

Can Foucault's Analysis of Power Inform a Radical Politics?

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In a well known televised debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault (1971), the two great thinkers reach a deadlock. Chomsky is intent on drawing up an alternative society - though he admits he is vague on the details - in which justice allows human nature to flourish. Foucault, however, refuses to offer any suggestion of what should be. He emphasises the danger in universalising what is an unavoidably partial notion of human nature and goes so far as to suggest that the very concept of justice which Chomsky holds so dear is complicit in the perpetuation of structural inequality in the West. Chomsky's understandable frustration at the practical implications of Foucault's thinking is shared by a great many philosophers, political theorists and activists; it is arguably this aspect of his work that has made the biggest contribution to his reputation as a controversial and contrarian theorist.

This essay explores the difficulties in applying Foucault's work to practical political problems and discusses the question of what a Foucauldian radical politics might look like, focusing particularly on Judith Butler's development of Foucault's thought and the implications of this for feminist politics. The essay also serves as an introduction to Foucault as philosopher, historian and political thinker, bringing together a range of his work to demonstrate the continuing value of Foucault's idiosyncratic ideas to academic, political and everyday life.

This essay provides an explication of Foucault's approach to power, with an emphasis on the main components of his concern: the productive nature of power, the subject as the effect of power and the crucial relationship of power to knowledge. While his analysis is somewhat ambivalent to the left/right dichotomy of traditional politics, I argue that his dislocation of power from the subject redefines politics- or the 'art of government'- as a concern with the practices of everyday living. Suggesting that an inadequate account of resistance presents problems for the practical use of Foucault in politics, I move on to respond to this criticism with the suggestion that the lack of normative grounds at the root of these problems is in fact valued by Foucault as a method of resistance to all totalising power/knowledge systems and that this 'hyperactivity' may in fact be understood as an extremely radical position rather than philosophical paralysis. Lastly, the essay turns to the work of Judith Butler as an example of the use of Foucault in the creation of a feminist radical politics. I argue that Butler's purge of all forms of essentialism from the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality shifts the focus of feminism from 'who?' to 'how?', guarding against the reconstitution of marginalisation in all forms through a practice of constant re-imagination.

Overall, the essay demonstrates that Foucault's analysis of power can inform a radical politics through a hyper-vigilant permanent critique that provides a thorough understanding of how power/knowledge relations work in order that we may be able to imagine ways of doing politics-as-life differently.

The terms 'politics' and 'radical' are difficult to define without reference to certain political or philosophical viewpoints and will therefore be discussed throughout the essay in relation to the specific subject matter in hand. However, it is useful to briefly take note of the standard dictionary definitions in order to provide a starting point from which to explore this aspect of Foucault's theory.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'politics' as '[T]he theory or practice of government or administration' and 'radical' that 'relating to roots' and, in relation to politics, '[A]dvocating thorough or far-reaching political or social reform' (2010, online). From this, a preliminary definition of radical politics may be drawn as the theory and practice of government with the aim of advocating change or reform, the more extreme the change, the more radical the politics. As we shall see, Foucault's theories have significant implications for this definition, especially concerning the issue of roots or origins. However, it is with these most general definitions in mind that I begin my exploration of Foucault's analysis of power.

Foucault's most famous work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), was also the first to devote itself to an investigation of how power works. Focusing on the development of the penal system during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the book describes a societal shift from punishment- the corporal, retributive spectacle aimed at restoring the power of the sovereign- to discipline- an 'art of the human body' concerned with minute detail and

'directed not only at the growth of its [the body's] skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely' (Foucault, 1977:137-8).

Describing the various disciplinary techniques of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination, *Discipline and Punish* is particularly concerned with the use of the individual as an instrument of power. Bentham's imagined Panopticon, an architectural experiment with the tool of visibility, presents an ideal society in which individuals are encouraged to regulate their own behaviour in accordance with institutional norms. Discipline, then, is aimed not (or at least, not only) at the repression of undesirable behaviour, but at the production of desired behaviour. This insight drastically revises traditional theories of power:

'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'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (ibid, pg 194).

