

## EXPLANATORY GROUNDS: MARX VS. FOUCAULT

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### 1

It has often been said that people are motivated to possess three things: power, money, and sex. This paper is an evaluative study of two theories which hold a given one of these three primary to the other two. The theorists are Marx and Foucault.

Marx holds that the mode of production determines who has the basic power and controls modes of acceptable sexual behavior. There are actually two variant theories held by Marxists. One, the economic determinist position, holds that the economic base of society determines other social institutions. All important changes in the culture of a period—its politics, ethics, religion, philosophy, and art—are ultimately to be explained in terms of changes in the economic substructure. The relations of production constitute the economic structure of society, and they determine the existent social consciousness of the populace.

The second variant, dialectical materialism, holds that there is a two-way causal relation between the economic production mode and the political, religious, ethical, artistic, etc., superstructures. Hence, economic factors determine the laws and the particular laws in turn affect certain economic situations. Hence, it is not always the case that economic forces determine everything else. Engels, for example, says, "law must not only correspond to the general economic condition and be its expression, but (at the same time) it rarely happens that a code of law is the blunt, unmitigated, unadulterated expression of the domination of a class."

Both of these Marxist variants differ from Foucault, who contends that power *per se* is primary to sex and on most occasions economic matters as well. For many years Foucault's ideas were seldom found in philosophical literature, but now they are ubiquitous. Of him it is said that he is no longer a person, but like Freud a climate of opinion. Few if any, other philosophers have written about the subjects of his research, viz.: madness, prisons, religious confessionals, infant sexual behavior, etc. His central concern, how-



ever, is about the nature of power and the consequent discourses as to truth. More precisely he wanted to show how power works, not what it is. This research has aroused much interest in various groups including feminists who find his power studies particularly valuable for their cause, as they see themselves as victims of patriarchal power.

What are his thoughts about power? Foucault for one thing objects to viewing the negative conception of power as the only power type. He maintains that since the 18th century power has become an increasingly positive or productive concept, involving the careful construction of new capacities rather than the repressive pre-existing one. Hence, for example, 'power over life' comes to consist not so much in relation to the threat of death, but in the positive management of life itself. Such positive power management by ourselves takes as one of its central concerns the human body in:

...its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the exhortation of its forces, the parallel increase in its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls...<sup>1</sup>

In order to produce these useful bodies, says Foucault, "...a real and effective assertion of positive power was necessary, in the sense that power had to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to our acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior such as slimming, tanning, and molding."<sup>2</sup> Today we are told to get slim and to get fit.

Thus we now exist under disciplinary power, both of our own choosing and that of our bourgeois society. Factory workers are disciplined by efficiency theorists, bureaucrats by time schedules, students are disciplined by subjects offered as well as the rites of periodic examinations. Besides disciplining our bodies we also discipline our sexuality. Bodies are being said to become 'sexualized' in a sense closely analogous to that in which they have formerly been said to be 'militarized'. Both types of power: negative (repressive) and positive (assertive) exist in our sexual lives, the fulfillment of which today we believe to be crucial for the good life. A person can, by his own choice the often is not acting as a result of repression, but by a positive decision. On the other hand in the past he may have been negatively repressed by his particular social-historical situation. Such is the case of sexual desire which has been repressed in Western civilization via its roots in Christianity as it adopted the Stoic ethical beliefs. 'Sexuality' does not refer simply to an ahistorical drive as Theodore Reik claimed, but also to various

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (ed. Colin Gordon), New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Quel corps? "Power and Body"* (trans. C. Gordon), Paris: Petite Collection Maspero, 1978, p. 62.



characteristics ascribed to it in the modern discourse(s) about sexuality. Foucault maintains that everyone has a particular ideology of sexuality and one presents discourses about it usually offering his positive as well as his negative thoughts. As one offers his thoughts about sex acts desires are created, and rather than being repressed one positively seeks fulfillment.

Is Foucault correct to hold a two-concept theory of power? One critic argued:

"It is far from obvious that Foucault's distinction is a reasonably clear one; or, at least, that his own examples of modern power are distinctively 'positive'. After all, he himself talks frequently of the 'subjugation' of bodies, of the 'controls' imposed upon them, of their being rendered 'docile'; and also, of their ('natural') capacities for 'resistance' to such exercises of power over them. These terms seem surely to belong to the vocabulary of negative, repressive power.<sup>3</sup>

It may not always be easy to distinguish between the negative and the positive whatever the subject. Recent debates about negative and positive freedom exhibit this. Nonetheless it seems clear that Foucault's distinction is of real value. We do make choices independent of repressive forces and, if so, there is such a phenomena as a positive power act in our various behaviors, including our sexual endeavors.

