

THE POWER OF DISCOURSE AND THE DISCOURSE OF POWER

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Abstract

Discourse is one of the most frequently used terms from Michel Foucault's work and has acquired distinct intellectual status in his hands and is the central subject of analytic concern. Foucault's work on Discourse is useful and revolutionary as it forces us to question what we have always taken for granted. In all his works he focuses on the intent of the establishment to lay down procedure by which our societies regulate themselves on a rationalized and orderly basis. In this paper an attempt will be made to comprehend the network of discourses and discursive practices through which we seem to acquire knowledge about the world and their underlying agendas.

THE POWER OF DISCOURSE AND THE DISCOURSE OF POWER

Discourse is one of the most frequently used terms from Foucault's work and at the same time, it is one of the most contradictory. It has acquired distinct intellectual status in his hands and is the central subject of analytic concern. For Foucault discourse is a "group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (*Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* 44) thus the 'social' is produced in the network of discourses and discursive practices through which we seem to acquire knowledge about the world.

During his career as a historian Foucault (1926-84) wrote many books on the history of psychiatry, the origin and rise of clinical medicine, the evolution of biology, the emergence of the modern prison system and other important social developments. In all of these books he focuses on the intent of the establishment to lay down procedure by which our societies regulate themselves on a rationalized and orderly basis. Foucault is of the view that these human sciences have made 'man' both a subject of study and the subject of the State. Foucault, attributes this to the 'power' that is at the heart of 'discourse'. In *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) he has used 'discourse' to refer to the general domain of all statements, sometimes as a group of statements,

and sometimes as regulated practices that account for a number of statements; that is the unwritten rules and structures that produce particular utterances and statements.

In “The Order of Discourse” he states that discourse is regulated, controlled, selected, organized and redistributed in such a way so as to work off its powers and dangers and he is concerned with what rules permit certain statements to be made and what rules order these statements. Whenever sets of rules of these kinds can be identified, we are dealing with what Foucault calls ‘discursive formation’ or ‘discourse’. Discourse constructs the topic, defines and produces the objects of knowledge, governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about. In its policing of abnormal behaviour, the power of the human sciences derives from what they claimed to be knowledge; it derives from their claims to expertise. Such a cluster of claims to knowledge is what Foucault calls a ‘discourse’. To be more precise, a discourse is a loose structure of interconnected assumptions that makes knowledge possible. Such a discourse, then, produces claims to knowledge and it is these claims which we accept and that give it its power.

Foucault’s work has been concerned basically with the configuration of discourse, knowledge and power and it is through these three key notions that he elaborates a complex theory. According to him Power and Knowledge are jointly imbricated in institutional practices such that power is always involved with the production of knowledge and knowledge is always involved with the institutional exercise of power and discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. He was interested in analyzing the discursive pathways by which power circulates within formations and traditions. According to him Power is always a matter of using language, information and images and nowhere is this more clearly the case than in discursive formations. Discourse is regulated by a set of rules, which lead to the distribution, and circulation of certain utterances and statements. Some statements are circulated widely and others have restricted circulation thus within the West, the Bible is a text, which is always in print, many political commentators use quotations from the Bible to illustrate points that they have made. Journals are devoted to its analysis, and there are always new interpretations and commentaries on it. In this way, the Bible itself, and statements about it, can be seen to constitute a discourse which is kept in circulation within our society.

The notion of exclusion is very important in Foucault’s thinking about discourse, rather than seeing discourse as simply a set of statements which have some coherence, we should, rather think of a discourse as existing because of a complex set of practices which try to keep them in circulation and other practices which try to fence them off others and keep those other statements out of circulation. Those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known and those who have knowledge have power over those who do not. It is absolutely undeniable that in the past false claims to knowledge have served as instruments of power, of social suppression. Take, for instance, the supposed inferiority of women and coloured people, which endless generations of white males have accepted as factually true, as part of their knowledge of the world. It is this sense of the structure of discourse and control which this exercises on what can be said which

interests Foucault. According to him discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system, which structures the way we perceive reality.

He describes in his article “The Order of Discourse”, the procedure which constructs discourse and which lead to discourse being produced. In the first set of procedures, he suggests consists of three external exclusions, and they are taboo (prohibition), the distinction between the mad and the sane (division & rejection) and the distinction between true and false (the will to truth). Taboo is a form of prohibition since it makes it difficult to speak about certain topics like sexuality and politics, thus discourse in these spheres may be forbidden, so may the speaker or the occasion. It does not matter here that discourse appears to be of little account, because the prohibition that surround it very soon reveal its link with desire and with power. As history constantly teaches us that discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power, which is to be seized.

The second external exclusion is the distinction between the speech of the mad and the sane. The discourse of madness is rejected, taken as noise and treated as if it did not exist. To give an example, those people in Britain who have been certified as mentally ill and who have been prescribed certain medicine to help their condition, now, because of changes in legislation, are not able to state authoritatively that they do not wish to take such medication, in this sense only the statements of those considered sane are attended to.

The division below true and false is the third exclusionary practice described by Foucault, those in positions of authority who are seen to be experts are those who can speak the truth. The will to truth, which Foucault calls “that prodigious machinery designed to exclude” (“The Order of Discourse.” 215) is institutionally supported and reinforced by a wrote range of practices and institutions, universities, government departments, publishing houses, scientific bodies and so on. Thus even if we are asserting something which as far as we know it is ‘the truth’ our statements will only be judged to be ‘true’ if they accord with, and fit in with, all of the other statements which are authorised within our society. This will to truth according to Foucault is reinforced, supported and renewed by a whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, the system of books, publishing, libraries, intelligentsia, laboratories etc. Due to the far-reaching support base of the will to truth it exerts pressure and something like constraint on other discourses.

