

Michel Foucault: An Examination of Power

An introduction to Michel Foucault's concept of Power

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Michel Foucault is a philosopher whose politics everybody seems to have a differing opinion on. He has been called a disguised Marxist, both a secret and explicit anti-Marxist, a nihilist, a new conservative, a new liberal, a neutral interpretivist, a crypto-normativist, a principled anarchist as well as a dangerous left-wing one, and even a Gaullist technocrat. An American professor complained that an obvious KGB agent like Foucault was being invited to talk at his country's universities and the Eastern European press of the Soviet era denounced him as being an accomplice of the dissidents.

A socialist even wrote that the thinker he resembles most closely was Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and others on the left have claimed he is a danger to Western democracy. What could the man have done to receive such a variety of labels? A simple answer to that question is that he analysed power.

Foucault starts one of his seminal works, *Discipline and Punish*, with a graphic description of a torture scene from 18th century France. A regicide called Damiens is publicly drawn and quartered, after having the skin peeled from his body and a combination of sulphur, oil and lead poured into his wounds. The book then jumps ahead 80 years to a description of the new way of dealing with criminals, the prison. Instead of public execution we now have a time-table. The prisoners' day involves time for prayers, reading, workshops, meals and recreation; a reflection of a more enlightened, humanist form of governance one would assume.

Not so, argues Foucault. The problem with the old public torture and executions, what he calls 'the spectacle of the scaffold', was not their cruelty, but that they didn't have the intended effect. The victims became the heroes of folk tales and pamphlets. Breeding more resentment than discipline, the scaffold, the great displays of power and brutality, were replaced by disciplining and normalising institutions of less visible, more discreet, and most importantly, more 'efficient', power.

The technology of power

The prison, and its panoptic architecture, was for Foucault a perfect example of these new technologies of power. In the panopticon, the prisoner can be observed at any time. However, because the observation tower in the middle of the prison is also a source of light, he doesn't know when he is actually being watched, therefore acts with the assumption of an omnipresent observer.

Along with other methods such as the examination of a parole board hearing, the prisoner is slowly normalised back into society. The same panoptic principles of normalising judgements, examination and omnipresent, hierarchical observation – that have their ideal model in military camps where soldiers were made from the 'formless clay' of a peasant – were also incorporated into the schools, factories, asylums, working class housing estates and hospitals of the era.

That this also coincides with the expansion of capitalist economic relations Foucault does not see as a coincidence: "the industrial system requires a free market in labor and, in the nineteenth century, the role of forced labor in the mechanisms of punishment diminishes accordingly and 'corrective' detention takes its place."¹ To aid capital accumulation these 'discreet' forms of discipline produce "subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces

¹ *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, by Michel Foucault, p.25

of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).”²

Resistance?

Such a conception of power in the modern world seems to leave little space for agency or resistance from those subject to it; this is one of the most common critiques of Foucault coming from the left. People, according to Jurgen Habermas’ interpretation of Foucault, are merely “individual copies that are mechanically punched out”. However Foucault is not so pessimistic and does not have an exclusively negative definition of power. Power for him is simply the ability to create change in society or in the behaviour of individuals, be it positive or negative.

Power is then everywhere, in every relationship; we are constantly subjecting it and being objects of it. Take for example a male worker. He is obviously an object of his boss’s power; but if he joins a union and goes on strike, he subjects his boss to the collective power he and his co-workers possess. If the union bureaucracy then calls off the strike against his wishes, he is now an object of their power. Now let’s say he is the sole breadwinner of a traditional family but he drinks a good portion of his wages; he has then subjected his family to his power as patriarch in a patriarchal world.

That power comes from multiple sources means there must be multiple sources of resistance – in contrast to the Marxist-Leninist conception of power as emanating from one source, capital, with all other struggles secondary to, or a product of, that primary battle. If one fails to tackle the multiple sources of power, “one risks allowing them to continue to exist; and to see this class power reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process”.³

This forms the basis of Foucault’s objection to vanguardism; instead he argues for many struggles by “women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals against the particularised power, the constraints and controls, that are exerted over them...these movements are linked to the revolutionary movement of the proletariat to the extent that they fight against the controls and constraints which serve the same system of power.”⁴

Lessons

Although the conception of power as coming from many sources is not something new to anarchists – Bakunin wrote of the power of capital, the state and the “savants” in a technocratic society – Foucault seeing it as present in all relationships and as both positive and negative is something we could learn a lot from. Even in our ideal classless post-revolutionary world, power would still exist in such ways as the power of possessing certain knowledge, or the power of being able to make a good argument in a meeting.

This doesn’t mean we are all little dictators, rather that we must exercise power with ethics, “a practice of the self” as Foucault calls it, to avoid domination. For example, on the student-teacher relationship Foucault says:

² *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, by Michel Foucault, p.138

³ *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature*, p.41.

⁴ *Intellectuals & Power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze*.

“I don’t see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices – where power cannot not play and where it is not an evil in itself – the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher, or put a student under the power of an abusively authoritarian professor, and so forth.”⁵

As a professor, Foucault has quite a unique view on the role of intellectuals in militant practice. We may be used to left-wing intellectuals who publish tomes on exactly what movements should do, but wouldn’t be seen within a mile of a direct action protest; Foucault, however, does the opposite. During his life he took part in occupations of university buildings and other protests, but as for his status in such movements, he was always quick to point out that he was participating as just another person, not a leader. The intellectual, for Foucault,

“no longer has to play the role of advisor. The project, tactics and goals are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is provide instruments of analysis...a topological and geological survey of the battlefield – that is the intellectual’s role. But as for saying, ‘Here is what we must do!’, certainly not.”⁶

Likewise, another anarchist intellectual, Noam Chomsky, expresses similar reticence whenever he is asked about the path toward a revolution. Of course, most other anarchists have no problem (nor should they) saying, ‘Here is what I suggest we should do! What do you think?’ However it’s easy to see how mere suggestions from intellectuals of the status of Chomsky and Foucault could be seen as gospel, thus the quite relevant viewpoints of those suffering the oppression would be overlooked, and the development of their own strategic thinking hindered.

Although at no point during his life did Foucault claim to be an anarchist, he nonetheless gives us an incredibly useful conception of power with which to support our championing of non-hierarchical relations. What Bakunin and Kropotkin wrote about the State and hierarchy has been proven correct in Russia and every other country where Marxists have taken power; however, just pointing to historical examples and saying ‘we told you so’ only gets our ideas so far. Examining power in as in-depth a manner as Marx did to capital should be a priority for anarchists; as should, of course, putting the results of these analyses into practice.

⁵ *The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, by Michel Foucault, p.18.

⁶ *Power/Knowledge* by Michel Foucault, p.62.

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