On Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge, Discourse, and Subjectivity

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The indubitable significance of Michel Foucault within the realm of modern humanities cannot be overstated. His far-reaching influence across various fields of study has proven to be of paramount importance. The present study is intended to bring into focus the most consequential critical concepts of Michel Foucault. While certain scholars have previously endeavoured to depict and reconceptualise Foucault's principal notions, many of them have tended to complicate the matter by problematising his understanding of these concepts. The most significant concepts include Discourse, Power, Knowledge, and Subjectivity. The nature and function of discourses in shaping knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and power have been subject to investigation. Additionally, this study sheds light on the manner in which subjects are shaped in the duality of power and resistance. The primary objective of this study is to offer a lucid definition of these terms and their interrelatedness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The comprehension and interpretation of Foucault's theories have posed significant challenges for many scholars due to the complex nature of his conceptualisation of history and truth. Foucault's understanding of history is notably influenced by Nietzsche's perspective, particularly Nietzsche's genealogical approach to the history of knowledge. This genealogical perspective highlights the subjective factors that have shaped notions of truth and knowledge. Consequently, the construction of subjectivity within the context of history and truth deviates from conventional understanding. Foucault himself acknowledges the difficulty of his writings and the inherent contradictions within his works. Racevskis (2005) argues that Foucault encountered challenges in articulating the nature of subjectivity using language as a mediator. Furthermore, Smart (2002) aptly notes that Foucault's works exhibit shifts in "emphasis, changes in direction, and developments and reformulations of ideas". Thus, following Foucault's line of thought can be challenging for the aforementioned reasons. In addition, the relationship between Foucault's terms has not been explicitly elucidated. O′Farrell (2005) highlights an equitable relationship between Foucault's concepts of Power, Knowledge, History, and Truth. However, other scholars consider truth,

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history, and knowledge as subcategories of power (Feldman, 1997). Even Colin Gordon, the translator and editor of *Power/Knowledge* in English confesses, "I have misinterpreted Foucault with respect to the wandering life of the medieval mad" (Midelfort, 1990). These complexities and misinterpretations of Foucault's key terms necessitate a thorough examination and clarification of the frequently employed and misused terms in Foucauldian discourse.

The intricate nature of societal forces, their interdependencies, and reciprocal influences are evident in the works of Foucault. Notably, the concept of power presents a challenge as it permeates various levels of social and personal existence. While Foucault is believed to have been influenced by Marxist thinkers, his understanding of power deviates from traditional Marxist perspectives. Nevertheless, some scholars highlight the similarities between Foucault's ideas and those of Marxist scholars (Olssen, 2004), despite Foucault's critical stance towards Marxism and its limited comprehension of history and power. Classical Marxism primarily analyses power relations within the framework of social classes, whereas Foucault's conception of power focuses more on the body as the site of power struggles (Mills, 2003). During his formative years, Foucault joined the communist party under the influence of Louis Althusser (Kelly, 2010). Althusser's exploration of institutional organisations and their role in ideology and power significantly influenced Foucault's development of the concept of a panopticon society. Foucault acknowledges the role of institutions in normalisation and the construction of subjectivity. To elucidate the relationship between Foucault and Marxism, one might find Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" sufficient.

Foucault's analyses have often been regarded as paradoxical (Koopman, 2010) when examining their relationship to modernity, particularly in his exploration of the role of clinical psychology as a subjective entity within power dynamics. His studies reveal the impossibility of maintaining notions of madness and freedom within the realms of power relations, discourse, truth, history, and subjectivity. In the context of modernity, freedom becomes abolished, subjected to societal constructs and constraints. The concept of the panopticon, emphasising "the power of the observer over the observed" (Caluya, 2010, p. 623), further restricts or even eradicates one's sense of selfhood. As Rabinow (1984) points out, "Foucault's perspective asserts that there is no external position of certainty or universal understanding that exists outside the realm of history and society". The inherent uncertainty and paradoxes in seeking alternatives that can emancipate individuals from the shackles of modernity remain crucial questions within the humanities.

It is essential to emphasise that Foucault's critical terms do not assert themselves as universal laws but rather manifest through a multiplicity of minor techniques, known as the disciplines, originating from diverse sources and applied in various contexts (Bogard, 1991). This decentralisation and diversity inherent in Foucault's critical terms challenge the notion of a singular, overarching framework, thereby accentuating the intricate and complex nature of their application and interpretation. These inherent paradoxes and complexities serve to underscore the ongoing significance and relevance of Foucault's ideas within the field of humanities. The relentless pursuit of alternatives capable of emancipating individuals from the entanglements of modernity remains a critical and imperative inquiry. Scholars persistently grapple with the far-reaching implications of Foucault's analyses, endeavoring to navigate the inherent uncertainties and contradictions that permeate our understanding of power, subjectivity, and resistance within the complexities of contemporary society.

