MICHEL FOUCAULT "TWO LECTURES" (1976)


Lecture One, January 7, 1976

While Foucault notes the "increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses" (80), he is wary of "global, totalitarian theories" (80) which have in fact proved a hindrance to research. Hence, his sense that social criticism over the last few years has been local and less theoretical than reality-oriented. In addition, Foucault argues that we have been witness to the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (81), that is, of the "historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functional coherence or formal systematisation" (81). By 'subjugated knowledges,' Foucault means those "naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required levels of cognition and scientificity" (82). It is through the reappearance of such 'knowledges' that criticism of the sort which he offers performs its work. He is of the view, for example, that it is a semiology of the life of the asylum or a sociology of delinquency which would have prevented an effective "criticism" (81) of the asylum of the sort which he himself offered in works like Madness and Civilisation.

For Foucault, it is as much in the "specialised areas of erudition' (83) as in what he characterises "disqualified, popular knowledge" (83) that there lies the "memory of hostile encounters . . . confined to the margins of knowledge" (83). It is precisely such marginalised memories that his approach to social criticism, what he came to describe with the Nietzschean term 'genealogy,' is concerned to uncover. Genealogy "allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today" (83) by entertaining the claims of illegitimate knowledges versus the claims of that "unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects" (83). There is no question here, however, of a naive return to "direct cognition" (84) or "immediate experience" (84). There is, rather, a concern with the insurrection of knowledges opposed to the "effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within a society such as ours" (84). Genealogy "reactivates local knowledges against the scientific hierarchisation of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power" (85). Where the activity which he terms 'archaeology' (and to which most of his early works were devoted) refers to the "methodology of this analysis of local discursivities" (85) (that is, the analysis of the particular discourses which constitute the human sciences such as psychiatry), genealogy refers to the "tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities" (85), such subjected knowledges could be located in opposition to the forces of centralisation and hierarchisation.

Foucault's objection against Marxism is located precisely in the claim to make a science out of it. For Foucault, it is vital to "question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science" (84). He asks:

What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify. . . . Which speaking, discoursing subjects – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you then want to diminish? . . . Which theoretical-political avant-garde do you want to enthrone in order to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of knowledge that circulate about it? (85)

Moreover, Foucault's concern is that once hitherto unvalorised knowledges are brought to light and put into circulation, they "run the risk of re-codification, re-colonisation" (86), annexed and taken back into the fold, as it were. Indeed, he warns that the silence with which unitary,
scientific theories confront the genealogy of knowledges which Foucault is desirous of undertaking is no indication of fear on their part, indeed, it could be the "index of our failure to produce any such fear at all" (87).

The reason for this fearlessness, and the object with which all genealogies must ultimately come face to face, is that "power which has surged into view in all its violence, aggression and absurdity" (87) in recent years. Foucault is at pains to discover the nature of this power while avoiding what he terms the "theoretical coronation of the whole" (88) or 'scientification' which he has already warned about:

what are these various contrivances of power, whose operations extend to such differing levels and sectors of society and are possessed of such manifold ramifications? What are their mechanisms, their effects and their relations? (88)
The key question for Foucault in this regard is simply this: "is the analysis of power or of powers to be deduced in some way from the economy, a way of thinking about power most commonly associated with Marxism per se.

Foucault contends that though it is not immediately apparent, both Marxist and non-Marxist (liberal) theories of power are guilty of a certain "economism" (88) in their conceptualisation of power. In the case of what he terms the "classic, juridical theory of power" (88) (the political philosophy normally called 'liberalism'), it is viewed as a right, which is one is able to possess like a commodity, and which one can in consequence transfer or alienate, either wholly or partially, through a legal act or through some act that establishes a right, such as takes place through cession or contract. Power is that concrete power which every individual holds, and whose partial or total cession enables political power or sovereignty to be established. This theoretical construction is based on the idea that the constitution of political power obeys the model of a legal transaction involving a contractual type of exchange, hence the clear analogy that runs through all these theories between power and commodities, power and wealth. (88),

In this schema, "political power" (89) is predicated on the "process of exchange, the economic circulation of commodities" (89). Foucault is alluding in all this, of course, to the foundational role played by Rousseau's The Social Contract in the development of liberalism and continued in the work of recent Anglo-American philosophers like John Rawls. For Foucault, Marxists conceive of power "primarily in terms of the role it plays in the maintenance simultaneously of the relations of production and of a class domination which the development and specific forms of the forces of production have rendered possible" (88-89). Political power, in short, is possessed by the wealthiest sectors of a society and is used to maintain the status quo.

