

## **Foucault**

### **The Nature of Discourse**

In order to begin this investigation into the relevance of Foucauldian theory, I believe it is important to arrive at a contextual definition of power, which has become a very multifaceted expression in the present age. Is power in cyberspace entirely decentralised as the utopian camp would have us believe, or is this a myth and in actuality it is held by a few companies/institutions? It would appear on the surface that the Internet facilitates decentralised power, with all having equal publishing rights and free speech. The commonly accepted virtual ideology upholds this utopian view of power as decentralised, but we need to look at Foucault here to establish a theoretical framework. Although Foucault died of Aids in 1984 his theories of power and discourse provide a 'vehicle for thought', enabling us to map existing notions onto cyberspace. Through looking at the interplay between discourse and ideology, I hope to illuminate a Foucauldian theory of power in cyberspace, whilst maintaining a clear direction and sense of purpose. This use of Foucault's method will be self-conscious at every stage in order to provide signposts for future research. Before I can bring any Foucauldian logic to bear on cyberspace, we first need to look closely at his method of historical study through analysis of discourse.

Foucault's concept of discourse is an important one for understanding much of his thinking on power. According to Foucault discourses are historically situated truths or means of specifying knowledge. Power and knowledge are intimately linked together

through a multiplicity of discursive elements, and ultimately bond in the formation of discourse.

“We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power... Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it... there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy...” (Foucault, 1990, 101)

At the same time as producing power, discourse is also produced by it, as legitimating discourses produce counter discourses attacking the same validation. That is to say, for every discourse there is an alternative reading. Foucault states that there can be no power without resistance, as counter discourses produce new knowledge and ways of thinking. Thus ‘truth’ is never an absolute, as it is constituted through discourse. By means of an example one might consider the recent feminist thinking that has contested the stability of the categories of sex and gender. Within the strategy of Feminism there exist multiple discourses approaching the problem of equality from different perspectives.

“The theory that bodies are not biological essences, but are culturally constructed, just as much as sexuality and sex are cultural constructions, hobbles the possibility of a feminist identity grounded in any kind of “natural” category of women” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, 116).

Broadly speaking the two main camps of feminist thought oppose each other on these very grounds. On the one hand 'Goddess' feminism seeks a spiritual connection with mother earth, and on the other there is radical feminism, which rejects everything that can be plausibly situated within male defined institutions. These are but two counter discourses to a system of compulsory heterosexuality. These resistant discourses speak new truths, validating different sexual identities right across the board. As one such resistant discourse, feminism utilises Foucault's notion of bodies as a battleground of interests and power.

"Bodies are produced, understood, deployed in the service of certain interests and relationships of power... Foucault's understanding of bodies as the simultaneous source and product of a notion of self allows for strategic redeployment of these embattled bodies" (Ibid., 115).

Jana Sawiki (1991) notes that Foucault's theory of identities as culturally constructed and plural gives rise to a 'politics of difference' where different identities intersect, multiplying the forms of resistance.

"Where there is power there is resistance" (Sawiki, 1991, 56).

Indeed power always produces resistance through discourse. Power relations are established within the historical field of conflict and struggle, with the potential for liberation and domination, just as discourse legitimates or opposes the societal order.

“Foucault does not hope to transcend power relations altogether but rather to multiply the forms of resistance to the many forms that power relations take” (Ibid., 62).

Foucault’s politics of difference rejects humanism, which places the subject at the centre of history and reality, as the subject is fragmented and decentred in the social field through the very process of subjectivisation. For example the technologies of femininity (i.e. makeup, dress, how to walk in high heels etc.) subjugate by developing skills & competencies.

“Disciplinary technologies control the body through techniques that simultaneously render it more useful, more powerful and more docile” (Ibid., 83).

These are highly effective as they enhance the power of the subject at the same time as subjugating him/her. However, female body builders define a new aesthetic that destabilises feminine bodily identity and confuses gender. As power cannot exist without resistance, individuals are the vehicles as well as the targets of power. Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist mother and poet remarks:

“I find that I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole” (Ibid., 65).

