

Unit 12

Power/Knowledge

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Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you should be able to

- define and discuss power
- discuss the relationship of power/knowledge
- outline what is Foucault's Archeology and Genealogy

12.1 Introduction

Sociologists usually define power as the ability to impose one's will on others, even if those others resist in some way. "By power is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests" (Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*). Power manifests itself in a relational manner. That is, one cannot meaningfully say that a particular social actor 'has power' without also specifying the other parties to the social relationships. Also power almost always operates reciprocally, but usually not equally reciprocally.

The understanding and analysis of power has been critical to sociological thought. One of the prominent delineations of power has been provided by Michel Foucault (1926-1984). His works analyse the link between power and knowledge. Foucault began his intellectual pursuits in philosophy but became disillusioned by its abstractions and "naive truth claims" and turned to psychology and psychopathology. This resulted in his early writings, 'Madness and Civilisation', 'The Birth of Clinic' and initiated his lifelong interest in the relationship between power and knowledge.

The main influences on Foucault's thought were German philosophers Frederick Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Nietzsche contended that truth, knowledge and power are inextricably associated. He maintained that human behavior is motivated by a will to power and that traditional values had lost their power over society. Heidegger criticized what he called 'our current technological understanding of being'. Foucault's thought explored the shifting patterns of power within a society and the ways in which power relates to the self. He investigated the changing rules governing the kind of claims that could be taken seriously as true or false at different times in history. He also studied how everyday practices enabled people to define their identities and systematize knowledge; events may be understood as being produced

by nature, by human effort or by God. Foucault argued that each way of understanding things had its advantages and its dangers.

12.2 Definition of Power

Foucault never attempts at any definition of power but gives a definition of power relations at best. "The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individuals or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. Which is to say, of course, that something called power with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist."

Foucault goes on to insist that knowledge and power are always and necessarily interdependent. A site where power is enforced is also a site where knowledge is produced and conversely, a site from which knowledge is derived is a place where power is exercised. In 'Discipline and Punish' he sees prison as an example of just such a site of power, and as a place where knowledge, essential to the modern social sciences, was formed. Reciprocally the ideas from which the social sciences were formulated were also the ones that gave birth to the prison. The belief that a scientist can arrive at an objective conclusion, Foucault argues, is one of the greatest fallacies of the modern, humanist era.

"Modern humanism is therefore mistaken in drawing this line between knowledge and Power. Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time where knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge. It is impossible for knowledge not to endanger power."

So instead of referring to power and knowledge separately, he prefers to compound the term **power/knowledge**.

Box 12.1

The concept of "discourse" is central to many of Foucault's ideas. He describes discourses as ways of identifying truth and knowledge at historically specific moments, thus providing set of rules that define realities.

This is especially pertinent to scientific discourses, which are legitimated by the rationality paradigm. Discourses contain power because they establish particular truths and knowledge, and their power is exercised through the creation and sustenance of social norms, practices and institutions. In Foucauldian analysis, power is not monopolised by any one subject through its control of a predominant discourse; the discursive field comprises multiple subjects who manipulate various discourses to some extent. For Foucault, the issue is not origin of discourses, but the implications of their power effects and the types of knowledge they produce and institutionalise. Since power originates in discourses, it has no unitary source but is heterogeneous and pluralistic, coming from everywhere and being everywhere.

12.3 Power Knowledge and Discourse

Foucault analyses the relationship between power, knowledge and discourse that develops from the establishment of Enlightenment rationality which

presents itself as progressive and emancipatory. The hegemony of Enlightenment rationality and its institutions, and the marginalisation of other discourses, create and validate a social network of normative power which disciplines and constrains the individual at the micro level. Foucault studies the emergence of several kinds of rationalities in history. The emergence of a particular kind of rationality, then, presupposes that the field of knowledge is tightly linked with an empirical field. Due to its instrumentality, a form of reason as well as any form of knowledge define a set of possible practices and is thus an instrument of power. Further, being embodied in an empirical field, a form of reason (or any form of knowledge supported by it) has no 'being' beyond any set of practices. Therefore, the field of knowledge defines a field of power and vice-versa.

Power, thus, is not to be considered as opposite to reason; but on the contrary as the necessary condition for the construction of knowledge. Moreover, because power produces knowledge, it can be, at least partially, grasped by archaeology.

Reflection and Action 12.1

What is the relationship between power/knowledge. Does one always imply the other? Discuss and write down your answer in a note book.

Foucault's discussion of the nature of modern power is located within the postmodern framework. In keeping with the postmodern perspective, he critiques modernity and the universalising claims of modern rationality, and emphasises multiplicity, discontinuity and fragmentation. Foucault calls for a "theoretical production" (Foucault 1980:81) which is independent, localised and free from traditional discourse, such as his own application of the differing but overlapping perspectives of psychology, medicine, criminology and sexuality in his exploration of modernity.

The two major approaches employed by Foucault in his analysis of power and knowledge were **Archaeology** and **Genealogy**. His aim is to establish a genealogy of how power is exercised in our own society basing his analysis on archaeology of the discursive formations. Hence, his analysis is aimed towards the 'modes of functioning' of power in our society.

