

Understanding Postmodern Modes of Power

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the notion of postmodern power as propounded by the French postmodern thinker Michel Foucault (1926-84). He constructs the theory of postmodern power in contrast to the conventional model of sovereign power as repression of the powerless by the powerful. He goes beyond this negative understanding of power and advocates the theory of power which is positive, dispersed, indeterminate, heterogeneous, subjective, and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities. The power in postmodern time does not serve to objectify, exclude, coerce or punish, but rather to order and enhance life. The most characteristic feature of postmodern power is that it is intimately related to knowledge mutually producing and generating each other. The production of knowledge is always an expression of power and any expression of power always produces knowledge.

Key Words : Bio-power, Disciplinary, Postmodern, Power/knowledge, Regulatory, Repression, Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

The concept of postmodern power perhaps is the most significant and unique contribution of the great French intellectual, Michel Foucault (1926-84). Foucault uses the word power to signify the expression, the relations of power. His conception of power does not signify the general notion of power such as political structure, a government, a dominant social class, the master and the slave and so on. Rather he understands power as a presence everywhere, a presence that is completely involved in or subliminal in all of the human actions and interactions. In contrast to two traditional models of power, namely the judicial (power seen as law, political sovereignty) and the economic (power as class domination) he gives a postmodern approach to power and sees power as dispersed, indeterminate, heterogeneous, subjective, and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities. He propounds that the most characteristic feature of this postmodern power is that it is intimately related to knowledge. He argues that, "it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge and it is impossible for knowledge not to

engender the power" (Foucault, 1980: 52). Through his genealogical method he radically reformulates the theory of power, and its relations in specific practices, techniques and disciplines in society.

Foucault's Notion of Power:

Thomas Lemke in his book, *Foucault, Governmentality and Critique*, has shown that Foucault's conception of power is distinct from the traditionally accepted interpretations of western philosophy. He argued that Foucault moves beyond this too-common division and calls into question the underlying premise of both conceptions: the coupling of the analysis of power to question either of legitimacy and consensus or of constraint and violence. His point of departure is the variety of ways in which power has been analyzed in political and social theory (Lemke, 2016: 10). Basically, Foucault differentiates power into two modes or into two levels, micro and macro. In his lectureseries *Security, Territory, Population* (2009), Foucault not only talked about pastoral power, but also of sovereign, disciplinary and regulatory-power. Even in the beginning of this lecture, he said this lecture is just an extension in his project of

bio-power. On the basis of pastoral model¹ of governmental structure in Western history, Foucault discovered these three forms of power in different epochs. He associated sovereign power with late seventeenth century when criminals, on the basis of their crimes, were punished by exiling or mulcting them. He associated disciplinary power's emergence with eighteenth century when criminals became the matter of study; state started studying the psychological reasons and mentality of criminal to reduce the number of crimes. And finally he associated regulatory-power with twentieth century in which state's concentration increased more on crimes and its number, data, rather than on criminals (Foucault, 1998: 139-140). Foucault in his lecture *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), talked about the technologies of power where he argued that in pre-modern era the power was known as sovereign power which works by extraordinary violent acts. The technology of power during that period was sovereign. Now according to Foucauldian view power can't change itself, but changes its modes. So, in the modern period, sovereign power has been supplemented by two technologies of power, as disciplinary and regulatory-power which are in fact two forms of bio-power.

Power as sovereignty:

Sovereign power can be understood as juridico-discursive form of power. For Foucault in the pre-modern period governing forces worked in the form of sovereign where the notion of sovereignty was invested in the prince by God or in the state (Dean, 1999: 104). Hobbs's *Leviathan*² had posed the scope and the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the power of the sovereign as the original and fundamental questions of politics. But Foucault argued that both the underlying conception of power as sovereign power and the question of law and right with which it is engaged have a historical location in the formation of European monarchy. The conception of sovereignty that emerges from the historical moment has following crucial aspects. First of all, Sovereignty is a standpoint above or outside particular conflicts that resolves their competing claims into a unified and coherent system. Secondly, the dividing question in terms of which these claims are resolved is that of legitimacy, often framed in terms of law and right: which powers can be rightfully exercised, which actions are lawful and which regimes are legitimate. Together these two points project the sovereign as the protector of peace in the war of all