Being the vehicle as well as the target of power in this case necessitates the repression of other character aspects. It is through disciplinary technologies and the notion that power cannot exist without resistance, that women are produced by patriarchal power at the same time as they resist it. One of Foucault's principal aims was to analyse the power relations governing the production and dissemination of discourses. He was aware that oppositional discourses often extend the very relations of their own domination. Critical feminist theory has resistance to identification built into it as dis-identification with femininity, as it has been defined by a male dominated society.

Thus far in the chapter I have introduced the concept of discourse as constituting its own truth. This is a crucial mechanism for understanding a Foucauldian application of theory, as it forms a conceptual base that theoretical building blocks may be placed on top of. We can already see the relevance to this thesis, as power being constituted through discourse is extremely pertinent when one considers the nature of cyberspace as a facilitator of discourse transactions. From here the discussion moves onto 'bio-power' and 'genealogy', as Foucauldian mechanisms serving the theoretical project of an "invitation to discussion" (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/ctr-fou3.htm>, 1).

## **Bio Power and Genealogy**

“[Foucault]... he examines particular ways whereby the conception of a subject and its domain, such as sexuality, punishment or pathology, is constituted within knowledge as a concern central to a specific age, society or social stratum” (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991, 226).

The conception of a subject as central to a specific age involves locating the body as a site for the operations of power. It is primarily through sex and the establishment of ‘normal’ behaviour by society that the notion of bio-power arises. The new domain of political life constituted by body (bio) politics consists of the following aspects:

“...the investment of the body with properties making it pliable to new technologies of control; the emergence of normalisation; the divestment of power from an absolute sovereign to a magnitude of regulative agencies located throughout the social body; and, the advent of empirical human sciences, making possible these new technologies of control” (Ibid., 228).

In cyberspace these regulative agencies are replicated from real life, for example you may be punished for illegal acts. However there are also specific instances of self regulatory systems such as moderated discussion groups, where the group itself upholds order by “flaming” (reproaching by expressing a point of view opposed to the recipient; also

verges on character assassination), or exclusion (perhaps the most effective self regulatory mechanism). Deviations from ‘the norm’ established by either society or cybercommunity then, can be disciplined. The mechanisms for judging both deviations and extent of deviation are embedded in the very core of our society: teachers, psychiatrists, social workers etc. It is through the process of problematisation that the illusion of ‘normality’ is created. In this light normalisation becomes the great strategy of power.

“...these transformations involved new forms of knowledge and power, both reinforcing one another within what Foucault terms the power/knowledge complex (*pouvoir/savoir*). Clinical medicine, psychiatry, educational psychology and criminology arose to provide discourses that promulgated new technologies of intervention, new targets and new policies” (Foucault 1979a, 189-91: cited in Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991, 229).

Thus bio-power is power over bodies, inscribed into the regulative mechanisms of society through social policy, which has become one of the main apparatuses of state power. ‘Policing’ in this context is defined as the ensemble of mechanisms upholding societal order, the conditions for health preservation and properly channelled accumulation of wealth (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991, 238). It is the main technology of discipline that accounts for the local origins of bio-power.

Policing and power are united with knowledge through discourse. Foucault's method of studying history through the analysis of discourses is called genealogy. This method was designed to study how discourses exercise power, rather than exploring to whom power actually belongs. Subjects are constituted in this method within the discourse of social policy. Within any one instance of discourse, a relationship between subject and social conditions is evident, illuminating the way they are constituted as knowledge within discourse. It is the analysis of these socially and historically situated discourses that constitutes genealogy. Foucault's genealogical method was concerned with tracing discursive formation. This replaced the method of archaeology, which sought to 'excavate' the rules that form an exclusive discourse, during the 1970's.

