

## ON FOUCAULT'S "TRUTH AND POWER"

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### ABSTRACT

*Power can never be a thing of the past, or present or future. Its existence is always simultaneous to that of a civil society. Power based relationships have defined society for the longest time and continues to do so. How does power emerge then? And is it always right? Or is it wrong? Maybe both? Philosopher, writers, thinkers and theorists have pondered on these question throughout history. The emergence of power may come from wealth and authority. Or it perhaps comes from status and class. Maybe through the 'natural' hierarchy between men and women. Or that of the society. A general notion of power would state "power involves the capacity to produce or prevent change." Some people use "authority" and "control" to define power. Control and authority that have brought order as well as exploited it. The French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault observes that power comes from knowledge. In an "Interview with Michel Foucault on "Truth and Power", Foucault states that power is based on knowledge and makes use of this knowledge to execute change and order. It produces and reproduces knowledge in accordance with its anonymous intentions. Foucault sums up the range of interesting questions posed for political status of science and ideological functions in these two terms: power and knowledge. This paper will focus on this nexus between power, knowledge and truth as well as its implications in the society as suggested by Foucault in his essay "Truth and Power."*

**Keywords:** Power, Truth, Foucault, Society, Power dynamic, Ideology, Knowledge.

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### Introduction

The notion of power has been a fundamentally intrinsic part of civilized society. Power has remained important to distinguish between who wields it and who doesn't. Throughout the history of civilization, the possession of power has defined the relationship and fate of a people with the one holding this power over them. One might wonder, who holds power? And over whom? The king over his subjects perhaps? Or tradition over innovation maybe? Or is it innovation over tradition? Or perhaps it's the state over the citizens? Or parents over children? Or maybe, it is science over philosophy... or it is the other way around? This list of questions is too long, ranging from history, culture, family, tradition and modernity. Pondering over the question of power, one may think of all the possible power based relationships they may have.

Dealing with these questions, Foucault first starts talking about the progressive maturation of science which has been taken to be an empirical form of knowledge. At certain moments in certain 'orders of knowledge' there is a sudden 'hastening of evolution', a certain transformations which fails to correspond to the calm and normal of the created conventions. These changes do not affect the content or the theoretical forms and understanding, but instead poses the question of what "governs" these statements "in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedure." (Foucault, 3). The importance here is not on the external power that constitutes to these changes but the internal "regime of power" that leads to the global modifications. These regime of power, as we discuss later, are a result of the truth of knowledge that help establish the power that is present everywhere and for everyone who can wield it.

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### Review of Literature

Great significance has been attributed to Foucault's notion of power in contemporary philosophical discourse. His ideation of truth in relation to power exhibits the role they play not only in the political or academic domain but also in the regular day-to-day lives of people. Published in 1977, the text highlights Foucault's radical approach to understanding the discourse of knowledge and power and how they intersect to shape the societal norms as well as individual experiences.

Writing during the 1970s, Foucault's work represents the experimentation and fragmentation of the postmodern era through his discussions on the contemporary political theories and concepts. Foucault's sensibilities were influenced by the emerging during a period of social and political upheaval in the world. The postmodern decade saw the destabilization of authority throughout the globe. The colonies were becoming independent through revolution and governments were being overturned by the will of people. Being a former colonial power itself, France too saw these changes and underwent a tremendous political and social change as was characterized by events like the student revolt of May 1968. Foucault's intellectual interest and background in philosophy and psychology as well as political activism influenced him in his exploration of power dynamics. Therefore, his essay "Truth and Power" offers a critique of the traditional notions of truth and authority, questioning the conventional notions that resonated with the era's spirit of questioning established norms.

One of the key elements of the text is Foucault's exploration of the relationship between power and knowledge. He argues that power and knowledge are inextricably linked, reinforcing and producing each other. This approach opposes the traditional perception of knowledge while separating it from power structures.

Although Foucault has been critical of the traditional understanding of power he is not censorious of the idea of power itself. For him power is not only exercised by the regimes or the authorities but also by regular people in their every day life. As theorized by John Gaventa in his work *Power after Lukes: a review of the literature* (2003), Foucault's understanding of power is:

"a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them" (Gaventa, 2003).

For Foucault, "power is everywhere" (Foucault, 1998) and can be wielded by anyone. He states that power is understood and exercised through the different truths of knowledge possessed by the individual. The truth of knowledge ultimately make power available and employed by different people. As he states that "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power." (Foucault. 1991)

### Justification

In order to understand power, we must understand what Foucault means by knowledge. Traditional understanding of knowledge would correspond with terms like 'wisdom' or 'information'. The term is commonly defined as "facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject" (Oxford Learner Dictionary, 1989). For Foucault, knowledge is not a transcendental, empirically verifiable reality. It is an epistemological premise/profile that is linked with a whole range of institutions, economic requirements and political issues of social regulations. The political question is thus not an illusion or alienated consciousness or ideology but truth itself as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. Foucault admits that he would never have had the courage to pursue his research in the direction of penal theory, prisons and disciplines without the political opening created during the 1968.

