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Methodology of power analysis in Michel Foucault's thought

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Abstract

This work seeks to reconstruct Michel Foucault's power analysis methodology in order to understand how he overcomes the classical theories of power by proposing a way of seeing power as a relation that occurs between subjects. In order to do so, the relations between truth and power will be analyzed, as well as the methodological premises elaborated by the author in his main works on power.

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1. Introduction

This article has as main objective to identify the conceptual and methodological bases from which Michel Foucault constructs his analytic of power. Thus, the intention was to verify to what extent the Foucauldian power analysis methodology can serve as a basis for contemporary studies on the institutional mechanisms of intervention on the life of individuals and the population.

Therefore, in order to understand how Foucault overcame the classical theories of power, notably the contractualist theory of sovereignty, it will be necessary to follow three steps: 1) demonstrate how the author reconstructs the classical theories of the subject and especially the theories of the truth; 2) investigate how these notions of power and truth influence and articulate with Foucauldian research on power; 3) explore the way in which his power analysis methodology was developed.

So, in the first place, we will seek to understand how the author redefined his own reflection on the subject and the truth from a conception according to which knowledge has no nature or essence, but is the result, the effect, of struggles, of social forces and of power games historically situated. In sum, we will try to understand how he breaks with universalist and essentialist conceptions on behalf of a perspectivist and

historicist view.

From this, the intention was to investigate if and how this conception of subject and truth overflowed for the analyzes of power undertaken by Foucault and how he reunites the dimensions of truth and power. Therefore, there will be an attempt to evaluate to what extent the author builds a critique of modern and contemporary political philosophy, woven from the elements of the medieval monarchies - and the end of them - and for what reasons his proposal is more adequate to think about the challenges imposed by contemporary power practices.

Lastly, it will be sought to minimally systematize what Foucault established throughout his work as *indications, premises or methodological precautions* for the power analysis, which allow to account for this new dynamic perceived by him.

2. Truth and power in Michel Foucault's thinking

For some interpreters of Michel Foucault's thinking (MACHADO, 2007), the question of power is not, at least not explicitly, the oldest challenge formulated by him. The problem that would have guided his studies for nearly a decade after the publication of his doctoral thesis *History of Madness in the Classical Age* were the processes of truth formation.

In this sense, Lechuga-Solís (2007: 64) asserts that

As a whole, Foucault's work can be considered a *philosophy of truth* which is characterized by showing that this is not a universal proposition valid for every moment and every place, but that each society has its own *general policy* on it.¹ (our emphasis)

In fact, in working with the problem of truth, Foucault profoundly innovated the approach of the predominant philosophy in France of his time. He attempted to go beyond the framework of Kant's transcendental philosophy and the notion of the Marxism ideology, as well as various premises of Platonism, to think the truth as "the set of procedures that allow each moment and each one to utter statements that will be considered true" (FOUCAULT, 2006: 233).

In other words, this author sought to redefine his own reflection on truth. Therefore, his concern was not to discover *what was* or *which was* the truth, nor which would be the possibility conditions of the subject's knowledge, but *how* and *under what conditions* a given discourse was elevated to the status of truth.

In order to do so, Foucault refers to Nietzsche, because he finds in him precisely "a type of discourse in which the historical analysis of the subject's own formation is made, the historical analysis of the birth of a certain type of knowledge, without ever admitting the preexistence of a subject of knowledge" (FOUCAULT, 2003: 13).

This means that knowledge itself, knowledge as such, is not natural, is not something given to human beings in a *priori* manner either for its reason, or by a metaphysical entity - or even by the two concomitantly. Knowledge is produced within a concrete history, by concrete subjects, who have passions, instincts, interests, etc.

However, from the 1970s, on the one hand, with the maturation of the debates surrounding the processes of truth formation and, on the other hand, with the fact that it has approached other objects of research, Foucault advanced in his investigations in the sense of demonstrating that these discursive practices are,

above all, strategic relations of struggle and power. In short, after Nietzsche, Foucault realizes that the relation between *knowledge and things to know* is arbitrary, of force, of violence, and not a peaceful and naturally established relation.

