

Theory versus Analytics of Power—

The Habermas-Foucault Debate

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas criticizes Foucault's "theory of power" as over generalizing and universalizing; reductionistic; contradictory in its role as a concept of empirical analysis *and* as a transcendental theory of constitution; and, most importantly, as cryptonormative.¹ Although Habermas is very critical, even dismissive, of Foucault's analysis of power, I will argue that this position is, up to a point, only maintainable according to a misreading and misunderstanding of some of Foucault's most important insights and qualifications regarding power. At the same time, Habermas' criticism of Foucault's inability to provide a normative justification for genealogical historiography foregrounds the question of critique. Can Foucault meet Habermas' demands, or does this already reject the critical power opened up by genealogical historiography? In the concluding section I will discuss the two alternative paradigms of power and critique that appear in Foucault and Habermas, arguing that Habermas' imposition of a normative grid may in fact neglect the critical possibilities Foucault's genealogies offer.

I. Toward an Analytics of Power

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas presents a reading of Foucault's genealogical historiography as presentistic, relativistic, and cryptonormative. In the attempt to avoid the hermeneutic problematic of the "self-relatedness" of the interpreter to her object domain, Foucault's explanation of discourse from the outside – that is, in terms of internal structural economies and external generative practices, a method that

¹ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. F. G. Lawrence. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990.

brackets both truth and intentional meaning – inevitably befalls his own objectivistic, positivist illusions, presentistically fashioning the past according to the hermeneutic of the present.² Here Foucault seems unwilling to admit how his “antiscience” remains blind to its own hermeneutic conditions of possibility. Moreover, Habermas tells us, the theory of power one finds in Foucault undermines its own foundational conditions, being as it is trapped within the aporia of self-referentiality.³ For if Foucault’s discourse analysis *both* confines truth claims to the specific discursive formations in which the conditions of truth are first defined *and* treats these very discourses as effects of power, then the validity of Foucault’s own discourse, according to Habermas, is immediately questioned. Lastly, genealogical historiography engages in critique, but without appeal to a “right side.” As both Habermas and Nancy Fraser have noted, Foucault’s rhetorically charged, critical descriptions implicitly indict the objectifying and subjugating operations of technologies of power, but are unable to sustain any fuller normative contestation that attempts to answer the question “why fight at all?”⁴

Foucault’s analysis of power situates truth (knowledge) and power in a peculiar, mutually affective relationship that Habermas finds both ambiguous and very problematic. In the transition to a theory of power, Habermas claims that Foucault uncritically and reductionistically conflates power and knowledge, thereby constructing a “utterly unsociological concept of the social” that is unable to recognize the important ways in which knowledge is and has been distanced from the regimes and technologies of power.⁵ While Foucault’s analyses continually center on the curious relation between particular discourses of truth/science and social practices geared toward surveillance, discipline, and control, the specification of this domain of analysis is not intended as an

² Ibid., 276.

³ Ibid., 279.

⁴ Ibid., 284.

overarching, grand metanarrative of history according to a monological theory of power. Nor is Foucault committed to a position that posits power/knowledge as an “indissoluble unity.” Rather, genealogical historiography has always been much more modest in its scope and claims. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Foucault writes that

The aim of the inquiries that follow is to move less towards a “theory” of power than toward an “analytics” of power: that is, toward a definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power, and toward a determination of the instruments that will make possible its analysis.⁶

The distinction between a *theory* and an *analytics* of power is crucial, for Foucault does not want to implement power as an historical *deus ex machina*, nor does he intend his conception of power to extend beyond a particular domain, or to designate that subsisting element of reality from which history and society are borne as epiphenomena. In other words, power and discourse (or truth/knowledge) are not conceptualized in a base-superstructure relation, respectively. In this respect, Habermas’ claim that Foucault reductionistically equates all discourse with the “dispositivities of power” depends upon a false attribution of causality to Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge. And intent upon reading Foucault as an architect of a “theory of power” Habermas misrecognizes Foucault’s positive contributions opened up by a radical reformulation of the nature of power through an analytics of power that “requires that ‘truth’ like ‘power’ be conceived in the multiplicity of its occurrences, that it conform to no essence or *eidōs*.”⁷

The explicit methodological move towards an “analytics of power” is characteristic, on the one hand, of Foucault’s nominalism, and on the other hand, constitutes the attempt to delimit new concepts calibrated to phenomena fundamentally different from that traditionally captured by “power.” For Foucault, political theorists and philosophers have

⁵ Ibid., 242.

