Thinking about Power:
An Analysis of Foucault's Theory

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Michel Foucault wanted to think about power in ways other than the classical theories: for example, that power is not something to be possessed and used by someone and therefore external to the individual but is constitutive of the individual to begin with. He thought that others' and even his own earlier work had insisted too much on techniques of domination and saw as important the techniques that individuals perform on their own bodies and souls to modify their conduct and transform themselves (Howison Lectures, 1980, *apud* MILLER, 1993, pp. 222-223). He observed that history has studied individuals and institutions that have held power but has neglected its "mechanisms" and "strategies" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 51). In his attempts to discover the connections between "mechanisms of coercion and elements of understanding", he wanted to erase the perception of powerful practices and institutions as an unquestioned given or historical necessity to show rather their contingency, the arbitrary quality of the "games of truth" invented or constructed at given historical periods in specific situations (MILLER, 1993, pp. 303-304).

In his early works (the 1960s), he rejected the essentialist Platonic search for historical origins, offering instead what he called "archeologies", in which he examined the sets of discourses that condition what counts as knowledge—for example, knowledge of madness or clinical medicine—in a given historical period. He thought that discourses and discursive practices could be articulated in the "unconsciousness of an age" (CUTTING, in CUTTING, 1994, p. 63), indications and expressions of how people thought and acted at a certain period. Such discourses and practices establish norms and rules, but also controls and exclusions, determining what counts as true or scientific in a given period (FLYNN, in CUTTING, 1994, p. 30). They are, therefore, social constructions with no privileged access to the truth (CUTTING, in CUTTING, 1994, pp. 10-12).

Subsequently, in works called "genealogies" (the 1970s), he pointed out the discontinuities and the importance of randomness in historical events. The dispersed character of events and their multiplicity of explanations, levels of different types of events that differ in their capacity to produce effects, suggest that Foucault did not share the traditional historian's concern with reconstructing what happened but wanted to write, as he claimed, "a history of the present". The particularity of the genealogies tends to subvert, in what is thought of in the postmodernist fashion, Lyotard's

"grand narratives" of inevitable progress, to diagnose problems rather than causally explain, "to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 81; FLYNN, in CUTTING, 1994, p. 44).

Foucault′s originality as a theorist of power is his break with the notion, which can be seen in all historical theories, that power "consists in some substantive instance or agency of sovereignty" (GORDON, in FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 235). To the consternation of some critics, Foucault never defined power. He was concerned not so much with *what* it is, its essence, or even the Marxist question of over *whom* it is held, as he was with *how* it is exercised (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 92). Like Nietzsche, he understood power not as a fixed quantity but as a flux flowing through individuals and societies, bound up with habits, systems, and organizations (MILLER, 1993, p. 15). Its mechanisms are distributed along different centers and not unified at a single point, such as the state (MOHANTY, in CAPUTO & YOUNT, 1993, pp. 33-34; CAPUTO, in CAPUTO & YOUNT, 1993, p. 246), which is perhaps a reply to critics who charged that his analysis, as such, does not make a normative distinction between oppressive and non-oppressive forms of power, although it has been concluded that his theory implies one (INGRAM, in: CUTTING, 1994, p. 253, note 16). To be sure, in papers and interviews, Foucault explicitly discussed a kind of local opposition to the "totalizing nature" of power. He claimed that where there is power, it is exercised, although no one, properly speaking, is its "title-holder", which is not to say that it is not known who exploits, where the profit goes, etc. To force the information network, to designate the target, is a first inversion of power; the local, regional, and discontinuous theories being elaborated are the beginning of discovering how power is exercised. Since power relations are not localized at the level of the state or between classes but penetrate the depths of society, resistance does not consist of destroying the institutions or acquiring control of the state apparatus, but is fought out at points of confrontation and instability (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 27).