Foucault's admits that "power is profoundly enmeshed in and with economic relations" (89). However, he wonders whether, contrary to the view of Marxists, power is always in a subordinate position relative to the economy? Is it always in the service of, and ultimately answerable to, the economy? Is it its essential end and purpose to serve the economy? Is it destined to realise, consolidate, maintain and reproduce the relations appropriate to the economy and essential to its functioning? (89)

On the other hand, he wonders, alluding to liberalism, whether power is best conceptualised as a kind of commodity that exchanged between persons. He concludes that neither the model of "functional subordination" (89) (i.e. Marxism) nor "formal isomorphism" (89) (i.e. liberalism) accurately characterise the "interconnection between politics and the economy" (89), the "indissolubility" (89) of which is of an entirely "different order" (89).

In seeking a "non-economic analysis of power" (89), the pertinent question for Foucault is: "If power is exercised, what sort of exercise does it involve? In what does it consist? What is its mechanism?" (89). Defining power as the "way in which relations of forces are deployed
and given concrete expression” (90), Foucault argues that one common answer to this question offered by thinkers ranging from Hegel to Marx and Freud is that power is “essentially that which represses. Power represses nature, the instincts, a class, individuals” (90). Another view, which Foucault associates with Nietzsche, holds that power is best analysed in terms of “struggle, conflict and war” (90). Playing on the view of Clausewitz that “war is politics continued by other means” (90), Foucault suggests that political power is merely a “war continued by other means” (90). By this, he means that the role of political power . . . is perpetually to re-inscribe this relation through a form of unspoken warfare; to re-inscribe it in social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and everyone of us. (90)

In short, politics is a means of “sanctioning and upholding the disequilibrium of forces that was displayed in war” (90). The “political struggles, the conflicts waged over power, with power, for power, the alterations in the relations of forces, the favouring of certain tendencies, the reinforcements, etc., etc., that come about within this civil peace” (90-91) should be understood as “episodes, factions and displacements in that same war” (91), the end result of this “contest of strength” (91) being “decided in the last analyses by recourse to arms” (91).

There are, in short, two alternative conceptions of power to “economistic analyses of power” (91): on the one side, “power as an organ of repression” (90) and, on the other, the view that the “basis of power lies in the hostile engagement of forces” (91). These are related conceptions of power which are opposed in turn to the liberal conception thereof as an: original right that is given up in the establishment of sovereignty, and the contract, as matrix of political power, provide its points of articulation. A power so constituted risks becoming oppression whenever it over-extends itself, whenever – that is – it goes beyond the terms of the contract. Thus we have contract-power, with oppression as its limit, or rather as the transgression of this limit. (91)

There are, in short, “two schemes for the analysis of power” (92): the “contract-oppression schema, which is the juridical one” (92) (predicated on the binary opposition “legitimate and illegitimate” [92]) and the “domination-repression or war-repression schema” (92) (which is predicated on the binary opposition “struggle and submission” [92]). Foucault argues that repression in the latter scheme does not perform a role analogous to that of oppression in the former schema: “it is not abuse, but is, on the contrary, the mere effect and continuation of a relation of domination” (92). It is, from this point of view, merely the realisation of a “perpetual relationship of force” (92) within the “continual warfare of this pseudo-peace” (92).

Acknowledging that much of his work to this point is located within the domination-repression schema, Foucault argues that this model now need to be “considerably modified if not ultimately abandoned” (92) or at least “submitted to closer scrutiny” (92) for the reason that the “notion of repression” (92) is “wholly inadequate to the analysis of the mechanisms and effects of power that it is so pervasively used to characterise today” (92).

