

Abusing Foucault: methodology, critique and subversion

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Abstract

This paper examines the uses to which Foucault's work has been put in a variety of areas in the social sciences. The argument is made that Foucault's work is often used to legitimate practices which bear little resemblance to the original and are frequently based on a misunderstanding of his method. Foucault's work should not be turned into a slogan and then inserted within an existing political project. Foucault's work invites scepticism, rather than dogmatic belief. The argument is illustrated with examples from discourse analysis.

Introduction

...veneration of monuments becomes parody; the respect for ancient continuities becomes systematic dissociation; the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to

the will to knowledge. (Foucault, 1977a: 164)

Michael Foucault is a writer of crucial importance in the social sciences, where he is regularly represented as a *methodological* authority figure. Texts as diverse as Said's (1978: 3 ff) *Orientalism* and Beer's (1983: 268) *Darwin's Plots* use Foucault as a methodological starting point for their accounts. It is hard to think of an area in the social sciences that has not felt in some measure what, following Burchell et al (1991), we might term the 'Foucault Effect'. For example, he has been given as an important methodological source for discourse analysis (eg Parker 1990, 1992; Potter & Wetherell 1987), for feminism and 'post feminism' (eg Diamond and Quinby 1988; Jordanova 1989), for critiques of psychiatric practice (eg Miller & Rose 1986), for a potential reformulation of psychology (eg Henriques et al 1984), and for writings in the history of psychoanalysis (eg Forrester 1990). In this paper, we dissect statements about Foucault's work and claims about the relevance of his conclusions. We draw on examples from discourse analysis, feminism to make the point that Foucault's work can not be inserted unproblematically into any (or every) existing political project. If Foucault is taken seriously, it is necessary to become a sceptic perhaps even one of the Pyrrhonian variety). In addition, we ask whether it is legitimate to ground research with the kind of 'moral authority' that mention of Foucault's name, and fleeting citation, seems to invoke. We conclude by offering a view of what 'Foucaultian scholarship' should look like, and review the work of those authors whose work seems to be the most helpful development of some Foucault's characteristic themes.

Gordon (1990) points out how Foucault's groundbreaking (1961) *Foile et déraison* has been the subject of a variety of misreadings and misunderstandings, not least because many commentators have relied on reading the abridged translation. We argue that *Foile et déraison* is not the only text to suffer the fate of being misunderstood; but we add the suggestion that the motivating factor behind such misappropriations of Foucault is more than the unavailability of full translations: we also point to the desire to subsume Foucault within political projects. Our analysis of these misappropriations relies on selecting specific examples from the tradition we concentrate upon. We use examples that are either typical or widely cited, and make limited claims about the generalisability of what we say.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, which has become an academic growth area, is essentially the celebration of language-use as the most important aspect of human culture and the key to understanding human interactions. Within psychology, for example, it has established itself as one of the most self-consciously 'modern' (or perhaps even postmodern) approaches to understanding social psychological issues (therefore subverting other methodological practices within psychology). It is claimed, for example, that racism can be investigated and pinned down (perhaps even remedied) by understanding the language of 'discourses' engaged in by participants in social life (eg Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Within psychology at least, this type of research is descended from a tradition known as conversation analysis (eg Atkinson & Heritage 1984), which concentrates on a

microscopic analysis of verbal exchanges, focusing attention on turn-taking, hesitations, pauses, overlaps, tag-questions, and so on, largely without commenting on the situations within which a verbal exchange took place. Discourse analysis adds a (fairly non-specific) attention to the context of their target utterances, noting political and socioeconomic issues (see Potter & Wetherell 1987). To establish its difference from conversation analysis, discourse analysis needs to make a display of methodological sophistication - which is where Foucault so frequently comes in. Reference is routinely made to Foucault as a methodological inspiration. Foucault's (1972) 'methodology handbook', *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is the 'authority' for the use of the term 'discourse'.

Discourse has almost become a term without meaning. Potter and Wetherell, for example, use it to cover "all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds" (1987: 7). This use of the term can be usefully anchored with a paper by Ricoeur (1971), in which the distinction is made between linguistic systems examined in their own right, and the uses to which language is put. Potter and Wetherell's approach is an attempt to engage in the latter. The problem lies in the fact that the term 'discourse' is derived from a (mainly French) theoretical tradition which is too infrequently examined for its internal coherence. While the famous French poststructuralists, like Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze use the term in subtly nuanced and different ways, there is also an input from theorists rather more interested in semiotics, such as Barthes (eg 1977), Pêcheux (eg 1982), Serres and Kristeva. Add to this the investigations into discourse from

the psychoanalytic perspective of such as Lacan (eg 1988), Irigaray or Cixous, and one **begins** to **see** why this ever-present theoretical concept is in constant danger of lacking any **sort** of specificity.