Within this definition, then, the traditional subject as either the possessor or the victim of power, is not presupposed but repositioned as the *effect* of power. Foucault's genealogical method, with its strict attention to detail and refusal to dispense with contingency, reserves no place for an ahistorical, transcendent subject. The question is characteristically reformulated by Foucault, from one of how subjects exercise or resist power to how 'power and knowledge relations...invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge' (ibid, pg 28).

If the subject is to be understood as among the *effects* rather than the causes of power, then, it is clear that power is no longer to be conceived of as a possession. For Foucault, it is a strategy that both produces and uses individuals in its exercise, the subject is not just subject but also object and instrument in the circulation of power.

Foucault's work robs traditional theories of two treasured weapons against power: firstly, as discussed, the transcendent subject, and secondly, knowledge. *Discipline and Punish* is as much concerned with the development of the human sciences as with the politics of the penal system, emphasising the importance of a growing field of knowledge about the individual in designing new methods for the production of disciplined 'docile bodies'. Foucault stresses that knowledge cannot be dissociated from power:

‘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’ (ibid, pg 27).

The implications of this are weighty. If knowledge and power are inextricable then it is no longer possible to 'speak truth against power' as the scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment hoped. Foucault's preoccupation with the significance of each society's 'regime of truth' to the exercise of power relations within it (Smart, 1991:68) gives his work a political aspect in addition to the historical and philosophical focus. His interest in: 'how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth' (Foucault, cited in Smart, 1991:59) takes us to the most general level of political analysis.

In terms of the implications of Foucault's thought for the theory and practice of politics, it is this generality that is perhaps most striking. Power is everywhere for Foucault, there is no relation without power and no situation outside of power. His concern with the political, then, is not just related to those arenas that may traditionally be called politics (the state, government, political parties, movements etc.) but is an interest in the everyday activity of modern life. As Fraser suggests, Foucault's conception of power is vital to politics in that it 'widens the arena within which people may collectively confront, understand and try to change the character of their lives' (1989:26).

Foucault argues that neither the right nor the left of traditional politics has taken up the question of '[T]he way power was exercised- concretely and in detail- with its specificity, its techniques and tactics' (Foucault, 1984a:57) and that political positioning of this kind is largely irrelevant to the question of power. This suggests that a radical politics, in terms of significant change or reform, must approach politics as the operation and circulation of power in the everyday living of contemporary life rather than as a battle of ideology.

While a Foucauldian definition of politics may not be difficult to arrive at, a Foucauldian practice of politics has proved far more elusive for scholars of his work. Concluding an introduction to his series of lectures *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault gave a strict instruction to his students: 'Never engage in polemics' (2007 [1977-8]:18). Once again depriving political struggle of a valued weapon in preference of an unyielding loyalty to academic rigour, this statement is indicative of the problematic nature of applying Foucault to any practices of politics, radical or otherwise.

Foucault is often criticised for an inadequate account of resistance, or one that forecloses the possibility of resistance in advance by assuming the successful production of 'docile bodies'. If the subject is constituted by

power then the source of resistance is removed from the equation, thereby removing resistance along with it (Hartsock, 1990). Foucault's answer to this (perhaps not surprisingly) is that resistance, like the subject, is produced by power/knowledge relations:

‘there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised’ (Foucault 1980:142).

An investigation of what he terms 'counter-conduct' in *Security, Territory, Population* reveals how forms of resistance emerge as the effects of power-knowledge relations, as Reason (or in this case *raison d'état*) depends upon the simultaneous production of its opposite in order to retain its legitimacy.

‘Whether one opposes civil society to the state, the population to the state, or the nation to the state, it was in any case these elements that were in fact put to work within this genesis of the state, and of the modern state’ (Foucault, 2007:454).