against all and the embodiment of justice and settling of competing claims. Thirdly, sovereignty is considered as the embodiment of law or legitimacy. Although there are no limits to the scope of sovereign power, where everyone and everything is in principle, subject to the sovereign, the actual exercise of that power must always be discontinuous and negative (Rouse, 2005: 103). Sovereign power comes into play only at specific points where law and rights have been violated and can only act to punish or restrain the violation. Thus, Foucault suggested that "power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure of things, time, bodies and ultimately life itself" (Foucault, 1998: 136). Sovereign power is in fact negative interpretation of power which can be understood through its nature or characteristic of dominating, suppressing and its right to kill and to let live. Foucault himself said: "In the classical theory of sovereignty, the right of life and death was one of sovereignty's basic attributes..., the right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live" (Foucault, 2003: 240-41). In sovereign power, the juridical form of this sovereign state is exercised through a subtraction mechanism (Foucault, 1998: 136), it can be understood as power which deduces. It is a particular kind of right in which power can seize and take away anything from us, in another words, power has a right to seize our bodies, things, wealth, labor, time and services (Foucault, 1998: 136).

Foucault's understanding of power differs from its treatment in mainstream political theories. Foucault repeatedly situated his reflections as an attempt to break free of the orientation of political thought toward questions of sovereign power and its legitimacy. He states, "At the bottom despite the differences in epoch and objectives the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (Foucault, 1998: 88-89). Foucault objected to the very conception of a sovereign standpoint from which the legitimacy of particular political struggle is ascertained.

From sovereign power to bio-power:

Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* differentiates power into two kinds as sovereign and bio-power. (Foucault 1998: 139) In sovereign power, state is understood as having a right to kill and let live and its symbol is sword (Foucault, 2003: 240) whereas bio-power can be understood in terms of making live and letting die (Foucault, 2003: 241). The relation between these forms

of governing rationalities and population in sovereign power and bio-power is very much different from each other. The relation between sovereign and population is based on fear; there is a vertical type of communication taking place in this kind of relationship. Sovereign can change laws and rules according to his wishes and fancies. The state apparatus and institutions are all at the service of the sovereign. He can even kill anyone. But in the modern form of power, where power is in the mode of bio-power, the relation between governing rationalities is more flexible than ever. Individual is more important, as we see in the liberalism and in neo-liberalism. Foucault invites readers to shift their focus from the conventional sovereign notion of power against which there is a need to call for freedom, to a positive notion of power.

Foucault attempts to think of the nature of modern power in a non-totalizing, non-presentational and anti-humanist scheme. He says that to this day we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power. He rejects the notion of modern power to be anchored in macrostructure of ruling classes. He gives a postmodern approach to power and sees power as dispersed, indeterminate, heterogeneous, subjective, and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities. He argues how the two traditional models of power, namely the judicial (power seen as law, political sovereignty) and the economic (power as class domination) are defective. In *the History of sexuality*, Foucault talks of new mode of power known as "bio-power". Bio-power is the form of power in which sovereignty is replaced by the political governmentality. Bio-power can be understood as a power over life. The word bio is derived from its Greek root *bios* which literally means life. He argues that with the constitution of bio-power as the coeternal concern of the modern state, sex became the focus of an explosion of discourses concerning the health of the body. Thus, discourses like organic physiology, genealogy, neurology, psychology etc., established life as the focus of power where the primary concern was the body and descent of the classes that ruled (Foucault, 1998: 123). Thus bio-power is the power over life and its management. This management of life is done through two technologies of power. The first is micro-technology of power which is disciplinary form of power and the second one is macro-technology of power which is known as regulatory form of power. When we say sovereign power is negative interpretation of power, then bio-power is the positive interpretation of power. Foucault states that governing rationalities in the form of

bio-power, "now present itself as the counter part of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 1998: 137). For him, this shift in mode of power took place in the Seventeenth century when sovereign power was replaced by bio-power. The two forms of power within bio-power are totally based on the relational activity of governmental structure. Here power does not kill people publicly but in contrast fosters human lives. The two poles of bio-power which are linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations, (Foucault, 1990: 139) emerged by defining and utilizing human bodies in two different ways. Whereas, the disciplinary form of power defined and used human body as a machine, the regulatory form of power understands individuals as race, as species. He claimed that although many of the political forms and practices of sovereign power remained in place; they were gradually taken over and ultimately sustained on the basis of power relations that functioned at a different location and scale. Increasingly, the sovereign apparatus (such as courts, prison and the army) became both dependent upon and productive of disciplinary and regulatory power. These power relations were disseminated through more extensive social networks and did not transmit power in only one direction. They were instrumental to the production or enhancement of various "goods", such as knowledge, health, wealth or social cohesion. Thus, political theories of sovereignty failed to recognize the many ways in which power was nominally deployed through the state apparatus (or for Marxists through the class ownership of capital), was more complexly mediated. Foucault concluded that from this failure that the traditional concerns for rights and justice provided an inadequate framework for political criticism of the modern nexus of power/knowledge (Rouse, 2005: 105).

