



POWER AND KNOWLEDGE: FOUCAULT'S DISCOURSE ON REGULATION AND RESISTANCES

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's exploration of power and knowledge is central to his philosophical framework. He argued that power is not simply a negative or repressive force but rather something that permeates all levels of society and is productive in nature. Foucault introduced the concept of "discourse" as systems of thought that produce knowledge and regulate social practices. Discourses are not just ways of speaking or writing but mechanisms through which power operates. They define what is considered true or false, normal or abnormal, thus shaping social norms and behaviours. Foucault's conception of power and knowledge offers a nuanced understanding of how social control operates through discourses and institutional practices, while also providing insights into strategies of resistance and the complexities of individual agency within power structures. His work like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Madness and Civilization* continue to influence fields ranging from sociology and political theory to cultural studies and beyond. Discourses regulate knowledge by determining what counts as knowledge in a given context. They establish the boundaries of acceptable knowledge and exclude alternative perspectives or forms of knowledge. For example, scientific discourse defines what counts as valid scientific knowledge and excludes non-scientific ways of understanding the world. Foucault's concept of discourse challenges to rethink how knowledge is produced, how power operates through knowledge, and how individuals are constituted within these processes. Foucault's analysis of discourse encourages critical reflection on how knowledge and power are intertwined. By exposing the mechanisms through which discourses operate, Foucault's work opens up possibilities for resistance and subversion against dominant discourses and their effects. It remains a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of social and cultural dynamics

This article is an attempt to understand how knowledge and power and the regulations limiting the formulation and the circulation of different types of discourse became the focal point of the colonial discourse analyses. The need to highlight this, springs from the urge to make people aware of the struggles of a colonised community of people from the invasiveness of the dominant impacts of colonisation and the subsequent regulations of colonial discourse analyses specifically in the works of Michel Foucault.

Keywords: Discourse, Power, Knowledge

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, historian, and public intellectual who used historical research to illuminate changes in discourse over time. The relationship between discourse, knowledge, institutions, and power was established in most of his works. His works also inspired many sociologists in the subfields of gender, sexuality, queer theory, critical theory, and sociology of knowledge.

Michel Foucault's exploration of power and knowledge is a central theme in his works, particularly in his studies of institutions, disciplines, and societal structures. Foucault's approach to power and knowledge is distinct in that he examines how power operates not just through overt coercion or domination, but also through subtle mechanisms of social control and normalization. Foucault argues that power is not just possessed by individuals or groups but is dispersed throughout society, embedded in language, institutions, and practices. He coined the term "discourse" to describe how power creates and maintains truth claims about what is considered normal or deviant. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge highlights the interplay between forms of knowledge and regimes of power. Knowledge is not neutral but is shaped by power relations, and conversely, knowledge production reinforces and legitimizes existing power structures.

The idea of discourse constitutes a central element of Michel Foucault's works and gave origin to the terms like 'Foucaultian discourse analyses'. The dictionary meaning of the term discourse is a set of meaningful statements, written or oral on any given topic but in the field

of critical theory, the term 'discourse' was first introduced by Michel Foucault.

Discourse is the central concept for Foucault, first introduced in *Madness and Civilization*. A total system of knowledge that makes true or false statements possible is essentially a discourse. The discourse of madness is particularly powerful. A madman often believes unreal things to be significantly true because the delirious discourse and meaningful statements that structure his belief are dictating it.

In the work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault primarily talked about the regulations and limits of discourse and he assumes, "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality." (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 52)

The regulations and limits of discourse are as follows:

- I. The first factor is Prohibition or Taboo where the speaker and the subject matter of the discourse may be forbidden. There are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics in any society at a given time. These topics are often looked down upon as any discussion on these topics is considered taboo.

So, within the social milieus, there always remains an absence of a discourse on certain topics. So, take for instance, the subject of

sexuality, as certain areas of sexuality are considered to be taboo and it becomes very difficult to talk about areas like sexual violence happening within the confines of domesticity.