Though the detailed historical analysis contained within the set of lectures certainly supports this conclusion, it is also highly problematic in that there seems to be no basis for distinguishing 'counter-conduct' from conduct. Evidently, the difficulty in conceiving of all relations as power relations is that the line between resistance and domination is no longer visible. There seems to be no way of deciding

‘when forms of self-discipline or self-surveillance can ... be seen as exercises of autonomy or self-creation, or when they should be seen, rather, as forms of discipline to which the self is subjected, and by which autonomy is constrained’ (Grimshaw, 1993:66).

Similarly, although Foucault is adamant that resistance does occur and is in fact vital to power, there seems to be no explanation of why this is (Philip, 1983). He even leans dangerously close to positing resistance as a natural reaction to oppressive power when asserting that power would not be obeyed if ‘it never did anything but say no’ (1984a:61). Again, the constituted subject so crucial to Foucault's notion of power creates logical difficulties for a practice of politics.

Most often though, Foucault is criticised for failing to provide an answer to the question of why anyone *should* resist. His refusal to stand still upon normative grounds has been interpreted as a kind of Weberian paralysis, in which science abandons the actor at the crucial point of decision, allowing politics to operate only at the level of individual ethical choices. As Fraser suggests,

‘[O]nly with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it’ (Fraser, 1989:29).

Foucault readily and somewhat humbly admits that one should not hope to find answers to these important questions within his work. However, certain hints may be of use in responding to these criticisms.

One crucial element is that, although Foucault is undoubtedly concerned with freedom, he is keen to stress that 'freedom' and 'liberty' must be conceived of as practices rather than states of existence. In this way, he seems to place a value on the active engagement of individuals in the production of practices ‘that will allow us to play

these games of power with as little domination as possible' (Foucault, cited in Welch, 2001:84). The suggestion here seems to be that, though power is inescapable, some forms are preferable to others.

Similarly, Foucault certainly does not place his own work outside of the power-knowledge nexus. In an interview given in 1983 he asserts that, while he is wary of judging writers by the effects their work is deemed to produce (noting the infamous link between Nietzsche and Hitler), the two cannot be fully dissociated (1984b). It is perhaps this acknowledgement of a certain level of intellectual responsibility that led him to consistently refuse to offer normative foundations to his critics, emphasising the severe dangers of totalising theories. In this vein, he declares that 'I would like my books to be [...] Molotov cocktails, or minefields; I would like them to self-destruct after use, like fireworks' (cited in Merquior, 1991:118). While he argues, in no uncertain terms (see in particular *Society Must Be Defended*, 1997), that there is a struggle to be had, Foucault sees no virtue in resistance that takes the form of the totalising systems it claims to oppose.

Though these examples do not answer the questions of the source and justification of resistance posed by Foucault's critics, it is important to recognise that this amounts to a refusal rather than a failure. For Foucault, it is vital that the 'regimes of truth' which allow power/knowledge relations to function are disrupted at every opportunity, in order to prevent the exclusion and negation inherent in a system which claims universal legitimacy.

In this way, and Foucault suggests this himself (1983), his approach leads to 'hyperactivity', and a refusal to stand still and stagnate. A commitment to constant movement and constant change may be seen as the most radical position possible, not only digging out the roots of a system but preventing the germination of new ones. With regard to the question of the target for Foucault's Molotov cocktails, then, the only possible answer seems to be Reason itself, the power/knowledge system that establishes itself as truth and produces in order to exclude.

The potential significance of Foucault's approach for a radical politics can be illustrated by turning to feminist theory. Particularly important in this respect is the ideas and impact of Judith Butler on feminism and gender politics.

Taking an overtly Foucauldian approach to concepts of 'sex' and 'gender', Butler's focus is the means by which the body is made into a gendered subject by power/knowledge relations. She picks up Foucault's insight in *Discipline and Punish* that the soul is the prison of the body rather than vice versa (pg 30), and uses it to demolish the notion of an essential gender identity. Both sex and gender are little more than performative repetition:

'In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause' (Butler, 1990:136).

