

THE POWER–KNOWLEDGE IN MICHEL FOUCAULT’S VISION

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Abstract. The study relates the idea of the permanence of conflict with the discontinuity effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing theories. These theories were previously designed to mask knowledge. Hence, the investigation that relates not only knowledge and power, but also the aspects of conflict, coercion, control and punishment, in fact, analyzes the potential overcoming of the *insurrection of subjugated knowledge*. Thus, power is that force of subjugating and concealing knowledge to the aim of managing conflict.

Keywords: power, knowledge, subjugated knowledge, conflict, struggle.

Introduction

One of the main themes of Foucault’s works is the relation power-knowledge and the manner in which humanistic sciences could surprise this theme, approached mostly *Surveiller et punir* translated in English by Alan Sheridan with the title *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and in Romanian with the title *A supraveghea și a pedepsi*. At first, Foucault conducted a research that followed to “find again that something from which all [knowing] started so that all knowledge and theories to be possible.”¹

Michel Foucault wrote many books and many books were written about his works confirming the great impact of his ideas². The philosopher was born at Poitiers and he studied at L’Ecole Normale Supérieure de Paris. He was influenced by Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hypolitte and Georges Canguilhem. He taught philosophy at Clermont Ferraud University and the history of the systems of thought at College de France.

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¹ This commentary on the relation power-knowledge is from C.O. Schrag, *Resursele raționalității*, translated in Romanian by Angela Botez. Calvin O. Schrag, *Resursele raționalității*, Bucharest, Ed. Științifică, 1999, pp. 74-80.

² Works on Foucault: H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982), M. Cousins and Athar Hussains, *Michel Foucault* (1984), A.Sheridan - (1986), J. Arac (ed) *After Foucault Humanistic Knowledge Postmodern Challenge* (1988), J. Diamond and L. Quinby, *Feminism and Foucault: Reflection on Resistance* (1988), S. Doring, *Foucault and Literature. Towards a Genealogy of Writing* (1992), Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso and Silvia Coporale-Bizzini (ed), *Reconstructing Foucault: Essays in the Work of the 80* (1994), Gilles Deleuze, *M. Foucault* (trad. în lb. rom.), Cluj-Napoca, Ideea DP. 2002.

In modern society, conflict is accepted and seen rather as a starting point to arrive at cooperation, and we can appreciate that a good conflict management can stimulate individual and group performance.

After long periods of time, when specialists and society as a whole considered that a conflict state is a negative thing that should be avoided, both people's perception and attitude has changed and evolved in time. They have understood the fact that not the presence of conflicts is dangerous, but the emergence of their violent forms, which perpetuate unfair systems and favour just one of the parts involved, inclined to seize power at all costs and to impose their own interests.

As following we are going to investigate the relation between power and knowledge, creating thus a background against we can analyze both the social practices and the subject, as well as conflict as a permanent trait of human relations.

The relation between power and knowledge

The central theme of Foucault approach the relation between power and knowledge and this perspective constitutes one of the sources of postmodernism. He sustains that there is a strict relation between the "systems of knowledge" (discourses) which codify techniques and practices by the exercise of control, within localized and particular contexts and influence our ability to avoid the domination of bureaucracy and of technical rationality. The only manner in which "the fascism in our heads" can be eliminated is social exploitation and social construction on the foundation of the quality of the human discourse to be open and to resist to repression's institutions and techniques.

In what concerns the relation power-knowledge Foucault shows that power produces *subjugated knowledge*: "...an entire thematic to the effect that it is not theory but life that matters, not knowledge but reality, not books but money etc.; but it also seems to me that over and above, and arising out of this thematic that there is something else to which we are witnesses and which we might describe as *an insurrection of subjugated knowledges*."³

But what exactly is subjugated knowledge and what is the relation to conflict? The answer stays in a retrospective comparative and philosophical investigation of various historical contexts: "...only the historical contexts allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is designed to mask. Subjugated knowledges are thus those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but

³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1972-1977)*, edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p. 81.

disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory and which criticism – which obviously draws upon scholarship – has been able to reveal.”⁴

Conflict is a permanent component of human inter-relations. This is a presence with a frequent emergence in social life, in general, since the beginnings of human society, and there is no efficient antidote to it. Michel Foucault, who is considered one of the most important among the French thinkers, around the year 1960, sometimes was called historian of ideas.