Foucault has assumed pride of place in **this** pantheon; it is widely assumed that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is the *locus classicus* for the definition of discourse. However, a careful reading of this text suggests a highly specific definition of discourse which is a long way from the conception of discourse which lies behind **discourse** analysis within psychology. Foucault engages in a minute dissection of his **own** vocabulary, and says that the **analysis** of the statement **as** it occurs in the archive is his **main** concern (Foucault 1972: 79ff). In addition, Foucault points out that “[a]rchaeology describes **discourses** as practices specified in the **element** of the archive” (1972: 131), the archive being “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (1972: 130). Foucault’s terminology here alerts us **to** the fact that his approach is *historical*, although **he** is (perhaps overly) **keen** to **distinguish** between ‘archaeology’ and ‘history’. This emphasis is confirmed when Foucault **suggests** that to follow his ‘method’, one is necessarily **engaging** in ‘**historical**’ work, conceived of in his **own** idiosyncratic way: “the archaeological description of **discourses** is deployed in the dimension of a general history” (1972: 164). **This** is an important point: if one is engaging in work which is Foucaultian, one is doing **history**. It becomes obvious that there is something rather strange in scholars who **analyse** contemporary verbal exchanges claiming Foucault **as** a methodological inspiration: the more

clear the **distance** between their own **analyses** and the meticulous positivism of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* becomes, the more obvious it is that Foucault is **being** used **to** establish a **certain** authority **and** legitimacy rather than **as** **the** basis for a rigorous **method**.

Are **we** being unfair to the **discourse** analysts? it might be argued that certain methodological tools **are** derived **by** them directly from **Foucault**, such as **the** suggestion that **discourse** is constitutive: **objects** of scientific enquiry, **and** human subjectivity itself, are **textually** constructed. The main point here is that there **are** no stable entities **beyond** the discourse which govern a particular formulation. **As** Foucault argues, “the unity of a discourse is based not **so much on** the permanence **and uniqueness** of an object as on the **space** in which **various objects** emerge **and** are continuously **transformed... objects [are]** shaped by measures of discrimination **and** repression, objects **[are]** differentiated in daily practice” (1972: 32-33). It could **be argued**, then, that discourse analysis has provided a useful extension of this fundamental part of Foucault’s work. For example, considerations **given** to the construction of the **self** (**as racist, egalitarian, monarchist, objective, and so on**) by **discourse** analysts make the **point** that the self is a highly flexible entity, capable of rapid reformulations in response to discursive opportunities (for example, in response to **interview** questions). While such **work** may **be** laudable, it is **carried** out in isolation from the major question which Foucault **held** to be basic to **the** issue: **what** are the conditions of possibility which simultaneously promote and inhibit particular discursive constructions? **This** is, of course, a question about history, but it is **also** one which is hardly considered

history is misplaced. Such a rejoinder is inadequate. Much of the **work** in discourse analysis involves the investigation of relatively novel discursive forms: adaptations to feminist rhetoric, critiques of academic scrutiny, responses to the 'enterprise culture', as well as recent formulations of 'race', quantification in medical discourse, and 'nationhood', for example (see Fairclough 1992, Parker 1992; Potter, Wetherell & Chitty 1991; Wetherell & Potter 1992). What is missing here is some understanding of the rules of formation of such discourses. Merely remarking on the context of these constructions is **only** one step. That is, while tracing the permutations of **such discourse** is surely interesting, **an** analysis of the historical contingencies that allowed the appearance of such novel forms is highly relevant to what is attempted in discourse analysis. If nothing else, Foucault's historical approach holds out the promise of disrupting **our** present certainties, throwing our most cherished beliefs into confusion, rendering **our** present strange. What is needed is a much more **specific** account of the way in which discursive boundaries have emerged.

