Foucault's Power/Knowledge: Discourse as Truth and Power

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Foucault conceived of power and knowledge as being inextricably bound to one another. Power, for Foucault, is concentrated in networks wherein its flows become diffuse and decentralized. Power, however, depends on the knowledges that are used to construct and systematize it. In the same way, knowledges are contingent upon the structures of power that are used to disseminate this knowledge, while creating an array of discursive formations, identities, and authorities that are involved in legitimating or oppressing groups of people. Formulations of truth arise out of this bidirectional relation of power/knowledge, and prevailing systems and discourses are propped up as a result. Foucault's skepticism regarding knowledge and truth are made apparent in his conversations regarding the topic, and he undermines the existence of "Truth" as a result, while calling into question the authoritative forces that render the construction and validation of knowledge possible. I take his accounts to be plausible and persuasive, and find his undertaking to reject establishment and authoritative practices to be a laudable one indeed. The tightly-woven social fabric of reality ought to be eroded, and hegemony ought to be uprooted. Much like the accounts of his predecessors, Foucault's conceptions aren't flawless -- power seems to exhibit more of a centrality than he believes, emanating from the dominant forces at play. However, I agree with the notion that power is vested within everyone, and that we are all active and eager participants in precipitating its effects.

In his interview entitled "Truth and Power", Foucault elucidates the connection between power, knowledge and truth. Foucault does not view power as something that is concentrated solely in the sovereign in its aim to exert influence over -- it is dispersed and decentralized,

existing in any relation. Power is always shifting and "regimes of truth" arise out of this process -- "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (*Power/Knowledge*, p. 133). Worldly understandings are constructed through the dominant systems that imbue truth-statements with the credibility necessary for their acceptance into discourses. These discourses are scientific in nature, at times attempting to offer answers to uncertain questions regarding all facets of human existence. Foucault tries to call into question such notions of authority, how knowledge comes to be, and the way in which power and knowledge are connected. Foucault believes that the relationship between truth and power is bidirectional. Truth and power are inextricably linked in order to produce systems of thought which are sometimes based on hegemonic principles and institutions -- "Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power…Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it includes regular effects of power" (p. 131).

Discourse is one of the means through which knowledges are reified in society. Discourse is our way of linguistically engaging with the world around us -- it serves as an entrance into knowledge while comprising the bidirectional nature of power and knowledge. Specialists construct discursive fields and dominant ideas which wield power over people. In his "Discourse on Language", Foucault introduces us to power and knowledge through an analysis of the control, selection, organization and redistribution of discourse, which describes the way in which language is used to exclude and prohibit. This strict control of discourse is done in an attempt to regulate and foresee chance events to avert catastrophe. The realms of politics and sexuality are perhaps the most prominent examples in which this hyperregulation takes place. Who may speak, what may be uttered and under what circumstances, and how these utterances are wrought

into the world are all considerations through which discourse, and, subsequently, power/knowledge must be filtered through. Authority having the epistemic upper ground constitutes the bidirectional nature of power/knowledge -- authority dictates institutionally accepted modes of engaging with a subject as well as the epistmetic output emanating from the institution, and knowledge and "truth" are mediated as a result, especially in the sciences -- "...the great mutations of science may well sometimes be seen to flow from some discovery, but they may equally be viewed as the appearance of new forms of the will to truth…" (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 218). This process can be achieved through discursive *exclusion*. An example of this includes the juxtaposition of reason vs. madness during the Middle Ages. Madness was either taken to be a sign of divinity/prophetic insight, or ignored -- Truth in mad speech, then, is either nullified or rendered completely viable. Mad speech falls outside the parameters of accepted discourse -- "From the depths of the Middle Ages, a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered nul and void, without truth or significance...And yet… his words were credited with strange powers, of revealing some hidden truth…of revealing, in all their naivete, what the wise were unable to perceive" (p. 217). Doctrines and fellowships of discourse govern the standards of acceptability for their assimilation into discourses. Discourse works a lot like power in the ways in which it is concentrated, and the way it is treated -- as if it is an inherently evil thing, despite its inexorability.

Foucault's ideas of the Will to Truth and Will to Knowledge are important in describing the effects of discourse, which are lodged in the nexus of power/knowledge. These systems outline the determination of truth and falsity, as well as the relevance and prescience of truths. I take it that Foucault is skeptical about this need to exert control over discourse -- a certain

logophobia pervades consciousness, and we ought to do away with it. His skepticism regarding discursive limitations extends to his skepticism pertaining to knowledge and truth as a whole, because he resonates with the idea that knowledge and truth arise out of and are constructed by discourse. Questioning the Will to Truth and Knowledge in undermining the character of authority as well as the dichotomy of true versus false is essential to analyzing and deconstructing this relationship of power/knowledge. For Foucault, discourse should be more freeform, since we are all being policed in the way in which we employ discourse in schools, work, family gatherings, and so on. In essence, Foucault's contrarian anti-institutionalism shines through in his work about discourse. The democratization of knowledge and subsequently speech leads to a better understanding of the world while liberating these components from their repressive and hegemonic positionalities. Enabling discourse to flourish in places it doesn't exist results in the advancement of different fields and the liberation of subjugated knowledges, rather than keeping us locked in the order of things.