As the previous quote already indicates, Foucault’s methodology is rather an archaeological examination of “knowledges” (after the poetical license of the translators, Colin Gordon and Leo Marshall) based on a combination of historical investigation, and philosophical, epistemological and linguistic analysis.

For him, social control is maintained in ‘the disciplinary society’, through practices and institutions of control over the social actions, practices and customs. Official discourses and ideologies are vehicles of the authority, “subjugated knowledge,” and means of conflict management that bring people in line with the aims and interests of power and its representatives. Even schools, although they appear as objective institutions, are part in this mechanism of reinforcing social norms, and social obedience, to the benefit of the superior classes.

Foucault shows: “In the two cases-in the case of the erudite as in that of the disqualified knowledges – with what in fact were these buried, subjugated knowledges really concerned? They were concerned with a historical know/edge of struggles. (...) What emerges out of this is something one might call a genealogy or rather a multiplicity of genealogical researches, a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts. And these genealogies that are the combined product of an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge were not possible and could not even have been attempted, except on the one condition, namely the tyranny of the globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges of a theoretical *avant-garde* was eliminated.”⁵

Foucault’s definition seems as simple as possible: power is a rapport of forces, or, more exactly, any rapport of forces is a “rapport of power.” As a consequence we should understand that, first of all, power is not a form, such as the state-form, for instance; and also that the power rapport does not take place between two forms, as it happens in the case of knowledge.

Secondly, force does never exist in the singular, the essential characteristic being precisely that it is in relation to other forces, so that any existing force is a power, already found in a relation or rapport with other forces: force does not have any other object or other subject than force. The question that should be

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

raised is thus not “what is power and where does it come from?” but rather: how is power exercised?

A power exercise appears both as effect and affect because force itself is defined by the power to have an effect on other forces (with which it is in relation) and to affect them and to be affected by other forces. To incite, to raise and to produce (or any other terms from analogous lists) constitute in active affects, and to be incited, to be aroused, or to be determined to produce and have a “useful” effect or reactive affects is to be affected, subjected, influenced, or driven by a power.

The latter do not represent solely the “repercussion” or the “passive reversal” of the former aspects mentioned in the explanation of the relation force-power, but rather their irreducible double, especially if we take under consideration the fact that the affected force is not deprived of a certain capacity of resistance. Each force has at the same time the power to affect (other forces) and to be affected (by other forces), so that, each force in part presupposes force relations and each force field distributes the forces in relation to their rapports and to their variations.

The spontaneity and the receptiveness gain now new meanings: to affect and to be affected. With his theory on power, Foucault accomplishes also a description of the power-knowledge relation present in our social and personal existence.

The ubiquity of the power relations in society approximates a veritable ontology of power. There is no structure of the social and personal life that does escape from the predicates of power. Any human subject with its strategy for the seizing of power is a product of power. Foucault affirms this fact explicitly. “Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis, we must produce truth as we must produce wealth; indeed we must produce truth in order to produce wealth in the first place.”⁶

The philosopher also emphasizes that power produces knowledge and not just by encouragement, because it serves power, or by application, because it is useful. For Foucault, power and knowledge involve one another and there is no power relation in the absence of the constitution of a correlative field of knowledge as well as there can be no knowledge without the presupposition or the constitution of power relations.

In this perspective, power-knowledge relations should not be analyzed for this reason only on the basis of the subject of knowledge, but, on the contrary, the subject that knows and the objects to be known, the modalities of knowledge, should be understood as multiple effects of the fundamental implication of the relation power-knowledge and of the historical transformations.

We should examine the fluctuation of the modifications of the power relations, taking into consideration that the relations power-knowledge are not

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

static forms of the binary distribution between parties with interests. As Foucault shows: “we should not imagine a world of discourse divided between the dominant discourse and the dominated discourse.”⁷

For a change, we should see the relations power- knowledge as a matrix of transformation, as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can become functional in varied strategies, permitting the discourses to transmit and produce power, but also to undermine and to expose it, making it fragile and subject of judgement.

The power-knowledge connection sets its imprint on the entire scene of the humane, generating the disciplinary regime or the regimes of knowledge that condition and limit our institutional and social practices. Foucault’s interest was to describe the manner of operation for this nexus in the disciplinary practice of the history of the asylums, of the prison and of the patterns of sexuality.

The Panopticon

In his work *Discipline et punish*, the author investigates the link that exists between the exercise of power and the production of knowledge, as well as the link between knowledge, the Panopticon’s surveillance and control. He uses Bentham’s Panopticon as an architectural symbol and an illustration of the involvement of power and knowledge in the incarcerating society.