By acknowledging the profusion of minor techniques and the diverse array of applications that constitute Foucault's critical terms, researchers engage in a multidimensional exploration of the intricate dynamics of power, knowledge, and social systems. This approach recognises that Foucault's ideas are not confined to a singular, monolithic framework but rather encompass a diverse range of disciplinary practices and methodologies. It necessitates an openness to interdisciplinary dialogue and an appreciation for the multifaceted nature of power relations, knowledge production, and the construction of subjectivity. Furthermore, this recognition of the diverse applications of Foucault's critical terms prompts scholars to interrogate the ways in which power operates within different social, historical, and cultural contexts. It invites a nuanced understanding of how power relations intersect with other forms of oppression and domination, such as gender, race, and class. This multidimensional exploration challenges us to move beyond simplistic and static notions of power, encouraging a deeper examination of the complex and dynamic nature of social systems.

In the initial volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault's explorations into the evolution of sexuality from a silenced aspect of human existence to a subject of scientific inquiry exemplify the institutionalisation of sexuality not as a matter of mere curiosity, but as a means of power seeping into the most intimate and fundamental aspects of life. By investigating sexuality in the first volume and later exploring the subject of marriage in subsequent volumes, Foucault utilises these topics as a means of conceptualising power and resistance, ultimately leading to his theorisation of the panoptic society. Foucault's formulation is commonly understood to support the proposition that prior to the nineteenth century, European societies employed categories or classifications that primarily distinguished between various sexual acts rather than differentiating between individuals engaging in those acts (Halperin, 1998). This perspective challenges the notion that historical understandings of sexuality were primarily concerned with categorising individuals based on their sexual identities or orientations. His theories have subsequently been used by feminists, gender critics, and Eco-critics to gain greater insight into the alignment of power with patriarchy and anthropocentrism. One may contend that Michel Foucault is the preeminent social critic of the twentieth century, whose theories and analyses have already cast a long shadow into much of the twenty-first century. His enduring impact has permeated various domains, including Feminism, Cultural Studies, and, notably, New Historicism. Foucault's works examining the mechanisms of power and resistance as binary oppositions have proven to be a pivotal moment in the field of Cultural Studies. "Michel Foucault's reconceptualization of power has had an enormous impact on the social sciences and humanities" (Flohr, 2016). Michel Foucault's comprehension of power fundamentally diverges from Marxist conceptions, as Marxist thought fails to account for the dualistic relationship between power and resistance. Traditional Marxism regards the Bourgeois as the sole source of power. In contrast, Foucauldian studies present a notably different account of power, viewing it as a self-perpetuating entity that is omnipresent, devoid of the sanction of any individual or authority.

In the field of subjectivity studies, two contrasting trends have predominated. On the one hand, there are psychoanalytic investigations of subjectivity that are linked to the works of Freud and Lacan, while on the other, there is a cultural perspective towards subjectivity that aligns with the philosophies of Nietzsche and Foucault. Nietzsche's influence on Foucault primarily derives from Nietzsche's Master-Slave Morality, which contends that cultural conditioning empowers one group to dominate others while the other group is

subjected to subordination. Moreover, both Nietzsche and Foucault consider a powerful force at the service of those who seek to break the normality and convention of social life. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (2017) asserts, "The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed." The genesis of humanity's incapacity to act with autonomy and to believe in their unrestricted freedom, but instead, to be constrained by the influence of language and culture, constitutes the primary focus of Michel Foucault's research. The Foucauldian lexicon is quite intricate, necessitating a preliminary comprehension of several philosophical concepts and theories. The wide-ranging interpretations of Foucault's major theoretical concepts by numerous scholars have been arduous to apprehend and, at times, contradictory.

The intricate web of interpretations surrounding Foucauldian terminology, along with the ongoing challenges faced by scholars in pinning down precise definitions for these terms, has spurred a compelling investigation into the core concepts of Foucauldian discourse, power/knowledge, and subjectivity. This exploration is driven by the recognition that a clear and nuanced comprehension of Foucault's critical vocabulary holds the potential to enrich the scholarly landscape within the humanities greatly. Foucault's writings, characterised by their depth and complexity, have given rise to a multitude of interpretations that often appear to be in tension with one another. This inherent ambiguity, rather than being a drawback, has become a fertile ground for intellectual inquiry. This investigation aims to expound on Foucault's critical vocabulary, which has had significant influence across a variety of disciplines.

