



A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE CONCEPT OF POWER

SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA

Research Scholar,
Department of English
Punjabi University, Patiala (Punjab) **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault was one of the most influential thinkers in the contemporary world, someone whose work has affected the teaching of half a dozen disciplines ranging from literary criticism to the history of criminology. He was perhaps one of the single most famous intellectuals in the 20th century. This paper is focussed on the development of the concept of Power from Machiavelli, Hobbs and Weber to Michel Foucault. This condensed survey describes in general lines how the discussion of power burst through the boundaries of organization and location and penetrated into all the domains of the social discourse.

Key Words: Power, Repression, Resistance, Productivity, Discipline

This paper makes no pretension to survey all the existing literature in the field of the theories of power. It begins with a historical survey of thought about power in the social sciences, relating to the most prominent theories. Modern thinking about power begins in the writings of Nicollo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Their books are considered classics of political writing, and the contrast between them represents the main routes along which thought about power has constituted to this day. Machiavelli sees power as a means, not a resource, and seeks strategic advantages, such as military ones, between his Prince and others. Hobbes represents the casual thinking about power as a hegemony. Power, in Hobbes, is centralized and focused on sovereignty. According to Machiavelli, total power is desirable final end, which is achieved only rarely. Power was presented as a position of will, as a supreme factor to which the wills of others are subject.

After the Second World War, the social sciences began taking an understandable interest in power. At that time, the work of the sociologist Max Weber served as a point of departure for thought about power because it constituted the rational Hobbesian line and developed organizational thinking. Weber's approach to power connected with his interest in bureaucracy, and linked power with concepts of authority and rule. He was interested in power as a factor of domination, based on economic or authoritarian interests. Theories of power after Weber developed in the direction of investigation of illegitimate power, as this grows within the formal and legitimate frameworks of hierarchic and bureaucratic power, and in the direction of the critique of Weber's bureaucratic model. Moreover, the truth is that



Weber saw organizational power of the bureaucracy as the source of the mechanization of human life, and as a threat to the freedom of the human spirit. He also predicted that this organizational form, as a power instrument, would sabotage the appearance of more democratic forms of organization.

Robert Dahl continues Weber's approach, both in the definition of power and in the attribution of it to a concrete human factor. Dahl located the discussion of power within the boundaries of an actual community. However, the major importance of Dahl is in the development of the interest in understanding ruling elite, which came to force after the Second World War. According to his theory of community power, power is exercised in a community by a particular concrete individual, while other individuals, also actual, are prevented from doing what they prefer to do. Power is exercised in order to cause those who are subject to it to follow the private preferences of those who possess the power. Power is the production of obedience to the preferences of others. Even to this day, most writers dealing with organizational behaviour make do with Dahl's definition of power – power as the ability to make somebody do something that otherwise he or she would not have done.

Peter Bacharach and Morton Baratz developed a model as a response to Dahl – the two faces of power. This model is also a critique of Dahl's basic premises. They dealt mainly with the connection between the overt face of power –the way decisions are made – and the other, covert face of power, which is the ability to prevent decision making. In the seventies, Steven Lukes developed Bacharach and Baratz's approach further. It was he who shifted the discussion from community power to a focus on power as such by introducing a three-dimensional model into the discussion of the subject. The third dimension that Steven Lukes added to the discussion of power, which theoretically already recognized two dimensions – the overt and the covert dimensions – was the latent dimension of power. While the overt dimension of power deals with declared political preferences, as they reveal themselves in open political play, and the covert dimension deals with political preferences that reveal themselves through complaints about political non-issues, the third dimension of power deals with the relations between political preferences and real interests. Power, according to Lukes, is measured also by the ability to implant in people's minds interests that are contrary to their own good.

The writings of Michel Foucault extended the discussion of the concept of power from sociology to all the fields of social sciences and the humanities. Through Foucault's influence, the empirical activity of identifying those who possess power and of locating power loses its importance. Decentralization of the position of power is one of the great innovations of his thinking, which will be discussed more extensively further on. Anthony Giddens developed his approach as a continuation – and also as a critique – of Foucault and his predecessors. He constructed an inclusive social theory which he called 'structuralism or duality of structure'. In his view, power is an important component of social structure. Power



is exercised by human agents and is also created by them, influences them, and limits them. In other words, power is not a quality or a resource of people, or a position in the social structure, but a social factor which influences both these components of human society and is also created by them.