In this way, this could be considered as a major turnaround in the studies on power. The main innovation lies in the way he related these two themes, truth and power, not only as autonomous instances that complement or influence each other,² but from their immanent interfaces, from the way one produces and is produced by the other. The author states:

¹ “En su conjunto, la obra de Foucault puede ser considerada como una filosofía de la verdad que se caracteriza por mostrar que ésta no es una proposición universal válida para todo momento y todo lugar, sino que cada sociedad tiene su propia política general al respecto” (LECHUGA-SOLÍS, 2007: 64).

² In a simplified way, this would be the case with Marxism. Power and truth are related as autonomous institutions: the ruling class (power) uses the ideological processes to mask the truth, with power being on one side and truth on the other.

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that 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. These “power-knowledge” relations are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge (FOUCAULT, 2002: 27).

It is important to realize in this way, that the fluidity he gave to the notion of truth - from the idea that there is not *a truth*, but *relations of truth, processes of truth production* - ends up overflowing to his notion of power. That is, power could not be seen as something fixed, unitary, global, or concentrated in some instance as the state. If there are *truth relations*, there are also *power relations*.

In short, for Foucault, there is no such a thing as *the power*. Power is not something that one holds, it is not a property, something that some owns to the detriment of others distanced from it. What exist are practices, mechanisms, technologies, strategies, power relations diffusely exercised within the most different social relations (MACHADO, 2007).

For this philosopher, thinking power would be thinking of the various power relations that exist, for example, between men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, doctors and patients. Moreover, it would be to think that in each of these thousands (micro)relations there are confrontations, combats, opposition of forces, struggles and resistance. They are not peaceful or pre-defined relations (FOUCAULT, 2006: 231).

But as Foucault turns his eyes on this microscopic capillary perspective, or rather, on this microphysics of power, he withdraws from the state or state apparatuses its absolute monopoly. He does not believe that these power relations have been absorbed, confiscated, or oriented by the state power.

One cannot deny that there is a State and that it also exercises a power. However, this is a type of power relation among several that are transversally crossed and that mutually influence one another. According to Foucault,

If it is true that these small power relations are often commanded, induced from above by the great powers of the state or by the great class dominations, it must be said that, inversely, a class domination or a state structure can only function if there are, on the base, these small power relations (2002: 231).

Much less could one follow the procedures of traditional political theory, which centered its studies of power in the state. For Foucault, besides it being not the absolute source of all social power, the exercise of its power depends not only on legislations or the Law, but on a series of infinitesimal mechanisms linked to the production of knowledge, for example, on crime, disease, madness, etc. (MACHADO, 2007).

However, above all, Foucault was a critic of the approach from which the traditional theories of power – among which can be inserted from legal theories of medieval monarchies to liberal contractualism – explored its object. Normally they speak of law, legislation, legitimacy, limits and origins of power, while for him it was important to analyze the techniques, mechanisms, strategies that organize the way that power dominates and makes one obey (FOUCAULT, 2006: 267).

Thus, Foucault's proposal, as he explains in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, is to produce not a *theory*, but an *analytic of power* aimed at "a definition of the specific domain formed by the relations of power and the determination of the instruments which allow us to analyze it" (FOUCAULT, 2009: 92).

That would mean abandoning traditional representations of power. His purpose, therefore, is to construct an analytic of power that concentrates neither on the law nor on its capacity for interdiction. These are not the only forms of exercising power, not even the most important ones, one must go beyond the classical model of sovereignty.

On the other hand, the Marxist answer also did not prove sufficient to subsidize an analytic that could understand this multiple object that is power. He would question precisely how this Marxism understood power always in a secondary position in relation to the economy. To the extent that, in this perspective, the role of power would be to maintain relations of production and class domination, and its only historical reason for existence would be economy itself.

However, Foucault understood that even though power relations are extremely linked to economic relations, it would not be possible to defend the existence of a direct and unequivocal subordination of power to the economy, not even that all power relations are based on economic relations. Not all power comes from economics and not all domination is of class.

