as the plight of prisoners, that were unaddressed by governments, institutions, and the mainstream traditional paradigms and modes of struggle, such as Marxism. It seems that for Foucault these engagements are ways of counterpoising congealed forms of thinking and acting inscribed in social institutions and practices.

On the theoretical terrain the turn to the analysis of discourse is a step towards this aim. It is an aversion from the teleological, psychologistic, iconographic and hermeneutic approaches to the understanding of history, of texts, of language, of knowledge and knowledge production. It also indicates a strong resistance to philosophies tainted with anthropologism and with the illusion of the sovereignty of the subject.⁵

relations that are thereby involved." See Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *Introduction to Post Colonial Theory* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall, 1997), 98-99.

⁴"I think before '68, at least in France, you had to be as a philosopher a Marxist, or a phenomenologist, or a structuralist, and I adhered to none of these dogmas. The second point is that at that time in France studying psychiatry or the history of medicine had no real status in the political field. Nobody was interested in that. The first thing that happened after '68 was that Marxism as a framework declined and new political, new cultural interest concerning personal life appeared" (Bernauer and Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault*, 162).

⁵"My aim is not to transfer to the field of history, and more particularly to the history of knowledge (*connaissances*), a structuralist method that has proved valuable in other fields of analysis. My aim is to uncover the principle and consequences of an autochthonous transformation that is taking place in the field of historical knowledge. . . my aim is most decidedly not to use the categories of cultural totalities (whether world-views, ideal types, the particular spirit of the age) . . . but to question teleologies and totalizations . . . [and] in so far as my aim is to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme, it is clear that the theory that I am about to outline has dual relation with previous

According to Foucault discourse produces specific representations of things and of the world in the manner that enables those discourses within its norms, standards of what had been regarded as “within the true” or scientific, to exist and proliferate, and prohibit and/or marginalizes those that do not. The “political” character of these dominant discourses is carried through its ways of representing. At the same time, the marginalized discourses, because they are not granted the status of true or scientific or correct, are pushed to the side and consigned into obscurity, until such a time, if ever such an event arises, that these particular marginalized texts, knowledges, or collections of “untruth” is salvaged and granted the status of approval and is made to take its place among the very universe it was once banished.

If knowledge formation involves a cutting out, then it is imperative that we view knowledge production differently and approach it not simply as an objective collection of categories which bestows truthfulness upon compliance to these categories. As Foucault reminds us, discourse has formative and normative rules which polices itself by mollifying and delimiting the dispersion of those outside the true by performing legitimated and privileging functions in the social, political, epistemic and discursive space.

studies. It is an attempt to formulate, in general terms, the tools that these studies have used or forged for themselves in the course of their work. But, on the other hand, it uses the results already obtained to define the method of analysis purged of all anthropologies” (Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* New York: Pantheon Books, 1972], 15-16).

In another text Foucault clarifies that his project is not the effacement of the subject but to look at the subject at a different perspective. He writes: “But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. *We should suspend the typical questions*: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and into what form appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitute) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex variable of discourse” (Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1977], 137-38; emphasis mine).

In the year before his appointment at College de France, Foucault published the book *L'archeologie du savoir* wherein he theorized this analysis of discourse. Archeology as used by Foucault is a way of analyzing systems of thought,⁶ it tries to determine discursive formations⁷ or the rules which govern discourse and describe the various relations of statements⁸ that form

⁶The task of the archeological project is not to reveal the *Zeitgeist* nor the structure of governing language. Foucault writes: "What I would like to do, however, is to reveal a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of scientists and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature. What was common to natural history, the economics, and the grammar of the classical period was certainly not present to the consciousness of the scientist; or that part of it that was conscious was superficial, limited, and almost fanciful (Adanson, for example, wished to draw up an artificial denomination for plants; Turgot compared coinage with language); but, unknown to themselves, the naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archeological" (see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* [New York: Vintage, 1970], xi).

