

## MICHEL FOUCAULT THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE (1969)

### Chapter One: "The Unities of Discourse"

Foucault questions here the most important ready-made syntheses (22) by which we have traditionally distinguished one discourse (e.g. literature) from another, that is, the unquestioned continuities by which we organise, in advance, the discourse we are to analyse (25). The four most important such notions are:

**Tradition:** a "special temporal status" (21) is given to a "group of phenomena that are both successive and identical (or at least similar)" (21) which "makes it possible to think the dispersion of history in the form of the same" (21);

**Influence:** this "refers to an apparently causal process . . . the phenomena of resemblance and repetition" (21);

**Development:** this "make it possible to group a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organizing principle" (21-2);

**Spirit:** "enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation" (22).

Such divisions are, Foucault asserts, reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutional types (22) that are facts of discourse that deserved to be examined in themselves.

There are two other unities of discourse that are also in need of being questioned, Foucault argues:

**the Book:** this is a material thing which occupies a determined space and has an economic value. However, beyond its "internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (23); and

**the Oeuvre:** something "we recognise and delimit by attributing a certain number of texts to an author" (23). An oeuvre is a "collection of texts that can be designated by the sign of a proper name" (23). It is defined by a certain "expressive function" (24): an oeuvre is the "expression of the thought, the experience, the imagination, or the unconscious of the author, or, indeed, of the historical determinations that operated upon him" (24).

Foucault wants to also question two other important related notions:

**Origins:** the "secret origin" (25) beyond any "apparent beginning" (25), an "ever-receding point that is never itself present in any history" (25) and of which any beginnings can only ever be a recommencement; in the light of this, the historical analysis of discourse proceeds as the "quest for and the repetition of an origin that eludes all historical determination" (25). In fact discourse must be referred not to the "distant presence of an origin, but treated as and when it occurs" (25);

**Thought:** the notion that all discourse is "secretly based on an already-said that is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a never-said, an incorporeal discourse . . . everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in the semi-silence that precedes it" (25). The "manifest discourse . . . is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say" (25) which is a hollow which "undermines from within all that is said" (25).

Each of these notions must be exposed as deliberate constructions, the "rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinised" (25). Their alleged self-evidence must be interrogated, the problems that they pose liberated.

Foucault argues that any discourse ought to be understood as an event, rather than simply words on a page to be deciphered. If the analysis of language poses the question of according to what rules has a particular statement been made (27), discourse analysis asks: "how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another" (27). Foucault states his intention to interrogate the existence of current disciplines such as psychiatry, medicine and political economy in order to ask:

by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that

individualises them in time; according to what laws they are formed; against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether they are not . . . ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. (26)

Suspending these accepted continuities opens a vast field "made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them" (27). Whether one is dealing with a science, a book, novels, political speeches or the entire oeuvre of an author, one is dealing with a population of events in the space of discourse in general" (27) and the goal is a "pure description of discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it" (27).

Such questions are different from the kind of questions posed by the history of thought (7) (what we could call the history of ideas or intellectual history) which has traditionally sought to discover beyond the statements constitutive of a particular discipline the "intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant, or . . . the unconscious activity that took place despite himself, in what he said or in the almost imperceptible fracture of his actual words" (27). The goal in so doing is to reconstitute "another discourse . . . the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears" (27). "The analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs" (27). Discourse analysis proceeds in a different direction, however, the goal being to grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse; we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy. (28)

The erasure of given unities enables us to restore to a statement the specificity of its occurrence (28), and to examine the "incision that it makes, that irreducible . . . emergence" (28). A statement is an event that cannot be exhausted by either the language or its meaning.

