

Foucault, Discourse, Society and Power

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Abstract

The paper will largely focus on Foucault's discussion on his notion of 'discourse' which has such an enormous influence on cultural analysis. His denunciation of 'fons et origo' of discourse and call for treating it as and when it occurs will also be discussed. He says that forms of continuity and unity are just the result of a construction following the rules with its own justification. What will also be discussed is his theorizing of relationship between knowledge, truth, and power. He shows that truth is produced through multiple forms of constrain and induces effects of power. His definition of the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the will to knowledge will also be examined. His anti-essentialist claim that man is a new wrinkle in our knowledge, his genealogical approach, and his denial that power is something which is merely coercive in a traditional Marxism or Weberian perspective associate him to both poststructuralist and postmodernism.

The Rise of Practices and Discourse

Foucault highlights the existence of a 'middle region'¹ or a domain which lies between the fundamental codes of a culture and the scientific theories. This middle region reveals the modes of being of order and makes them lose their original transparency and invisible powers and shows that these orders are not the only possible or unique ones. Thus, the linkage of empirical orders to space and its composition is revealed. What we then have is the pure experience of order and its modes of being. This middle region, which is the most fundamental in nature and existing prior to words and perceptions and is archaic, shows how practices forms the object of which they speak. This middle domain brings to light the actual use of the ordering codes and the philosophical interpretations which try to explain why order exists. The linguistic and practical grids are nothing, but the product of practices systemically pursued.

Different practices in both the Classical age and the modern age² formed the different modes of being of the order or the grid which served as the basis for our thinking or the way we actually perceive the world. Foucault's archaeological inquiry shatters the continuity

¹Michel Foucault (1970), *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge.

² *ibid.* Foucault's archaeological inquiry reveals two discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture. The first starts the Classical age and the second marks the beginning of the modern age.

created at the level of ideas and themes which is just a surface appearance. The system of positivity was transformed in a great way. The reason was that the mode of being of things, and of the order was changed greatly. Language loses its status as the spontaneous tabula, the primary grid of things, as a vital link between representation and things. The theory of representation is no longer the universal foundation of all possible orders. From the nineteenth century onward the configuration of coherence between the theory of representation and the theories of the natural order, and language changed entirely. Language is no more the vital link between representation and things.

A different set of practices arose with historical authenticity replacing the old set of practices. It sought to define things in their own coherence assigning them different forms of order. The analysis of the organism gains priority over the search for taxonomic characteristics, the study of production assumes significance while the analysis of exchange and money makes way for it.³ This causes refulgent language to lose its once-enjoyed privileged position. Things sought their intelligibility without sharing the space of representation and were taken account of reflexively. Man takes a new position in the field of knowledge which gives rise to a new configuration. This gives birth to a figure called man which is 'no more than a kind of rift in the order of things'⁴.

Foucault here clearly points out that if the scientific discourses in which human beings have been described were to disappear 'then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'⁵. So, he suggests that there is no 'human essence' but what a given society understands human beings to be at any given point is a product of the kind of discourses that it produces about itself. This can be seen as an anti-essentialist claim. This notion of man is also not in the line with humanism. It marks a break with humanism inasmuch as it de-centres the individual as the prior agent in creating the social world, rejecting subjectivity as something essential, and prior to discourse, which power acts against.⁶

The present form of knowledge created by modern discourses through practices is not going to exist forever. Foucault says that man is only a recent invention, a new wrinkle in our knowledge and will disappear as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form. New set of practices, formation of different modes of being of things or a new regime of truth inconsistent with the old ones will provide our knowledge with a new form. Foucault claims that discourses are practices that systematically form the object of which they speak⁷. The emphasis of practices thus determines the course and direction our knowledge will take.

³ibid.

⁴ibid.

⁵Foucault, 1966/1974:386

⁶ Nick J. Fox, *Foucault, Foucauldians and Sociology*, The British Journal of Sociology. Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), p.417.

⁷Foucault, 1969/2002: 54

The way a given culture perceived the otherness and sameness in the things of the world through the play of symbols prompted Foucault to undertake the detailed examination of Classical knowledge. Resemblance till the beginning of the seventeenth century served as the basis for the construction of the knowledge of Western culture. Thus, he examines the history of resemblance in his book 'The Order of Things'. The principal figures like 'convenientia', 'aemulatio', 'analogy', and 'sympathies'⁸determined the knowledge of resemblance.