The horizon of observation of the supervisor from the central tower of the Panoptic is constantly open. He sees while he is not seen. The prisoners are seen, but they do not see the supervisor. They are object of information, to be observed, but never subjects in the communicational exchange.

Yet, the Panopticon is not just a tower of observation, as it is also a “laboratory of power” where experiments are conducted, where habits are being changed and deviant behaviour is corrected.⁸

Foucault is preoccupied in the research of the manner of supervision of Bentham with the undefined virtual generality of the Panopticon’s mechanism. “Panopticism is the general principle of a new political anatomy,” Foucault shows, which subject and purpose are not the relations of sovereignty, but the relations of discipline. “Discipline” understood in this context is not “identified neither with an institution, nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a manner to exercise power, to include the whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of applications, tasks: it is a physics or an anatomy of power, a technology.” The levels of applications of this physics or anatomy of power, to

⁷ Alan D. Schrift, „Reconfiguring The Subject: Foucault’s Analytics of Power” in the volume *Reconstructing Foucault: Essays in the Wake of the 80s* editors Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso and Silvia Coporale-Bizzini, *Postmodern Studies* 10, Amsterdam-Atlanta, Edition Rodopi BV, 1994.

⁸ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*, New York Random House, 1979, pp. 27-28.

which we have referred above, are manifest in the domain of military institutions, in the police apparatus, in clinics, hospitals, in religious organisations, in economic units and in governmental institutions. Possible and of great importance is also the extension of the panoptic principle to the daily micro practices. The network of connections power- knowledge appears to be global and universal.

Numerous challenges were launched toward the classical visions of power politics through the ideas launched by Foucault and his commentators. Whether the logos itself is an effect of power than any appeal to theory for the comprehension of the power's constraints and of their direction becomes useless. If the rational subject proves to be rather a product than an agent of power, than the "grammar" of autonomy and emancipation becomes somewhat less important.

When we see everything, from the specialized disciplines of knowledge, to the day to day practice as impregnated with power, then there are neither resources, nor landmarks to fight the spectrum of ideology that hovers always over the power relations in any given society. If any rational discernment is available for the forms and the uses of power alike, then there can be no distinction between power, domination, oppression and violence.

Power, knowledge and education

On the list already of a considerable length of the challenges, one may add one concerning the definition of higher education institutions. Although Foucault has chosen to analyze the insinuation of power within the disciplinary practices in the history of asylum, prison and sexuality, its implications in the modern (and postmodern) university are quite obvious.

We are tempted to define the centres of education as places where reason is dominant in the discovery and communication of knowledge. Though, it is often overseen the extent to which these fortresses of knowledge are subjects of the interplay of power relations.

The constellations of power inserted into the life of the university appear with most clarity and can be discerned in the organisation of the university, by the separation and equilibrium of power between the administrative bodies, faculty, the clergy body (where the case, during the history of university) and the students.

The most mentioned areas of conflict are between faculties and administration; the formulation and the exercise of the policies of hire and fire, the decisions on the duration of the functions, positions, or promotions, the territorialisation in the design of the curriculum; the affirmation of the autonomy and authority of the departments. All are concrete institutional expressions of an explicit and persuasive structuring force of power insinuated into the governance of the university.

There is though a more subtle and less explicit presence of power within the field of knowledge. This involves the very definition, consolidation, contribution and evaluation of knowledge. Knowledge is defined along the lines of disciplinary matrices and regimes, schools, departments, areas of concentration that function as political entities with authority, with recommendation techniques, and with systems of pressure and sanctions. This regimentation of knowledge determines that certain texts are selected and canonized and certain procedures to be legitimated. Certain texts and procedures become more “authoritative” or the only ones with authority, while others are marginalized and situated outside the rules, if not outlawed. Often, this thing leads to the situation where the local narrations concerning, sex, race, minorities and non-Western ways of life are marginalized in the academic discourse.