The role of the intellectual, for example, is in the order of knowledge and "truth", a local practice that struggles to make power "appear" and to harm it where it is invisible and insidious (FOUCAULT, 1981, pp. 71, 75-77), that is, "not the uniform edifice of sovereignty", but domination within 'lateral' relations of power, "the multiple forms of subjugation that have a place and function within the social organism" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 96; CAPUTO & YOUNT, p. 9). In the "vaguer dominion" that Foucault said he investigated in the genealogies as well, the point is to assemble and to "make visible" in their strategic connections the discourses and discursive practices of institutions, which are not just the sum of discourses formulated about an institution but the workings of the institution itself, including the unformulated practices that ensure its functioning and permanence (FOUCAULT, 1981, p. 130; FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 38). What Foucault proposed, therefore, with respect to resistance, is what he called "an insurrection of dominated knowledges", or whatever is below the level required by knowledge or science: the activation of non-legitimated kinds of knowledge against the unitary theoretical system that orders them hierarchically in the name of a "true" knowledge, the centralizing effects of power connected to institutionalized scientific discourse (FOUCAULT, 1981, p. 169-171).

Foucault′s nominalism, noted in the particularity of the historical researches, no

doubt accounts for his surprising statement that "power does not exist", by which he presumably meant that there is no essence as such, but only particular relations of domination and control in specific social situations and under specific historical conditions (FLYNN, in CUTTING, 1994, pp. 34-39). Gerard Lebrun thought that Foucault´s analyses of an invading and insidious power returned to the state of things comprehensible to Hobbes and Hegel: "What Foucault describes is the triumph of the leviathan, the perfection of the Hegelian state" (LEBRUN, 1984, pp. 69-73, my translation). If this were true, there would be no more politics. What Foucault was more likely describing is the tendency rather than the accomplished fact.

It seems that Foucault understood relations of power as something other than domination, as occurring in all relationships where one wishes to direct the behavior of another. Since there can be no society without relations of power, Foucault, like Talcott Parsons, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Hannah Arendt, sees power as positive and enabling, as well as (potentially) repressive—although his perception of it is far less benign than theirs. The exercise of power in fact implies freedom. Slavery is not the consequence of power but of force, constraint, and violence, since the slave´s range of possibilities are severely reduced. As Caputo and Yount put it, power and freedom contend agonistically, with different strategies "winning" or "losing", with victorious consolidation (one might say "hegemony") on one side, or successful resistance on the other (CAPUTO & YOUNT, 1993, pp. 54-55).

Foucault does not search for causal or determining factors in the Marxist fashion, identifying domination with a certain class or mode of production; instead, he analyzes social, political, and technical 'conditions of possibility' to reconstruct a system of interlocking relations and effects that are contingently connected. Power relations are found at different levels, under different forms, and are not given once and for all but are amenable to change, since total control over the other implies the absence of power (GORDON, in FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 243; BERNAUER & RASMUSSEN, 1988, p. 12). Domination, on the contrary, would occur when an individual or group was able to render relations of power invariable and irreversible by political, military, or economic means (BERNAUER & RASMUSSEN, 1988, pp. 1-3, 18; FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 119). In this case, liberation from a restricted state of freedom is the historical or political condition for the practice of liberty, a notion similar to Arendt's, although such practices are articulated not at a universal but at a local level. If power only functioned as a negation, if it were, as thinkers like Herbert Marcuse suppose, primarily repressive, people could not be brought to obey it so willingly. What makes power acceptable is that "it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 119). As opposed to the congealed situation of domination, therefore, Foucault rather perceives power as a complex "capillary" network of relations that are variable and reversible at different moments by varied strategies of resistance.

Although he later insisted that his works were not, after all, analyses of the phenomenon of power but were undertaken "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our own culture, human beings are made subjects" (qtd. by RABINOW, 'Modern and Countermodern', in CUTTING, 1994, p. 199), the centrality of power, especially in the genealogies of the middle works, is undeniable. In fact, one may take the

"different modes" of the previous statement as the means of domination and the way that "human beings are made subjects" to mean both how people are subjectified and how they are subjected. These two meanings are perhaps not that far apart in the genealogies and they come together in the notion of 'governmentality', which, according to Arnold Davidson, has a double objective: first, to criticize current conceptions of power as a unitary system, and, second, to analyze it as "strategic relations between individuals and groups, relations whose strategies were to govern the conduct of those individuals" (DAVIDSON, in CUTTING, 1994, pp. 118-119).

