

FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF POWER: A RADICAL DEPARTURE FROM REPRESSION TO PRODUCTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Power is often conceptualised in terms of capacity to domination and the ability to manipulate, thereby, ultimately repressive and negative. This paper presents, how the French philosopher Michel Foucault conceptualised 'power' and how it is different from the traditional understandings. As the recent debate considers power is a synonymous term of social life as it is inseparable from our lives, it is necessary that power must be analysed. In this paper, I shall suggest or defend that power is not essentially repressive but has productive nature. In order to substantiate my argument, I shall propose a comparative analysis of three-dimensional views of power which includes Liberal conception, Radical conception, and Foucauldian perspectives. The proposed comparative analysis basically inquires the questions such as what power is and how it exercises etc. It brings not only new questions for the analysis of power but also interesting angles on the old debates. However, I shall suggest that we must study power broadly, that is, paying attention to its subtle tactics. Furthermore, the analysis examines the status of the subject in the power relation which, I argue, reveals a radical departure of power's conceptualization from repression to productivity.

Keywords: Power, subject, repression, productive, discipline

1. Introduction

In the course of my argument, I shall basically handle the issues such as what power is and how it exercises. However, the main focus would be to criticise the general definitions of power characterised in terms of domination and repression by analysing the Foucauldian perspective of power. My approach will be to outline three conceptual maps or dimension, which will reveal the distinguishing features of the nature of power. I shall recapitulate the basic assumptions of the three dimensions of power and propose a comparative analysis in which distinguishing features of them are studied. Having analyzed the basic premises of three dimensions, I shall try to show that the third view which is the Foucauldian perspective allows one to give a deeper and more satisfying analysis of power than the other two. To bring these into a set of ordering relationships with each other, a concept of circuits of power has been proposed where what is the status of the subject is studied. In short, my intention is to execute a comparative analysis of the three dimensions which reveal different aspects and angles of the problem of power with regard to the subject.

2. Section A

2.1 The liberal conception of Power

The Liberal conception of power is classified into two dimensions or faces. The First face is often called the pluralistic concept of Power proposed mainly by Dahl, Polsby and Wolfinger. The basic assumption of power is that it is an activity, for example, 'A'¹ significantly affects 'B' to get what 'A' wants to do. To put it another way, Power is considered as the capacity or ability to impact others in a way in which the person or group gets others what they wish to do. Strictly speaking, power is the exercise of affecting or influencing B's values, preferences, interests, beliefs and desires etc seen as the result of B's acceptance of A's interests either by violent or non-violent forms of domination. In his seminal article, Robert Dahl defines Power as " 'A' has power over 'B' to the extent that he can get 'B' to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl (1957).p.202-203)

As per this definition, it is evident that in order to exist a power relation, specific subjects (here, in our example, A and B) are presupposed. In other words, power exists or exercises between subjects who have a conflict of interests based on their certain issues. As conflict occurs between subjects, who have the capacities to affect outcomes will be the powerful subject. Therefore, it is conceivable by definition that, if power exercises, then B's interests are harmed by A. This suggests that power is conceptualized as not only A's capacity but also a possession which enables 'A' influencing B, thereby, obtaining the dominance. Moreover, power is conceived to be exercised maximum where A 'gaining control' over B depends on the means, the source used by A. In short, Power is the act of bearing outcomes when there are conflicts of interest between subjects in which the most powerful subject is who wins the majority of the conflicts².

