

# Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

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**TOPIC:** How is power institutionalized? Foucault.

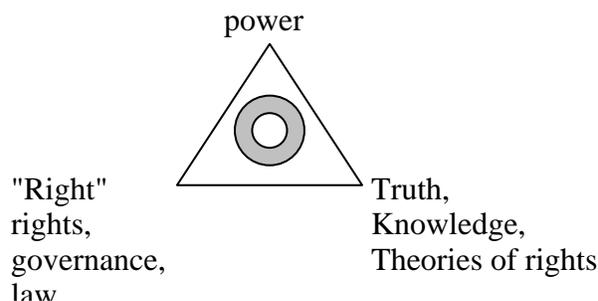
Note: Excerpts from today are taken from "Two Lectures" by Michel Foucault by Pantheon Books (1980)

Foucault, (1926-1984) French.

Foucault talks about how **power creates truth**, not what truth/knowledge can tell us about power. He explores what rules of governance, what relationships, what conceptions of rights/obligation, what conceptions of truth are produced and implemented by different relations of power...

He is concerned with the *how* of power, the mechanisms of power...

- Not specifically with the rules/rights of law that provide formal/official limits, but with
- how power works to the *effects of truth* that power produces/transmits, effects which reproduce this power (**feedback loop**)



He begins with the traditional question of political philosophy: *How is philosophy concerned with truth?* How is **philosophy** (the pursuit of true knowledge) able to set limits to the rights of power? (*What rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth?*)

Traditional question is how can philosophy tell us what is true about power and its limits? Philosophy *produces* truth and truth produces power. power is a function of truth,  $\text{power} = f(\text{truth})$

Foucault's point: He reverses this relationship. **Power produces truth**, truth is a function of power, **truth = f(power)**

"My problem is rather this: what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth? Or alternatively, what type of power is susceptible of

producing discourses of truth that in a society such as ours [*he means Western capitalist society*] are endowed with such potent effects? What I mean is this: in a society as such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body..." (Foucault 1980: 93)

- cannot achieve intended/foreseen effects without language, without communication (except in one form of force)
- discourse is just what is said and done

"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. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth." (Foucault 1980: 93)

Every society has a different conception of where truth comes from and where you can make it. Our society, we have **particular way of producing truth** – it's not the same as it was in the past (e.g. through religion or the sovereign) but is now **based in claims of knowledge/science/ truth**.

"...we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: **we must speak the truth**; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth." (Foucault 1980: 93)

When we lived in a world before science/empirical knowledge, truth was given by religious figures, by leaders. What was true was "the way it has always been." People did not justify their authority/power; they just said "God says," e.g. "It is written, but I (Son of God) say unto you..." Foucault says to speak now, to have legitimacy now, we can't say "it is written and now listen to me," but we have to *claim* that it is the truth, what we constitute as knowledge. **We can't speak as religious or traditional authority, authority without question, authority today must speak truth (knowledge, expertise).**

Recall **Weber's reasons for social action**:

- habit/tradition
- expressive/emotion
- substantive value
- instrumental/needs/ends/relationships (this last one is like Foucault)

"...we are constrained or condemned to discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit...we must produce truth as we must produce wealth, indeed we must produce truth in order to produce wealth in the first place." (Foucault 1980: 93-94) (Is this not MIT after all?)

e.g. A child says he wants a bucket of candy. The parent can respond with either: "No, because I said so" or "No, you'll get sick and I'm telling you the truth."

**paradigms of power** – in the modern world we **exercise power by expertise** not by legitimate/normative/ historical authority, or force (we declare force unacceptable, relegate to crime or war, or the province of law).

"we are also subjected to truth" (Foucault 1980: 94) = **what is true justifies action**

“we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings...as a function of true discourses which are bearers of the specific effects of power.” (Foucault 1980: 94) Foucault is talking about the way we speak, about what we speak, the categories that we create – all are produced through discourses which are themselves produced by power.