The first objective offers an alternative model to the hierarchical one of a vertical descent from ruler or other higher order of truth such as Rousseau's "will of the people". It is claimed that unitary power has given way, with the development of a more fragmented and differentiated society, to another, horizontal type of power, "more ubiquitous, diffuse, and corporeal", circulating throughout all areas of social life (INGRAM, in: CUTTING, 1994, p. 220). The second objective is both ethical and political—ethics being ´that component of morality that concerns the self´s relation to self´, including the construction of subjectivity (DAVIDSON, in CUTTING, 1994, P. 118). The abstract conception of who we are, determined ideologically and economically by the state, must be resisted, in one way, Foucault thought, by new forms of subjectivity; hence, the ethical becomes political. The power that institutions have over people comes in a large part from the ability of institutions to deny people their individuality. This is easily seen in bureaucratic or military organizations, prisons, hospitals, and even schools. Foucault wanted to keep the question of identity open and prevent the administrators and managers of various kinds from constituting an identity for individuals that is a historically contingent constraint (DREYFUS & RABINOW, 1983, pp. 212-216; CAPUTO, in CAPUTO & YOUNT, 1993, p. 250).

As a result of this conception of political struggle as a "politics of ourselves", ethics, as defined above, becomes central in the late works of the 1980s. Disciplinary techniques, which Foucault describes and documents so thoroughly in the genealogies of power, are applied to the self to create a new self, an anesthetization of ethics found, for example, in the ancient Stoic philosophers, a process that he evidently admired for their cultivation of self-discipline. The crucial difference is that, in this sense, discipline is self-willed, and not imposed from without by authorities for the purpose of subjugation. With self-discipline, the freedom and creativity of the individual are not curtailed and controlled but ensured and enhanced: "...the exercise of self-mastery is closely related to the state of freedom" (BOYNE, 1990, p. 144). Foucault recognized this difference as a continuity in his thought, to be understood under two aspects: the role of coercive practices and institutions in the normalization of individuals, on one hand, and the role of ascetic practices in the constitution of the ethical subject, on the other (BERNAUER & RASMUSSEN, 1988, pp. 9-19). Some critics, notably Jurgen Habermas, however, found not a continuity but a vacillation between, respectively, objectivists or constructivist, and subjectivist or voluntarist conceptions of agency; that is, either the agent is a determined object or a "strategic subject" (INGRAM, in CUTTING, 1994, pp. 215-269). Without presuming to decide whether Foucault was consistent in this matter, I shall concentrate, in accordance with the theory of power as it has been discussed up to this point,

on the agent as determined object, Foucault's concern with control, domination, subjugation, subjection.

He saw a certain connection of "economism" between the liberal and Marxist conceptions of power. In liberal theory, power is a right and can be possessed like a commodity, transferred, etc. through a legal act. The basic notion here is a contractual type of exchange, as can be seen in the analogies of power and wealth (e.g. in Talcott Parsons). In Marxism, power plays a role in maintaining relations of production and the class domination that these relations make possible; the historical reason for political power is therefore located in the economy. Social institutions, however, do not directly coincide with relations of production; one cannot therefore criticize the dominant system only by attacking these relations (LEBRUN, 1984, 63-69). Foucault was concerned with breaking away from this "economistic" model toward an analysis in which power is not exchanged or possessed but exercised, existing only in action, not the privilege of the dominant class but the "overall effect of its strategic positions" (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 26; 1981, pp. 174-175). Once liberated from economism, the two hypotheses that come to suggest themselves are: first, that power mechanisms work for repression (the "Reichian" hypothesis), and, second, that the basis of the power relationship is a hostile conflict of forces (the "Nietzchean" hypothesis), a war prolonged by other means (inverting Von Clausewitz), or the reinscribing of relations of force in institutions, economic inequality, etc. These two hypotheses are connected in the sense that repression can be considered the political consequence of the conflict of forces, just as oppression was once the consequence of the abuse of sovereignty in judicial models, where power exceeded the contract. Two basic themes therefore emerge: "contract-oppression", the judicial model of the eighteenth century philosophers, and the "dominant-repression" analysis, in which repression is not an abuse of power, but the effect and continuation of a relation of domination, the practice of a perpetual relation of force. Foucault said that he adopted his scheme of power as an occluded war to about the mid-1970s, but that it needed to be adapted (FOUCAULT, 1980, 91-92; 1981, pp. 175-177). At least one commentator thinks that in the lectures of the late 1970s Foucault did not get beyond the Nietzchean hypothesis (MILLER, 1993, p. 301).