The goal in discourse analysis is not to trace the occurrence of the statement / event (28) to operations of a purely psychological kind (the intention of the author, the form of his mind, the rigour of his thought, the themes that obsess him, . . .) (28-29), etc. behind the statements. Rather, the goal is to grasp other forms of regularity, other types of relations (29): each statement / event is grasped in terms of its relations to other statements, relations between groups of statements and between statements, groups of statements and events of quite a distinct nature (technical, economic, social, political). No statement exists in isolation but rather in an "interplay of relations within it and outside it" (29). By freeing statements of the unities that purport to be natural, immediate, universal (9), one can seize other unities (29), discursive groups that are not arbitrary, and yet remain invisible (29).

## Chapter Two: "Discursive Formations"

Foucault is interested here in describing the precise nature of the relations between (31) the statements (31) which comprise the particular discourses that constitute specific disciplines such as medicine, biology, and psychiatry: what

one must characterize and individualize is the coexistence of these dispersed and heterogeneous statements; the system that govern their division, the degree to which they depend upon one another, the way in which they interlock or exclude one another, the transformation that they undergo, and the play of their location, arrangement, and replacement. (34)

In other words, what is the link which exists between different statements on the same subject (e.g. the respective efforts of Freud and Lacan to define the psyche).

**Firstly, Common Object:** Foucault asks whether statements different in form, and dispersed in time, form a group if they refer to the same object (32). Foucault argues that the object (e.g. madness) to which a discourse ostensibly refers is in fact entirely constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations,

judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own. (32)

Moreover, different discourses may seem to discuss the same object but the object is different in each case. For example, the discourse on madness

is far from referring to a single object, formed once and for all . . .; the object presented as their correlative by medical statements of the seventeenth or eighteenth century is not identical with the object that emerges in legal sentences or police action. (32)

Each of these discourses on madness in turn constituted its object and worked it to the point of transforming it altogether (32). The typical relation (32) that would enable one to individualise a group of statements concerning madness (32) would be the simultaneous or successive emergence of the various objects that are named, described, analysed, appreciated, or judged in that relation (32). As a result, the "unity of discourses on madness would not be based upon the existence of the object madness, or the constitution of a single horizon of objectivity; it would be the interplay of the rules that make possible the appearance of objects during a give period of time" (32-3). Indeed, the unity of the various discourse on madness would consist in the interplay of the rules that define the transformations of these different objects, their non-identity through time, the break produced in them, the internal discontinuity that suspends their permanence (33).

**Second, Mode of Statement:** Foucault asks whether a discourse is united not so much by its objects or concepts as by a certain *style*, a certain constant manner of statement (33). Does a particular corpus of knowledge (33) presuppose the same way of looking at things, the same division of the perceptual field, . . . the same system of transcribing what one perceived (33)? Descriptions are, however, inseparable from the hypotheses by which they are subtended. What constitutes the unity of a body of statements is not their determined form (34) but the group of rules (34) that have made possible purely perceptual descriptions (34).

**Third, Concepts:** Foucault wonders whether statements can be grouped by determining the system of permanent and coherent concepts involved (34). The unity of a discourse is found not in the coherence of concepts (35) but in their "simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them and even in their incompatibility" (35). The goal is not the discovery of an "architecture of concepts sufficiently general and abstract to embrace all others" (35), but rather the "interplay of their appearances and dispersion" (35).

**Fourth, Themes:** Foucault asks whether a particular set of statements can be grouped through the "identity and persistence of themes" (35), the possibility that a certain thematic is capable of linking, and animating a group of discourses (35). For example, could one not constitute as a unity everything that has constituted the evolutionist theme from Buffon to Darwin (35)? His answer: the same thematic (36) can be articulated on the basis of two sets of concept, two types of analysis, two different fields of objects (36). The unity of a discourse is to be found, rather, in the "dispersion of the points of choice that the discourse leaves free" (36), the "field of strategic possibilities" (37). It is necessary to describe the dispersions themselves (37) in order to discover

whether, between these elements, one cannot discover a regularity, . . . an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchised transformations. (37)

What unites a particular discursive formation is not coherences but forms of division (37) and systems of dispersion (37).

Foucault advances the hypothesis that one is dealing with a discursive formation (38) whenever one can

describe between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations). (38)

The rules of formation (38) are the "conditions to which the elements of this division (objects, mode of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected" (38).