Hence, the analytic of Foucauldian power could not depend neither on the structure of traditional theories of power nor on the Marxist criticism. He would thus initiate the development of his own methodology, which would be better suited to the understanding of this *microphysics of power*.

3. Power Analysis Methodology

In an interview given in 1977, Foucault makes clear his view of the method. He claims:

I do not have a method that would apply, in the same way, to different domains. On the contrary, I would say that it is the same field of objects, *a domain of objects that I seek to isolate, using instruments found or forged by me, at the exact moment I do my research*, but without privileging the problem of method in any way. In this sense too, I am by no means some structuralist. Since the structuralists of the 1950s and 1960s were essentially aimed at defining a method that would be universally valid for a whole series of different objects: language, literary speeches, reports, iconography, architecture... This is not absolutely my problem: I try to make this kind of layer, I would say this interface, as modern technicians say, the interface of knowledge and power, truth and power. That's it. That's my problem. (FOUCAULT, 2006: 229)

With regard to his analytic of power, that is precisely what happened. Foucault did not propose a research methodology so he could, from there, investigate its object. His method of analyzing power emerged, between comings and goings, from the ramifications of his researches that revolved around *Discipline and Punish*.

In this work he sought to make a genealogy of modern punitive power, especially the figure of the prison sentence, which had taken the place of torture as a general form of punishment, the main type of punishment of criminal law.

It turns out that the research ended up demonstrating that the prison sentence was not a specialized structure within a branch of the law, but part of a new power technology that was consolidated in modern societies and that Foucault would call *disciplinary power*.

In this way, prison was inscribed in a broader framework of institutions aimed at the normalization of individuals, the creation of *docile bodies*, and which therefore acted no longer on the body, as was the case with medieval tortures, but on the soul of those subjected to their networks of power.

In short, the research that began having as one of the main objects the prison sentence, now realized to be impossible to understand it disconnected from all other existing mechanisms of power, even outside the scope of criminal justice.

Therefore, using Deleuze's words (2005: 50), Foucault had to "invent a new conception of power". Or perhaps, lined up with what he said in the passage that opens this topic, the needs of his object made it necessary to forge new instruments of analysis. After all, it was not possible to account for this new conception of power by using the tools offered by traditional theories, even those elaborated after the decline of feudalism - whether it was contractualism or Marxist criticism.

For this reason, in the face of the fact that his instruments of analysis were being constructed as he deepened his research on power, Foucault did not come to systematize a definitive method for this. However, at different moments in his work he alerted us to what he would sometimes treat as *prescriptions of prudence*, sometimes as *questions of method*, or as *methodological postulates of analysis of power*.

The main texts in which the author constructs, reinforces and lapidates some methodological indications that become essential for the construction of an analytic of power are: *Discipline and Punish*

(2002); *Society must be defended* (2005); *The History of Sexuality, v. 1, An Introduction* (2009); and *Security, Territory, Population* (2008). However, it is not possible to leave aside Gilles Deleuze's detailed analysis of Foucault's (2005) work for a discussion on this topic.

So, although it has never seemed to be the intention of the author to systematically list them, this research covered the work of Foucault with the objective of recovering and systematizing these main precautions of method exposed by him as fundamental to proceed to an analytical of the power. From this work, nine postulates were found (some with derived propositions) more recurrent in his texts about the power, which we will list next:

1) Power should not be analyzed at the level of intention or decision

Power relations are both intentional and non-subjective at the same time. Although there is an instance that applies them, this does not mean that they result from a rational choice or decision of a subject, or from a government or an economic elite. This intention appears as real and effective practices of power and, to that extent, does not depend on a subject or group (FOUCAULT, 2009: 105).

2) One should not regard power as a phenomenon of mass and homogeneous domination

Power is not constituted as an essence or attribute subject to being acquired or appropriated by qualifying some (dominant) to the detriment of others (dominated), because for the philosopher one must understand power as a relation, a series of force correlations that, through struggles and clashes, is changing and can be embodied in the state apparatus, legislation and social hegemony. In short, power transits through individuals, it traverses them, and thus, depending on the relation that is established, people may be in a position to be submitted to that power, but also in position to exercise it (FOUCAULT, 2005: 32-35).

