

RETHINKING POWER WITH AND BEYOND FOUCAULT

In order to rethink power with and beyond Foucault, it is important initially to distinguish between different dimensions of Foucault's theorizing about power—between, on the one hand, the methodological level of his theorizing and, on the other hand, the interpretive level. I would argue that, at the first, methodological level, Foucault's treatment of power is multi-dimensional and copious; however, at the second, interpretive level, the constant generation of new forms of social interaction and political relations requires us to continually explore the present through new conceptions of power.

Let me turn first, then, to the methodological level. In this respect, I believe that we have been both blessed and cursed in the United States by the inevitable idiosyncrasies of translation. English readers have received a somewhat distorted or peculiar representation of Foucault on power, but one that has focused concentrated attention on the question. There are a couple of reasons for this.

First, Foucault's interviews and essays, published exhaustively in French in the multi-volume *Dits et Écrits*¹ have been selectively reconfigured, in English translation, into three thematic volumes: *Power, Ethics, and Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*.² So rather than getting a chronological and complete version of his essays and interviews, English readers

received coded texts that differentiate between themes that are in truth, in Foucault's work and thought, entirely imbricated. The idea that ethics would somehow be a different topic or volume or enterprise than power, or for that matter epistemology, is confusing and misleading (and has promoted the false idea of a "turn to ethics")—but it has focused our attention, in the United States, on the power dimensions of particular texts.

Second, Foucault's 1982 essay titled "The Subject and Power"—published early on in the American reception of Foucault, both in *Critical Inquiry* in 1982³ and in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's book *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*⁴ (also published in 1982)—played a formative role in our interpretation of Foucault on power in this country. This was due, in part, to the fact that it was an early accessible text with power in the title. The essay represented, of course, a specific intervention of Foucault's at a particular time in his thought, a period when Foucault wanted to rethink or reframe his writings, which had been received in this country as dominantly about power. So Foucault would write, in that essay, sharp statements to the effect that "the goal of my work during the last twenty years [...] has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis."⁵ Or that "it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research."⁶ All the while, Foucault developed a concentrated and extensive theorization of power in that essay. The result has been, among English language readers, an intense focus on the methodological question of Foucault's theory of power.

FOUCAULT'S APPROACH TO THEORIZING POWER

In the March 28, 1973, lecture of *La Société Punitiv*,⁷ and in certain passages of *Discipline and Punish*,⁸ Foucault carefully identified and delineated four methodological approaches to thinking about power that he used to demarcate and distinguish his own approach to theorizing power.

First, he argued, power is not something that can be appropriated, nor possessed. It does not “belong” to any dominant social class, and cannot be possessed because it is something that is exercised. It is never monolithic, he says, it is not controlled by anyone. It is always and constantly at play, always in struggle, producing momentary, local victories and defeats at a micro level.⁹

Second, power cannot be understood as localized in the State or in “*les appareils d'États*,” a direct reference to Althusser. As Foucault explained in *La Société Punitiv*, “State apparatuses are a concentrated form, or rather a structure of support for a system of power that goes well beyond it and much deeper.”¹⁰ It is therefore crucial to explore how power circulates in the different realms of family, work, private associations, etc., all the realms that Foucault, Arlette Farge,¹¹ Jacques Donzelot,¹² and so many others have explored.

Third, power is not the guarantor of a mode of production, it is not subordinated to and does not simply maintain or reproduce certain social relations. Rather, as Foucault said in 1973, “power is in fact one of the constitutive elements of the mode of production, it is what makes it possible to constitute a mode of production.”¹³ Foucault would develop this theme, in

his 1973 Rio lectures “Truth and Juridical Forms,”¹⁴ as well as in *Discipline and Punish*, into the idea that the accumulation of men—the accumulation of docile bodies—was just as necessary as the accumulation of capital, to produce industrialization; that the two accumulations went together; and that the essence of human beings was not work, that it had to be made so.¹⁵

Finally, power cannot be mapped onto the logic of ideology: it simply cannot be the case that power works either through coercion and violence or through hidden forms of ideology—here too, he rejects Althusser’s notion of the “State ideological apparatus.”¹⁶ There cannot be a simple opposition between being forced to do something and being indoctrinated to want to do it. Instead, Foucault argued, “we need to show how knowledge (*savoir*) and power are effectively linked one to the other, not at all on the mode of identity—knowledge is power or vice versa—but in an absolutely specific manner and according to a complex game.”¹⁷

To study power, then, one must explore the struggles and strategies, the complex ways in which it is exercised, the way it is played, and all “the strategies, the calculations, the defeats, the victories”¹⁸—in short, what Foucault refers to as “relations of power.”¹⁹ This is a multi-dimensional approach to thinking about power that covers a lot of ground—and leaves little ground unturned.