“...**polymorphous techniques of subjugation**. Right should be viewed...not in terms of a legitimacy to be established [*i.e. what is appropriate/respectable/valued*], but in terms of the methods of subjugation that it instigates.” (Foucault 1980: 94) It’s not a matter of whether or not laws are about what is legitimate/ or good – but **how does the law institute different forms of domination and subjugation?**

Foucault discusses the **question of legitimacy**, what we owe the Leviathan. **We have substituted the problem of domination and subjugation for sovereignty and obedience**. So now it’s not what we owe the ruler, let’s talk about how we are subjugated!

Foucault’s **methodological precautions**: four lessons on how to study power

- ◆ (1) we shouldn’t pay attention to the “continued effects” of the central offices but the study of power “should be concerned with **power at its extremities**, in its final destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary” (Foucault 1980: 94)
  - he is concerned with how power operates in our fingertips, not the head, in the persons and communities, not the central government
  - by society he means the citizenry, not the government/state – how our individual lives are shaped by power
  - “Its paramount concern, in fact, should be with the point where power surmounts the rules of right [authority/ legitimacy, position, government] .... where it invests itself in institutions, becomes embodied in techniques, and equips itself with instruments and eventually even violent means of material intervention.” (Foucault 1980: 94)

**Everyday objects are forms of power that structure our lives**; Foucault is most famous for this idea. To be *Foucauldian* is to look at techniques that seem banal, perhaps merely efficient/productive; some constraint (perhaps intention) is being achieved though we can not find the person to attach it to. Thus, we move from looking at interpersonal interactions with identifiable intentions to places where we see effects and *sometimes but often not* see **intentions embodied in techniques** but the person with original intentions is gone (Lukes, Power)

e.g. Rather than ask about who has the right to punish, he asks “...in what ways are punishment and the power of punishment effectively embodied in a certain number of local, regional, material institutions...” (Foucault 1980: 94-95) He asks, *how is punishment or power embodied/ built into our spaces and habits?* Think about it in our modern world: therapy, organization of malls, surveillance, self-surveillance, record keeping (we are embodied in that piece of paper).

We have turned humans into **sets of categories/labels with signification** all over. We use this categorical information and store it for marketing, insurance, education, politics? Those are the techniques that govern our lives to which Foucault wants us to pay attention. No one *intended* the ubiquitous use of computers for social control, but that’s what it has become. We must look at life everyday, the habits, practices and see what forms of behavior and meaning are made, often invisibly, by these techniques! For example, consider the cosmetics store Sephora – we are making our faces for others, and there’s an entire technology for it. How is this organized? What

gender or class consequences develop from this technology?

If we want to understand power, we must ask, what do people do every morning? What backs that up? How is the economy behind it? In regards to punishment – how does therapy work? We're at a time of self-surveillance, discipline, governing the self – just think of self-help books.

“...locate power at the extreme points of exercise, where it is always less legal/governmental in character.” (Foucault 1980: 97)

Example: In 1995, Professor Silbey spent some time in France and went shoe-shopping often, noticing how women wear unbearably tight or high heeled shoes. Soon after, she saw these same shoes in the US, and on college students who could not bend their feet for the weight and inflexibility of the soles of the shoes and depth of the platforms that constituted the soles. Now women walk around with bounded feet again (like ancient China) – before it was because were they were subservient but now it's about a free market economy of fashion. Gendered analysis: what has feminism produced? Women have to work to be respected, must also be free sexually, but continue to be physically constrained and objectified (assessed by their surface appearances.) What burden has been removed? Or have some been added?