Discourse and Knowledge

Foucault tries to explain the changes in the discursive formation by looking at the relations of thought and discourse to the factors that lie outside them. It is important to look at his initial formulation of dynamic conception of knowledge when he draws distinction between *connaissance* and *savoir*. Archaeology's concern lies in paying attention to discursive formation or positivity that makes possible the existence of disciplines and sciences. He says that it is the episteme of the epoch that archaeology seeks to reveal and which defines the conditions of possibility of all forms of knowledge. It is in this epistemic context all branches of knowledge become relevant and intelligible. Investigations and requisite examinations required by new disciplines were also structured in this epistemic matrix, which made possible the coexistence of dispersed and heterogeneous statements and concepts. Sartre also attaches importance to the contemporary state of knowledge in determining the character of an experiment⁹.

He calls 'epistemic knowledge' *savoir* and scientific knowledge or 'accumulated, refined, deepened, adjusted knowledge'¹⁰ *connaissance*. To constitute a scientific discourse or a discipline containing scientific knowledge such as psychopathology or particle physics, a group of objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices need to be formed by a discursive practice. These elements are made available by the *savoir* of a discursive formation or what Foucault calls the knowledge of a discursive formation such as Natural History or political economy. Foucault thus sees objects which the discourses talk about as emerging in the space offered by *savoir*. It is in this space the subject speaks of the objects of his discourse. Thus, the occurrence of discursive formations and the objects made possible by it is coeval. There is no one permanent, delimited object to refer to. This underpins the nominalist streak in Foucault's archaeological approach. This non-realistic line is what is found even in two of the twentieth century's most towering physical theories, that is, the theory of general relativity and the quantum theory, as concepts in these fields of physics lacked real referents. Albert Einstein's positivist predisposition prompted him to adopt the non-realist path to the special relativity and the quantum physics.

⁸op. cit.

⁹ Sartre, 1960/2004:42

¹⁰ op.cit., p.169.

Foucault says that *connaissance* remains in the clutches of subjectivity or *connaissance* is the subjective enterprise. So, subject plays the key role in achieving the scientific knowledge and for this subject depends on *savoir*. On the other hand, it is *savoir* that concerns archaeology, so archaeology explores the discursive practice/knowledge (*savoir*)/science axis. Under these considerations, Foucault suggests that we should distinguish between scientific domains and archaeological territories. Those texts or propositions that do not meet the accepted norms of the period are not seen as belonging to the scientific domain. Literary and philosophical texts are excluded from any domain of scientificity as they do not observe the established scientific norms of the period. But an archaeological territory extends not only to scientific texts but also to literary and philosophical texts that do not observe to a great deal the scientific norms of the period.

Knowledge (*savoir*), thus, acts as an epistemological site or the background in which the sciences emerge. This epistemological site contains everything that contributes to the formation of the sciences, so knowledge (*savoir*) is distributed across the entire epistemological field and is not just contained in a science or a particular set of statements which gains intelligibility and legitimacy because of its background. Such understanding of the distinction between *savoir* and *connaissance* thus alludes to the Foucault's dynamic understanding of knowledge.

To conclude this section, it can be said that the critical notion of 'discourse' indicates a set of practices which has a limiting effect on human behaviour and the corroborative theoretical concepts which creates a kind of ubiquitous gaze or scrutiny which make humans act and think in line with regimes of truth.

Sexuality and the Techniques of Power

Foucault's notion of discourse and the idea that practices systematically form the object of which they speak cannot be explained adequately without reference to his work on the history of sexuality. In his first volume 'The Will to Knowledge', he shows how sexuality attained the status of 'science' and became subject to different kinds of controls. In his analysis he adopts a discursive approach. He establishes the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality, the link which existed since the Classical age. This link, he shows, is 'repression' which imposed shackles on recently invented man or human beings and issued edicts.