This condensed survey describes in general lines how the discussion of power burst through the boundaries of organization and location and penetrated into all the domains of the social discourse. In the period after the Second World War, power was a central concept only in the political sciences. The works of Lukes and Giddens contributed to the establishing of the importance of the concept of power in the contemporary sociological discourse.

It is almost impossible today to deal with the subject of power without relating it to Michel Foucault. The issue of power is central to his thinking regarding the relations between society, individuals, groups and institutions. He investigated this issue from a critical and historical point of view in his books, articles and interviews. The fundamental idea emerging from all these works is that the privileged place to observe the power in action is the relations between the individual and the society, especially its institutions. Consequently, Foucault studies – in what he calls “the analysis of power” – how various institutions exert their power on groups and individuals, and how the latter affirm their own identity and resistance to the effects of power. Thanks to Foucault, thinking about power, which for many years was ponderous and predictable, became fascinating and full of surprises. Foucault does not present an ordered doctrine of power. He himself lives in peace with the contradictions and the dialectics that his approach creates; however, anyone who, like me, is interested in applying his approach runs into more than a few difficulties. Foucault was influenced by Weber and Marx, but unlike them, did not feel committed to a comprehensive analysis of organizations or of aspects he chose each time to analyze a different social institution. With the coming of Foucault, the discussion of power became a widespread intellectual preoccupation. As stated earlier, Foucault investigated the concepts in new fields: medicine, psychiatry, penology and human sexuality. Foucault adopted Nietzsche’s ideas about the connection between knowledge and power. He assumes a power/knowledge connection that cannot be separated, even semantically. A review of Foucault’s writings reveals his theory of power, and especially the way power/knowledge connection is created.

The issues of power and knowledge have occupied a central position within sociological analysis and debates. From the works of Weber, the exercise of power and domination has been conceptualized within sociology as a constitutive feature of social life. There is an underlying thematic unity or continuity in Foucault’s work which may be described as the analysis of particular modes of objectification, of the forms of knowledge and relations of power through which human beings have been constituted as subjects. In 1970, Foucault delivered his inaugural lecture ‘The Order of Discourse’ in which he outlined a series of ideas on discourse and power and set a provisional agenda for a related series of studies on the

forms of control by which in every society the production of discourse is governed, namely 'prohibited words'. Although references to power within this text are relatively limited, it is clear that the issue of the powers associated with or attached to discourse has been placed on the research agenda. With the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, the theme of power became an established component in Foucault's work, as did the question of relations of power and knowledge:

Foucault's interest was not directed at the expression of power in its most central and institutionalized forms such as class relations rather, he was concerned to examine how power relations of inequality and oppression are created and maintained in more subtle and diffuse ways through ostensibly humane and freely adopted social practices. (McNay 2)

In Foucault's work, a conception of the body as a central component on the operation of power relations has occupied a prominent place. Genealogical analysis reveals the body as an object of knowledge and as a target for the exercise of power. The body is shown to be located in a political field, invested with power relations which render it docile and productive, and thus politically and economically useful. Foucault's genealogical analyses begin with an examination of the character of modern power relations literally with the question: 'how power is exercised' and the associated issue of the relationships between power and knowledge. It is clear from the studies in which the question of relations of power occupies a prominent place, notably *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Vol.1*, that there can be no general formulation of the relationship between power and knowledge; indeed these studies are concerned precisely with examining the various historical relations between forms of knowledge and forms of the exercise of power. In both cases analysis is clearly predicted upon an assumption that knowledge is inextricably associated with networks of power:

Power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

(Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27)