Such prohibited subjects also called the tabooed subjects, vary from one time to another and in fact from one society to another but the fact remains that there will always be some subjects that are extremely difficult to discourse.

"People will be surprised at the eagerness with which we went about pretending to rouse from its slumber a sexuality which every-thing-our discourses, our customs, our institutions, our regulations, our knowledge-was busy producing in the light of day and broadcasting to noisy accompaniment." (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 109.)

II. The second factor is the opposition between madness and reason. Often, the discourse of madness is taken as noise and therefore, rejected or ignored. A "Great Confinement" occurred in the classical period which changed the position of madness. Power was exercised in houses of confinement, not medical establishments. Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilization* explains attitudes to labor and ideas of the city, attitudes toward madness in terms of economic ideas. Madness was rather constructed as a place set apart from a world that valued work.

"The possibility of madness is therefore implicit in the very phenomenon of passion."

This quotation has been taken from Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which reveals his radical interpretation of seventeenth-century theories of the passions. Traditionally, the writers like Descartes and Hobbes shown the passion as feelings or movements within the mind that produced a bodily action. Envy, fear, lust, and desire were all passions and the reason usually opposed the passion.

The passions represented a way of uniting mind and body for they began in the mind and ended with a physical action. The idea has been taken one step further by arguing that any phenomenon linking mind and body allows a disease like madness to affect the mind and body. So, the notion of madness and sanity acts as another important factor limiting the discourse formation. For instance, if someone says that "an apple was reading a book", then in all likelihood that person will be taken as mad and his or her statements will be considered as outpourings of an insane mind which do not have any meaning. Thus, if discourse is a set of meaningful statements, which actually derive some meaning in a particular context, then someone who is deemed mad is by definition someone who cannot create a discourse. So, even when a mad person is able to speak, the speech never gets accepted as discourse.

"And now, if we try to assign a value, in and of itself, outside its relations to the dream and with error, to classical unreason, we must understand it not as reason diseased, or as reason lost or alienated, but quite simply as reason dazzled." (*Madness and Civilization*, 58)

Unreason is presented in *Madness and Civilization*, but this is the only real definition of it offered by Foucault. In the classical period, unreason was not exactly the opposite of rational thought, but had a complicated relationship to reason. A mad person, who is always seen as representing the unreason of thoughts, is in many ways like a blind person. Even after seeing the same "light" of reason as the sane man, the madman is confused and dazzled by it. Foucault explains that unreason is not a deformation of reason or a disease, but merely a different attitude towards it. Understanding how reason becomes "dazzled" or how this attitude develops is no simple matter, as Foucault demonstrates.

III. The third factor is institutional ratification which limits the proliferation of discourse. The process of knowing

something and writing or talking meaningfully about those things is closely guided by various institutions like schools, colleges, news agencies, the publishing industry, scientific laboratories, learned societies, so on and so.

The institutes and agencies that will get to regulate the discourse are always the ones associated with the power.

For instance, if there is an imbalance of power in the society then the discourse of the powerful is always circulated as the true knowledge which brings us to the very important idea propounded by Michel Foucault that is: The power and the knowledge are interrelated. The discourses that are prevalent in a given situation largely depend on the institution which ratifies the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Therefore, in most of the situations, the institutions that will get to regulate the knowledge will be the institutions that are powerful or the institutions that are associated to the powerful.

To try and understand the very prominent relationship between Power and Knowledge, let us take up this statement extracted from a document titled "Minutes upon Indian Education" by Thomas Babington Macaulay.

"I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But [...] I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. [...] I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." ("Minutes upon English Education", 2)

Macaulay was employed as a member of the Governor General's Council and he looked after East India Company's affairs in India which made him a part of that institution or that body. Now, the statement that Macaulay makes,

which disparages the long and rich tradition of Indian and Arabic literature comparing the whole of it with just a single library shelf of European books, is a manipulative statement. Today one might be willing to dismiss it as a rambling of a mad person. Yet, in 1835 this statement was considered to be reasonable enough and not dismissed as madness. In fact, it was taken seriously, as a meaningful discourse that influenced the society. The primary reason behind the acceptance of this discourse was Macaulay's position of power, which he was exercising. Macaulay, being a member of the Governor General's Council, during that period represented colonial authority. Since, Macaulay was one of the members of the Governor General's Council; the statement issued by him was accepted and circulated as a discourse in spite of the fact that he did not know either Sanskrit or any other Indian or Middle Eastern languages for that matter.