The response was perhaps Foucault's most important work of political theory, (*Discipline and Punish*, French edition 1975, English translation 1979). This book was written during his politically active period with French Maoists, 1972-1974, a work that he describes as "a genealogy of the present scientific-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications, and rules", and, most important, "from which it extends its effects" (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 135). It was treated as a seminal work of social criticism that avoided both cruder forms of Marxism and conservative empiricism (MILLER, 1993, p. 234). Its historical aim was to describe in detail how methods of punishment changed between the horrific torture of Damiens, in 1757, and the beginnings of modern prisons, around 1840. Foucault revived and extended Nietzsche's notion of "mnemotechnics" to an account of the change from the old practices of torture and violent public executions, which were intended to avenge the criminal's offense against the sovereign by reproducing the crime on the visible body of the prisoner—a display of sovereign power's asymmetrical relation (FOUCAULT, 1979, pp. 50,

55), but which exposed the cruelty in justice itself. From this kind of exemplary punishment, the means of social control came to be an increased control over desires and actions through discipline, with the modern human sciences taking over Christianity's disciplinary role. The point of application is once again the body—and the soul insofar as it is the seat of habits. The aim of imposing new rules was "not to punish less but to punish better… to punish with more universality and necessity, to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body" (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 84).

Penal reform came in at the point it became necessary to define a punishment in which continuity would replace excess and expenditure, since spectacular punishment was haphazard in application. According to the "economy of power", it became more effective and profitable to guard and discipline criminals than to physically punish them. Foucault admits that every system of power has the problem of 'the ordering of human multiplicities' (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 218), but that discipline tries to do so at the lowest cost (in both senses) and at the maximum intensity and reach (i.e. the extension of domain) and the maximum output of the organizations (penal, military, etc.) within which it is exercised (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 218).

The social cost of this transformation was that the army of technicians, including not only warders and guards but also doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and educationalists, took over. The technology of power became the liberal principle of humanizing penal institutions but also of the knowledge of man, a diffuse "power/knowledge" (one implies the other) that is multiform in method but coherent in result (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 23). Discipline introduced the power of the "norm", from which power demands the production of truth made possible by its new techniques (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 6). As a result, normalization, which came into being from contingent circumstances (i.e. other "solutions" might have been adopted), narrows human possibilities by binding people to a normalizing apparatus. It imposes homogeneity and, at the same time, makes it possible to measure differences as deviations from the norm. It therefore tolerates diversity up to a point, but punishes it when it threatens the discipline of the norm (CAPUTO & YOUNT, in CAPUTO & YOUNT, 1993, p. 6; BERNAUER & MAHON, 1988, p. 143). Those categorized as deviants are excluded. Science thus develops the knowledge it requires to create the desired, well-ordered individual. It is therefore not a neutral and objective search for transcendental truth but is itself implicated in the practices of domination (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 129).

The range of authorities was extended to the general population. There was a general and continuous submission to supervision, milder than that exercised by a sovereign, but more insidious and "microscopic", a "capillary" regime that exercised power in the social body rather than over it, once the myth of the sovereign was no longer possible (FOUCAULT, 1981, p. 130-131). The idea was to create "docile bodies", to "shape an obedient subject" (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 129), to increase the forces of the body in economic terms but reduce them in political terms, a "mechanics of power' that links an increased aptitude to an increased domination (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 138). Anyone who has served in the military finds instantly familiar the spatial and temporary techniques of discipline that Foucault elaborates: enclosure, partitioning, functional sites, ranking, time-tables, temporal elaboration of the act ("by the numbers") body-object

articulation, exhaustive use. Indeed, Foucault refers to an eighteenth century "military dream of society" as an alternative to the social contract ideal (FOUCAULT, 1979, p. 169).

Disciplinary power is exercised through invisibility. It is the subject, not leader, who must be seen. Surveillance (the title of the book in French is *Surveiller et punir*) or observation rather than physical coercion renders the actual daily exercise of power unnecessary. "Panopticism", which Foucault discovered in a description of the writings of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is a "technology of power", an architectural arrangement that makes soldiers, prisoners, patients, and students visible to a central control. Power is thus continuously exercised through an inspecting gaze that each one will end up internalizing, so that there is no need of weapons or physical violence (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 155). One who is subjected to such a field of visibility and knows it, Foucault explains, assumes responsibility for power's constraints and so "becomes the principle of his own subjection" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 203). "Is it surprising", he asks, "that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (FOUCAULT, 1980, p. 228).