Foucault states: “In fact, there were practices-essentially the major practice of confinement which had been developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century and which had been the condition for the insertion of the mad subject in this game of truth-which sent me back to the problem of institutions of power, much more than to the problem of ideology.”⁹

The postmodern challenge addressed to contemporary university refers to the need to recognize the insinuation of power and its game into the discipline practices and in the cognitive-operative actions in the academic life. If they continue to be based on logocentric totalizing principles of formalization, unity and hierarchic structuring of the discourse, we could consider the postmodern challenge as an invitation to engage in a subversive intervention. The idea of a *uni-versity* representing the whole solidarity of the unified discourse was placed under the question mark (and doubted) because it is considered by the practices of knowledge that are imposing a *pluri-versity*. This presupposes that there are resources that make possible the discerning of the misuse of power in the academic life, in the case of the establishment of a marginalisation regime, hierarchically ordered, and thus we are returning to the matter of the role of reason as critical discernment establishing norms.

It is risky and hastily to characterize the Foucaultian project as a facile act of renouncing logos, or as a simple identification of power with knowledge and a gloss on the distinction between power and domination.

The self

In *Discipline et punish*, Foucault attempts to avoid the reduction of power to knowledge or of knowledge to power, although he states that “the formation of

⁹ Text available at <http://groups.northwestern.edu/critical/Fall%202012%20Session%203%20-%20Foucault%20%20The%20Ethic%20of%20Care%20for%20the%20Self%20as%20a%20Practice%20of%20Freedom.pdf> accessed at 20 August 2014.

knowledge and the increment of power are, usually, mutually potentiating each other in a circular process.” In the interview entitled “The Ethics of Care for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” Foucault clarifies the distinction between power and domination: “One cannot impute to me the idea that power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom.”¹⁰ He talks here about the political and ethical subject driven by an imperative of a Socratic type “care about yourself,” which implies the “assimilation of logos.”

For this reason we should recognize, writes C.O. Schrag, the fact that there are indices of the existence of logos and of a subjectivity resituated in the process of the Foucaultian assault on the hierarchic rationality. It is clear that Foucault will not accept logocentrism and the epistemological privilege of the visual in the panoptical construction of knowledge.

In Schrag’s perspective, they remain a question for further discussion for which the configuration and reconfiguration of logos will maintain its genealogy intact. Following the genesis of our political and discursive practices will take place with a great difficulty outside the rational capacity of the human being to discern among the varied constellations produced by the relation power-knowledge. We’ve noticed the mergence of ethical imperatives included in the project of the “care about self,” interpreted by Foucault, which indicates the fact that genealogy can find the normative resources for the criticism of the constellations of power that lead to domination and oppression. Contrary to other interpretations, the critical vocabulary of emancipation and creative self-formation does not seem so foreign to Foucault’s thought. The questions about the place and the function of criticism in the genealogy and the possible strategies for the acquirement of emancipation from under the domination of power are in fact addressed to Foucault. Though, it is not clear which are the resources that he has in mind to cope with this problems, and for this reason it is no wonder that his affirmations rendered necessary this sort of questions.

Strictly related to the challenge to find a place for criticism and normative approach to the structure of the power relations present in our discursive and institutional practices is the challenge issued by the need to confront the desire with the requirements of reason. The entire political body of the postmodern world is at the same time political body of power and political body of desire.

The “power -knowledge” relations should not be thus analyzed starting from a subject of knowledge that can be free or not against power, in any shape that power may take, but we should consider that the knowing subject of the objects that are knowable and the manners of knowing are as many effects of the fundamental implications of power.

¹⁰ Text available at <http://groups.northwestern.edu/critical/Fall%202012%20Session%203%20-%20Foucault%20%20The%20Ethic%20of%20Care%20for%20the%20Self%20as%20a%20Practi%20ce%20of%20Freedom.pdf> accessed at 20 August 2014.

Conclusion

Foucault analyzes the political investment of the body and of the microphysics of power and arrives at the conclusion that renouncing, in terms of power interaction, to the violent opposition, to the metaphor of property and to the contractual model or to that of victory triggers a softer attitude toward those who are opposing to power. We may consider the fact that the author translates the term power, which in the academic institutions is still understood according to the modern conception of power, as in fact power relations operating within the academic institutions are postmodern.

Foucault affirms that “the punitive methods should be analyzed not as simple consequences of the rules of law either as indicators of social structures, or as techniques endowed with their own specificity in the more general field of the other procedures of power. Let us adopt in what concerns the punishment the perspective of the political tactics.”¹¹

Thus, the investigation that relates not only knowledge and power, but also the aspects of conflict, coercion, control and punishment, in fact, analyzes the potential overcoming of the *insurrection of subjugated knowledge*.

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¹¹ M. Foucault, *A supraveghea și a pedepsi* (translation in Romanian by B. Ghiu), Pitești, Edit. Paralela 45, 2005.