Paradoxically, Foucault says that his aim is to examine the case of a society which has castigated itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that has made it function¹¹. Before sexuality was confined, moved into the home, and a single locus of it was acknowledged in social space as well as in every household, sexual practices did not have much need of secrecy,

¹¹Michael Foucault (1976), *The will to knowledge, The History of Sexuality : 1*, Penguin books

codes regulating the obscene, and the indecent were not so strict compared to Victorian regime, bodies did not hesitate to make a display of themselves. Discourse was not under control; it was rather shameless.

Foucault tries to highlight the way in which sex is 'put into discourse' and the overall discursive fact¹². He wants to determine who does the speaking about sex, the positions from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said¹³. His main concern is to 'locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourse it permeates'¹⁴.

The incompatibility of sex with intensive work imperative in the bourgeois capitalist order became one of reasons for repressing sex rigorously. At the high of bourgeois capitalism, it was imperative to systematically harness the 'labour capacity'. This labour capacity could not be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits. This capacity, though, could engage itself to reproduce itself to further produce labour capacity. So, the proliferating discourses can be seen an attempt to circumscribe sexual activity within the strict economy of reproduction and reproduce labour capacity so that sexuality would be sexually useful and politically conservative. Sex, thus, can be seen to be constructed within discourses which produce the scientific knowledge and the regime of truth which enable the social control of the sexualized body. Discourses here functions to regulate and normalize sexual behaviour.

Foucault points out that 'the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics'¹⁵. This serves as a reason why only a contingent set of practices which has a limiting effect on the human body and the corroborative theoretical concepts which commands a kind of gaze on human acts do not always have the desired effect on the human subjects. A historical and political guarantee may help to protect and uphold the discourse on modern sexual repression; the 'critical discourse' openly denounces the effects of integration ensured by the 'science' of sex and practices of sexology. If a person tries to place himself outside the reach of power upsetting the established law, he does so by transgressing the established law, by lifting the prohibitions, by reinstating the pleasure within reality. Called 'other Victorian'¹⁶ or 'sexual sermon' by Foucault, they created discourse on sexual oppression or critical discourse heralding the coming age of a different law and anticipating the coming freedom. The preaching of these modern sexual sermons opposed the old order, denounced hypocrisy, and sang the praises of the rights of the immediate and the real.

Thus, the question of whether there was a historical rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression was taken up by Foucault. He argues that if repressive functions were really in operation since the Classical age there was also what he

¹² Foucault, 1970:54

¹³ Foucault, 1983:64

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

calls a ‘discursive explosion’ which challenged the ‘repressive hypothesis’ which holds that the western societies since the eighteenth century have been characterized by an ‘affirmation of nonexistence, an admission that there was nothing to say about sex, nothing to see, and nothing to know, and modern puritanism imposing its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence’¹⁷. He is not only concerned with this discursive explosion or the discourse on modern sexual repression but also with exploring the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them.

One of the most important formulations of Foucault is his conception of “polymorphous techniques of power”¹⁸. Foucault’s this conception marks a break with structuralism because this idea denies that power¹⁹ is something which is merely coercive in a traditional Marxist or Weberian perspective²⁰. It is in the positivity of power that we affirm or create reason to affirm that sex is something that we hide, that it is something that we silence, repress, and eschew taking about in public. The repressive form of power adopts channels and permeates discourses to reach the most tenuous²¹ and individual modes of behaviour, take pats to gain access to the rare or the scarcely perceivable forms of desire, and to penetrate and control everyday pleasure²². This power seeks to produce the effects of blockage, taboo, nonexistence, refusal, silence, and invalidation in the social sphere. This power also creates the effect of incitement and intensification. It is this incitement feature of power that sustains the discourse on human sexuality. It is this feature of power that sustains and brings out the ‘will to knowledge’²³ that serves as both their support and their instrument. The negative elements like denials, censorships and silence play only component parts in the form of a local and tactical role in a transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a will to knowledge. These negative elements constitute a central mechanism which imposes censorship and say no. The official analytical discourses or forms of knowledge which managed sex or controlled it within institutional controls sustained and incited the will to knowledge while in social sphere power manifested in the form of blockage, invalidation, and censorship.

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¹⁷ ibid.

¹⁸ ibid.

¹⁹ Foucault, 1980:92

²⁰ op.cit.

²¹ Foucault, 1975/1991: 26

²² op.cit.

²³ op.cit.

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