In the following work, the first volume *of The History of Sexuality* (1976; English translation, 1980), he seeks again to show that repression is not what power is all about. The historical inquiry is directed toward a society that "speaks verbosely of its own silence" and promises to "liberate itself from the laws that make it function" FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 8). The aim of this work is to define the power/knowledge regime that sustains the discourse on sexuality in society. Rather than repression—the "Victorian hypothesis", by which we falsely believe that when we say yes to sex we say no to power (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 157)—discourses of sexuality were multiplied by an ʹinstitutional incitementʹ to speak and hear about it. It was spoken not to be condemned (and here one may connect this work to *Discipline and Punish*), but to be managed and administered, inserted into nineteenth century systems of utility, and was incorporated into orders of knowledge: the biology of reproduction and the medicine of sex, the former giving cover to obstacles and fears aroused by the latter (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, pp. 54-55). In contrast to an oriental art of sex, western culture produced a science of sex geared to a traditional form of power/knowledge, the confession, that is so deeply ingrained that it seems like a liberation rather than a constraining power. A "political history of truth" would show that truth is not free, for its production is involved in relations of power. A confession, for example, unfolds within such a relation: one confesses to an authority who requires the confession in order to judge, forgive or punish (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, pp. 38-62).

The "analytic of sex" includes general reflections on power that take up some earlier themes. Foucault says his is an "analysis" rather than a theory of power, but, once again, the analysis needs to be freed from the judicial model. In his view, all modes of power are reduced to an effect of obedience, so that the productiveness, the resourcefulness, the "positivity" of power are neglected (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, pp. 82-86).

This negative view of power has been widely accepted because power can only be tolerated if it conceals part of itself: its success is directly proportional to its ability to

hide its own mechanisms (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 86). Historically, law was the weapon of the sovereign but also the system's "mode of manifestation and form of its acceptability" (FOUCAULT, 1976-1980, p. 87). The exercise of power in the west is formulated in legal terms, and facts and procedures are covered up by judicial discourse. This judico-political discourse is not adequate, Foucault thought, to describe how power was, and is, exercised, but "the code according to which power presents itself" (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 88) and how we conceive it. The forms of sovereignty still exist to some extent but they have been penetrated by new mechanisms of the type he described in this and previous works, mechanisms that operate not by right, law, and punishment, but by technique, normalization, and control, and that go beyond the apparatus of the state (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 89).

One must conceive, finally, not the sovereign model, merely temporary forms of power, but the multiplicity of power relations, which are not exterior to other types of relations such as knowledge or economics, but immanent in them. They are both intentional and non-subjective, i.e exercised through aims and objectives but not the result of an individual subject. They always and everywhere imply resistance but a resistance that is not exterior to power itself, which, according to Foucault's theory, would be impossible, but presents "points" distributed irregularly everywhere in the "network" (FOUCAULT, 1976/1980, p. 92-96).

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the new ways that Michel Foucault thought about power, which he did not see as something possessed and used by someone on others, like a consequence of sovereignty or external force, but as constitutive of individuals and institutions. He wanted to get away from the prevailing attitude toward power as domination. Power exists and is exercised at all levels. Through investigations of the discourses of institutions at different historical periods, his archaeologies, he attempted to show the practices, the "mechanisms" of these institutions in forming subjects through the exercise of discipline rather than brute force and determining what counts as scientific knowledge or truth and excluding what does not.

KEY-WORDS: Foucault's archaeologies; power; domination; discipline

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Resumo: Este artigo examina as novas maneiras de Michel Foucault pensar sobre o poder. Foucault não considerava poder como algo possuído e usado por alguém sobre outros, como uma consequência de soberania ou força externa, mas parte constitutiva de indivíduos e instituições. Ele desejava se distanciar da postura dominante de poder como dominação. O poder existe e é exercido em todos os níveis. Por meio de investigações dos discursos de instituições em diferentes períodos históricos, suas arqueologias, ele tencionava mostrar as práticas, os 'mecanismos', destas instituições para formar sujeitos por meio do exercício da disciplina ao invés de força bruta e para determinar o que vale como conhecimento científico ou verdade e assim excluir aquilo que não vale.

Palavras-chave: Arqueologias de Foucault; poder; dominação; disciplina.