



Research Paper

Understanding Foucault: The Shift from Archaeology to Genealogy

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Abstract: *The whole oeuvre of Michel Foucault is concerned with many shifts and turns. He sways between madness and sexuality, between Marquis de Sade and Hellenistic philosophers, from criminality to philosophy. Despite all these shifts, a decisive methodological shift is evident from archaeological to a genealogical one. This shift is often considered by critics as distinctive and apart. But while reading Foucault's own works, interviews and lectures one realizes that the two are in harmony. This paper tries to read the important works by Foucault to understand this methodological shift which enables one to understand his larger concerns about Power and Subjectivity.*

Keywords: *Foucault, archeology, genealogy, power, subject.*

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Answering to a question about his archaeological and genealogical shift at Berkeley's History Department in 1983, Foucault replies that archaeology "is the methodological framework of my analysis." The archaeology thus forms the methodological framework of analyzing various discourses and these discourses have "to be analysed as an event or as a set of events." "Genealogy is both the reason and the target of the analysis of discourses as events." which tries "to show . . . how those discursive events have determined in a certain way what constitutes our present and what constitutes ourselves: our knowledge, our practices, our type of rationality, our relationship to ourselves and to the others. So genealogy is the aim of the analysis and the archaeology is the material and methodological framework."¹

As Foucault moves from archaeology to genealogy, his thematic concerns also move. In archeological phase his main aim remained analysis of discourses explicated in his works like *Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In the first phase of his genealogy his main concern remains the analysis of power explicated in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, and the first volume of *History of Sexuality: Will to Knowledge*. And finally he abandons his genealogical analysis of power and takes on the project of developing the genealogy of ethics which is dealt in the remaining two volumes of *History of Sexuality*, i.e. *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. Foucault moves thematically from the discussions of discourses to power and finally to the issues of self and subject (McHoul and Grace ix).

Under archaeology, the main aim of Foucault is to critically analyze the systems of knowledge. More specifically, archaeology tries to discern the conditions that make knowledge possible. Foucault remarks in *The Order of Things* that archaeology is "an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historical a priori, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed . . ." (xxi-xxii). This analysis of systems of knowledge is done through a critical concentration upon its 'units' which he calls 'discourses'. Discourses as Foucault conceives, are concerned not so much with linguistic system of grammar, rather he uses the term as related to the notion of discipline – both as fields or disciplines of study (such as Biology, Bio-medicine, Economics etc.) as well as systems of control or disciplinary institutions (such as School, Prison, Hospital etc.) (McHoul and Grace 26).

¹ Michel Foucault "The Culture of the Self", Lecture at History Department, Berkeley, transcribed from audio files by Arianna Bove and can be retrieved [here](http://www.questjournals.org). All the preceding quotes are from the same source.

Foucault's conception of discourse tries to unravel the historically specific relations between various disciplines and disciplinary practices. Thus, "Archaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of archive." (Foucault, *Archaeology* 148)

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault analyzes the discourse of madness as described in the archives and practices of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, medicine, and shows the ways in which these discourses rendered mad individuals mentally ill and labeled them 'abnormal'. These discourses defined them in a negative language that deprived them of a voice (McNay 2). Likewise in *The Order of Things* Foucault tries to elaborate on the discourses of Life, Labor and Language and the way they have developed into full-fledged sciences of biology, economics and linguistics by the works of Cuvier, Ricardo and Bopp respectively. Foucault argues that enlightenment rationality in general and Kant's Copernican turn in particular gave rise to a common object – man – among other otherwise separate discourses.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault elaborates on his theory of discourse. Discourse according to him, allows us to write, speak and think in a specific way about given social practices (like madness). Discourse then constrains as well as enables us to write, speak and think within such specific historical limits (McHoul and Grace 31). But, Foucault came to realize that these conditions by which the possibility of knowledge becomes possible or the production of these discourse uses power as its economy. He discovered that discourses always need power to establish themselves in the same way as power needs discourses to produce knowledge. He admits it in *Discipline and Punish*. "We should admit . . . that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault, *Discipline*, 27).