Lecture Two, January 14, 1976

Foucault begins this lecture by contending that, to this point, his work has been concerned with the “how of power” (92), amounting to an attempt to “relate its mechanisms” (92) to the “rules of right that provide a formal delimitation of power” (93) as well as the "effects of truth that this power produces and transmits, and which in their turn reproduce this power" (93). Hence the “triangle: power, right, truth” (93). Foucault asserts that the traditional question posed by political philosophers concerns how the "discourse of truth, or quite simply, philosophy as that discourse which par excellence is concerned with truth is able to fix limits to the rights of power?"
In other words, the concern of philosophers from Plato onwards has been to discover the ground rules for knowing the truth about all things as a means of anchoring our claims about the right way to live with one another and rule ourselves. The question which Foucault now wishes to pose instead is the inverse: "what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth?" (93). In other words, "what type of power is susceptible of producing discourses of truth that in a society such as ours are endowed with such potent effects?" (93). Foucault’s concern is, to be precise, with the political inequities which necessarily inform the production of knowledge and the control which those who exercise power in a given social and historical context consequently exert on the production of truth-claims within the various knowledge-industries. To put this another way, Foucault is interested in the way in which those who possess power have the power to dictate what is held to be true which in turn consolidates the hold on power of those who already possess it. He continues:

in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body. . . . These relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth. . . . We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (93).

We are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we must speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition and its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. (93).

He argues that we are required to produce 'truths' much as we produce wealth, indeed, in order to produce wealth. Moreover, gesturing in the direction that his work immediately prior to his death would take, he contends that we are all "subjected to truth" (my emphasis; 94) in the sense that it is such 'truths' which determine our ethical codes (i.e. what is considered to be good or right) and shapes the laws (i.e. determinations concerning what is legitimate) and these in turn mould our identities, the sense which we have of ourselves: "we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power" (94).

Foucault argues that in Europe, it is "in response to the demands of royal power, for its profit and to serve as its instrument or justification, that the juridical edifice of our own society has been developed. Right in the West is the King's right" (95). The King is the central personage in the whole legal edifice of the West, he points out, in the course of the development of which Roman law was resurrected to establish the authoritarian, administrative and absolute power of the monarchy. When this legal edifice is turned against the monarch's control in later centuries, it is "always the limits of this sovereign power that are put into question, its prerogatives that are challenged" (94). The king is central to the general organisation of the legal system in the West, and discourse centres around either justifying the absolute nature of the sovereign's power as befitted his fundamental right, or advocating the necessity of imposing certain limits upon this sovereign power, submitting it to rules of right. However, he contends that the "essential function of the discourse and techniques of right has been to efface the domination intrinsic to power" (95) under a veil of legitimacy and benevolence. Foucault's goal up to this point has been, he points out, to invert this discourse of right, to expose the fact of domination, its latent brutality. Right, not simply the laws themselves but also the whole complex of apparatuses, institutions and regulations which comprise the legal system "transmits and puts into motion relations that are not relations of sovereignty but of domination" (95-6).
Foucault is particularly interested, however, in not merely the domination of the king in his central position but, rather, the "manifold forms of domination" (96) which form the matrix of any society, that of "his subjects in their mutual relations" (96) with one another.

Foucault wants to replace the concern with sovereignty and obedience with the problem of domination and subjugation. Right should be understood "not in terms of a legitimacy to be established, but in terms of the methods of subjugation that it instigates" (96). Moreover, Foucault’s concern is not the traditional one keen to understand the nature of power as it is dispensed in its central locations (that is, with the power of the monarch over his subjects), but "power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, . . . those points where it becomes capillary" (96). For example, he is not interested in researching how the right of punishment is founded on sovereignty (whether monarchical or democratic right), but rather "in what ways punishment and the power of punishment are effectively embodied in a certain number of local, regional, material institutions . . . concerned with torture and imprisonment, and to place these in the climate – at once institutional and physical, regulated and violent – of the effective apparatuses of punishment" (97). Foucault wants to eliminate the consideration of power "from its internal point of view" (97), that is, the obsession with the question 'who has power and what has he in mind to do with it?'. Rather, Foucault wants to study power as it is "completely invested in its real and effective practices . . . at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object" (97). The goal is to grasp how "subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects" (97).