⁶ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, Trans. R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. pp. 81.

remained restricted to a conception of power as “sovereignty” – or what Foucault terms the juridical conception of power. Power here tends to be rendered solely in terms of domination – usually in a hierarchical or asymmetrical relation, say, between dominator and dominated, master and slave – and repression. Accordingly, power signifies both instances of brute displays of force, or the ability to wield such force, and a limit, a taboo, a restriction: “it is a power whose model is essentially juridical, centered on nothing more than the statement of the law and the operation of taboos. All the modes of domination, submission, and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience.”⁸

Foucault develops an alternative account of power that does not so much reject the juridical model but rather extends the scope of analysis to target the meticulous rituals of power that are much more subtle and hidden, and to this extent, much more nebulous than explicit displays of force. What he objects to is precisely (1) the reduction of power to “the force of the negative,” as paradigmatically evidenced in the figure of the king, in explicit displays of force and violence, and in the prohibitive structure of laws and taboos. “It is this image we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyze power within the concrete and historical framework of its operation. We must construct an analytics of power that no longer takes law as a model and a code.”⁹ The articulation of power according to the image of law also (2) resists a more historically sensitive analysis by ignoring the question of the concrete forms through which power is exercised in particular spatial and temporal settings. Against Habermas’ contention that Foucault mobilizes a universalizing theory of power that ignores historical variation, we must recognize that central to Foucault’s genealogical historiography is the attempt to form “a different grid of historical decipherment,” and

⁷ Thomas Flynn. “Foucault’s Mapping of History.” In Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. pp. 116.

⁸ Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality, Vol. I.: An Introduction*. pp. 85.

that this requires “advancing little by little toward a different conception of power through a closer examination of an entire historical material.”¹⁰ Habermas thus misses the qualifications Foucault sets on his conception of power so as to avoid the dangers and blind spots of spatiotemporal generalizations.

While we may redeem Foucault from the charges of reductionism and over-generalization, Habermas also presents a more damaging criticism directed toward the performative consistency of genealogical historiography. On the one hand, Foucault’s genealogies analyze the material and historical forms of the operation of power. Power here appears as inseparable from its particular manifestations, and is analyzed in terms of concrete, corporeal-sensual practices and techniques, meticulous rituals of surveillance, discipline, and control that produce docile bodies. As Habermas writes, Foucault “will comprehend power as the interaction of warring parties, as the decentered network of bodily, face-to-face confrontations, and ultimately as the productive penetration and subjectivizing subjugation of a bodily opponent.”¹¹ Were Foucault’s genealogies restricted to such analyses of the concrete forms of power’s exercise, Habermas would have little objections. However, Foucault on the other hand “*joins* these palpable meanings of power *together* with the transcendental meaning of synthetic performances.”¹² In this moment of temporalizing the a priori, Foucault thus “undertakes a fusion of opposed meanings” that performatively constitutes power as both a conception of “transcendental generativity *and* of empirical self-assertion simultaneously.”¹³ This latter moment of genealogical historiography introduces a

⁹ Ibid., pp. 90.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. pp. 255.

¹² Ibid., pp. 256.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 256.

paradoxical tension between a materialism and nominalism *and* a concept that functions transcendently as a theory of discourse constitution.

II. The Colonization of the Life-World—The Dualistic Model of Power

Habermas' criticisms here are not so easily explained away by reference to textual examples that suggest otherwise, because here the problem resides not so much with what Foucault says or writes, but with what he does, that is, with how his analyses themselves performatively produce the "paradoxical consequences of a fundamental concept contaminated by contrary meanings."¹⁴ Nevertheless, although Habermas is correct in pointing out an ambiguity of intended use regarding the concept of power, and hence, of the potential danger for Foucault's genealogies to appear under the banner of a nuanced, yet "contaminated" transcendental account of history, to interpret Foucault's power as a "transcendental theory of constitution" again ignores the force of his analysis of the relation between discourse and power. Here, it is helpful to analyze the different conceptions of the power/knowledge dyad in the work of Habermas and Foucault.

The model of power one finds in Habermas, Foucault would argue, remains within the horizons of juridical domination, restriction, and repression, and is conceptually unable to render visible the infinitesimal forms and strategies that remain hidden under the code of law. Habermas' distinction between system and lifeworld constructs a dualistic conception of the social with power on one side and communicative action on the other. The former appears under the rubric of instrumental rationality and subsystems governed by the steering media of money and power, and the latter as that part of the social characterized by communicatively (democratically) coordinated forms of life which remain "uncolonized" by the instrumentalizing logic of subsystems. Power

¹⁴ Ibid., 257.

threatens the autonomy of communicative practices of the lifeworld as subsystems encroach upon and colonize domains of democracy. According to this model, then, power is rendered in terms of strategic action, and truth in terms of communicative action. Power threatens to replace our democratic, communicative contexts with strategic contexts powered by instrumentalizing logics of commodity exchange. As a result, we are left with a picture of power as embedded in certain contexts and absent in others. This subsequently allows for a point *outside* of relations of power, a point from which Habermas can appeal to communicative praxis as a basis for critique, ethics and political theory.