2. ON DISCOURSE

Discourse serves as a tool for constructing specific truths and knowledge, and it is ubiquitous, pervading every aspect of social contexts. The exertion of power often occurs via various discourses, although discourses are not solely the domain of any particular class or those in positions of dominance. Discourse can also function as a form of resistance against dominant power structures. "There is a physical reality outside of discourse, but discourse is the only means we have of gaining access to it" (Fiske & Hancock, 2016). This supposition calls into question the veracity of what we understand as objective reality or what we previously believed to be factual. The ultimate goal of discourse is to generate significance, which is not attained if discourse is entirely objective. Consequently, our comprehension of the world as it exists cannot be considered entirely dependable.

Foucault's analysis *in Archaeology of Knowledge* enlightens us through a thorough analysis of the langue in which the essence of discourse is centred. In a sense, a discourse is a unified group of statements which are coherently organised and ensure unity in the representation of the subject's reality. Moreover, these sets of statements that create discourses are entangled with one another in the sense that the outcome of each set of statements that contribute to the formation of discourse is affected by other sets of statements. In other words, discourses "derive from one another, regulate one another, and are involved with one another" (Foucault, 2010). On the other hand, Foucault's application of discourse takes place within two different definitions. On the one hand, Foucault (2010, p. 80) uses discourse to refer to "the general domain of all statements." On the other hand, he refers to discourse as "an individualisable group of statements" (Foucault, 2010, p. 80) which are concerned only with the representation of a particular issue through these statements. Foucault's analysis underscores the autonomy of statements from their

linguistic milieu, as they can exist independently of language. This implies that statements do not rely on language for their existence, but rather, language relies on statements. This is because regulated signs, which serve as the foundation of statements, can be found outside of language. Nonetheless, the formation of these statements necessitates that each statement has a relationship, however tenuous, to an adjacent field as a whole. With this in view, "There is no statement in general, no free, neutral, independent statement" (Foucault, 2010, p. 99). To elaborate, each statement affects and is affected by a set of other statements with which the possibility of creating discourse comes into existence.

There is another prerequisite to the formation of these statements. Each set of statements needs to represent a physical body. The physical body of discourse is basically the set of behaviour and practises that are generated from the statements which have created that discourse. Discourse without being practised is merely a set of sentences that have no subject rather than a set of statements. They are, therefore, irrelevant to the reality of the subject. The materialisation of discourse takes place through institutions that serve power. These institutions are the guarantor of discourse; they give discourse a reality through which it would be practised. Additionally, the materialisation of discourses exists for a certain period through a certain social condition. The created discourses are not everlasting within the language. They are not timeless statements which are constantly materialised throughout history. The death of a discourse is inevitable; it will be eventually superseded and replaced by another discourse which can correspond to the needs of power. Discourses keep one another within the structure and unity of power. In this sense, they "govern and are governed by one another" (Foucault, 1980, p. 170).

Power in this sense is not only seen through physical violence, it is regularly practiced in certain discourses. "This form of power results from a constellation of discursive structures, (scientific) knowledge and practices that accompany them which create a set of rules and standards" (Manokha, 2009, p. 430). Now, the coherence and homogeneity in the discourses of power are essential for them to appear authentic and trustworthy. "One shows how the different texts with which one is dealing refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period" (Foucault, 2010, p. 118). In the realm of power, the masking of discourses through the guise of scientific objectivity is a common practice. As previously mentioned, the reconfiguration of statements engenders a discourse, while the reconfiguration of discourses begets an episteme. An episteme is the manifestation of a cohesive array of discourses that advance distinct epistemological paradigms and engender a fundamental worldview that precipitates particular practices within a given society and era. The episteme is in constant flux, as the discourses that compose it expand and contract within the domain of power. As Foucault asserts, it is a "constantly moving set of articulations" (2010, p. 192) that constantly redefines the function and position of power.

3. ON POWER/KNOWLEDGE

Power, in Foucauldian terms, is highly dynamic; it exists everywhere, not because it is being practiced everywhere but because it potentially exists and is ready to be manifested. For Foucault, as Deacon (1998) points out, power in itself does not exist, and everything that is influencing history, subject, knowledge, and truth is power relations. It is "this dual articulation that allows for accounts of power relations that show the ubiquitous presence of power as well as its inescapability" (Hardy, 2015, p. 411). This potentiality of

power can be identified in a panoptic system where "inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault, 2009, p. 195). Furthermore, the practice of power has taken different forms historically. "the classical age discovered the body as object and target of power" (Foucault, 2009, p. 136). Foucault explores different historical eras and attests that in the beginning, the practice of power was radically exercised on bodies by different forms of torture and executions. It must be noted, however, that power is both repressive and productive (Allen, 2002). Today's practice of power is quite different. The practice of power has largely been institutionalised, and eventually, internalised. For Foucault, power is never monolithic (Berard, 1999).