In contrast, if Sanskrit or Arabic scholars from India or the Middle East compare their literary traditions with the tradition of European literature they would come up with a different assessment, which does not align with the parameters set by Macaulay. In other words, their status which represents a subjugated population means that their statements never enjoyed the institutional backing that was given to Macaulay's statement. So, in situations of such an imbalance of power, the discourse of the powerful gets accepted and further, circulated in the masses.

The knowledge and its discursive manifestations also influence power and the way in which power is enacted. It is not merely power that influences knowledge, it is also knowledge and its discursive manifestations that influence the power.

Macaulay's statement, not only enjoyed widespread circulation because of its association with colonial authority but it in turn influenced how the British authority should adequately function in India. Therefore,

Macaulay's 1835 "Minutes upon Indian Education" was soon turned into a legal act, also called as the English Education Act of 1835. This act diverted all the funds allocated for the development education system in India to English education. Therefore, Macaulay's discourse resulted in a vital exercise of colonial power that basically destroyed all native institutions of learning because most of the native institutions of higher learning, before the advent of the British, used either Sanskrit or Arabic as the medium of instruction.

So, one of the most fundamental concepts of Michel Foucault is power/knowledge. Foucault, however, argues that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, such that it won't make sense to speak of one without the other. Hence, power and knowledge are conjoined as one unit into a concept, which he calls "power/knowledge."

According to Foucault, the formation and circulation of all knowledge is possible within a vast system of power relationships which allow that knowledge to emerge out of the system, in order for statements accepted as "true" in any context and also, in order for what counts as knowledge to be generated in the first place.

Conclusion

Foucault looks at the discontinuities and continuities between 'episteme' (to mean the knowledge systems which primarily informed the thinking during a particular period of history), and the social context in which certain knowledge systems and practices emerged as the desirable permissible concept. In his view, knowledge is inextricably connected to power, such that they are often written as power/knowledge.

Foucault's conceptual analysis draws the transition from a top-down form of social control in the form of physical coercion meted out by the sovereign to an insidious form of social surveillance and process of 'normalisation'. The latter, says Foucault, has

been encapsulated by Bentham's Panopticon; a nineteenth-century prison arrangement in which prison cells were assembled around a central watchtower from which the supervisor could watch inmates, while the inmates could never be certain when they were being watched by the supervisors, therefore, over time, they began to police their own behaviour.

Foucault focuses upon the question of how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status of 'truth', and dominate how we define and organize both ourselves and our social world, while alternative discourses are marginalised and subjugated, yet potentially 'offer' sites where hegemonic practices can be challenged, contested and 'resisted'. He has looked specifically at the social construction of punishment, madness, and sexuality. In Foucault's view, there is no definitive structuring of either social (or personal) identity or practices, as there is a socially determined view in which the subject is entirely socialized. Rather, both the formation of identities and practices are related to, or are a function of, historically specific discourses which is an understanding of how these discursive constructions function.

Foucault's conceptualization of power and knowledge has been both influential and controversial. Critics argue that his focus on discourse and micro-practices may overlook broader economic and structural inequalities. However, Foucault's work has significantly impacted fields such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and critical theory by providing frameworks for analyzing how power operates at multiple levels and how knowledge is constructed and contested within societal contexts.

In conclusion, Michel Foucault's exploration of power and knowledge offers a profound critique of traditional power dynamics and knowledge production. By examining how power operates through

discourse and institutions, Foucault unveils the intricate ways in which individuals and societies are governed and controlled, while also illuminating possibilities for resistance and transformation.

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