Another aspect of Foucault's work that **has** been incorporated to some extent in discourse analysis (but without Foucault's terminology) is the thesis of 'enunciative modalities' (eg 1972: 92-96). **This is a radical** extension of the idea that objects are constituted by discourse, which relates it to the **concept** of personhood. This thesis breaks down the distinction between the author of a statement and discourse itself it becomes problematic to disentangle this relationship; an author is positioned by discourse, which is in turn defined by historical organisation (Foucault 1972: 52-55); the author is not a

transcendental subject **left** unaltered by the act of enunciation. Discourse then, according to Foucault, "is not the majestic unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and **his** discontinuity with himself may be determined" (1972: 55). Such a claim could be **usefully** compared to Burke's rhetorical question: "**Do** we simply use words, or do they not **also** use us?" (1966: 6). **A** watered-down version of this thesis appears in discourse **analysis** when it is argued that a person is not a holder of racist attitudes for all time; rather one is a racist because of one statement, but not through the use of another. Personhood then, for both Foucault and discourse analysis, is a function but. **again**, what is missing from discourse analysis is Foucault's sensitivity to the historical organisation of the **self**: vague affiliations with the theory of the de-centred subject are not sufficient to be **an** addition to Foucault's project of creating "**a history** of the different modes by which, in our culture, human **beings** are made subjects" (Foucault 1982: 777). The problem here is that discourse **analysis** does not adopt the radical implications of this **thesis** (see Fairclough 1992: 45); **again**, the connections with Foucault's **forms** of scholarship seem fairly superficial.

When one of us (Soyland) was presenting material on **discourse** analysis in Australia, a Radical Behaviourist in the **audience** (for such people do still exist) became very interested; here, he **was** certain, **was** a reassertion of behaviourist principles applied to verbal behaviour. Could discourse analysis be a form of neo-behaviourism? This similarity is **worth** pursuing for the differences it point up **between** discourse analysis and the work of Foucault. From his early **work**

(eg 1961), Foucault was careful to remove any discussion of the role of the agent (and particularly the role of 'great men') so typical of narratives of history, the interest is in the appearance of the text, the point at which knowledge becomes public; where we see accounts of significant individuals, these are conceptualised as functions of discourse; even the kind discussed in Foucault's (1977b) *Discipline and Punish* is relegated to an institutional role inscribed within French law. The tension, for example, between Foucault and psychoanalytic theory is that Foucault is not interested in ontology, he tells no phenomenological story, he does not contribute (directly) to an account of the inner workings of the individual mind, for him there is no attempt to get beyond the discourse to consider questions of psychical processes. Here there is a similarity with discourse analysis insofar as the latter makes no attempt to get "under the skull", to fix models of transference or cognitive dissonance; even attitudes (that topic most readily identified as the province of social psychology) are deconstructed in terms of discursive variability and contradictory repertoires. Yet here, too, is a similarity with Radical Behaviourism: the workings of the mind became the speciality of the neurosciences, consciousness became epiphenomenal. explanations were to be sought in the reinforcement history of the organism without resorting to inner machinations, the observable was the only threshold for psychological scrutiny. The behaviour of the agent is the site of analysis for both discourse analysis and Radical Behaviourism (see also Parker 1990, 1992). How, then, could Potter and Wetherell (1987) make good the assertion in their subtitle: 'Beyond attitudes and behaviour'? For while it is true that

they do not carry out observational studies of physical movements in controlled environments (the hallmark of studies in Behaviourism), they have merely restricted their attention to one aspect of behaviour: language-use. With a shift of terminology, it could even be claimed that the discursive repertoires of discourse analysis are responses to particular reinforcement histories; both of these are responses to particular aspects of the environment, and both disregard any need for the organism to minimise any internal inconsistency. Potter et al. (1990) attempt to answer this unfavourable comparison with Radical Behaviourism by stressing their use of the term 'interpretative', yet because they give no account of the agent giving an interpretative response (a phenomenological or cognitive story), they remain open to this form of attack; the level of any 'interpretation' is only judged according to behavioural criteria. Further similarities between these two paradigms need not be pursued here but, given such a comparison, what happens to the purported connection with Foucault? We suggest that any connection remains superficial at best, and that much remains to be done if such connections are to be expanded, or made more credible. Given that the tactic in this section has been, in part, to associate discourse analysis with Radical Behaviourism, thus placing a greater distance between discourse analysis and Foucault, one final point needs to be made concerning the other connection in this triad: Foucault could not be considered as a behaviourist because his work does not contribute directly to an account of contemporary behaviour; historical work does not bear a direct relation to behaviour beyond the text; understanding events in his terms does not entail that it

should have predictive power. **So**, while Foucault does not give accounts in which an active, reflective agent is present, his work should not be described as having any significant relationship with behaviouristic psychology.