From this point onwards Foucault's concern becomes power and he changes his methodology from archaeology to genealogy. He tries to see the connections between these discourses and power. In genealogy then, Foucault tries to see the ways in which these discourses come to play a role and their establishment as norms. Arguing that our society has "manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body", he suggests that "these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operate 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, *Power/Knowledge* 93). The relation of power and knowledge is doubly coordinated and both complement each other towards the maximization of their respective effects and it is for this reason Foucault combined the two in a single term: power/knowledge.

Genealogical methodology then tries to see the establishment of certain discourses as legitimate and standard forms of knowledge, their undermining of other knowledges and the power mechanism through which this has been achieved.

Genealogy is "a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them ... capable of opposition and struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 85). With this aim in mind genealogy looks for those discourses which have been rendered silent, which have been long forgotten and writes them against the already established discourses. It then becomes a sort of "counter-discourse", a kind of "counter-memory" which expose the hierarchies that have been maintained in the standardization of certain forms of knowledges. To summarize one can say that archaeology as a methodology tries to analyze the knowledges that have been rendered silent, what Foucault calls "local discursivities", and genealogy is the "tactics" which by its analysis of these "local discursivities" releases them from the strangling hold of standard knowledges which have subjected them and brings them "into play" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 85). So genealogy does not undermine Foucault's earlier works of archaeology, but in a way helps him in his genealogical analysis of power. Reflecting on his earlier works of archaeology he says, "When I think back now, I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about in *Madness and Civilization* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, but power?" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 117). In *Discipline and Punish* he analyzes the modern society, which according to him is a society of surveillance not of spectacle where "under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (Foucault, *Discipline* 217).

These techniques of power, according to Foucault, work in every form of disciplinary enclosure – the prison, the school, the hospital, military centers, psychiatric asylums, administrative institutions. The model for these enclosures is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Bentham's panopticon is a space (prison) where prison cells

are built in a ring shaped building all looking towards a central observation tower. The tower houses the watchers who are able to see the inmates all the time, but inmates cannot see the watchers all the time. Bentham's idea embodied in panopticon is that "the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen . . . maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, *Discipline* 187). The subject who is constantly visible and under surveillance habituates the norms to which he is being made visible and eventually internalizes them. What Foucault is suggesting is the fact that the control of the body through various disciplinary regulations controls 'the soul' as it imposes its values, beliefs, and identities. It is for this reason he suggests that, "the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault, *Discipline* 217) because this soul (having values, beliefs, habits) is born out of disciplinary techniques of punishment. This modern soul is not the soul as represented in Christian theology which is born in sin and thus liable to punishment, rather it is a soul "born . . . out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint" (Foucault, *Discipline* 29). This soul for Foucault is not an abstraction but a reality which is produced and forged through the exercise of power on the body. He considers it "wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or ideological effect" rather "it exists, it has a reality" (Foucault, *Discipline* 29) and is continuously produced in the body of those who are punished or kept under supervision, and under constant surveillance. The disciplinary institutions thus work through the technique of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, examination, panopticism and surveillance and in turn these techniques give rise to a new subjectivity which is in compliance with the norms.

In *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault elaborates, with drastic changes, his notion of power. *The History of sexuality* does not deal so much with sex and sexuality *per se*, rather the genealogical aim of this book is tracing of interrelated strategies and devices operant in the deployment of sexuality by producing specific subjectivity which sexual subjects take as truth and internalizes. Foucault talks about two types of deployments: deployment of alliances and deployment of sexuality. (Foucault, *Knowledge* 106). The deployment of alliance bases sexuality or sexual relations on laws or alliances that legitimate and define "the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 106). In Foucault's words, it is "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 106). While as the deployment of sexuality makes individuals sexual subjects by developing a particular conception of sexuality which shapes the needs and desires in a specific way and manufactures sexuality as confirming to the norms established as normal and abnormal. In Foucault's words, the deployment of sexuality "operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 106). The differentiation between the two deployments is that the main objective of the deployment of alliance is reproduction of "the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them" while as the deployment of sexuality "engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control." (Foucault, *Knowledge* 106). Foucault renounces "the repressive hypothesis", that our sexuality is actually repressed by power structures (as those of Victorian society and continued in disciplines by theorists like Sigmund Freud), instead he argues that the opposite happened. With repression "there was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 18) and these discourses were specific in certain ways, which with the play of power/knowledge nexus maximized the control.