Just as the Panopticon enlists prisoners in the process of their disciplining, women and men are instruments of the power/knowledge system of sex/gender with the 'organizing gender core' now appearing as an effect rather than a cause of power (ibid, pg 110).

Foucault's constituted subject, then, is crucial to Butler's project. As she suggests, the significance of the concept of performativity (as opposed to performance) is that it 'contests the very notion of the subject' (1993a

interview, online [no page number available]). This necessitates an approach to power that radically differs from the identity feminism of the 1970s and 80s. Rather than understanding gender relations as the oppression of women (deprived of power) by men (in possession of power), Butler details the process by which gender discourses and performative acts 'bring into being that which they name' (ibid) and recommends the active subversion of gender norms as a form of resistance. The emphasis is shifted, therefore, from the origins of power to the techniques of power.

This understanding positions all essentialist notions of gender, regardless of their origin, as a technique of normalising judgement, revealing how identity feminism 'presumes, fixes and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate' (1990:148), and providing a mode of analysis much less susceptible to the trappings of the cultural blinkers associated especially with liberal feminism.

Like Foucault, however, Butler is sensitive to the dangers of totalisation. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993b), she replaces her much celebrated concept of the 'heterosexual matrix' -a constraining and disciplining power/knowledge configuration that welds together sex, gender and sexuality into a normalising fusion- with the term 'heterosexual hegemony', a fluid conception of domination which creates theoretical space for resistance.

Similarly, Butler does not aim to replace other feminisms with her work, stressing the importance of multiplicity in struggle:

'The Foucauldian in me says there is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There have to be many, and they don't need to be reconciled with one another' (1993a interview, online [no page number available]).

Butler's works have been described as part of 'a radical democratic project that seeks both to resist and to extend the discursive norms by which subjects are currently defined' (Salih, 2004:6), in which the instability and hyperactivity of Foucauldian theory is valued as a defence against what Butler calls 'recuperation'. For example, 'liberatory' strategies based upon the collective action of 'women' as a universally oppressed group have been incorporated and institutionalised by systems which continue to individualise, totalise and divide through the power/knowledge configurations of sex and gender (see e.g. Annesley et al., 2007; Geisler, 1995). Butler's destabilisation of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality, while preserving collective action as a tactic, prevents this kind of appropriation and stagnation.

'Some people would say that we need a ground from which to act. We need a shared collective ground for collective action. I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens' (Butler, 1993a interview, online [no page number available]).

Though the evasion of definition and institutionalisation may appear as a barrier to creating change, the significance of both Foucault and Butler's work to politics lies in a commitment to ensuring that change is substantial, or *radical*. The refusal of both writers to abandon historical and philosophical rigour to perceived political utility allows a much deeper understanding of the implications of political change. As Gore argues, in

her Foucauldian study of educational practices, 'we must know what we are and what we are doing...in order to begin to address adequately how we might do things differently' (1998:248).

In conclusion, then, the application of Foucault's analysis of power to a radical politics remains problematic. An account of resistance that refuses to offer stable foundations for its justification or to locate power within a specific origin may be seen as the antithesis of a radical politics that has roots as its target. However, if Foucault's analysis of power is taken to inform the *definition* as well as the practice of radical politics then his work begins to appear increasingly relevant.

If the subject can no longer be understood as either holding or lacking power, and if truth is the ally rather than the enemy of power, then the practice of radical politics becomes a kind of hyper-vigilance and hyper-activity. As Butler's Foucauldian feminism illustrates, this radical politics guards against the reconstitution of totalising power-knowledge relations through an approach that actively disrupts notions of truth, identity and universality wherever they begin to appear. In this way the definition and practice of radical politics is de-totalised, change must be constant and practices must be reflexive. Above all, however, critique must be permanent (Foucault, 1984c).

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