We have characterised discourse analysis, then, as an attempt to celebrate language use as that which is the most fundamental aspect of being human. However, it fails to move much beyond this celebration, preferring the comfort of its own assumed intellectual 'bettemess' and 'modernness'. It is a project without a rigorous method (we are unsure how discourse analysts' accounts of what lies behind language use can be distinguished from common sense, off-the-cuff remarks), and with only the most tenuous grasp of the philosophical themes claimed as legitimating its practices. It is a political project in the sense that it wishes to install 'language' as the ultimate explanatory category, and it seeks to enlist the services of Foucault to this end. Foucault is being used here as little more than a source of moral authority: his archaeological method is not followed rigorously by discourse analysts in psychology. Foucault's own work would resist discourse analysis, if his method were ever rigorously employed.

Concluding remarks

It took fifteen years to convert my book about madness into a slogan: all mad people were confined in the eighteenth century. But it did not even take fifteen months - it only took three weeks - to convert my book on will to knowledge into the slogan 'Sexuality has never been repressed'. (Foucault 1983: 211).

Towards the end of his life, Foucault complained about bookshops piled up with hastily written books which "with lies and pronunciation mistakes, say anything and everything about the history of the world ever since its foundation, or which rewrite more recent histories with slogans and clichés." (Foucault 1985: 76; translation from Macey 1993: 426). Foucault's work has not been immune from this process of rewriting; indeed, we have argued that he has served as a kind of moral authority for some books which we guess he would not have regarded very highly. Why is this a problem?

We have risked accusations of policing the uses to which Foucault may be put. Yet we maintain that the use of Foucault as a legitimating device, a source of moral authority, is unacceptable. We have suggested that certain discourse analysts claim Foucault as a founding father, but then forget the necessity of having a rigorous method, particularly one sensitive to historical processes. But Discourse Analysts are not alone in their abuse of Foucault - the problem is fairly wide spread in many areas. Foucault has been enlisted by many scholars to aid their various theisms; but Foucault's work is more appropriate for intellectual atheists.

Many scholars have, however, produced accounts which seem to fit in with our Pyrrhonian view of Foucault, and have followed his injunction to 'produce genealogies'; that is, they have written accounts which give us histories of present problematics. In Australia, genealogies of education have sought to use Foucault's method to outline the conditions under which modern deployments of educational techniques have emerged, and have allowed us the possibility of viewing education in a new way. Hunter's

(1989) account of the 'invention' of the aesthetic citizen allow us to understand the realm of personal experience as one which is neither fundamentally individualistic nor one which is the simple imposition of a dominant ideology. Hunter is able to demolish the arguments of those for whom education is either class control or a victory for enlightenment thinking; he is able to do this precisely because he makes use of history. The nineteenth-century educational reforms of David Stow are crucial for Hunter in terms of the construction of our modern practices; and it is through his analysis of Stow that Hunter points out where most theorists of education go wrong:

[they] assume that education is a manifestation of culture, pictured as the historical reconciliation of an exemplary opposition between the self-realising and the utilitarian, the self-expressive and the normative. They disagree only over whether this universal movement towards the complete development of human capacities has already occurred or has been blocked by a freezing of the dialectic on the side of 'class cultural control'. However, it seems to be the case that self-realisation and social norms, self-discovery and moral training, are by no means opposed to each other in Stow's modified version of the pedagogical disciplines. Quite the opposite: it was in the supervised freedom of the playground that moral norms would be realised through self-expressive techniques; and it was in this space that the forms of self-discovery organised around the individual would permit the realisation of new social norms at the level of the population.
(Hunter 1989: 38-9; italics in original).

Hunter's counter-intuitive conclusion arises precisely because he takes Foucault seriously: he is a genealogist of education. More examples of this tendency in Australian education studies can be seen in McCallum (1991) and the special 'Foucaultian' issue of *History of Education Review*. Both these publications seem to us to be worth some consideration because they use Foucault - they do not simply attempt to legitimate themselves by reference to his method.

Similarly, Rose's (1985, 1990, 1996) accounts of the self-actualising citizen produced primarily through psychological and educational discourses is successful, we argue, because it obeys our injunction and uses Foucault. Béjin's (1985) genealogy of orgasmotherapy is another attempt to use Foucault's methods in the field of sexuality, as is Hacking's (1990) account of the ever-increasing importance of statistics as tool for mastering a world that appeared to be becoming more and more indeterministic.

In an interview concerning his use of Nietzsche, Foucault commented:

The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest.
(Foucault 1977c).

We do not object to scholars who 'deform' Foucault; but our argument is that the certain uses of Foucault are unhelpful. We reaffirm our suggestion that the notion of 'use' be taken seriously, and not just to reduce his work to a slogan; some of the scholars we have discussed in this paper have

not taken up the challenge of using Foucault.

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