This relationship between power/knowledge is not a new one, but it has beome pronounced with the emergence of the social sciences. The social sciences have mediated the way that knowledges are assimilated into popular discourse -- how they come to be conceived of, accepted and controlled: "A 'medico-administrative' knowledge begins to develop concerning society, its health and sickness, its conditions of life, housing and habits, which serves as the basic core for the 'social economy' and sociology of the nineteenth century. And there is likewise constituted a politico-medical hold on a population hedged in by a whole series of prescriptions relating not only to disease but to general forms of existence and behaviour (food and drink, sexuality and fecundity, clothing and the layout of living space)" (*Power/Knowledge*, p. 176). Power/knowledge has existed with any society, but with the scientific discursive boom of the

19th and 20th centuries, it has been propelled to new heights. One example of this includes the birth of the scientia sexualis, and its juxtaposition with the ars eortica. The scientia sexualis aims to medicalize the practice of sex, assigning an impersonal charatcer to something as mystical as sex. Sexual practices and identities are constructed in an attempt to study sex, resulting in our preoccupation with it in the public imaginary. In essence, Foucault believes the idea of sexual repression to be false, as history has seen a massive discursive boom with the way in which sexuality is discussed -- this, in turn, imbures sexuality with an undeniable gravity and facilitates the flow of power in the realm of sexuality, thereby inciting more pleasure in directing our attention to it, comrising the knowledges that transpire as a result. Ultimately, Foucault is concerned with the way power infiltrates the discourse and knowledge of sexuality -- where it is found, in what relations, through what historical framework, and who has the final say in establishing knowledges and truths about the subject of sexuality. All of this is to say that the liberation of sexuality as a discourse is a project that requires our attention.

Foucault's skepticism regarding knowledge and truth is made evident in his work. The notion of truth is used to create frameworks of worldly understanding, but this becomes a problem when truths are used to dominate subjects and further entrench them into systems of repression (such as with gender essentialism). Knowledges are not always used in this way, however -- power can also be a positive force wherein people willingly use knowledge as a means to become inculcated into the social world through reinforcing practices. Institutions such as schools and the media are the main purveyors of truth, and truths reflect the dominant epistemic traditions that underlie their construction. While Foucault decries notions of absolute truth, I believe that he is not a relativist. For him, the knowledges arising out of hegemony are to be uprooted. Foucault calls into question the way in which we acquire truths, and the standards

of acceptability surrounding what is considered to be "true" and what isn't. What is deemed "true" has much to do with the society's assimilation of it into discourse -- "Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (p. 131). Foucault sees the attainment of truth not as a universalized end goal, but as a means of inquiring into its vanguardism in order to facilitate the questioning and eventual undermining of the socially, culturally and economically hegemonic forms of truth to produce subjects. The status quo surrounding truth and the effect it has sociopolitically is in need of examination. Deconstruction of the normative and repressive by means of critically engaging with truth as a product of political circumstance is a way of liberating truth from present forms of hegemony, and taking the relationship of power/knowledge out of this fatalistic bind. Certain systems of thought exist for the purpose of controlling others. Foucault is not too keen on ascribing social ills merely to the problem of ideology of political affairs -- "The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself" (p. 133). Popular conceptions of "truth" can be problematic, and they ought to be uprooted.

However, while discourses can be formed around and propped up because of these power relations, they can also function as instruments of power, and alternatively, liberation. I believe that Foucault acknowledges that knowledge contains within it a liberatory component, and that the democratization of knowledge can help to liberate people and knowledges. Because knowledge is power, the democratization of knowledge can help to imbue individuals and groups with the epistemic power necessary to undermine systems of dominion. Resistance takes root in

the form of counter-knowledge which seeks to subvert dominant narratives of truth. The job of the intellectual, therefore, should not be to ascertain a universal truth, or to "criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology…The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (p. 133). Thus, replacing dogma with more dogma in the form of value-laden truth statements should be reconsidered -- the truths themselves need not be the sole objects of critique, but rather the authoritative forces that produce these truths to begin with must be reckoned with.