The fundamental idea emerging from all the works of Foucault is that the privileged place to observe the power in action is the relations between the individual and the society, especially its institutions. Consequently, Foucault studies – in what he calls "the analysis of power" – how various institutions exert their power on groups and individuals, and how the latter affirm their own identity and resistance to the effects of power. Foucault thinks that it is wrong to consider power as something that the institutions possess and use oppressively against individuals and groups, so he tries to move the analysis one step beyond viewing

power as the plain oppression of the powerless by the powerful, aiming to examine how it operated in day to day interactions between people and institutions. In *The History of Sexuality Vol.1*, he argues that we must overcome the idea that power is oppression, because even in their most radical form – oppressive measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviours to emerge. As opposed to most Marxist thinkers, Foucault is concerned less with the oppressive aspect of power, but more with the resistance of those the power is exerted upon. For example, the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser studied mainly how “people are oppresses by the state institutions and how they build themselves as individuals through the mystifying action of the ideology” (Althusser 68). While for Althusser, individuals are just puppets of the ideological and repressive apparatus and power is seen as acting from top downwards. Foucault proposes an alternative model in which power is exerted and contested, as well as an analysis centered on the human individual as an active subject, not as a simple object for the power. According to Foucault:

Most of the social analysts tend to regard power in an essentially negative manner, as a repressive force which is the property of an elite and is used to maintain social hierarchies. Foucault rejects such a uni-directional and repressive notion of power, replacing it with a concept of power as an essentially positive force which permeates all levels of society, engendering a multiplicity of relations other than those simply of domination. (McNay 90)

Usually, power is understood as the capacity of an agent to impose his will over the will of the powerless, or the ability to force them to do things they do not wish to do. In this sense, power is understood as possession, as something owned, by those in power. But in Foucault’s opinion, power is not something that can be owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way; it is more a strategy than a possession. “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization...individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98). This way of understanding power has two key features: “(a) power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor; (b) individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the locus where power and the resistance to it are exerted” (Mills 35).

Foucault thinks that power must be understood differently than repression, which simply forces individuals to obey. “If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 91). Therefore, says Foucault, power is “coextensive with resistance, productive, producing positive effects; ubiquitous, being found in any kind of relationship” (Kelly 38). In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault says “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol.1* 93). This means

that power relations between individuals cannot be reduced to master-slave relations, but they are productive relations, because they imply resistance – without which no power relations can be conceived, where is power, there is always someone who resists it. Foucault remarks:

This new mechanism of power is more dependent upon bodies and what they do than upon the earth and its products. It is a mechanism of power which permits time and labour, rather than wealth and commodities, to be exerted from bodies. It is a type of power which is constantly exercised by means of surveillance rather than in a discontinuous manner by means of a system of obligations disturbed over time. It presupposes a tightly grid of material coercion rather than the physical existence of a sovereign. It is ultimately dependent upon the principle, which introduces a genuinely new economy of power, that one must be able simultaneously both to increase the subjected forces and to improve the force and efficacy of that which subjects them. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 104)

Conclusively, now the French thinker examines how discipline, as a type of self-regulation encouraged by institutions, becomes the norm in modern societies and acts as for the individual as an instrument to change to change the reality and himself. “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’, it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 104) The institutions use various types of power enforcement, with specific mechanisms and techniques. Foucault shows how the hospitals, the clinic, the prison and the university share some of these disciplinary techniques and practices. Discipline is a concern for control internalized by every individual, referring to temporal bench-marks, bodily posture and functions, sublimation of wishes and immediate emotions. All these are the effects of the disciplinary pressure, but are also actions that, through pressure initially imposed externally, lead to self-discipline for the individual and eventually to the production of the individual himself as a subject. Alec McHoul contends:

The most significant feature of Foucault’s thesis is his stress on the productive of power’s modern exercise. His main aim was to turn a negative conception upside down an attribute the production of concepts, ideas, and the structures of institutions to the circulations and exercise of power in the modern times. (McHoul 64)



WORKS CITED

- Althusser, Louis. *Essays on Ideology*. London: Verso, 1984. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print.
- . *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- . *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*. Ed. Gordin Colin, New York: Pantheon, 1980. Print.
- Kelly, M.G.E. *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- McHoul, Alec. *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and The Subject*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- McNay, Lois. *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 1994. Print.
- Mills, Sara. *Discourse*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.