Now we will discuss how do these two forms of postmodern biopower supplement the sovereign power and continue to objectify the human bodies and create identities and docile subjects.

Disciplinary power:

The first basic form in which the power over life evolved was centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and

economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the discipline: an *anatomo-political of the human body* (Foucault, 1998: 139). Rather than repressing or concealing, it works by constituting and structuring perceptual grids and physical routines. Disciplinary power is a kind of power which is exercised by making humans disciples; making them disciple of the sets of practices, of languages, of culture, of institutions. Disciplinary power works at a micro-level. In contrast to more traditional forms of domination such as slavery or serfdom, discipline allows for the increase of the economic productivity of the body, while at the same time weakening its forces to assure political imperatives that define discipline and establish its status as technology: “The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a regulation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely” (Foucault, 1977: 137-38).

These Disciplines developed inside of institutions, such as the army, prisons, schools and hospitals. In a micro-level power governs the mentality of individual through controlling his behavior and trains him in such a way as desired by these power structures. In *Discipline and Punish*, he wrote that discipline makes individuals. It is the specific technique of power that regards individuals as objects and instruments of its exercise (Foucault, 1977: 170). In it, power used the idea of space and time. Through the ideas of space, power constructs various spaces, we can call it as the architectural space which helps the mechanisms of disciplinary power to have separation and constant surveillance. These can be understood as institutions of states from which we can't escape if we want to be civilized persons according to society. These institutions are schools, hospitals, army camps and universities. Through these spaces, state regulates individuals into a particular way because in these enclosed spaces, state's pre-constructed truth is imposed on individuals as universal truths. Gradually, in this way, disciplinary power produces an organic individuality by exerting a control over bodily activities (Hoffman, 2011: 29). In the mind of individual these given truths exist as subjective truth. He starts thinking within these closed given frameworks as state needs and sacrifices his freedom without being aware of it, only in order to become normal in the eyes of the society. There is a

separate space for the normal ones who surrender their freedom and start operating their behavior as directed by the state. The second category is of abnormal ones who are on the way to become normal or those who are yet to adjust their minds as the state wants. For them these spaces are like prisons, mental asylum. Now because state controls individual's subjectivity through above mentioned spaces and at some level this subjective truth which is in fact objective one, becomes the truth of collective psyche and eventually becomes a social truth. Now this social truth will govern and become the basis of our rights, of our freedom and all laws. In all these spaces, there are some similarities in their architectural design. There is a special type of architecture of all these spaces which helps these to function as tools of ultimate surveillance. The architectural design of these spaces was influenced by and in fact is the extension of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*.³ But now there is no need of one tall tower to watch over the all subjects. These spaces are distributed into wards, cells, classrooms and even individuals' roles are also divided according to their ages. Now there is no need to torture subjects physically, because subjects are being watched by someone all over the time. They themselves are regulating their bodies as they have a fear in them that they are being watched by someone. All we need just to understand it as normal and regulate our body and actions according to it.

Regulatory power:

Regulatory-power is second kind of bio-politics in which macro technology of power works. This form of technology of power focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population* (Foucault, 1998: 139). This technology of power was not directed at the bodies of individuals but at the collective body of population. By “population” Foucault does not imagine a legal or political entity but an independent biological corpus: a “social body” that is characterized by its own processes and phenomena, such as birth and death rates, health status, life span, and the production of wealth and its circulation. The instrument applied here are regulation and control of the population which was organized and centralized

by the state (Lemke, 2011: 37).