What Foucault achieves by this analysis is a notion of power which is not negative, which is not coercive. This notion reveals power as positive and creative in social relations. According to Foucault, there is a need to rethink the whole notion of power earlier conceived as negative, coercive, institutional, juridical, violent, and repressive in nature. There is a need that "we . . . rid ourselves of a juridical and negative representation of power, and cease to conceive of it in terms of law, prohibition, liberty, and sovereignty" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 90) rather, it should be understood "as the multiplicity of force relations" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 92). Foucault warns that power is not an "institution", not a "structure", not "strength", instead "It is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 93). Foucauldian power is positive, relational, and non-subjective in nature. Positive in the sense that it does not repress or censor, rather it creates and defines the behavior and subjectivity of the constituent subject. Relational in the sense that it always operates or comes into play only when people come in relation to each other. Power is non-subjective in the sense that it does not come as a result of a decision of an individual rather it works as certain actions modifying other actions. It is not to be conceived as an individual acting upon another individual through persuasion or coercion as in slavery.

Foucault's genealogical analysis of power and his attempt to give power a positive role jeopardizes his whole project because power emerges as overdeterministic and his method structural as power becomes the defining feature of each and every aspect of social life. Against this Foucault argues that his analysis of power as a defining feature of society does not mean that it is "unconquerable, foundational and that one has to kneel before it" (Afary and Anderson 189) rather the analysis of power is done to "find out where are the weak points of power, from which we can attack it." (Afary and Anderson 189) Thus, power is always confronted and resisted. According to Foucault, "where there is power, there is resistance . . . and these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network" (Foucault, *Knowledge* 95).

In the next two volumes of *The History of Sexuality – The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* – Foucault makes another shift and abandons his earlier project of analyzing power and genealogy of sexuality and takes up the genealogy of ethics. Identifying this shift and all the earlier shifts, he writes that “a theoretical shift [was] required in order to analyze what is often described as the manifestations of “power”; it led me to examine, rather, the manifold relations, the open strategies, and the rational techniques that articulate the exercise of powers. It appeared that I now had to undertake a third shift, in order to analyze what is termed “the subject.”” (Foucault, *Pleasure* 6) This analysis of the subject is done by recognizing the “forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject.” (Foucault, *Pleasure* 6)

All these shifts that Foucault takes in his works are not arbitrary but some problems in his notion of power that needed to be answered makes the trajectory of these shifts clear. In his earlier works like *Madness and Civilization* the notion of power that emerges is a negative one which represses or excludes those who are not part of the dominant discourse e.g., the mad. This notion of power makes them the ‘other’ to that discourse and they remain silent and cannot voice their concerns. This notion of power makes individuals passive subjects. To minimize this negativity in his notion of power, Foucault from mid-1970 onwards worked in a new direction and reformulated his concept of power as an essentially positive phenomenon. Here, power is an enabling force working in a capillary manner in our day-to-day lives and Foucault calls it the “microphysics of power.”

Despite this effort, Foucault’s power always runs in the danger of being taken negatively. To make his notion of power positively sustainable, Foucault takes another shift concerning with the ‘genealogy of ethics’. Here, the power is both, an objectivizing as well as subjectivizing force. And with the notion of the “technologies of the self”, Foucault conceives of individuals as active agents capable of transforming themselves and modifying themselves. These “techniques . . . permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power” (Foucault, *Ethics* 177). These ‘technologies of the self’ enable subjects to resist – with an ‘ethics of the self’ – the power everywhere in daily practices.

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