- ◆ (2) “...the analysis of power should not concern itself with power at level of conscious intention or decision; that it should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and that it should refrain from posing labyrinthine and unanswerable question: Who then has power and what has he in mind? [*this is the moment of transition in this class*] What is the aim of he who possesses power?” Instead of intentions, we must pay attention to how organizations and institutions are themselves techniques of power. Instead of looking for intentions, “it is a case of studying power where its intention, if has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices.” **We have to infer the intention from what is achieved.** We look at effects and reason backwards. “What is needed is a study of power in its external visage...where power installs itself and produces its real effects.” We must study the effects and reason *backwards* to figure out whose interests are being served.

Foucault doesn't want to know *why* they pursue power or their overall strategy. (This is the liberal's preoccupation; tracing individual human intentions; the individualist fallacy.) He is concerned with how things work as subjugation, in processes that constrain our bodies and govern our gestures (e.g. civility, manners, gendered behavior, performances).

Foucault doesn't ask how the sovereign appears to us in lofty isolation, instead he wants to discover how subjects are gradually, progressively constituted through a multiplicity of organizations, desires, thoughts. He tries to grasp the subject, **desire in the material instance as the constitution of subjects** (why we wear the clothes, eat the food, why we desire a particular house/lover). Thus, Foucault is the **exact opposite of Hobbes** – his theoretical problem is not the distillation of a single will or a singular body animated by the spirit of sovereignty (e.g. Congress or the Leviathan). “We the people” is a mistaken project of political and social analysis. The Leviathan is an amalgam of separate individualities reunited in the complex of the state. We must study the myriad of bodies, not the Leviathan. They are the effects of power. How we live in deference to kings, why most subordinate themselves – we must examine these instead of trying to figure out how to create a unitary whole.

- ◆ (3) “power is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and

homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others [*recall how Marx would say it's a struggle between classes*]...power...is not that which makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it and those who do not have it and submit to it. **Power must be analyzed as something which circulates**, or rather, as something which only functions in the form of a chain." (Foucault 1980: 98)



- This idea is similar to Simmel and Wrong's notion of interscursive power
- **Power is the blood of the body politic** – it doesn't belong to the sovereign but instead moves around and circulates
- Power is never localized here or there, never in anyone's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Wealth is a resource that enables the exercise of power, so is knowledge and personality and so is force and so is lying.
- Power is employed/exercised through a netlike organization. Individuals circulate between its threads and are the threads: they are **always in a position of simultaneously undergoing (being the objects) of this power and exercising it (being the subjects/agents)**. (Recall Simmel: there's always an element of freedom even in the most extreme forms of domination). People are **vehicles exercising power as they are experiencing it**. Humans are the **elements of articulation** – they are vehicles of power, *as well as* its points of application.

Power does not subdue or crush individuals entirely. The individual is one of the prime effects of power and has already been made by power. Certain gestures/desires come to be constituted "as individuals." *What we look like, gesture, speak, desire has been produced including the notion that we are individuals, rather than carriers of souls, or members of the family primarily.* When we examine the previous generations, they have different gestures/desires – thus, we see that it's not a natural development writ in our genes or environment. We have been made to want/desire/think/act.

- e.g. in 1940s.50s. even into early 60s, women had to go to college in skirts – what we do has been produced! Why does everyone claim to be an individual, and what they wear believed to be an expression of their individual personality, wants, tastes, but when you look around, everyone is wearing the same things?
- E.g. of creating wants, desires, tastes, believe to be individual: ideas about beauty, sexuality; media in the 1980s-1990s – not a lot of smoking on TV but now it has resurgence.

**The individual is one of the effects of power.** An individual which power has constituted is also its vehicle.

Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was no language of the "individual." A person was always socially situated by role, father/son/husband/farmer/peasant/noble. In Western Europe most people were below the nobles and didn't have surnames unless their surnames were of their jobs or places of origin. They belonged to place/group and had a specific role. The role of individual was an invention of the bourgeois revolution in the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward when the landed gentry with accumulated wealth wanted rights which the nobles had and made claims for themselves even though they didn't have any noble lineage, "Why can't I have what he has?" (e.g. Philosophers from this time were Locke and Montesquieu.)