The exercise of power cannot be solely attributed to the bodies of subjects, as it extends beyond this domain. However, bodies remain a critical site where power and resistance are continuously enacted. Foucault's concept of power seeks homogeneity, limiting both the body and subjectivity of individuals to exercise control. In contrast, resistance takes on diverse forms and thrives on heterogeneity, thereby posing a threat to the authority of power. Resistance avoids detection by masking itself in various discourses, and like power, is omnipresent. Social resistance is particularly concerning for power since it opposes institutionalized knowledge, which is traditionally regarded as objective and scientific. For instance, the opposition to the Corona vaccine was a significant manifestation of resistance, highlighting the failure of institutionalised power to ensure the safety and efficacy of vaccines. The practice of power seeks efficiency by concealing itself behind objective knowledge, just as resistance conceals itself through diverse forms of expression.

A common belief in knowledge and truth was primarily the characteristic of being objective. Social studies have given a new outlook towards knowledge and truth. John Fiske, for instance, proposes that "knowledge is never neutral, it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to real" (2016, p. 149). The question is, however, why a subjective source of knowledge comes to be beneficial. "The discursive power to construct a common-sense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central in the social relationship of power" (Fiske, 2016, p. 149). The creation of hegemony requires the construction of knowledge that serves the interests of the dominant power. The subjects of society are susceptible to manipulation and deception, as they come to believe in the knowledge and truth that are propagated by those in power. Hence, "in the Foucauldian sense, knowledge formed in discourses is governed by particular limits, rules, exclusions and decisions" (Manias & Street, 2000, p. 52). Through the creation of various discourses, the subjects are directed towards a particular path that aligns with the interests of the dominant power. Physical violence is not always necessary to exert control over the subjects, as the construction of their reality can be sufficient. The challenge lies in the fact that the reliability and authenticity of knowledge and truth are often contingent upon the constructed discourses that serve the interests of the dominant power. Furthermore, Foucault argues that this formation of knowledge must remain a secret "not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged" (Foucault, 1990, p. 48). Discourses are the involving agents which promote the secrecy of the formation of knowledge. The more successful they are at hiding the dominance of power and, in particular, in how knowledge is formed, the more reliable that knowledge and truth become.

The availability of discursive statements extends beyond the confines of language itself, and the available statements are often purposefully designed and constructed to

further specific agendas. Knowledge is the product of these discourses, and their existence is often concealed by representing knowledge and its purposes as objective and independent. However, as Foucault points out, "there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice" (2010, p. 183), meaning that knowledge is a product of discourses. As Wandel points out, "every time an absolute truth is claimed, this claim has certain effects of power" (2001, p. 375). Having this in view, we can argue that knowledge exists to serve the dominant power; however, a by-product of knowledge can also be beneficial to the status of humans in general. Scientific discourses are ideologically inclined, and they facilitate the way that power is practised. In this sense, the correlation between knowledge and power in the Foucauldian mindset is inseparable, and it is at this point that Foucault created the term power/knowledge. The existence of one relies on the other, and this correlation is not necessarily negative. It is the main contributor to the progression of knowledge and the way it is perceived. The methods should be provided in sufficient detail to allow other authors to replicate or reproduce them.

4. ON FOUCAULDIAN SUBJECT

Foucault's work is deeply influenced by Nietzsche's views on the formation of subjectivity, which they argue is the result of the interplay of culture and power within society. Cultural Studies, as a discipline, is primarily concerned with identifying social and institutional practices that promote either resistance or domination. The most insidious trick of power is to create the illusion of freedom from institutions, knowledge, and language, leading individuals to believe that they alone are responsible for their subjectivity. Such a belief is fundamentally naive, as the objective of power is to establish and control the truth through a complex network of interconnected discourses, unifying and representing a single reality and truth. The function of language in Foucault's analysis is of paramount significance since language, in Foucauldian analysis, is no longer autonomous. Rather, it is shaped and helps shape various discourses through which reality comes into existence. In her *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler's emphasis on Foucault's investigation of language has shown the unification of language and patriarchy as inseparable.