⁷Pertinent to the understanding of discourse is the comprehension of *discursive formation*. Discursive formations are said to exist if we can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations) between objects, types of statement, concepts thematic choices (see Foucault, AK, 38). To analyze a discursive formation is to describe: 1) the statement, 2) the enunciative function of the statement, 3) the condition in which the function of the statement operate, and 4) the different domains that the function of the statement presupposes and the way in which these domains are articulated (see *ibid.*, II5).

Foucault's analysis of discursive formation proceeds twofold. First, he charts how discourse forms and delimit the object of which it speaks by delineating the rules for the formation of objects, types of statement, concepts and thematic choices. Second, while establishing these rules, he sought to determine the relations between statements.

⁸For Foucault *statements* are not simply propositions nor speech acts nor just symbols of human invention for communication. Statements are rather the cohesional and comprehensional function behind a group of signs. Statements play a major role in discourse for it is the very element that allows discourse to "make sense." Foucault writes: "The statement is not therefore a structure . . . it is a

a group. Archeology as a tool of investigation tries to show that discourse are not just group of signs “in the form in which they can be heard or read,” they are not just a “slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*).”⁹ Archeology, as analysis of discourse, permits us to view discourse as a group of representations but more importantly, it allows us to see them as “practices that systematically form the object of which it speaks”¹⁰ by policing its own domain, which is a form of exclusion, marginalization and choosing. Discourse, as a set of anonymous rules, delimit, shape and form its object.

The Non-discursive Domain

Vesting approval as well as exclusion and marginalization also rests upon nondiscursive influences. Three are mentioned by Foucault as illustrations. First, *the status of individuals* who has the right and qualification to use and employ diverse statements. He writes:

Medical statements cannot come from anybody; their value, efficacy, even their therapeutic powers cannot, and generally speaking, their existence as medical statements cannot be dissociated from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them, or to claim for them to overcome suffering and death.¹¹

Individuals who do not possess the qualification and status of legitimacy are usually regarded as not credible agents when they use such statements. The right and qualification for the utilization of statements by those who would employ them is usually vested by law, tradition and

function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they ‘make sense,’ according to what rule they follow one another or are juxtaposed, of what they are the sign, and of what sort of act is carried out by their formulation (oral or written). One should not be surprised, then, if one has failed to find structural criteria of unity for the statement; this is because it is not in itself a unit, but a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them with concrete contents, in time and space” (ibid., 86-87).

⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

authorities and the status of legitimacy, of competence and knowledge is awarded by institutions.¹²

This status also includes relations with other individuals (other medical practitioners) or groups (professional organizations, etc.) who also possess the same status of competence in the exchange of information. The status also imposes regulative roles to members “whose function is to preserve or reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community, according to strict regulations, without those in possession being dispossessed by this distribution.”¹³

His rank and position would also involve his function in society, as for example, the medical doctor summoned by the state as an authority, or the various contracts that he may enter as a professional, or the payment he receives as an authority. All of these are focal to his status as a competent and legitimate “specialist.”

Next is *the institutional and technical site* from which the so called authority speaks. This is where his discourse is applied and derives its mandate and power. Again taking the medical doctor as our example, these sites include the hospital, the laboratory, and the documentary field where the various texts such as case histories and statistical information are supplied by other professionals and technical experts from different fields of knowledge and disciplines.¹⁴

Lastly, *the situation he could occupy in various fields or group of objects as a perceiving, observing, and even a teaching subject*. In this domain he could become

¹²In his inaugural lecture at the College de France published under the title *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault mentions “[t]he most superficial and obvious of these restrictive systems is constituted by what we collectively refer to as ritual; ritual defines the qualifications required of the speaker (of who in the dialogue, interrogation or recitation, should occupy which position and formulate which type of utterance); it lays down gestures to be made, behavior, circumstances, and the whole range of signs that must accompany discourse; finally, it lays down the supposed, or imposed significance of the words used, their effect upon those whom they are addressed, the limitations of their constraining validity. Religious discourse, juridical and therapeutic as well as, in some ways, political discourse are all barely dissociable from the functioning of a ritual that determines the individual properties and agreed roles of speakers” (ibid., 225).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴See ibid., 51-52.

an agent within the information network such as an author of a theoretical or scientific treaty. It could even include the function and influence to pass on quasi-judicial decisions within the ambit of his domain.