2.2 Second-dimensional view

Two-dimensional view of Power is proposed by Bachrach and Baratz. According to them, the first dimensional is inadequate to understand what power is. However, they do not deny the argument that power is exercised when A adversely affects B when there is a conflict of interest based on certain issues. Bachrach and Baratz argue that power is not only the matter of getting B to do something A wants to do but also preventing what B wants to do. What it means that when power is exercised, A works for the outcome by making the conflict favourable to A. As conflict occurs on issues, A creates an agenda to keep certain issues away from B which are not in favour of A but potential issues for B. As argued by Bachrach and Baratz, the first face is inadequate as it is confined only 'safe issues' (favourable issues for A) by presupposing issues involve actual disagreement. Two-dimensional view proposes the effective form of power is exercised not necessarily based on conflicts of 'safe issues' but also suppressing the potential issues. A suppress the potential issues by 'devoting his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 7) to avoid the emergence of B's potential issues (it includes values and interests of B) which are contrary to A³. Therefore, Bachrach and Baratz argue that first face of power is visible and easily recognizable whereas in the second face, both invisible and visible (visible only to agenda setters, that is A)

3. Section B: The radical conception of power

It is evident that the second face of power has major advantages and a better understanding of power over the one-dimensional view. However, the radical conception of power does not deny their basic arguments but tries to correct the shortcomings of the previous view. According to Steven Lukes, the supreme exercise of power is A gets B to do what A wants B to do seen as B accepting A's wants willingly. In other words, power is all about to prevent conflict between A and B from arising in the first place by influencing, shaping, or determining B's wants and interests. Power is exercised when B may willingly do something that A wants B as A gets B to do the desires that A wants B to have. The willingness of B shows that there is no conflict of interests⁴. As Lukes argues " is it not the supreme and most insidious use of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?" (Lukes, 1974: 24). Therefore, as per the Radical conception, power is insidious as it works by distorting perceptions, desires, preferences, thereby, shapes the subject (B).

4. Section C: The Foucauldian concept of Power

Foucault insists we must think about power broadly and pay attention to the invisible nature of it. His understanding of power is not only the extension of the ideas of the previous views but also supplementing different perspectives. Foucault extends the power's functions to all our social practices: moral, political, cultural and so on. He argues social conditions shape our beliefs, thoughts and feelings etc. thereby construct the subject. The very mechanism of constructing the subject is what Foucault calls Power⁵. As per Foucault, If power exercises between A and B, then both A and B are subjected to it. Foucault argues that as the social conditions are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of a particular individual's choices, it is also possible to think that A may be adversely affected or A is not necessarily always in privileged position in the power relation. For example, in the class society, in order to become a class itself, divergent social practices whether it is moral, cultural and political etc were performed primarily on its own members⁶. In other words, in order to form a class consciousness, these social factors play great roles⁷. Therefore, theoretically speaking, Power is not necessarily a possession by a few individuals over the many, but something to which everyone is subjected. For that reason, when we consider power exercises between A and B, both are positioned within the society in which they are influenced by different social factors. Though the previous view claims the social and political values and institutional practices can be mobilized, recreated and reinforced by A, in practice it is not necessarily possible that A alone succeeded in doing that as they are depended on socially structured and culturally patterned collective behaviour. It is also true with the radical conception as we cannot say that A is always successful in shaping B, thereby gets B what A wants to do. In a nutshell, for Foucault, power is neither a capacity of a particular individual or state nor a possession to dominate others.

5. Comparative analysis of the three views

It is important to note that when it comes to Foucauldian perspective, power is more subtle or invisible than the previous views. The first face is easily recognizable as it is based on observable conflicts of subjects

whereas the second face and radical conception aware of the fact that power could be insidious. As per the first face, power is conceptualised as capacity and possession as it is concerned with the question of who is exercising power. However, the second face's central problem is the exercise of power than who exercise it. It focuses mainly non-decision making process, which is, keeping certain potential issues mobilized off the agenda by A. On the other hand, Radical view analyses the subtle exercise of power where B's real interest is harmed though B is willingly acting for A. Briefly, according to these two views, power is considered as repressive and negative. Moreover, it is also evident that A is more or less free from the power relation or A is at least some level in the privileged position. Nonetheless, Foucault argues that power is not essentially suppressive as A as well as B subjected to power. In other words, technically speaking, power decides not only what B must do but also what A must perform⁸. In principle, suppose power exercises between A and B, if there is no conflict between A and B, that is, the rationality of the power (rules, norms and other procedures) is justifiable to both, then power is not essentially negative but also can be productive⁹. For example, if a teacher and a student agree on the educational procedures such as syllabus, exams, seminars, assignments etc., power works on them in order to improve them. It not only maximise the efficiency of the institution but also helps them to utilize their own ability at maximum¹⁰. In short, power is not necessarily possessed by any subject to dominate others. In principle, it is not subjects who use the power, but power produces the subject. Therefore, it is not possible to say that power is always suppressive.