Foucault then dives into the discussion of truth. He states that "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power." (Foucault. 1991) He believes that truth is never outside of power, nor is it a reward for free spirits, produce of a protected solitude or the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is subjective to each society, with their different regimes of truth and different types of discourse that decided what constitutes to be true and what doesn't.

"Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to

distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." (Foucault, 1991)

The ability of one to distinguish the true from false statement, thus, comes from this discourse that is different for each society and culture. The political economy of truth is sanctioned by five important traits that is centred on scientific discourse, subject to economic and political incitement, the object of immense diffusion and consumption. These are circulating through apparatuses of education and information and is produced and transmitted under control of a few great political and economic apparatuses. This becomes the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation surrounding ideological struggles. The class position of an individual, the conditions of his life, and the specificity of the politics of truth in our society, determine what truth is and where power lies.

This argument about knowledge and truth bring us back to the notion of power and the means by which it is used. The power of state or the monarch over the people was exercised in many ways. In the eighteenth century, for instance, population becomes an object of scientific investigation. There was a technical inventions and the proper methods that determined reproduction. This could be seen in the institution of marriage, for instance. The political significance of the problem of sex is because it is treated at the point of intersection of the discipline of the body and the control of population. The primary question of power as Foucault suggests, come from the Right and the Left. The Right reads power as constitution and sovereignty and the Left as state apparatus. Power was invested in the institution of monarchy developed in the Middle Ages and the previously endemic struggles between feudal power agencies. Monarchy thus has juridical functions that include signs, ceremonial rituals, levies and taxes, as well as negative functions such as pillage, hunting and war.

The beginning of modern state is from the seventeenth century, when monarchy was replaced by discipline, surveillance, normalization and control resorting to the means of incorporation and conditioning of the people to obtain productive service from individuals in their concrete lives. Power thus had to get access to the bodies of the individuals, their acts, attitudes and modes of behavior. Thus the importance of school discipline and population control increased while the economic system promoted accumulation of capital and ordains the accumulation of men. The great political struggles eighteenth century, Enlightenment, were fought over law, right, the constitution, the just in reason and law, things which could and must apply universally. And thus mental normalization, sexuality of individuals, penal institutions and psychiatric internment believed to be essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power. Relations of power extend beyond the limits of the state. State needs other existing power relations to be able to operate. For all the omnipotence of its apparatus it is far from being able to occupy the whole the field of actual power relations. Foucault's argument leads to the understanding that state is a codification of a whole number of power relations which render its functioning possible.

The existence of power can have positive as well as negative attributes. The system created from the positive attribute of power brings the ability to function and operate a society. The excess to this however, lead to the negative attributes. The fine line between the two attributes is crossed through repression where the laws starts to prohibit. As a judicial concept, repression leads to a negative, narrow and skeleton notion of power that rejects and disregards everything that threatens it. Foucault gives us the instances in history to support this. He suggests that the concept is used above all in relation to sexuality. The campaign against masturbation in eighteenth century, for instance, or the medical discourse on homosexuality in the second half of the nineteenth century and the bourgeois societies' repression of infantile sexuality by refusing to acknowledge its existence. But the notion of repression is inadequate for capturing the productive aspect of power. This leads to the question of what makes power hold good. Would we have obeyed power if it was entirely repressive? How could it survive for so long then?

Foucault answers these series of questions something that produces things, induces pleasure and forms knowledge. It becomes the productive network that channels through the entire social body. Truth, then, is not outside power. Truth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and institutions which produce it. It is subject to constant economic and political incitement. It is the object that circulates thought apparatuses of education and information through the social body using diverse forms and immense diffusion. It is produced, transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses like universities, army, writing and media. The insufficiency of repression as an analytical tool is also dealt with in the case of Discipline and Punish. Foucault admits that when he wrote *Madness and Civilization*, he was associating repression with the mechanisms of

power which does not capture the productive aspect of power "which induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1980). He maintains that power needs to be considered as a productive network that binds the social fabric much more than the negative attributes it is used for. Relations of power thus extend beyond the limits of the state. But for all the omnipotence of its apparatus it is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations. Thus the intimate relationship between power and knowledge involves one's normal relationship to one's own body, kinship, family are effects of power which circulates in a manner at once continuous, adapted and individualised throughout the entire social body.

### **Conclusion**

Foucault's understanding of power and truth in relation sheds light upon the nature of power. The understanding of power has been demarcated into the Right way or the Left way. This demarcation and understanding follows us till date when the power of state is criticised and resisted by the people who refuse to follow it. The notion of control and authority that was mentioned before becomes a part of this repressive regime where power is exploited by the one who has access to it. In such a repressive regime it seems the only option one has is to reject the power-holders for survival. The state, be it in a democratic nation, a socialist and communist nation or a constitutional monarchy, has used and failed repressive power for benefit. Progress becomes the most easily available substitute for benefit. Nations talk about the importance of peace while also manufacturing and supplying weaponry creating war zones. The survival of the fittest becomes a common practice for them. The preservation of self as opposed to any other becomes utmost important. Self-preservation in that sense is not wrong, but doing it at the expense of others leads to the negative use of power. Power holds a fundamental position in society and therefore must be respected. Abuse of it diminishes its need and one is forced to retract from it. It is needless to say that power should not be used carelessly without deliberation.

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