FOUCAULT’S INTERPRETIVE THEORIES OF POWER

Through this lens, Foucault then developed a series of contrasting interpretations of forms of power. First, in his 1971-72 lectures on *Penal Theories and Institutions*, he ana-

lyzed sovereign power in its repressive forms, and would go on, in later work on the Ancien régime, to describe forms of sovereign power that, for instance, marked the body with the truth of the crime.²⁰ This form of juridical power, which he described as binary and oriented toward prohibition would characterize *les supplices*, but also be found in nineteenth century institutions such as Mettray.²¹ Second, beginning with *La Société Punitiv*e, then in *Psychiatric Power* and throughout *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborated a well-known analysis of disciplinary power and panoptic surveillance, articulating on a very different model that was far more graduated, centripetal, and normalizing. The binary prohibition had been replaced with correction and the norm. Surveillance replaced the spectacle. As he would declare: “Notre société n’est pas celle du spectacle, mais de la surveillance.”²² Later, Foucault explored forms of biopower in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in 1976 and, a couple of years later, in his lectures on *Security, Territory, Population* and *Birth of Biopolitics*, would develop the form of “security”—contrasting it, piece by piece, to disciplinary mechanisms: while discipline is centripetal, focused on minor disorder and seeking to eradicate it, *sécurité* in contrast is centrifugal, is tolerant of minor deviations and seeks to optimize, to minimize or maximize, rather than to eliminate.²³ These are the textured readings or interpretations of different forms of power that we continue to explore in our own work.

MOVING BEYOND, WITH FOUCAULT

With that distinction in mind, I would argue that there is less to add or revise on the methodological front, than there is

on the interpretive dimension. For I am confident that neither disciplinary power nor security are fully adequate to understand the kinds of relations of power that mark our existing condition—specifically our situation with regard to the digital world we live in and the forms of digital security that we are subjected to and try, unsuccessfully perhaps, to resist.

The specific model of power that Foucault developed in the 1970s—panoptic rather than spectacle—no longer holds. The new collection and algorithmic analysis of huge quantities of data rests, I would argue, on a new form of power. Neither classically spectacle, nor surveillance only. Not spectacle, because we do not see the others watching with us. We are no longer in public, in an arena. We have our own computer screens, iPads, and smart phones. Though we are all looking, we are not looking physically together—we are virtual spectators and create, at best, a virtual arena with our chats and comments, our likes and dislikes. There is undoubtedly a spectacular dimension, to be sure. Especially, the spectacle of the YouTube video that goes viral. The very notion of “going viral” is spectacular. But we are watching the spectacle alone, or at most, in a small cluster of friends or acquaintances.

Not surveillance only, either—and not only because of our virtual spectacles. The relation is inverted: the subjects are giving everything up willingly, voluntarily. It’s a mad frenzy of disclosure. This form of power takes subjects as consumers – in our leisure, in our entertainment, at play. It draws us in through our desires, passions, curiosities, and obsessions. Modern subjects are not forced, they are not coerced. They are not limited or constrained. Giving up our information is just a small price we pay for having fun, for sharing photos with friends, for chat-

ting, for making things easier and more convenient. Is it even a “price”? I am not sure. It is, at most, a momentary hesitation... And the use of our information is not intended to correct or shape subjects, rather just to see. To predict desires. To predict consumption. To feed our consuming desires.

Today, we are not being surveilled so much as we are *exposing ourselves*.

In sum, the way Foucault thought about power strikes me as still useful. The question, then, is to explore how power operates today—with and beyond Foucault.

NOTES

- 1 Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits, 1954-1988*, Daniel Defert and François Ewald, eds., 4 volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); reedited in 2 volumes, collection « Quarto » (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).
- 2 Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: New Press, 1997); *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, James D. Faubion, ed. (New York: New Press, 1997); *Power*, James D. Faubion, ed. (New York: New Press, 2000).
- 3 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8(4), 1982: pp. 777-795.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- 5 “The Subject and Power,” p. 777.
- 6 Id., p. 778.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *La Société Punitiv. Cours au Collège de France. 1972-1973*, Bernard E. Harcourt, ed. (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2013).
- 8 Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 9 Foucault, *La Société punitive*, pp. 231-232; see also *Discipline and Punish*, French edition p. 31; English edition pp. 26-27
- 10 *La Société Punitiv*, p. 233.
- 11 *Le Désordre des familles : lettres de cachet des Archives de la Bastille au XVIIIe siècle*, Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, eds. (Paris : Gallimard, 1982).
- 12 Jacques Donzelot, *L'invention du social: Essai sur le déclin des passions politiques*. (Paris: Fayard, 1984).
- 13 *La Société Punitiv*, p. 234

- 14 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," in *Power*, James Faubion, ed. (New York: New Press, 2000).
- 15 "Truth and Juridical Forms," p. 86; *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 25-6.
- 16 Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* Ben Brewster, trans. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970): pp. 121-76.
- 17 *La Société Punitiv*e, p. 237
- 18 *La Société Punitiv*e, p. 239.
- 19 E.g. "The Subject and Power," p. 793.
- 20 Cf. *Discipline and Punish*, "The body of the condemned," pp. 3-31; "The spectacle of the scaffold," pp. 32-69. "The tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open and for all to see, the truth of the crime," p. 35.
- 21 Juridical power was an important piece of disciplinary power at Mettray. See Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 147.
- 22 "The Subject and Power," p. 218.
- 23 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Michel Senellart, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 7 and 46; Bernard E. Harcourt, "Supposons que la discipline et la sécurité n'existent pas — Rereading Foucault's Collège de France Lectures (with Paul Veyne)," *Carceral Notebooks* 4 (2008), p. 153.