12.4 Foucault's Archeological Writings

Foucault's early work provides an archaeology of knowledge, wherein he deconstructs the underlying unconscious rationalities of historically specific domains. In his first major work, *Madness and Civilisation* (original French edition 1961; English edition 1965), Foucault traces the evolution of the relationship between insanity and modern reason. He examines the historical and discursive process whereby insanity is constructed as the opposite of rationality and is systematically separated from reason through "discourses of exclusion and institutions of confinement".

Box 12.2

According to Foucault, the "scientific psychiatry" (Foucault 1965:158) that emerged in the nineteenth century was invested with morality, and the scientific treatment of the insane was to occur through confinement. For Foucault, the power mechanisms involved in the process were more repressive than the shackles of the past.

Foucault's most elaborate archaeological exposition occurs in his following book, *The Order of Things* (original French edition 1966), in which he describes the emergence of the human and social sciences as the product of "the underlying rules, assumptions and ordering procedures of the Renaissance, classical, and modern eras" (Best and Kellner 1991:41), and the creation of "man" as a discursive construct of scientific knowledge and inquiry. In his final archaeological writing, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (original French edition 1971), Foucault provides a reflexive critique and clarification of his intellectual project: the development of a historical and theoretical epistemological space.

Foucault's archaeological writings have been criticized for an excessive focus on discourse, to the exclusion of social institutions and practice. Nevertheless, Foucault's archaeologies clearly privilege the analysis of theory and knowledge over social practices and institutions. An inquiry into the effect of discourse on the social and political environment would require an evaluation of material institutions. This principle guides Foucault's next intellectual phase, in which he borrows from the Nietzschean principle of genealogy to concentrate explicitly on power effects and their relationship with knowledge (Best and Kellner 1991:45).

12.5 Foucault's Genealogical Writings

Genealogy signals a shift and broadening of Foucault's focus, but not a fundamental change in his vision. Like Foucault's archaeological writings, his genealogy explores discursive discontinuities and clarifies the historical contexts of positions which are presented as absolute. Following from archaeology, genealogy focuses on the multiplicities and pluralities within a field of discourse; explicates the shifting, discontinuous undercurrents of evolutionary history; and examines the role of reason in the production of the human sciences. In contrast to archeology, genealogy aims at social, political and economic institutions and practices; and the relations between discursive and non-discursive domains.

Following from this position, Foucault began to theorize about power in the 1970s from a non-totalizing, non-subjective and non-humanist perspective. His conception of power is radically different from earlier juridical, political and economic macro perspectives. He suggests that power cannot be observed in these apparatuses, and that it is diffuse, non specific and polymorphous, shaping individual identities and bodies. Thus, unlike most earlier explanations, he does not see power as inhibiting and negative, but as productive and prescriptive, operating through the authority of social norms (Best & Kellner 1991:48-49).

Reflection and Action 12.2

Reflect on Foucault's genealogical approach. What are the advantages of such an approach?

In his first genealogical work, *Discipline and Punish* (original French edition 1975; English edition 1979), Foucault describes "the historical formation of the soul, body, and subject" within "disciplinary matrices of power" which operate in schools, armies, hospitals, factories and prisons. He thus examines the relationship between modern social institutions and the power relations of rationality. In his later work, Foucault explicates the nature of rational power.

Foucault critiques the 'repressive hypothesis' by stating that the idea of sexual repression is a mechanism situated within "the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure" (Foucault 1978:11), which creates and sustains the discourse on sexuality and focuses on the body as the site of control. Thus, Foucault reveals the ubiquitous and insidious operations of power; problematizes rationality, subjectivity and knowledge; explores the links between power and knowledge. Foucault's vision has often been considered oppressive. His archaeological and genealogical works reveal the colonizing power of modern rationality and its dispersed presence throughout the social field.

Nonetheless, Foucault's theorising is grounded in the belief that knowledge can be transformative. At the same time, although discourses reinforce power, they also provide potential for resistance, whereby the disenfranchised can extend oppositional discourses and demand legitimacy, frequently by appropriating institutional categories.

12.6 Conclusion

Even if one does not agree with Foucault, at the very least, he reveals the pervasive presence of power in human existence and critiques the demonstrated validity of rationality, subjectivity and knowledge. His analyses describe the extensive effects of power and its multiple operations: in rational institutions such as schools, hospitals, factories, asylums and prisons; in the production of scientific knowledge; and in the construction of epistemological systems (Best and Kellner 1991:68-69). However, Foucault also has clear limitations. His critique of modernity has been accused of being one-sided, presenting only the negative results of rationality, which limits his applicability. More significant is the startling neutrality of his analyses. Although Foucault states that power operates through knowledge and discourse, he ignores the reality that established epistemologies favor certain groups or individuals to the exclusion of others. The discourse of rationality itself has historically specific roots to white Western male intellectuals: thus, its predominance has very real and specific effects. Although he speaks of bringing subjected discourses into play, he does not address the fact that subjected discourses are discovered among clearly identifiable sections of the human population: among non-white, non-affluent, non-West European, non-heterosexual men and women.

In spite of practical goals of his analysis, Foucault has been broadly criticized by his adversaries on the 'backdoor determinism' inherent to his conception of power.

However Foucault has made an invaluable contribution to the study of power/knowledge by opening new fields of understanding and interpretation.

12.7 Further Reading

Foucault Michel, 1973. *Birth of the Clinic* N.4. Pantheon

Foucault Michel, 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* N.4. Pantheon

Foucault Michel, 1965. *Madness and Civilization* N.4. Pantheon