The third system according to Foucault assimilates the others, both in order to modify and support them and to provide them with a foundation, it is also the most dangerous for we are unaware of prodigious machinery used by to exclude. Thus of the three great systems of exclusion which forge discourse the first two become subordinated to third as they become more fragile while the third grows all the time, masking its links with power and discourse.

In addition to these external exclusion on the production of discourse, Foucault asserts that there are four internal procedures of exclusion and these are commentary; the author; discipline; and rarefaction of the speaking subject. These procedures are all concerned with classifying, disturbing and ordering discourse and their function is ultimately to distinguish those who are authorized to speak and those who are not, those

discourses which are authorised and those which are not. The first internal exclusion, commentary, is writing about other statements, which leads to the differentiation below canonical texts and their commentaries. Some texts are privileged (the canon, in religion, law, literature or service) and this hierarchy is always active, never stable, constant or absolute. Plenty of major texts become blurred and disappear and sometimes the commentaries move into the primary position, but though its points of application may change, the function remains the same and the principle of difference is continuously put back in play. On one hand it allows construction of new discourses but the dominance of the primary text remain, the commentaries only role being to say what was articulated beyond the text. The new thing here lies not in what is said but in the event of its return.

The second internal exclusionary practice is the author. For Foucault the notion of the author is used as an organizing principle for texts, and can be considered to be a way of providing cohesion to diverse texts, which have been published by him. Foucault prefers to use the term ‘author –function’ rather than focusing on the real author, since it is the organizational aspect of the author-function which interests him. Foucault is very critical of such notions as the progression of an author from immaturity, early works to maturity or later works. According to him we should simply analyze texts in their own terms rather than according to or fictional schema, which we have of the author’s life. Foucault main concern here was to explore the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which text points to the figure that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it.

The third internal exclusion on discourse is the disciplinary boundary, that is, the limits which we place on subject areas. Disciplines work as a limit on discourse, because they prescribe what can be counted as possible knowledge within a particular subject area. In order to be recognized as such by a discipline, in order to be true or false, a discourse must be “in the true” it must in a sense play the game of the discipline. They are at once an element of constraint and an element of creation & proliferation. Disciplines work as a limit on discourse, because they prescribe what can be counted as possible knowledge within a particular subject area as they each have strict methodological rules and a body of propositions which are considered to be factual, disciplines allow for the production of new propositions but within tightly defined limits. Thus academic journals have editorial boards and referees who are responsible for evaluating whether articles which have been sent to them to be published fit in with the disciplinary rules for discussing a particular subject and what it is possible to say within that discipline.

Thus for Foucault, these practices which are integral part of disciplines constitute the subject area through rigorously excluding knowledge which might challenge them. The final internal exclusion on discourse discussed by Foucault is what he terms ‘the rarefaction of the speaking subject’ by ‘rarefaction’ he means the qualification of the speaking subject to enter the order of discourse, that is, the limitation placed on who can speak authoritatively. Speaking authoritatively is hedged around by rituals and takes place within particular societies of discourse, where discourse circulates according to prescribed rules. For example, at universities, only certain people can give lectures; these are generally held in specially designed halls where

the lecturer is positioned at the front. Only the lecturer speaks for the duration of the lecture, because of the unwritten regulations on who can speak during a lecture, when a student does speak, it is often seen by others as aberrant or potentially disruptive of the status. Foucault argues that any system of education is political, way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers, which they carry. Indeed a Foucauldian analysis of the university would focus less on the circulation of knowledge and more on the way certain types of knowledge are excluded, the rigorous process whereby student's ideas are brought into line with the type of knowledge which is considered to be academic. Thus, this complex system of multiple constraints acts both internally and externally on the production and reception of discourse and it is these constraints, which bring discourse into existence.

The most superficial and visible of those systems of restriction is constituted by what can be gathered under the name of ritual. Ritual defines the qualification, which must be possessed by individuals who speak, it defines the gestures, behaviour, circumstances and fixed the supposed effectiveness of the words to whom they are addressed, and the limits of their constraining value. Religious, judicial, therapeutic and political discourses are covered under this category. A somewhat different way of functionally is that of the societies of discourses which function to preserve and produce discourses, but in order to control their circulation they distribute them according to strict rules. An archaic model for this is the groups of rhapsodists, who possessed the knowledge of the poems to be recited, though the knowledge was after all a ritual recitation, this knowledge was protected, defended and preserved within a definite group by the after complex exercise of memory which it implied. To become a part would entail adhering to their rules, thus the roles of speaker and listener were not interchangeable.

At first glance doctrine seems to be different because it tends to be diffused and it is by the holding in common of one same discursive ensemble that individuals define their allegiance. At a superficial level the only condition is the recognition of the same truth and acceptance of a certain rule of conformity with the validated discourses but it goes way beyond and binds individual to certain types of enunciation and consequently forbids them all others. Doctrine brings, about a double subjection of the speaking subjects of discourse and of discourse to the group of speaking individuals.

Foucault work on discourse is useful and revolutionary as it forces us to question what we have always taken for granted. Societies recruit us as subjects, subject us to their values, and incite us to be accountable, responsible citizens, eager to give account of ourselves in terms we have learned from the signifying practices of those societies themselves. Discourses go on to determine the way we talk and think and often persuades us to keep ourselves and others under constant surveillance and since we are all instruments of the discourse that we have internalized, we ourselves constantly reproduce their power, even in our intimate relations. Discourses organize the way we see the world for us .We live and breathe discourses and because of that function unknowingly as links in a good many power chains.

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