



FOUCAULT'S GENEALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MODERN POWER

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Genealogy is a conception of history outlined by Nietzsche which is quite different from traditional forms of historical analysis. Traditional or 'total' inserts events into grand explanatory systems and linear processes, celebrates great moments and individuals, and seeks to document a point of origin. Genealogical analysis, on the other hand, attempts to establish and preserve the singularity of events, and turns away from the spectacular in favour of the discredited and the neglected. Moreover, genealogies focus on local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge. Genealogy, thus, is a form of critique. It rejects the pursuit of the origin in favour of a conception of historical beginnings as complex and contingent. It attempts to reveal the multiplicity of factors behind an event and the fragility of historical forms. In this view of history, there can be no constraints, no essence, no immobile forms of uninterrupted continuities structuring the past.

Historians have studied those who held power and we have many personal histories of kings and generals. As against this, there has been the history of economic processes. We also have the histories of institutions. But power in its strategies and mechanisms has not been thought of in negative terms and been considered as an essentially judicial mechanism: a mechanism which lays down the law, which limits, obstructs, refuses, prohibits and censors. Foucault rejects this traditional or negative conception of power saying that it is also an essentially positive, productive, and 'capillary' which circulates throughout the cells and the extremities of the social body. According to Foucault, modernity consists, at least in part, in the development and operation of a radically new regime of power/knowledge. This regime comprises procedures, practices, objects of inquiry, and forms of social and political constraint that differ remarkably from those of previous regimes. The modern power/knowledge regime, says Foucault, was not imposed from the top down but developed gradually in local, piecemeal fashion mainly in "disciplinary institutions" beginning in the 18th century. A variety of 'micro techniques' were developed by obscure doctors, wardens and school masters in obscure hospitals, prisons and schools, which were far away from the great power centres of the ancient regime. Later on, says Foucault, these techniques and practices were taken up and integrated into global or micro-strategies of domination. The disciplinary institutions, thus, were the first to face the problems of organisation, management, surveillance and control of large number of persons. In other words, they were the first to face the problems that would subsequently become the constitutive problems of modern government. In Foucault's view, therefore, the techniques and tactics they pioneered are definitive of modern power. These institutions were among the first responses to the problems of population management, that later came to define modern government.

The modern techniques of surveillance, control and management are very different from pre-modern power mechanisms. The pre-modern mechanisms operated discontinuously and intermittently and constantly required the presence of an agent to apply force. On the other hand, modern power does not require such presence; it replaces violence and force with the 'gentler' or 'subtle' constraint of uninterrupted visibility. Moreover, modern power is not essentially situated in some central persons or institutions such as King, sovereign, ruling class, state or army. Rather, it has the character of a network or 'capillary', the threads of which extend everywhere. It does not emanate from some central source but circulates throughout the entire social body.

Foucault, thus, enables us to understand power very broadly, and yet very finely, which resides in the multiplicity of 'micro-practices' or the social practices that constitute everyday life in modern societies. This positive conception of power has the general but unmistakable implication of a call for a "politics of everyday life". According to Foucault, politics is no longer restricted to the level of general class relations, but percolates down into domestic relations, schooling relations, parent-child relations, sexual relations, etc. As he observed, "in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point of where power reaches into the very grain of individuals". Thus, unlike the standard modern liberal normative framework which distinguishes between the political and non-political spheres of life, Foucault's genealogical period sees politics everywhere.

Foucault's genealogical analysis bears political significance in that it rules out some rather widespread political orientations as inadequate to the complexities of power in modern society. For instance, he maintains that modern power is 'productive' rather than prohibitive. This helps to rule out those types of liberationist politics that presuppose that power is essentially repressive. Foucault also argues that modern power is 'capillary', that is, it operates at the lowest extremities of the social body in everyday social practices. This helps to rule out state-centred and economistic political praxes, since these praxes presuppose that power resides solely in the state or economy. Let's have brief explanation about these implications.

As mentioned earlier, Foucault rejects "the negative hypothesis" of power which assumes that power functions essentially negatively, through such operations as interdiction, censorship, and denial. Power, in this view, just says 'no'. It says 'no' to what are defined as illegal desires, needs, acts and speeches. But, according to Foucault, , modern power is equally involved in 'producing' all these things. His empirical account, thus, rules out the repressive hypothesis and the liberationist political orientation it supports. This liberationist orientation aims at liberating what power represses. It makes 'illegal' speeches, desires and acts into expressions of political revolt. Foucault not only rejects it as inadequate to the true nature of modern power, but also suggests that it is a feature of the deployment of modern power to proliferate liberationist discourse to mask the actual functioning of domination.

The capillary character of modern power also reveals the inadequacy of state -centred and economistic political orientations. Such orientations assume that power emerges from one or the other or both of these central points in society. But Foucault's description of the polymorphous, continuous circulation of power through micro-practices rejects this assumption. Rather, it shows that power is everywhere and in everyone. It shows that power is as present in the most apparently trivial details and relations of everyday life as it is in schools, industries, parliamentary chambers and military. Foucault thus rules out the view that the seizure and transformation of state and/or economic power would be sufficient to dismantle or transform the modern power regime.

In revealing the capillary character of modern power and thereby ruling out statism and economism, Foucault deals with the "politics of everyday life". Because if power resides in mundane social relations and practices, then efforts to dismantle or transform the regime must address those practices and relations. Here lies the significance of Foucault's thought. He provides the empirical and conceptual basis for treating such

phenomena as sexuality, the family, schools, psychiatry, medicine, social sciences, etc. as 'political' phenomena. This makes possible the treatment of problems in these areas as 'political' problems. It thereby widens the arena within which people may collectively confront, understand and seek to change the character of their lives.

However, the critics have criticised Foucault's genealogical conception of power on various grounds. Firstly, Foucault does not conceptualize power in terms of the state, as a property or a possession, or as purely repressive. He conceives power as positive, productive and relational. Hence the critics argue that he is trapped within a logical 'impasse'. Given his conception of power, there can be no escape, no locus of opposition or resistance because, as he observes, "power itself has no specific basis or ground". His concept of power is, thus, very vague and ambiguous.

Secondly, Foucault believes that the existence of power relations presupposes forms of resistance. Just as power is present everywhere in the social network, so is resistance. But he does not say anything precisely on this. If power cannot be identified with repression (since he insists that it is both productive and regulative), then what is the mechanism that generates resistance? Why do people resist? Foucault does not provide answer to such questions. Hence, his concept of resistance remains undeveloped and unanalysed.

Finally, while analysing modern power, Foucault does not find it necessary to provide an analysis of the state. It seems that he has deliberately decentred the question of the state since he does not believe that the state is the locus or prime operator of power. In other words, he has suspended assumptions concerning the unity, functionality and importance of the state. Moreover, he believes that it is no longer feasible to conceptualize relations of power simply in terms of the state, class-struggle, relations of production and capitalist exploitation. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that he under-estimates the significance of social class and class struggles and neglects the role of law and physical repression.

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