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Aims**

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**Foucault on Subjugated Knowledge and Emancipatory
Aims**

Foucault equivocates on power when he calls for an emancipation of subjugated knowledge. I argue that if we take seriously Foucault's thesis that power is productive, then the practice of genealogy emancipates neither subjugated knowledges nor those marginalized by a dominant discourse. This is important because many commentators have argued that Foucault's theory supports liberal emancipatory aims. Drawing on Foucault's use of genealogy, I will show that this claim is not borne out by Foucault's theory.

Keywords: *Foucault, Subjugated Knowledge, Marginalized, Discourse Power, Emancipatory*

Introduction

Foucault writes “[T]here is a battle ‘for truth,’ or at least ‘around truth’...it being understood also that it’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth, but a battle about the status of truth and the economic political role it plays.”¹ One of Foucault’s most compelling points throughout his work is that truth claims and knowledge are produced by power relations, and that they must be understood in terms of power. However, Foucault equivocates on power when he calls for an emancipation of subjugated knowledge. These conflicting views make it difficult to ascertain the ethical import of the call to give voice to this marginalized knowledge through genealogy. I describe the relationship between subjugated knowledge and genealogy. I argue that if we take seriously Foucault’s thesis that power is productive, then the practice of genealogy emancipates neither subjugated knowledges nor those marginalized by a dominant discourse. This is important because many commentators have argued that Foucault’s theory supports emancipatory aims. Drawing on Foucault’s use of genealogy, I will show that this claim is not borne out by Foucault’s theory.

Subjugated Knowledge

In the first of his “Two Lectures,” Foucault discusses the importance of his genealogical method in terms of its relationship to “subjugated knowledges.” Genealogy operates through what Foucault calls local struggles and critiques, and the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”² Foucault distinguishes between two kinds of subjugated knowledge, *erudite subjugated knowledge*, and *local memories*, or naive knowledge.

Erudite subjugated knowledges are the “historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization.”³ Foucault is referring to historical knowledges that have been masked or buried in response to the demands for a systematic, coherent, scientific discourse of knowledge. Such systematic coherent totalizing discourse is of course the hallmark of a good scientific theory. The more total and encompassing the theory, the closer to the ‘truth’ it is purported to be. By acknowledging the history of these masked and buried erudite knowledges, we can see that certain claims have been excluded or marginalized for the sake of coherency of the system. Foucault’s claim is that these knowledges point to a struggle for domination, and that these rival knowledges illuminate the power mechanisms whereby one knowledge gains supremacy only through the suppression of others.

The second type of subjugated knowledge defined by Foucault is local memory. Local memories refer to the knowledge of individuals that have been

¹Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980) p.132.

²Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p. 81.

³Ibid.

disqualified *as* knowledge because they don't meet the standards of systematic scientific discourse. Local memories are naive, popular knowledges. They are a "whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."⁴ They are "naive" in that they lack the seriousness, coherency, and systematicity that science requires a knowledge to have.

Examples of both kinds of subjugated knowledges can be found in Foucault's genealogies of the penal system, psychiatry and sexuality. Certain erudite theories of the madman, for example, were displaced by the medicalized, pathologized truth of psychiatry. Likewise, the theory of a sexual nature repressed in response to the demands of society replaced former erudite theories of the nature of the individual. The naive knowledge of the individual madman was also silenced or subjugated by the expert classification and testimony of the psychiatrist. The madman was no longer able to know himself or speak for himself. His experience became a local memory.

Foucault argues that genealogy as a form of critique operates, at least in part, through the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. These knowledges can function strategically to undermine the authority of the dominant knowledge. By uncovering these subjugated knowledges, the history of struggle and the method of subjugation can also be uncovered. By doing this, the allegedly universal, essential, natural or self evident nature of the dominant discourse can be exposed as a contingent and historical construction. The task of genealogy and its critical force is to challenge the position of the dominant discourse. Uncovering subjugated knowledges, and the power mechanisms by which they became subjugated, forces a recognition of the struggle that underlies all truth/knowledge regimes.

Foucault claims that we are well advised to learn what "historical contents" have been buried or masked for the sake of coherency. "[T]he historical contents allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is designed to mask."⁵ In other words, we are well advised to engage in genealogy or genealogical critique because genealogy unites erudite knowledges and local memories in a way that allows us to acknowledge the historicity of the struggles by which some knowledges gain dominance and some knowledges are marginalized. Genealogy shows us that these dominant knowledges gained their coherency and systematicity through power strategies. Therefore, their universality and/or naturalness are obvious only because the rival knowledges have been effectively excluded, suppressed, masked, or disqualified. Furthermore, genealogy allows us to use these subjugated knowledges tactically, and strategically to displace the hegemony of the dominant knowledge.

The language that Foucault uses here is curious when compared to his claims about the nature of power. Foucault argues that power is productive, not repressive. "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms; it '*excludes*', it '*represses*', it '*censors*', it '*abstracts*' it '*masks*', it '*conceals*'. In fact,

⁴Ibid, p. 82.