Even disciplinary power also regulates us, but there is a difference in the perspectives of these powers to perceive the subjects. For disciplinary power we humans are individuals, and its task is to make us disciple through various institutions, but for regulatory-power we are population. It concentrates on the collection of people's data. In this mode of power, state regulatory controls over bodies; it is like bio-political control of the population. Regulatory power's main target for collecting data is classification of population, such as criminal and non-criminals, civilians and immigrants, male and female, sexually normal and perverts, employees and job seekers, etc. Through this data governing forces construct laws, regulations and policies. It studies on the statistics, economics, public health and cases of migrations and collect their data. Political government's policies are dependent on this data. Neo-liberalism works as bio-political governing system. According to Foucault, state develops regulatory mechanisms with the help of technologies of security and its main task is to prevent and protect population from diseases and internal threats. This technology of security creates different type of racism. For Foucault, the modern wars are in fact the race wars and it makes war bloodier than ever. In the name of preserving life wars are fought to remove any threat for life. Nazism in Germany is the fitting example of this. In regulatory-power, power structure changes its image as more rational and liberal than any other structure and transforms itself into a republic in the name of better government. Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1) predict about this form of power that: "If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population" (Foucault, 1998: 137).

Power / Knowledge Relationship:

The problematic of power and knowledge is a fundamental theme of Foucault. Among his well-known views, the idea that there is no power that doesn't produce a whole set of sciences that go with it, is the most unique. For him it is the most distinguishing characteristic of the postmodern power that it is intimately related to knowledge. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* and in *the Punitive Society*, Foucault argues that it was not theoreticians or philosophers who set the stage for the

prison in their theories, instead it was the workmanlike petit managers who built an incipient criminal science that made the prison possible. For Foucault, there is no prison without criminology and vice-versa, nor are there mental institutions without the medicalization of the mind: no power without certain forms of knowledge and vice-versa. Power and knowledge as two concepts are inter-related with each other in Foucault's philosophy. As a general formula, Foucault's power/knowledge thesis argues that power relations and scientific discourses mutually constitute one another. Foucault does not attempt to break down the elements of that mutual constitution systematically, deliberately entangling power and truth. Knowledge, as human or social sciences, and power relations constitute each other by rendering the social world into a form that is both knowable and governable each being dependent on the other. Power can only be exercised over something that 'techniques of knowledge' and procedures of discourse were capable of investing in. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault describes programs of government or models for the rule of society such as Bentham's *Panopticon*. These programs presuppose knowledge of the field of reality they act upon and render reality into a programmable object.

He is of the view that it is power which produces knowledge. Thus, he denies the independent knowledge. Foucault says, in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body and these relations. Power cannot itself be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation and circulation and functioning of a discourse. We are subject to the production of truth; Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge bring to our attention the fact, that in fields of specialized knowledge, the constituents of the power structures themselves govern our action. This means that there cannot be criminology without prison, forensic DNA without police and medicine without the clinic. It means that the understandings in fields of knowledge are manufactured within their discourses. In these and other cases, modern ways of pursuing, qualifying, testing and teaching knowledge are not possible apart from reciprocating patterns in the exercise of power, as in a prison, police or welfare system. In addition, power is not possible without knowledge.

Power and knowledge were thought to be in a symbolic relation to each other. 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. In other words, the independent, neutral, self-determining, self-affirming Cartesian Subject, the Subject of knowledge as a purely autonomous ego without shadows, is a construction. Foucault expresses the same idea in a different way: “Knowledge and power are integrated with one another and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender the power” (Foucault, 1980: 52). According to Foucault, the relation between power/knowledge determines what possible domains of knowledge are and how they can be engaged.

Characteristic features of postmodern power:

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains the way postmodern power is something entirely new. Unlike monarchical power, whose exercise was top-down centralized, intermittent, highly visible, extravagant and stable, postmodern power is bottom-up, diffuse, continuous, invisible, operating in the micro-practices, and constantly on the move colonizing new domains. Let us discuss some of the fundamental features of the notion of power as conceived by Foucault.