### Chapter Three "The Formation of Objects"

Foucault's interest here is in the precise way in which objects (e.g. madness) are formed by the rules of

formation (38) which inform a particular discursive formation (38) (e.g. psychiatry). Using the discourse of psychopathology from the nineteenth century onwards (40) as his example, Foucault's concern is with why, in addition to the motor disturbances, hallucinations and speech disorders that were the conventional objects with which psychopathology . . . dealt (40) up to that point, objects subsequently appeared that belonged to hitherto unused registers (40) such as minor behavioural disorders, sexual aberrations and disturbances, the phenomena of suggestion and hypnosis, criminality. Foucault wants to know according to what rules, according to which non-deductive system these objects could be juxtaposed and placed in succession in order to form the fragmented field . . . of psychopathology (41).

**Firstly, Surfaces of Appearance:** Foucault suggests that the *first* surfaces of their *emergence* (41) must be mapped, that is, where these individual differences, which . . . will be accorded the status of disease, alienation, anomaly, dementia, neurosis, or psychosis, degeneration, etc., may emerge and then be designated and analysed (41). These surfaces of emergence are historically variable and socially specific. In the case of nineteenth century psychopathology, these surfaces were constituted by the family, the immediate social group, the work situation and the religious community (41), all of which are normative (41), susceptible to deviation (41), and possessed of a margin of tolerance and a threshold beyond which exclusion is demanded (41). In the

distances, the discontinuities, and the thresholds that appear within it, psychiatric discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object--and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable. (41)

Other surfaces of appearance begin to make their appearance: for example, art with its own normativity, sexuality ("its deviations in relation to customary prohibitions become for the first time an object of observation, description and analysis for psychiatric discourse" (41), and penalty (whereas madness hitherto was distinguished from criminal conduct and was regarded as an excuse, criminality itself becomes . . . a form of deviance more or less related to madness [41]).

**Secondly, Authorities of Delimitation:** Foucault suggests that the "authorities of delimitation" (41) must be described. Medicine, the law, religious authority, literary criticism each constitute an institution possessing its own rules, . . . a group of individuals . . . , a body of knowledge and practice, . . . an authority recognised by public opinion, the law, and government (41-42). For example, literary criticism came at this time to treat the work less and less as an object of taste that had to be judged, and more and more as a language that had to be interpreted and in which the author's tricks of expression had to be recognised (42).

**Third, Grids of Specification:** Foucault stresses that the "grids of specification" (42) must be analysed: the systems, for example, according to which different kinds of madness are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of psychiatric discourse (42).

However, these three strategies do not "provide objects, fully formed and armed" (42) that the various discourses have merely to list, classify, name, select, and cover with a network of words and sentences (42). The objects of a given discourse (e.g. madness) are not established anterior to the discourse in question (e.g. psychiatry). It is not, for example, the legal system which hands over criminals to psychiatry. Discourse is not a place where previously established objects are laid one after another like words on a page (43). It is not a question of the sudden discovery by a psychiatrist of a resemblance between criminal and pathological behaviour (43) but of how to "decide what made them possible, and how these discoveries could lead to others that took them up, rectified them, modified, or even disproved them" (43). If

in a particular period in the history of our society, the delinquent was psychologised and pathologised, if criminal behaviour could give rise to a whole series of objects of knowledge, this was because a group of particular relations was adopted for use in psychiatric discourse. (43)

Examples of such relations include those between planes of specification like penal categories and degrees of diminished responsibility, and planes of psychological characterisation (43); the authority of medical decision and the authority of judicial decision (44); judicial and police interrogation and the medical questionnaire, clinical examinations, the search for antecedents and biographical accounts; the family, sexual and penal norms of the behaviour of individuals, and the table of pathological symptoms

and diseases of which they are the signs (44); therapeutic confinement in hospitals (44) and punitive confinement in prison (44).