This separation of contexts of strategic and communicative action produces a substantively different picture than that of Foucault, who repeatedly insists that the communicative domains are always already fraught with power, entwined in multiple networks and channels of relations of power. Foucault makes the crucial qualification that “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations.”¹⁵ Thus any distinction that attempts to free discourse or truth from power produces a duality that misrecognizes the relations of power that permeate and organize forms of truth. Although reformulating the problematic in these terms suggests a return to a naïve reductionism, we must continually emphasize that power and knowledge are not identical, and that Foucault’s project is more one of revealing the subtle coalescence between each, than metaphysically postulating them in an “indissoluble unity:”

Foucault seeks neither to reduce knowledge to a hypothetical base in power nor to conceptualize power as an always coherent strategy. He attempts to show the specificity and materiality of their interconnections. They have a correlation, not a causal relationship, which must be determined in its historical specificity.¹⁶

Genealogy then attempts to explain the effective formation of discourse by specifying the connection between discursive systems and extra-discursive practices in terms of the materiality of techniques and strategies of power. To frame the problematic of power via “strategies” and “techniques” enables us to conceptualize the relationship between power and knowledge in terms of a complex field of multiple configurations. In this way “Knowledge is established ... in relation to a field ... of objects, instruments, practices, research programs, skills, social networks, and institutions:”¹⁷ knowledge does not appear as exterior to such relations, nor is it identical with such relations, but comprises a complex alignment with power, forming an epistemic field that varies historically.

Returning to Habermas’ criticism that Foucault’s conception of power plays the role of *both* an empirical analysis of technologies of domination and strategies of surveillance and discipline *and* a transcendental role explaining the formation of any discourse whatsoever, we must reply that, on the one hand, Foucault does not in fact have a “theory of power” that plays the role of an empirical concept. In a very important sense, Foucault offers us no theory of power, per se. Rather, Foucault’s various regional studies and his nominalist uses of power always retain a particularizing effect that bounds his comments ultimately to the strategies he analyzes. *Pace* Habermas, who turns Foucault into a methodological monist, Foucault’s cursory definition of power as “an open, more-or-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of relations”¹⁸ suggests more

¹⁵ Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. pp. 94.

¹⁶ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. pp. 203.

¹⁷ Rouse, Joseph. “Power/Knowledge.” In Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. pp. 110.

¹⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault*. pp. 184.

of a methodological pluralism, an attempt not to theorize power *qua* power, but rather as *powers*, pluralities, multiplicities. As Thomas Flynn clarifies,

This is the context of his claim, for example, that ‘power does not exist,’ that there are only individual instances domination, manipulation, edification, control, and the like. . . . It is the historian’s task to uncover discursive and nondiscursive practices in their plurality and contingency, in order to reveal the fields that render intelligible an otherwise heterogeneous collection of events.¹⁹

On the other hand, though Foucault’s elusive descriptions of power suggest a crypto-transcendental theory of constitution, such criticisms rest, again, on a fundamental misunderstanding of the task of the genealogist and the “role” of power. Habermas makes no distinction between (or recognition of) a theory and analytics of power, and thus reads Foucault as a theorist of power who reduces everything to the “to-and-fro movement” of power. In this way, we read that “Under the *cynical* gaze of the genealogist, the iceberg begins to move: Discourse formations are replaced and regrouped, they undulate back and forth. The genealogist explains this to-and-fro movement with the help of countless events and a single hypothesis – the only this that lasts in power, which appears with ever new tasks in the change of anonymous processes of overpowering.”²⁰

III. The Centrality of Critique in the Analysis of Power

Habermas’ criticisms of Foucault’s genealogical historiography are up to this point based on fundamental misunderstandings of Foucault as a reductivist, and conversely, an overgeneralizing theorist of power who tries to remain blanketed from the very discourse and power formations he analyzes. This reading then supports Habermas’ claim that Foucault’s analysis of power is self-referential as “Genealogical historiography is supposed to make the practices of power. . . accessible to an empirical analysis. From this perspective, not only are truth claims confined to the discourses within which they arise;

¹⁹ Thomas Flynn. “Foucault’s Mapping of History.” pp. 39.

they exhaust their entire significance in the function of a given totality of discourse. . . . the meaning of validity claims consists in the power effect they have. . . . This basic assumption of the theory of power is self-referential; if it is correct, it must destroy the foundations of the research inspired by it as well.”²¹ As demonstrated, Habermas’ criticism depends upon a questionable reading of Foucault. At the same time, however, the tension between Foucault and Habermas reveals a much deeper rift, perhaps, a conflict between alternative paradigms of power and discourse, and power and critique.