An important proposition deriving from this postulate is that *power is not owned by a class or by anyone*. It is a strategy and its effects are attributed to maneuvers, tactics, techniques, operations. This does not mean there is a denial of the existence of classes and their struggles, but there is an extension of this perspective to a scenario in which it is possible to perceive that amongst great conflicts there are innumerable points of confrontation, struggle, and possibility, at least transitory, of inversion of the forces game.

3) Power should be analyzed at its extremities

Research on power cannot focus on its regulated and legitimate forms, regulations, and laws. Power must be analyzed precisely where it becomes capillary, at its extremities, where, going beyond rules, it consolidates itself in techniques, it is invested in institutions and provides instruments for material intervention - even violent ones (Foucault, 2005).

In fact, as Foucault did in *Discipline and Punish* (2002), it is not a matter of seeking to establish the grounds of the power to punish, where its legitimacy comes from, but to perceive how punishment is consolidated in a set of local and material institutions, and how it is exercised in all its expression.

4) Not perceiving power as a deduction from the center to the periphery (or from top to bottom)

According to Foucault, there is no global matrix that reverberates from top to bottom on more and more restricted groups or increasingly peripheral instances. The point would be to make an ascending analysis of power, from its infinitesimal mechanisms to the more general forms of global domination, trying to understand how the former are annexed by the latter. In his words:

I think we have to analyze the way in which the phenomena, techniques, and procedures of power come into play at the lowest levels; we have to show, obviously, how these procedures are displaced, extended, and modified and, above all, how they are invested or annexed by global phenomena, and how more general powers or economic benefits can slip into the play of these technologies of power, which are at once relatively autonomous and infinitesimal (FOUCAULT, 2005: 36).

By that, the author is clearly trying to avoid the Marxist hypothesis that it would be possible to deduce all relations of power from the general phenomenon of domination of the bourgeois class. For him, the key would be to think how, historically and from below, the mechanisms of repression, exclusion, punishment, of power in general, became, in a given moment, in a precise conjuncture, politically useful or economically profitable and, therefore, absorbed or incorporated by a particular political group or social class.

Therefore, *(4.1) power is not subordinated to any mode of economic production or infrastructure*, even though this does not mean that there is no relation between the mechanisms of power and the economic instances. These relations can be established according to the utility or profit that certain mechanisms of power may represent, without, however, having a prior subordination or connection between one and the other. (DELEUZE, 2005)

5) The power is exercised from the formation of knowledge devices

One of the crucial elements for the analytic of power is the fact that it is directly connected to the truth. Multiple relations of power permeate, cross, constitute the social body, but are not capable of dissociating from or functioning without a formation and circulation of truthful discourse. We are submitted by power to the production of truth and we only exercise power through the production of truth (FOUCAULT, 2005: 28).

However, Foucault insists that the relations between truth and power cannot be confused with an ideological dimension, or rather with the power being exercised by the ruling class through ideology. For the author, the ideology is always in opposition to something that would be the truth, it hides the truth. That means to say there is somewhere an absolute, transcendental truth that we can unmask as soon as we overcome the ideological processes, something that Foucault profoundly disagrees with. In this way, power is not exercised through ideology, insofar as it does not abstract or conceals truth, but it *produces* truth and is sustained by it (FOUCAULT, 2007: 07).

6) Power is not grounded in itself

Power is not autonomous, nor is it autogenetic, it is not grounded in itself, it does not exist alone. This means there is no way to separate power relations from other relationships, such as production or family relationships. The mechanisms of power are the intrinsic part of all these relationships, they are

concomitantly their effect and their cause. For this reason, for example, there are no relations of power *plus* production relations, just as there are no production relations without power relations (DELEUZE, 2005: 42). Power relations are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other kinds of relationships, but they are immanent to them.