The process of the formation of the subject depends upon a set of factors that ensure the efficacy of power/knowledge. In other words, subjectivity is a product of power/knowledge (Hancock, 2018). In the formation of subjectivity, Foucault's investigation involves humans as a community rather than individuals (Luxon, 2008). In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault sheds light on the process by which power was exercised. The exercise of power was unmasked and strongly blunt. In this process, the bodies of subjects were a site of power. Punishment became the medium through which power revealed itself. The approach of power towards rogue subjects altered as the purpose of punishment changed. There was no longer a need to punish an offence, rather, the need for supervision and ensuring the neutralisation of the offence became the primary purpose of power. In this sense, punishment becomes "corrective" (Foucault, 2009, p. 179) as it seeks to subjugate and redefine a subjectivity aligned with its ideologies. Furthermore, the violent and cruel practice of power gave way to a more civil sort of punishment and a new system of "gratification-punishment" (Foucault, 2009, p. 180). This system mainly focuses on rewarding the normalised and subjugated subjects rather than punishing those who disobey power. Accordingly, subjects are often incentivized to engage in practices that reinforce their alignment with power. However, it is important to recognize that as the objectives of

punishment have evolved, new institutions have emerged to serve as corrective mechanisms for those who challenge or resist power.

The prison system represents the quintessential example of corrective punishment. The effective use of imprisonment as a means of correcting and punishing those who are deemed abnormal has emboldened those in power to consider implementing similar systems within society at large. An effective element of prisons was surveillance, which was "based on a system of permanent registration" (Foucault, 2009, p. 196). It is at this point that Panopticon society emerges. Panopticon surveillance ensures the permanence of its gaze by manipulating subjects of its permanent existence. This system includes an "omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible" (Foucault, 2009, p. 214). Power asserts its influence through the operation of a vast network of interconnected institutions, which are mutually reinforcing. In this way, docile bodies and disciplined subjects are produced. Each of these institutions, including hospitals, schools, and universities, serves to discipline individuals and promote the normalisation and homogenisation of society. The ultimate objective of this system of power is to produce a society that is more easily manageable and controllable.

Foucault's conception of subjects suggests that dynamic discourses and practices of resistance are constantly at play, seeking to challenge and subvert the authority of power. These practices may not always be institutionalised, but they are far from impotent. Discourses produce opposing ideologies to resist one another and contribute to the formation of subject (Howarth, 2002). Resistance operates within the domain of language and social practices, with subjects rebelling against the hegemonic unity and authority of power. Such forms of rebellion are often unconscious, meaning that subjects do not necessarily engage in these social practices with the explicit aim of resisting power. Rather, they do so in order to carve out a space within which they can assert their individuality and autonomy, separate from the hegemonic structures of power. It is within this conflict between power and resistance that subjects are able to assert their agency and come into being.

5. CONCLUSION

The examination of Foucault's critical terms has frequently been characterised by incompleteness, dissatisfaction, controversy, and paradoxical interpretations. The multifaceted nature of Foucault's critical terms exacerbates these challenges rather than simplifying them. This article undertakes a comprehensive reevaluation of several pivotal terms that hold considerable prominence and widespread usage within the domain of humanities: Foucauldian Discourse, Power/Knowledge, and Subjectivity. Foucault's contributions to diverse social sciences have profoundly illuminated society as an intricate web of interconnected concerns, exerting both direct and indirect influences on one another. Among the myriad critical terms introduced by Foucault, this study concentrates on some of the most significant, notably discourse, power, knowledge, and subjectivity. The concept of power, as expounded by Foucault, has engendered the emergence of new disciplines and perspectives within the humanities. Cultural Studies serves as a notable exemplar, drawing extensively from Foucault's archaeological explorations of society. According to Foucault's conceptualisation, the construction of the subject is intricately intertwined with the dual forces of power and resistance, which shape the understanding and perception of individuals.

Foucault's critical terms have engendered a breadth of scholarly discourse, with varying interpretations and debates surrounding their meanings. Scholars have grappled with comprehending and contextualising these terms within their respective disciplines, yielding a diversity of perspectives that contribute to the ongoing academic dialogue. The complexity and contentiousness of Foucault's critical terms have prompted scholars to delve into their nuanced implications, leading to rigorous examinations that aim to shed light on their multifaceted nature. Moreover, Foucault's critical terms have permeated interdisciplinary boundaries, transcending the confines of specific disciplines to influence a wide range of intellectual pursuits. The far-reaching impact of these terms extends beyond traditional social sciences, permeating fields such as philosophy, anthropology, and literary theory. This interdisciplinary engagement serves to enrich the understanding of Foucault's concepts by incorporating diverse viewpoints and methodologies.

Authors' Contribution
Younes Poorghorban has completed this project entirely.

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