⁵Ibid.

power produces; it produces reality”⁶ How then are we to understand the *subjugation* or *silencing* of one discourse or knowledge by another? The disqualification of “local memories” and “naive knowledges” is an act of power that says no to those local memories and naive knowledges. It is a *denial* by the power mechanisms that make scientific discourse dominant. This model of disqualification as an act of power is not easily reconciled with the other statements Foucault makes about power:

But it seems to me that repression is quite inadequate of capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. Now I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one which has been curiously widespread.⁷

In fact, Foucault specifically claims that discourse and knowledge are not repressed by power, but *produced* by it:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, *forms knowledge, produces discourse*. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.⁸

It seems that Foucault has simply replaced the term repression with the terms *masked* or *disqualified* without showing how masking or disqualifying is different from repressing or excluding.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that all discourse and knowledge within an episteme are governed by the same discursive rules of formation. Both the scientific knowledge and the subjugated knowledge are produced by power relations within a single episteme. Foucault argues that both the theoretical sciences such as mathematics and physics, and the rational field of philosophy on the one hand, and empirical knowledge, including the most naive notions on the other hand, exhibit a well defined regularity determined by a set of discursive rules governing all discourse of a particular period.⁹ Thus, whereas the theoretical sciences and philosophy were historically privileged because they were thought to be more systematic and truthful than less systematic empirical sciences, Foucault claims that both discourses are governed by the same epistemic rules of discursive formation. Philosophy and theoretical sciences are no more truthful than the empirical sciences and naive notions. Furthermore, the truths of philosophy and the errors of naiveté

⁶Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977) p. 194, emphasis added.

⁷Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p. 119, emphasis added.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Random House, 1970) p. ix.

are generated within the discourse itself, and are governed by the same rules of discursive formation. Foucault asks

what if empirical knowledge, at a given time and in a given culture, did possess a well-defined regularity? If the very possibility of recording facts, of allowing oneself to be convinced by them, of distorting them in traditions or of making purely speculative use of them, if even this is not at the mercy of chance? If errors (truths), the practice of old beliefs, including not only genuine discoveries, but also the most naive notions obeyed, at a given moment, the laws of a certain code of knowledge?¹⁰

And later, in “Power/Knowledge,” when speaking about the status of ideology as just another discourse, Foucault writes

I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourse which in themselves are neither true nor false.¹¹

According to Foucault, intuitions, beliefs, truths, ideologies and scientific facts are all determined by the same rules of discourse. These seemingly different discourses are not heterogeneous. The difference between subjugated knowledges and scientific discourse, then, is where they fall along the hierarchy at any given historical moment.

Foucault argues that subjugated knowledges can oppose the “scientific hierarchization of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power.”¹² The insurrection of subjugated knowledges can disrupt the “effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours.”¹³ The question that needs to be asked is what ethical significance does the hierarchization of knowledge have? The implication is that hierarchy is to be avoided, but how could it be, and why should it be? By arguing that one knowledge, the systematic and scientific one, has the authority or power to “disqualify” another knowledge, is Foucault also arguing that this authority or disqualification is illegitimate? I think the answer to this would have to be no. Since Foucault rejects the model of power as coercive and also the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power, surely he can’t be claiming that the hegemonic status of a dominant knowledge is somehow *wrong*.

Foucault must be arguing for the genealogical approach because it can disrupt the hegemonic hold that a systematic and “centralized” dominant discourse has. He claims that through the “insurrections of subjugated knowledges” tactical and strategic displacements can be made. Presumably, such disruption, according to Foucault is good, but why? Do these insurrections open up a space for subjugated

¹⁰Ibid, p. xiv.

¹¹Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980) p. 118.

¹²Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980) p. 84-85.

¹³Ibid.

knowledges as viable *alternatives* to the dominant scientific knowledge? Foucault does not seem to be arguing for the *displacement* of dominant scientific knowledges so that a *replacement* by subjugated knowledges could take place. For if this was to happen, then the formerly subjugated knowledge would occupy a dominant position, and would itself need to be displaced.

It is difficult to see how Foucault could successfully argue for “new ways of thinking or being” beyond the limits of power, since there is no point beyond the limits.¹⁴ Foucault must be arguing for the disruptive property of subjugated knowledges, and *only* for the disruptive property. Genealogy is useful and desirable only because it employs and utilizes a disruptive mechanism. Disruption as ethical desiderata, however, seems to depend on a shift from a model of productive power to a model of oppressive power or domination. For, why else *should* one employ genealogy unless it is because subjugated knowledges are oppressed and should be emancipated? In fact, Foucault explicitly states the need for emancipation:

[I]n contrast to the various projects which aim to inscribe knowledges in the hierarchical order of power associated with science, a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to *emancipate* historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the *coercion* of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse.¹⁵

Throughout his works Foucault argued that it is foolish to claim that power follows a juridical model. That is, that power is centralized, systematic, coercive, and exclusionary. But these are the exact same terms that Foucault is using to describe scientific knowledge. Foucault has made scientific knowledge functionally equivalent to the juridical model of power, and thus remains within the parameters of the juridical model.