## 2

Let me now turn to Foucault's criticism of Marx's concept of power. An economic determinist sees all power in such terms as economic ideology and the play of superstructures and infrastructures. Foucault in contrast argues that when one considers other phenomena such as psychiatric internment, the mental normalization of individuals, and penal institutions, one realizes that such functioning is not significantly determined by economic forces. Furthermore, these three institutions are essential to the functioning of social power entities, but their role has been minimized by Marxists as a study in our society. Hence Marxists theories represents an obstacle for the proper study of power because of its ignoring certain institutions and because of its continued emphases on its particular ideology as well as viewing capitalist power simply as repression. If power is nothing but repression, if it did nothing but say no, would one readily be brought to obey it? Our society's power, Foucault emphasizes, is usually seen as a good. It produces

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<sup>3</sup> Russell Keat, "The Human Body in Social Theory", *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 42, p. 25 (Winter/Spring 1986).



things, usually beneficial things and experiences, and that is one reason we seldom reject it. This is positive power. So the Marxist view of capitalist power as repression is not always the case. For example, some capitalism in Marxist China is viewed there as a good. Thus, the notion of economic ideology, which is central for Marxists, stands in a secondary position for Foucault. It is far removed from the existents of which he claims to be crucial causal forces. To say my economic ideology is the main force in one's life is even as Engels said too vague and even vacuous.

One of Foucault's criticism of economic determinism evolves from his famous study of madness. He points out that until the Renaissance madness was linked to the presence of imagery transcendence. Later on in the Classical age preceding the French Revolution madness was linked with a condemnation of idleness. Communities took to themselves the power of segregating all forms of social uselessness. At that time a madman was one who had crossed the borders of bourgeois order. The consequent confinement of such insane as well as the insistence on work for all was not, according to Foucault, an economic matter but rather a result of the moral attitudes pervading in the 17th and 18th Century onward. Idleness was not considered a product of unemployment, but due to "the weakening of discipline and the relaxation of morals."<sup>4</sup> Moral attitudes and not economic forces determined who exhibited idleness as well as insanity. Thus the Marxist's theory at best fails to account for that incarceration of the lazy and the mad.

Finally Foucault, in his criticism of Marx, distinguishes different kinds of power. People ordinarily see power directly yielded by some type of sovereign but there are other types. Foucault especially favors one type of power, capillary power, *viz.*, power at the ultimate end of a series of events—power, as the best explanatory concept. Thus, rather than seeing economic acts in terms of, e.g. Keynesian theory, one will find it, he says, more fruitful to study the specific economic acts of workers, i.e., the micro-economic forces. It is in this regard Foucault speaks of these "capillary forces" — by which he means the ultimate forces at the beginning of a chain, and their consequent major events. Foucault argues that the analysis of power, right, and truth ought not to be concerned with the forms of power at their central locations but rather with the forms of subjugation at the extremities, the peripheral loci. This is consistent with one of his definitions: *viz.* "power is a relationship in which one person's actions shape the field of possible actions of another". At these extremities the exercise of power relations is most easily visible as are the actual social practices which tend to modify the legitimate rules of order and which establish new practices. Once the focus is

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 157 (New York: Vintage Books).



established, one can explore the further question of the annexation or colonization of the peripheral practices by the global ones.

Thus, one must conduct an ascending analysis of power starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, each of which have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been—and continue to be—invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination.

As exemplified in Foucault's study of madness, one must begin with the lowest levels and study how the mechanisms of power function in terms of the smallest social units such as the family or such agents as doctors, parents, or teachers. By doing this, Foucault discovered the mechanisms of exclusion which eventually became politically useful and economically profitable. For example, as the exclusion of the insane from society became advantageous, the practices of handling them "came to be colonized and maintained by global mechanisms." So Foucault's capillary theory has, some value, yet it is strange that he does not illustrate this power concept by sufficient examples. At times it appears to be a strange Schopenhauerism without will that Foucault gives us. It seems to be power without a subject.

In contrast to capillary power we are all too aware today of surveillance power. This is a major corollary change from the old historically prevalent sovereign repression and/or domination type of power. Yet the theory of sovereignty as being central persists in peoples' minds because of prevalent discourse as to what is discoursed about power as true by our establishment. The rules of social right acts are power forces themselves as they have been produced via the discourses of what is held to be truth in our society. Power relations permeate and constitute the social body and are established, consolidated, and implemented by way of the production and use of discourses which are taken as truth. In every society people are subjected to the production of truth via power groups. Truth is produced as the power groups determine the social discourse. What is held to be truth must be pervasive in order to have order and for a society to function. Thus "truth" is a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation of statements. Systems of power produce and sustain these "truth". It simply isn't a mechanism of capitalism alone, but is prevalent in all Marxist societies as well. Each power group has its regime of truth. Each has types of discourses which it promotes and makes function as true. The Marxists have failed to emphasize this relation between power and truth especially in Marxist societies. In conclusion, in contrast to Marxists, Foucault argues caution regarding causal imputations concerning economic notions of power. Rather we need to focus on social practices, especially those occurring at the

periphery and involving the relation of the extremities to the global or central powers to explain the forces in our society. Foucault has told us some generally startling things about what we thought we understood.

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