In short, psychiatric discourse, for example, is "characterised not by privileged objects, but by the way in which it forms objects that are in fact highly dispersed" (44). It is a discursive "formation . . . made possible by a group of relations between objects that are in fact highly dispersed. This formation is made possible by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification" (44). A discursive formation is defined if one can establish such a group, if one can show how any particular object of discourse finds in it its place and law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects, without having to modify itself (44). The object does not await, in limbo, as it were, the order that will free it and embody it in a visible objectivity: "it does not pre-exist itself . . . It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations" (45). These relations are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification (45), etc. which are not present in the object (45). They do not "define its internal constitution, but what enables it to appear, to juxtapose itself with other objects, to situate itself in relation to them, to define its difference, its irreducibility, and even perhaps its heterogeneity" (45).

Foucault stresses that these *discursive* (45) relations by which objects are formed in particular discursive formations are to be distinguished from those *real or primary relations* (45) which exist, independently of all discourse (45), between institutions, techniques, social forms, etc. (45) (for example, the relationship between the bourgeois family and the functioning of judicial authorities and categories in the nineteenth century) that can be analysed in their own right. "They cannot always be superposed upon the relations that go to form objects: the relations of dependence that may be assigned to this primary level are not necessarily expressed in the formations of relations that makes discursive objects possible" (45). The primary relations are distinguishable from the secondary relations formulated in discourse itself: what nineteenth century psychiatry say about the relations between the family and criminality does not reproduce the interplay of real dependencies nor the interplay of relations that make possible and sustain the objects of psychiatric discourse. There are thus three sets of relations: "a system of *real or primary relations*, a system of *reflexive or secondary relations*, and a system of relations that might properly be called *discursive*" (45). The problem is to reveal the specificity of these discursive relations, and their interplay with the other two kinds (46).

Foucault emphasises that discursive relations are not internal to discourse, connecting concepts or words with one another (46) or establishing a deductive or rhetorical structure between propositions or sentences (46). Neither are they external to discourse, something akin to social relations that might limit it, or impose certain forms upon it (46). Discursive relations exist at the limit of discourse: they offer it objects of which it can speak" (46), that is, they

determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object . . . These relations characterize not the language (*langue*) used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice. (46)

The unity of discourse is not found in the objects themselves, in the interplay of their differences, nor in what is given to the speaking subject, but in the relations that characterize discursive practices: what we discover is not a configuration, nor a form but a group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity.

Consequently, discourse analysis does not try, for example, to write a history of the referent (47), to find out who was mad or in what his madness consisted or whether his madness is identical to what we call madness today. The goal is

not to neutralise discourse, to make it the sign of something else, and to pierce through its density in order to reach what remains silently anterior to it, but on the contrary to maintain it in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity. (47)

The goal, in short, is to dispense with things (47), to depresentify them (47), to substitute for . . . things anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical

appearance. (47-8)

To suppress (47) the things themselves (47) is not to return to the linguistic analysis of meaning (47) but to operate at a metalinguistic level. When one describes the formations of objects of a discourse (48), one tries to locate the relations that characterise a discursive practice, one determines neither a lexical organisation, nor the scissions of a semantic field (48): one does not question the meaning given at a particular period to specific words like melancholia nor the opposition of content between psychosis and neurosis. In short, discourse analysis is concerned not with the lexical contents . . . at the disposal of speaking subjects in a given period or the semantic structure that appears on the surface of a discourse that has already been spoken (48), but with the relations that characterise a discursive practice.

In trying to discover how criminality, for example, could become the object of medical expertise or sexual deviation the object of psychiatric discourse, discourse analysis is interested in "discursive practice as a place in which a tangled plurality . . . of objects is formed and deformed, appears and disappears" (48). Discourses are not "a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words" (48), not a "slender surface of contact . . . between a reality and a language" (48). In "analysing discourses themselves, one sees . . . the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects" (49). The goal is not to treat discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49). Discourses evidently utilise signs but "what they do is more than use these signs to designate things . . . It is this more that we must reveal and describe" (49).