Power: From Productive to Oppressive

It seems to me, that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.¹⁶

Foucault’s intention in calling for “insurrections of subjugated knowledges” is to destabilize the coherency of the systematicity of grand narratives that claim universality. Why does Foucault view universalizing theories as so dangerous? The answer is that universal theories can, through their own strategies, reduce the number of alternatives. In other words, there is a risk of total domination such that

¹⁴“Michel Foucault, “Power and Strategies,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p. 141-142.

¹⁵Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p. 85, emphasis added.

¹⁶Michel Foucault, “Human Nature: Justice versus Power” in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders, (New York: Souvenir Press, 1974), p. 171.

local memories and erudite knowledges become erased or modified completely by the systematic knowledge. Thus, the number of possible alternatives is reduced by the drive for coherency. Of course, this coherency is the result of power struggles for dominance, and the ground on which any coherency rests is fragile, and all coherent systematic knowledges are subject to displacement.

Rather than arguing against exclusion, Foucault is really arguing against systematicity or universality. Exclusion in Foucault's model is not the kind of act that one usually associates with the term. Exclusions aren't exercised on already existing things, or knowledges. Rather exclusions are produced through the constructive act of power. Foucault can't be arguing for the eradication of exclusions, because then, of course, there would only be total incorporation into a systematic, coherent universality. Exclusions are what provide the critical and transgressive impulse that Foucault holds so dear, and exclusions allow for the multiplicities and divergent strategies that Foucault privileges. So the real problem, for Foucault, isn't that systematic knowledges *exclude* other forms of knowledge, but that systematic knowledges may permanently *engulf* those other forms of knowledge by modifying them such that they become completely coherent with the dominant discourse, and are systematized by it. Another possibility is that certain knowledges might be completely lost through silencing by a completely systematic discourse. But Foucault does not seem to be claiming that any discourse reaches a state of such extreme systematicity. Power requires resistance, and Foucault's description of the manner in which power circulates rests on the claim that power, and thus transgressive elements, are both ubiquitous to a greater or lesser degree.

In any case, engulfment or elimination if either were even possible, are to be avoided because each reduces the number and type of alternative, multiple strategic possibilities. In other words, they reduce the number of possible power arrangements, and the ease with which novel arrangements might occur.

Foucault's language regarding the status of subjugated knowledges is misleading: "A genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse."¹⁷ Foucault's characterization of knowledges being emancipated, or coerced, or subjected strikes a very loud discordance with his theory of power as productive. All of these knowledges are produced, and changed by changing power relations. Foucault writes as if the emancipation of subjugated knowledge would allow that knowledge, or the subjects of that knowledge, to emerge in some pure state. Foucault explicitly rejects this option, however, and the language of emancipation is inconsistent with his rejection.

Foucault thus renders the idea of subjugated knowledges ethically problematic. Given the account of subjectivity and discourse found in the *Order of Things*, and in later works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, subjugated discourses are themselves the products of the discursive system that also

¹⁷Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980) p. 85.

produced the dominant discourse. Both discourses are more or less the product of power relations, and as such they are on an equal standing. Foucault claims that

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.¹⁸

As Charles Taylor points out, for Foucault,

the idea of a liberating truth is a profound illusion. There is no truth which can be espoused, defended, rescued against systems of power. On the contrary, each such system defines its own variant of truth. And there is no escape from power into freedom, for such systems of power are co-extensive with human society. We can only step from one to another.¹⁹

The force of this comment is not only that we are inevitably mired in relativism, but also that any critique, immanent or otherwise, is itself a product of power, and ultimately a regime of truth.

The elevation of the marginalized to a more dominant status would itself be an effect of the autonomous system. Moreover, it would not lead to a “fuller” picture of what had been squelched or oppressed. What had previously been marginalized was itself produced, was brought into existence, by the particular rules of formation that also produced the dominant discourse. A re-organization of discursive power relations would be simply that, a re-organization. It would not be of any ethical significance, and it is unclear if it would be of any political significance. With every re-organization a different dominant as well as marginalized discourse would be *produced*. If the marginalized discourse is a product of a specific constellation of power relations, then that discourse would not remain the same once the power relations that produced it had changed. Therefore, the marginalized would not really be “brought to light.”

If all knowledge is produced by power relations, then how can it, at the same time, be subjugated? All discursive constructions depend upon exclusion. Any production of knowledge immediately posits non-knowledge. Thus, domination, oppression, and constraint do not act upon anything that is there prior to construction. But, if subjugation is itself produced, then the imperative to emancipate subjugated knowledges loses its force.

Rather than being produced and then excluded, knowledges are perpetually produced according to the imperatives of discursive systems. If all knowledge is perpetually produced through changing and rearranging power relations, then no knowledge would remain as it was prior to the change in power relations, and thus there would be no emancipation of old or stable knowledges, or prior subject

¹⁸Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p. 38.

¹⁹Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Political Theory* May 1984, p. 153.

positions, there would only be the formation of new knowledges. Therefore, while it makes sense for Foucault to encourage recognition of the historical contingency of all positions and knowledges, and an increase in the multiplicity of available positions and knowledges, it does not make sense for him to encourage *emancipation*.