6. Concluding remarks

Having examined the comparative analysis of the three views, it can be concluded that we must think about power broadly as there are instances in which power is insidious. It is important to note that in a subtle way power is more effective than where it is easily recognizable. We cannot say that power is essentially suppressive because it is not necessarily domination as traditionally conceived. Power also has a productive nature as it is the power which constructs subjects not subject's possession as often defined. Thinking about power only in terms of capacity, possession and domination is a narrow understanding. Therefore, power should be viewed as a strategy or mechanism which is not truly possessed by anyone either a particular individual or owned by the state, a class etc. Therefore, it becomes necessary to study its mechanisms at the subtle level as power arises not from appropriation and deployment by a subject but from tactics and techniques. In short, Power has now become one of the greatest tools to understand social life.

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Endnotes

¹Here, A and B are considered as subjects. Subjects broadly indicate individual, groups, offices, governments, states or other human aggregates. Dahl states Power is a relation between subjects. Though Dahl uses the word 'actors' instead of subject, I should like to be permitted one liberty that I use the word subject as these two terms have same meaning particularly in this context

² Dahl, Polsby, Wolfinger and others deals with the concept of power mainly in a political system, for instance, New Haven and, more generally, in the United States. According to them, Power is distributed pluralistically in the society where groups represent interests of individuals as a policy preference in a political participation. Therefore, power consists in not only the ability of influencing the outcome or decision making when conflicts of interest occur between groups but also defeating the opponents' preferences.

³In the case of political participation, it is called the non-decision-making process in which certain issues are kept covert, or prevented from gaining access to the relevant political decision-making arena. Therefore, 'Power may also be located in the capacity to create or reinforce barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts' (Bachrach and Baratz(1962), p. 8)

⁴The best example is the Marxist notion of ideology that is creating a false reality as the working class will be convinced that what the ruling class wants.

⁵Though Foucault does not give any proper definitions of power, by critically engaging with the Liberal and Radical conceptions, here I will take only its productive aspects only. According to Foucault, Power has different dimensions and theoretical aspects, for instances, constructing subjects, knowledge, truth etc.

⁶ In order for the bourgeoisie to establish its position of class domination during the nineteenth century, it had to form itself as a class. As we have seen, there was first a dynamic exercising of strict controls primarily on its own members. The technologies of confession and the associated concern with life, sex, and health were initially applied by the bourgeoisie to itself.

⁷One could say that the strategy of moralisation (health campaigns, workers ' housing, clinics, etc.) of the working class was that of the bourgeoisie. One could even say that it is this strategy which defined them as a class and enabled them to exercise their domination. But, to say that the' bourgeoisie at the level of its ideology and its projects for economic reform, acting as a sort of real and yet fictive subject, invented and imposed by force this strategy of domination, that simply cannot be said. (Foucault, M., & Gordon, C(2015),p. 203)

⁸ In a teacher and student relationship, under the rules and regulations of the university, both teacher and student are subjected. Power decides not only how a student should be trained but also it enables a teacher to train a student. Therefore, it makes sure how a teacher or a student should do their work.

⁹Foucault neither says power is productive nor repressive. What he argues that we cannot say power is always negative. If A and B are subjected to power in an institution, it is the rules, norms and other procedures is more important than the subjects (A and B). Therefore, power constructs subjects not subjects necessarily use power.

¹⁰The whole power's mechanism works as a disciplined form of power that is constantly, unnoticeable and pervasive in the institution. This disciplinary power can also be found, in places such as schools, hospitals, shopping mall and military barracks etc.