““Genealogy is gray, meticulous and patiently documentary.” This announces Foucault's treatment of history as text. Genealogy is gray because it is not black or white; it is not random or haphazard but a careful consideration of texts that have been written and rewritten from multiple perspectives. It is opposed to 'metahistory', which presupposes a grand teleology and search for origins...” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” (1971) cited in <http://www.csun.edu/~hfspc002/fouc.B1.html>)

Foucault's genealogy takes all the available discursive documents to re-evaluate the surface of cultural activity in a given period. It attempts to discover what the historical discourses hide from themselves. Through exposing the legitimating ideologies of a system such as cyberspace by archiving events into narrative form, genealogy produces a new reading based on a different set of assumptions than the customary one. This kind of

analysis produces a different way of conceiving the present through changing the way we read the past.

“...Foucault chooses the organic metaphor, seeing the present as ‘birthed’ by the past”

(Ibid.).

The present having been born to the past is an excellent metaphor for comprehending Foucault’s notion of genealogy. I will give a brief example here of what a genealogy of cyberspace might look like. However, whilst I recognise this as a worthy pursuit, I do not intend to fully explore it here. Consequently this is one such point which may be taken up for further research at a later date.

## **A Genealogy of the Internet**

During the Cold War in the late 1950's, the United States Department of Defence decided that the nation's communication systems needed protecting against the threat of a nuclear conflict. Such a war would completely destroy the existing communication network. In 1962 a researcher named Paul Baran proposed building a decentralised network, connecting remote computers all over the United States. In the event of a nuclear detonation this system would be able to maintain communication by dynamically adjusting its connections. Thus, it could survive any of the network nodes being destroyed. The proposal was expanded upon and developed by various members of the computing community. In 1969 the first packet switching (a technical name for packets of data being sent through a system of nodes) network was funded by the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). ARPAnet linked four research facilities: the University of Utah, the Stanford Research Institute, and the Universities of California at both Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. Being decentralised, it was relatively easy to add more machines to ARPAnet. All that was needed was a modem (computer hardware for communicating over a telephone), a telephone line, and some Network Control Protocol software to enable the addressing and interpretation of data packets. ARPAnet had grown to include over one hundred mainframe computers within just a couple of years. As the main use of this system was to facilitate interaction between scientists and researchers, it immediately became a forum for the exchange of information and ideas. Thus, the decentralised public information network known as the Internet was born.

Without analysing any additional texts we can utilise the genealogical method here, as an exploration of the historical situation reveals the military and academic roots that has shaped the nature of cybersociety today. For instance the social landscape of cyberspace is still largely composed of white male professionals and academics exchanging information on diverse topics.

The present is not a fixed product of the past however. It is rather one of many events, embedded into a process that is forever striving towards the future. If history is viewed as a series of fictions then the present must also be fictitious, as it only exists as such for a moment, before becoming history itself. Rather than freeze present and past as in metaphysics, genealogy attempts to leave this inevitable process of time in motion. Thus the fiction of simultaneous events suggests there is no fixed reality. The nature of truth, discourse and power as constituted within genealogy resist absolutes, rather than attempting to be determinate.

I began this subsection with the notion of bio-power and normality as created through the mechanism of problematisation. This is relevant here, as bio-power offers us a theoretical means of thinking about the mechanisms of social control being embedded into the core of society itself. I believe this notion can be applied to cyberspace, which operates with the same mechanisms for judging deviation as real life. That is to say, it is the same doctors, teachers, social workers etc. that regulate normality in cyberspace as in real life, as they are the same people with the same knowledge, but in a different environment.

Thus the autonomous regulation which is taken for granted in many news groups can be theorised through the vehicle of Foucault.

The discussion of genealogy is an extension of bio-power in some respects, as it brings temporality into the equation. Genealogy then, is the recording of moments in history where new discursive forms emerge out of inflected truths, attempting to uncover 'legitimizing ideologies'.

The thesis now moves onto where Foucault stands in relation to the notion of a class society faced with globalisation. I've used Marx here to illustrate my ideas, as being the initiator of class discourse he is a good example of a trans-discursive theorist. I also discuss power through the notion of individual and collective consciousness. This is highly relevant to identity within virtual worlds.

