

MICHEL FOUCAULT "THE SUBJECT AND POWER" (1982)

"The Subject and Power." Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. By Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 208-226.

Foucault argues here that he has been concerned throughout his career to "create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (208) via "three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects" (208): firstly, those modes of inquiry that give themselves the status of sciences and which objectivise the speaking subject (e.g. Linguistics) or the productive subject (Economics) or the sheer fact of being alive (Biology); secondly, those "dividing practices" (208) that divide the subject inside himself or from others (the mad from the sane, the sick from the healthy, the criminals from the good) and, in so doing, objectivises them; and, thirdly, the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (208), for example, how people have learned to recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality. Not power but the subject, Foucault concludes, has been the main theme of his research.

The human being is placed in relations of production, signification and power. Where Marxism and Linguistics offer instruments for the analysis of the two former categories, the study of the latter, the subject-power nexus, has drawn only on legal models concerned with what legitimated power and institutional models concerned with the State. What is needed is a "new economy of power relations" (210).

Both Fascism and Stalinism, in spite of their own internal madness, . . . used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our political rationality" (209). The relationship between rationalisation and excesses of political power is evident. The role of philosophy is ostensibly to keep watch over the excessive powers of political rationality, but Foucault wants to analyse not the rationalisation of our culture as a whole but as it occurs in several fields and with reference to such fundamental experiences as madness, illness, death, crime, sexuality etc., the goal being to analyse "specific rationalities" (210). A more empirical economy of power relations "consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point" (211) and "using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used" (211). To find out what our society understands by sanity, we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. To "understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (211), for example "opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live" (211). Such anti-authority struggles are "transversal" (21), not limited to one country; they criticise power-effects, that is, the uncontrolled power exercised over people's bodies, their health, life and death; they are "'immediate' struggles" (211), concerned with instances of power closest to them. Most importantly, they are struggles which question the status of the individual, asserting the right to be different and underlining everything which makes individuals truly individual, and attacking everything which separates the individual from others and communal participation (that is, struggles against the "government of individualisation" (212). They are opposed to deforming and mystifying representations imposed on people, without having a dogmatic belief in the possibility of scientific knowledge nor a skeptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. Ultimately, they ask the question 'who are we?', refusing all abstractions which ignore who we are individually as well as all scientific and administrative inquisition which determines who one is.

These resistances oppose those techniques of power that apply themselves to immediate everyday life, categorising the individual, attaching him to his own identity,

imposing a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. In short, they are opposed to any "form of power which makes individuals subjects" (212). There are two meanings to the word subject: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (212). There are three types of struggle, against ethnic, social and religious forms of domination, against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce, and against that subjection and forms of subjectivity and submission which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way. Any one of these three may predominate during a particular epoch: in the feudal period, ethnic and social domination prevailed; in the nineteenth century, exploitation predominated; today, subjection, the submission of subjectivity, reigns supreme. The modern epoch is one that replicates those movements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries centered around the reformation and analysable as a "great crisis of the western experience of subjectivity and a revolt against the kind of religious and moral power which gave form, during the Middle Ages, to this subjectivity" (213). The need to take a direct part in spiritual life, in the work of salvation and in the Truth which lies in the Book all constituted a struggle for a new subjectivity.

Mechanisms of power cannot be studied apart from their relationship to mechanisms of exploitation and domination, but they are not phenomena derived from more fundamental economic and social processes (the infrastructure). The emergence of the State since the sixteenth century is envisioned as a kind of power which ignores individuals and favours the interests of the totality, or of a particular class or group. In fact, the State's power is both an "individualizing and totalizing form of power" (213) precisely because the modern Western state has integrated into a new form an "old power technique" (213) that originated in Christian institutions: pastoral power. Christianity was the first religion to organise itself in the West as an institution. Its ultimate aim was to assure individual salvation; it is not a form of power that merely commands (it must be able to sacrifice itself for the flock); it is concerned with the individual as much as the flock; most importantly, it is exercised by "knowing the insides of people's minds, . . . exploring their souls, . . . making them reveal their innermost secrets" (214). "It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it" (214). It is linked, in short, with the "production of the truth – the truth of the individual himself" (214).

After the eighteenth century, this individualising form of power spread and multiplied: the modern state is a sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated" and "shaped in anew form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns" (214). The state is the "modern matrix of individualization" (215), a new form of pastoral power. In the secular context of the state, salvation becomes a matter of assuring the health and well-being, the security of the masses and has two poles, "globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population" (215) and "analytical, concerning the individual" (215). Pastoral power spread throughout the whole social body, finding support in a whole set of institutions and in individualizing tactics which characterised a series of powers such as the family, medicine, psychiatry, education and employers.