When Habermas criticizes Foucault as a cryptonormativist, he is not merely misreading Foucault, but highlighting a potentially serious flaw in Foucault’s writings – the absence of any appeal to a “right side.” The genealogical Foucault persistently resists any demands that he needs to justify critique. This is because, firstly, there is no point outside of power, there is no escaping power, and no freeing of truth from power. Whence Foucault’s rejection of discourses of emancipation that attempt to move beyond the network of power. However, as Dreyfus and Rabinow note, “it would seem incumbent on Foucault to use his work to locate the endangered species of resistant practices and to consider how they could be strengthened in nontotalizing, nontheoretical and nonnormalizing ways. If truth is to operate in society so as to resist technological power, we must find a way to make it positive and productive. Whether such a possibility exists remains an open question.”²²

The attempt to locate precisely those uncolonized practices in society that are to serve as a point of resistance to power is, of course, ostensibly Habermas’ problematic, and not Foucault’s. However, this is not to say that Foucault cannot engage in critique. Rather, what is eschewed is precisely the attempt to critique *outside* of power, as if one was not

²⁰ Jurgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. pp. 253.

²¹ Jurgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. pp. 279.

²² Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault*. pp. 201-202.

in power. Foucault's form of critique, then, assumes not a universal form or basis, as it does with Habermas, but is described as "local critique." In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Foucault opens the way for what a local critique might look like if there is no escaping power:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. . . . [The] strictly relational character of power relationships. . . . depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the network of power.²³

Because power relations envelop or run through even those points that serve as resistance, "there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary."²⁴ Local critique is thus critique that occurs within and in terms of power, that is, as the outside within power – resistance.

Even so, Habermas still poses the question of "Why fight at all?" to show that Foucault still does not provide a basis for true critique, that is, for a critique that could resist on a normative basis the normalizing forms of power: "if it is just a matter of mobilizing counterpower, of strategic battles and wily confrontations, why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of the body of modern society, instead of just adapting it to ourselves?"²⁵ While Habermas argues that Foucault's position "undermines the rational basis and practical efficacy of critique,"²⁶ to demand that Foucault give a normative justification of his critical moments already begs a fundamental question in Foucault of the power-status of such appeals. Because Habermas institutes the distinction between contexts of power and contexts free from power, and because for Habermas to be in power – and recall here that

²³ Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. pp. 95.

²⁴ Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. pp. 96.

²⁵ Jurgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. pp. 284.

this embeddedness within power for Habermas is not the same as it is in Foucault – is to be outside of truth, Foucault will always remain “contaminated” by a fundamental contradiction borne of the power/knowledge union. He simply cannot articulate a normative position given his premises. This is true to the extent that we remain within the horizon of Habermasian discourse. While Foucault may not be able to redeem himself from Habermas’ criticisms from within the terms constructed by transcendental pragmatics, his local critique and closely related genealogical historiography do provide a means by which critique can occur. In “Two Lectures,” Foucault thematizes resistance in terms of an “*insurrection of subjugated knowledges.*”²⁷ Genealogical historiography contests the globalizing discourses that restrict play through a totalitarian production of continuity and attempts to subvert the tyranny of such continuous histories by revealing how the search for signification, meaning, continuity, and identity regulates and restricts, structures, a multitudinous ensemble of events as a violent imposition of regularity. In this sense Foucault offers a “freedom of thought which initiates and sustains critique is the contestation of the difference, the transgression of limits which destroys the illusion of identity in sameness.”²⁸ While Habermas is unable to consider Foucault hereby ‘redeemed,’ Foucault at least points us in a direction that eschews the utopian politics of identity in the attempt to secure a non-totalizing critique whose value is precisely the dismantling process encouraged by genealogical historiography.

²⁶ Kelly, Michael. “Introduction.” In Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994. pp. 2.

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. “Two Lectures.” In Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994. pp. 20.

²⁸ Gillan, Garth. “Foucault’s Philosophy.” In James Bernauer and David M. Rasmussen, eds., *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988. pp. 42.

Works Cited

- Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Flynn, Thomas. "Foucault's Mapping of History." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed. Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Flynn, Thomas. "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the College de France." *The Final Foucault*. Eds. James Bernauer and David M. Rasmussen Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures." *Critique and Power*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, Trans. R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Gillan, Garth. "Foucault's Philosophy." *The Final Foucault*. Eds. James Bernauer and David M. Rasmussen. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. F. G. Lawrence. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990.
- Ingram, David. "Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed. Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Kelly, Michael, ed. *Critique and Power*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Kelly, Michael. "Foucault, Habermas, and the Self-Referentiality of Critique." *Critique and Power*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Kelly, Michael. "Introduction." *Critique and Power*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Rouse, Joseph. "Power/Knowledge." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed. Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.