Moreover, Foucault argues that power should not to be considered as the "phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over another" (98). Rather, power

must be analysed as something which circulates . . . which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (98)

It is a simplification, he suggests, to think of the individual as crushed by power. The individual is, rather, both an "effect of power" (98) and the element of its articulation: the "individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (98).

The task is, from Foucault's perspective, not to deduce the nature of power by starting from its centre, but rather to "conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting . . . from its infinitesimal mechanisms . . . and then see how these mechanisms of power have been . . . invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc. by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination" (99). For example, in a conventional economistic analysis of the sort popular with Marxists, one might start with the hegemony of the bourgeois class in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and deduce from this that since lunatics are useless to industrial production, society was obliged to dispense with them, to lock them up and keep them out of sight. Similarly, starting from similar premisses, one might conclude that any sexual activity which did not lend itself to the procreation of the productive forces in society was banned, repressed and excluded or, alternately, that sex was encouraged in order to provide a greater labour force. The alternative approach suggested by Foucault is to start at the other end, seeing "how mechanisms of power have been able to function" (100) precisely at their points of application: his goal has been to understand phenomena such as the confinement of the insane or the repression of sexuality with reference to their "immediate social
entourage" (101), such as the family, parents, doctors, rather than in relation to a generalised bourgeoisie, in order to perceive how they became economically and politically useful. What it is important to see is that the bourgeoisie did not believe that mad people ought to be locked up or that infantile sexuality repressed, so much as they stumbled by accident upon mechanisms of exclusion and surveillance that turned out to be politically useful and economically profitable. These mechanisms were subsequently put to the use of the entire state system.

Foucault contends that, contrary to the conventional Marxist view of such things, these mechanisms did not give rise to ideological formations (e.g. an ideology of education, or an ideology of the monarchy, or an ideology of democracy etc.). They have given rise, rather, to the "production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge – methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control" (102). Power "when it is exercised . . . cannot but evolve, organise and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge, which are not ideological constructs" (102), that is, not merely illusory ideas which distract us from an accurate knowledge of reality. This is why, in order to balance these dominant perspectives there is need for what in the first lecture he referred to as 'subjugated knowledges.'

In conclusion, alluding to the work of the early modern political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Foucault argues that we "must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power. We must escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination" (102) between the people which comprise a society. As long as a feudal type of society survived, the mode in which power was exercised was definable in terms of the relationship sovereign-subject. However, Foucault argues, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one witnesses the emergence of a different mode of power, one that thrives more on bodies and their activities, rather than what they produce, more on their labour per se than the wealth produced. This emergent form of power is one exercised via surveillance rather than levies. It presupposes a "tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign" (104). It is a form of power in which there is minimum investment and maximum return. This non-sovereign form of power is the invention of the bourgeoisie: it is a disciplinary power that is practiced, in effect. The theory of sovereignty persists as an ideology and as an organising principle of the major legal codes even as the "juridical systems . . . enabled sovereignty to be democratised through the constitution of a public right articulated upon collective sovereignty" (105). However, he stresses the "democratisation of sovereignty was fundamentally determined by and grounded in mechanisms of disciplinary coercion" (105), the legislation and discourse of public right thereby disguising the "disciplinary coercions whose purpose is in fact to assure the cohesion" (106) of the social body. These disciplines each cater to the rule of the sovereign while simultaneously generating multiple apparatuses of knowledge that operate to normalise and to homogenise, that is, which function to say what is normal and right and, by contrast, what is abnormal and which should thus be excluded from normal social intercourse. The various disciplines which comprise the human sciences (e.g. psychology or criminology) play a crucial role in this regard, existing as they do at the point of intersection between the two heterogeneous levels of discipline and sovereignty. Indeed, sovereignty and disciplinary mechanisms are both integral and inter-related components of the general mechanism of power in modern society. The way out of this, Foucault concludes, is not a return to sovereignty but a move towards a "new form of right" (108). To this end, he asserts, "one must indeed be anti-disciplinary" (108).