An example of the manifestation of power/knowledge includes that of the confessional. In confessing one's sins, a person is simultaneously being positively reinforced by and contributing to the flow of power. The priest is placed in a position of authority in absolving a person of their sins while crafting an identity to be attached to the confessor. The confessor derives pleasure from doing what they ought to do -- confessing their sins, being an active participant in the religious community, being absolved. This process produces knowledge about the identity of the person, and truth about the act being uttered into existence. This truth pertaining to people's innermost desires and fantasies results in the formulation of labels (homosexual, pervert, adulterer) and the entrenchment into subjectification, which is a kind of knowledge. These identities were to be controlled and punished, which re-instantiates the relation of power, producing dominant discourses regarding compulsory heterosexuality and the intolerability of sexual deviancy, subjugating knowledges relating to homosexuality and sexual exploration, thereby resulting in the penultimate goal of the individual self-monitoring turning ethics inward. This relationship would pave the way for the therapist-patient relationship, wherein the patient engages in the divulging of sensitive information and the therapist frames the

patient's worldview and identity as a result, prescribing normality or deviance. One other example in which this relationship of power/knowledge becomes manifest is with the existence of previous versions of the DSM, where transgenderism, gender fluidity, and homosexuality used to be regarded as mental illnesses. Knowledge that was "scientifically sound" and empirically derived was used to marginalize and castigate groups of people, and the medicalization of sexual practices resulted in the pathologization of deviance. Sexual normativity was established with the dawn of the scientsia sexualis, and the very construction of said identities was used as a means to advance the interests of an anuthoirty pitted against a minority in the name of "science". The general scientific episteme is founded on the connection to power/knowledge in its capacity to make visible groups of people while at the same time direct our "distintersted", albeit unwarranted gaze towards them, inevitably resulting in the "othering" of individuals and groups. The dominant systems of knowledge which make such a process possible can be explained through this concept of power/knowledge in Foucauldian terms -- and if this knowledge is not being used to liberate people, it should be relentlessly examined and critiqued.

It is important to elucidate the idea that Foucualt does not conceive of power/knowledge as being only or inherently oppressive. Power/knowledge has the capacity to inform our understanding and identities. In the same way that it places limits on the ways in which we conceptualize ourselves as being crazy, defective, or abnormal, it can also imbue us with an identity to cling to in an existentially uncertain era. Sites of truth can be gleaned and studied, and power can be used as a productive force in uncovering them. Nevertheless, I take his accounts to be persuasive and veridical, instructed by a keenness that informs his incisive societal critiques and understandings of the machinations of power. I think his point that we are all agents in the circulation of power is well-taken -- we are constantly being affirmed and examined through the

state apparatus, our progress and failures tabulated, our compliance rewarded, our departure from normative ideals apprehended. This seems to ring very true, and the existence of the social sciences as a discipline affirms this view. To ascribe natural inclinations and essential qualities to subjects within a society is, in Foucault's view, reductive. With the emphasis placed on studying and pathologizing drives, perversions, and deviation, it is worth noting that all of this fuss surrounding the subject can simply be contextualized within a socio-historical understanding of how power operates in the domains of pleasure and ability rather than relegated to biological workings which produce innate differences. The power exercised within and over the subject rendered the discourse surrounding it all the more viable -- actualizing it, in a way -- while solidifying the subject as an object of close analysis -- "Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch" (p. 45). Instead of viewing the subject as something that requires the exertion of control, examination, and subduing, it is more useful to understand the discourse surrounding them as mired in the context of historical interests and flows within power structures. In addition to this, Foucault's account of power/knowledge strikes me as being persuasive because of its propensity to call into question the systems of authority that govern the assimilation of knowledges into popular discourse. Foucault is right when he conceives of a popular knowledge prevailing over minoritized, subjugated sets of knowledges which come to be masked over and ignored, resulting in their not being ingrained into systems of thought and the subjectification of individuals and groups. All of this seems to echo the idea that power emanates from a source, however -- implying a kind of existence of a hierarchical relationship wherein there is a class of dominants who construct and maintain discursive dominance. This power might not emerge from a select group of people, but it seems to take root in the vanguardist nature of hegemony -- and the complicity of the people

who perpetuate this hegemony. There are not always clear power-aggressors, but perhaps power need not always be conceived or described in this networked way, decentralized to a fault. It may not always prove useful in directing our efforts to undermine this power when we don't really know who or what to direct it towards. I believe that his ideas are fruitful in regard to the recognition of power as not always being a negative force -- it also has the capacity to be productive, allowing us to arrive at versions of "truth" which may not have been possible before. I am able to appreciate his skepticism regarding the authoritativeness surrounding truth and knowledge -- it is of utmost importance to challenge institutionally accepted modes of engaging with the world, and to question who and what constructs these discursive fields to begin with. Even though he does not outline a political teleology of progress, or even answers to questions of praxis, I hold that subversion -- be it macroscopic, on the level of government -- or microscopic, on the level of discourse -- is helpful in enacting liberatory change. In some ways, Foucault is resistant to offering answers about how to act. Because liberation is not a linear trajectory with clearly-defined goals, Foucault finds it more useful to inquire into what underlies structures altogether -- while turning them on their head. Though he does cite the need to uproot the oppressive regimes of power/knowledge, resistance to it involves the creation of new meanings beyond the logic and language of hegemony. Much like how the subject cannot simply be described away through binaries, categories, essentialism and pathologies, the subject becomes something more unintelligible, flouting established discursive limitations of power/knowledge. Taking discourse and reversing the object-subject relations surrounding it is a creative act of resistance -- guiding knowledge in a new direction, attempting to free it from its brutality -- an attractive undertaking indeed, underscored by one of the more enigmatic philosophers.

Bibliography

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