7) *Power is omnipresent*

Power is everywhere, not because it encompasses everything, but because it comes from everywhere (FOUCAULT, 2009: 103). Power relations are plural, multiple, and scattered throughout social relations. In this sense it is wrong, for example, to think of power as located only in the state apparatus, just as it is wrong to think that private powers are or are influenced by the power of the state. In fact, the state appears as an "overall effect or result of a series of interacting wheels or structures which are located at a completely different level, and which constitute a "microphysics of power" (Deleuze, 2005: 42).

However, this does not mean that there are no power relations that occur from the state or within certain global strategies. Although power is diffuse, according to Foucault, *double conditioning* prevails over it: no local power mechanism could function if, through a series of successive sequences, it did not eventually enter into an overall strategy; at the same time, no overall power strategy would produce effects if it were not supported and fixed in precise and localized power relations (Foucault, 2009: 110). In short, "power is local since it is not global, but it is not local or localizable since it is diffuse" (DELEUZE, 2005: 43).

8) *Where there is power there is resistance*

It is not because power manifests itself in a sparse and capillary way that we would always be subjected to it, in a necessarily inevitable and inescapable way. An important feature of power relations is that resistance points exist throughout their network, and the very functioning of power involves the production of resistance (FOUCAULT, 2009).

It should be clear, however, that this does not mean that resistances are a byproduct of power relations, something like a passive reverse bound to infinite defeat and submission. They present themselves as *the other* power, their irreducible interlocutor, always present and, therefore, interior to the relations of power. Therefore, the mechanisms of power must always be understood from this correlation of forces between *powers-resistances*.

9) *One must perceive power in the tactical polyvalence of speeches*

It is in discourse that power and knowledge are articulated, and precisely for this reason one must conceive discourse as a series of multiple and discontinuous segments without a uniform or stable tactical function. There is no discourse of power, on the one hand, and a counter discourse, on the other. "Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy" (FOUCAULT, 2009: 112-113).

For this reason, a single discourse, with the same form, can serve different (even opposing) strategies, without this homogeneity being verified. That is, the same discourse can both support processes of

production of truth, as it can be, on the contrary, a critical instrument within this tactical polyvalence. It is worth mentioning that, for Foucault, the analytic of power should not serve to produce imperative discourses in the sense of fighting this or that. At most, it perceives some key points, some force lines, some locks and blocks within the real force fields of the power dynamics, that is, the points at which the struggle may be most tactically effective. However, always recognizing that this can only be done gradually and within concrete historical situations, never in abstract (FOUCAULT, 2008).

In this way, following the nine assumptions listed from the Foucauldian works on power, the aim was to outline his investigative tools that were being constructed insofar as he focused on the research of an analytic of power. By moving away from the traditional representations of power, Foucault made possible the development of a methodology that was deeply innovative. Not a theoretical, abstract, and universal foundation that could be as misguided as those he had so severely criticized, but a proposal for new methodological foundations and new instruments that could help us understand the historical and localized practices of power.

4. Conclusion

In this article, we sought to identify and systematize the conceptual and methodological bases from which Michel Foucault organized his analysis of power. Starting from the way he interprets the production of truth as a relation of dispute, we reached the way the author thinks power equally as a relational process. From there, it was analyzed how the traditional methods of interpreting power, whether it was contractualism or Marxism, did not prove sufficient to understand the multiple ways from which power relations are established.

Although Foucault had clearly pointed out that he did not intend to establish a method that could be equally applied to different domains, within the construction of his methodological procedures of power analysis, it was possible to enumerate some postulates that were constructed at the time of the development of his research, and perceived from the demands that his object of study imposed.

Therefore, this research sought to systematize the methodological indications developed by Foucault in his works on power. We came to nine postulates that prove to be essential to sustain critical analyzes of power even today.

Being faithful to the author, one cannot try to universalize this methodological perspective at the risk of incurring an insoluble contradiction. It is important to understand that it presents itself as a starting point for investigations concerning the forms and devices of power exercise, based on a multiple, heterogeneous and decentralized dynamic, even in the conditions presented by contemporaneity.

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