The key theme in his study of the penal system in *Discipline and Punish* is that power is not something that one class simply wields *en bloc* over another but that it forms a network of relations that travel downward, upward and sideways throughout society. As Arnold Davidson notes, “Foucault’s analysis of power will lead one to view power not as the homogeneous domination of one group or class over another, but as a net like circulation organization that involves everyone in society” (Swamikannu, 2004: 44). Power is not possessed by a dominant agent, nor located in that agent’s relations to those dominated, but is instead distributed throughout complex social networks. The actions of the peripheral agents in these networks are often what establish or enforce the connections between what a dominant agent does and the fulfillment or frustration of a subordinate agent’s desires. Certainly, this must be true of a power exercised discretely through surveillance and documentation. Indeed, Foucault would go on to emphasize the heterogeneity of the alignments that distribute power they include not just agents, but also the instruments of power (buildings, documents, tools etc.)

and the practices and rituals through which it is deployed. He says: “Power is produced at every moment, at every point or rather in every relation between points. Power is everywhere; not because it encloses everything but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998: 93). The concept of power from everywhere should be understood as referring to power’s embeddedness in everyday practices where everyone is caught up in a web of unequal relationships.

Foucault speaks of power as ‘something that circulates’ (Foucault, 1980: 98) and as being ‘produced from one moment to the next’ (Foucault, 1998: 93). Wartenberg points out that such a dynamic account is inherent in the recognition that power is always mediated by social alignments. Foucault rejects any reification of power. He insists that “power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away;’ (Foucault, 1998: 94) but power is employed through a net-like organization. These claims of Foucault regarding power can better be understood by Thomas Wartenberg’s discussion of power as always mediated by “social alignment.”? (Wartenberg, 1990: 150) Further, in Foucault’s view postmodern power is not localized or centralized in the hands of an individual or an institution, rather it is conceptualized as a chain or as a net. He argues: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized 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 organization. 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 vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, 1980: 98)

It means that power is a system of relations spread throughout society, rather than simply as a set of relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. The individuals are not mere recipients of power but the ‘locus’ where power is enacted and resisted. Thus, Foucault tends to see power less as something which is possessed but more as a strategy, something which someone constantly does or performs in a particular context. It is a set of relations which are dispersed throughout society rather than being located within particular institutions such as the state or

government (Swamikannu, 2004: 44).

Foucault distinguishes between two opposing views on power: the negative or the repressive model of power and the positive or productive model of power. Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* writes that, “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 excludes etc. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of object and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977: 194). He rejects the repressive and negative aspects of power and apprehends it as primarily positive and productive. Power constitutes the individuals in whom and through whom it subsequently operates. For Foucault postmodern power is not an instrument of exclusion, but a pervasive pressure towards ever greater inclusion. He does not serve to objectify, exclude, coerce or punish, but rather to order, discipline and enhance life.

Conclusion:

Thus, according to Michel Foucault power is a trans-historical phenomenon which, though in different forms and modes, has ever been operative in construction of subjects and identities. The postmodern mode of power goes beyond the view of power as repression of the powerless by the powerful to an examination of the ways that power operates within everyday relations between people and institution. The exercise of surveillance, elicitation and documentation enables a more comprehensive knowledge and pervasive control of what people do. In his view complex differential power relationship extend to every aspect of our social, cultural and political lives, involving all manner of ‘subject-positions’ and securing out assent not so much by the threat of punitive sanctions as by persuading us to internalize the norms and values that prevail within the social order. He points out that sovereign power tends to be totalizing, ignoring the individual but a new form of power- a bio-power that is at once both individualizing and totalizing- has come to dominate the social body. Knowledge is a conjunction of power relations and information seeking, which may play a significant role in the maintenance of the status quo and the affirming of current power relations operative in knowledge. Foucault coined the term ‘power/knowledge’ to indicate the close relationship between the two concepts. He insisted that the production and dissemination of knowledge is always an expression of power and that the expression of power

always involves the production and dissemination of knowledge. Discourses designate the conjunction of power and knowledge: it is through discourse that the production of knowledge takes place and through which power is exercised and power relations are maintained.

Notes:

1. This model refers to Judeo-Christian model of governance where the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is same as that of the shepherd and sheep. The Shepherd is responsible for the life and death of the sheep.
2. *Leviathan* is the famous classical Work by Thomas Hobbes.
3. The *Panopticon* is a type of institutional building and a system of control designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The scheme of the design is to allow all (*pan-*) inmates of an institution to be observed (*-opticon*) by a single watchman without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. Although it is physically impossible for the single watchman to observe the inmates’ cells at once, the fact that the inmates cannot know when they are being watched means that they are motivated to act as though they are being watched at all the times. This scheme effectively compels the inmates to constantly control their own behavior.
4. According to Wartenberg the concept of ‘social alignment’ provides a way of understanding the “field” that constitutes a situated power relationship as a power relationship.

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