These non-discursive domains tend to put forth significant pressure and control, sway and manipulate the circulation, accumulation and dissemination of discourse within and beyond its circle of influence to the extent that it polices discourse thereby controlling, sifting, transfixing and marginalizing knowledges.

The Role of Power

For Foucault power in modern society is linked to knowledge. Power, Foucault says, is not something negative and constraining which prohibits us from gaining knowledge but rather something which is positive. He writes:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply that fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the social body, much more as a negative instance whose function is repression.¹⁵

Power seen as productive and enabling force which moves upon things grants us to view it as not located in a single center or source but in manifold forms of manifestations, antinomies and inducements. Seen in this way, power rivets and wields through different discourses and institutions in its multifarious manifestation and latches in the play of knowledge production. Foucault writes that “there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.”¹⁶ On the other hand there can be “no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.”¹⁷ The role of power

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

then, in the production of knowledge, can be characterized by a kinship and/or an intimate relation between power and knowledge: knowledge gives rise to power, and the operations of power, on the other hand, produces knowledge. He writes:

Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalizes, professionalizes, and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis, we must produce truth as we must produce wealth . . . In another way we are also subjected to truth in the sense in which it is truth that makes laws, that produces discourse which . . . transmits and extend itself upon the effect of power. In the end we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power.¹⁸

The exercise of power creates knowledge and conversely knowledge induces effects of power. The accumulation of knowledge of “madness” and “madmen” as explored in *Madness and Civilization*, the acquisition of knowledge of disease by exhuming and dissecting bodies as examined in *The Birth of the Clinic*, the systems of recordings and dossiers for the management of a certain population in *Discipline and Punish*, all these investigations of Foucault demonstrate how power and knowledge produce and reinforce one another to form and represent objects and gain access to these objects through power and knowledge.

The Call for Reflexivity

As power is linked to discourse, to the accumulation and proliferation of knowledge, Foucault reminds us that the responsibility for truth and knowledge is double edged, that we must be persistently on guard, continuously reflect and conscientiously look at our own thought, knowledge, action and practices, and that we must cease to be agents that marginalize voices. It is also imperative that we be cautious about giving a voice. That an object of investigation is not just a subject discussed passively, that to deliberate upon things, that to speak or write about and/or for others carries with it implications. He reminds us of the influence of anonymous rules that we unknowingly or knowingly apply,

¹⁸ Ibid., 93-94.

that these rules are beckoned and reinforced by institutions and are strengthened by putative practices, which bring to the fore the possibility of misrepresentation, or rather, the consequence of “interested representation.”¹⁹

Foucault also evokes upon us to look at ourselves and our society, and the way we deal with ourselves and of others, differently. No doubt there is indeed a struggle that we must carry out ourselves. The struggle is not only a struggle against the subjection of the subject by controlling and domesticating it as an object of knowledge, it is also a struggle, for and against, the exercise of power. The struggle is local and specific for one must weigh the immensity of the structure in which one is embedded and once capacity for intervention is limited by one’s positionality within this particular site. And since one has an immediate knowledge of the specific sector in which one is inscribed, here then lies the promise and spadework for action, for “a new mode of connection between theory and practice have been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the universal, the exemplary, the just-and-true-for-all, but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them.”²⁰

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¹⁹ Foucault’s unease with political representation is a lucid indication of this imperative. In one of his last interviews he says that “The role of the intellectual does not consist in telling others what they must do. What right do they have to do that. And remember all the prophecies, promises, injunctions, and programs that the intellectual have managed to formulate in the course of the last two centuries. The job of the intellectual does not consist in molding the political will of others. It is a matter of performing analyses in his or her own fields, of interrogating anew the evidence and the postulates, of shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking, of dispelling commonplace beliefs, of taking a new measure of rules and institutions . . . it is a matter of participating in the formation of a political will, where [the intellectual] is called to play a role as a citizen” (See Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* [New York: Semiotext(e), 1991], 11-12).

²⁰ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 126.

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