The crucial thing for modernity is to replace Descartes' question (Who am I as a unique, universal and unhistorical subject?) with Kant's more historically specific query 'What are we at this precise moment of history?'. The problem is "not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are" (216) in order to get rid of this "simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures" (216), to "liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state" (216) and to "promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (216).

The important questions which arise in this context are: 'By what means is power exercised?' and 'What happens when individuals exert power over others?'. What characterises power is its "capacity" (217) to bring "into play relations between individuals (or between groups)" (217). The term power implies that is exercised by certain persons over others. Communication is a very important part of power: the "production and circulation of elements of meaning can have as their objective or as their consequence certain results in the realm of power" (217). Forms of communication and power relations share various interrelationships in diverse contexts: an educational institution, for example, constitutes a specific "block of capacity-communication-power" (218). Each such block constitutes a discipline, that is, a particular configuration of communication and power relations, sometimes privileging power relations and obedience (penitential or monastic organisations), sometimes "finalising activities" (218) (workshops, hospitals), sometimes communication (apprenticeship) etc. Since the eighteenth century, in the disciplining of European societies, there is no question of individuals having become more obedient, or having been assembled in barracks, schools or prisons. It is a question, rather, of a "better invigilated process of adjustment . . . more rational and economic – between productive activities, resources of communication, and the play of power relations" (219). The object of analysis is not power but power relations.

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between people, but a "way in which certain actions modify others" (219). "Power exists only when it is put into action" (219). Power is not a function of consent. It is rather a "mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions" (219). By contrast, a relationship of violence acts upon a body or things. Neither consensus nor violence constitutes the basic nature of power: it is rather a "total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions" (220). The exercise of power "consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome" (221). Power is less a confrontation between two adversaries than a question of government, a way in which the conduct of individuals or groups may be directed. "To govern . . . is to structure the possible field of action of others" (221).

Power is exercised only over subjects who are free, subjects who are "faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized" (221). Freedom must exist for power to be exercised since "without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination" (221). The crucial problem of power is not voluntary servitude but the recalcitrance of the will, the intransigence of freedom. Power is an "agonism" (222) that is, a relationship that is reciprocal incitation and struggle, less a confrontation than a "permanent provocation" (222).

It is important to analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations rather than vice-versa. To approach power relations from the point of view of the institution is to study mechanisms that are designed to ensure the survival of the institutions in question. Power relations conceptualised as the power of actions to induce other actions makes one realise that power relations are "rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted 'above' society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of" (222).

The task of analysing power relations is enjoined upon us all because it is impossible to conceive of any society in which there are no power relations. This analysis must be conducted with respect to the historical specificity of the social formation in question. Such an analysis must examine the "systems of differentiations which permit one to act upon

others" (223), whether these be determined by law, traditions of status, privilege, economics, linguistic or cultural differences, differences in competence etc.; the types of objectives pursued (maintenance of privileges, accumulation of profit, exercise of a function or trade); the means of bringing power relations into being (threat of arms, effects of word, economic disparities, systems of surveillance etc); the forms of institutionalization (traditional predispositions, legal structures, custom, fashion, specific apparatuses that are hierarchical or autonomous, complex apparatuses such as the State etc.); the degrees of rationalization (questions of the effectiveness of instruments and the certainty of results, questions of cost, and anything else dictated by the situation).

Power relations cannot be reduced to a study of institutions. The forms and specific situations of the government of men by other men in a given society are multiple, even though they all, in the modern state, refer to the state in the final analysis, not because they are derived from it but because "power relations have come more and more under state control" (224). The study of power relations must also include the analysis of strategies, however, the tactics in a situation of confrontation where the objective is to act upon an adversary so as to render the struggle impossible for him. Power strategies are the "totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or to maintain it" (225). Power relations must be interpreted in terms of strategies. "Every power relationship implies . . . a strategy of struggle" (225) in which each force "constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal. A relationship of confrontation reaches its term, its final moment . . . when stable mechanisms replace the free play of antagonistic reactions" (225). It is through these mechanisms that one can direct the conduct of others. The exercise of power reaches its limits when it attains over the adversary or by a confrontation with those whom one governs and their transformation into adversaries. Every strategy of power dreams of becoming a relationship of power and every relationship of power leans toward the idea that if it comes up against the idea of direct confrontation, it may become the winning strategy.