

Michel Foucault

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Introduction

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is among the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His ideas exhibit an extraordinary reach across the social sciences and the humanities, even gaining considerable popularity outside academia.¹ Foucault has been considered a structuralist, a historian, a philosopher, a sociologist, a left radical, an anarchist, a threat to youth, a neoconservative, a nihilist and a positivist, among many other labels. In a revealing interview, he conceived of himself as an ‘experimenter’, not as a theoretical thinker (Foucault 2000b). Experimenting implied, according to Foucault, not seeking to confirm a priori established theory via empirical proof, but to enter fields of inquiry with curiosity and to emerge from them as a different person, with new ideas and concepts. The focus of his work was on the historical and empirical genealogy of the modern subject (Foucault 1983, 2000c).

From the late 1940s, Foucault studied philosophy and psychology in Paris at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* and at the *Sorbonne* University. His habilitation thesis, written in the late 1950s, became his first widely known book, *History of madness* (Foucault 2009a [1961]). His 1966 book, *The order of things* (Foucault 2001a), was a veritable public event throughout France and sold several hundreds of thousands of copies. After professorships in Clermont-Ferrand (France), Tunis (Tunisia), and Paris-Vincennes (France), Foucault in 1970 was awarded a professorship in the *History of Systems of Thought* at the most prestigious academic institution in France, the *Collège de France* in Paris. His annual series of public lectures were ‘must-go’ events. Through his academic work and political engagements, Foucault became an iconic figure of fresh and emancipatory thinking all over the world.

The reception of Foucault’s writings has varied widely. His outstanding and innovative originality results from his turning philosophy from theoretical and speculative thinking into an empirical and historical discipline. This is to be understood against the background of the most influential and hegemonic French intellectual movements of his time. First, there was the *philosophy of the subject*, as represented, among others, by leading French philosopher, writer, and public intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and his work on *existentialism*.²

Philosophies of the subject seek to grasp the very substance of what the universal or transcendental subject is, regardless of historical, social and cultural contexts. Sartre's existentialism claimed the absolute ethical responsibility of the free human subject, thrown into the world, where it has to act and make moral choices according to its own will. Second, and in complete contrast, there were *Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history* and the intellectual movement of *structuralism*, led by French ethnologist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). Structuralism was based on the theory of language as a system of differences as established by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), inspired by the sociology of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). With branches in Marxism (Louis Althusser, 1918–1990), psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan, 1901–1981), linguistics, semiotics and cultural theory (Roland Barthes, 1915–1980), structuralism asserted the function of pre-established systems of differences as hidden forces that organise human life and practices.

Foucault, although flirting with structuralism in the early 1960s, essentially opposed philosophies of history and structuralism as well as philosophies of the subject. Instead, he argued for, and established, a third space of historical inquiry and analysis, which accounted for the empirical becoming and continuous transformation of modes of existence of human subjects and orders of practice.³ He transformed theoretical philosophy of the subject into empirical research on historical subject formation and situated subjectivity, and the philosophy of history and structuralist thinking into historical research on contingent constellations of heterogeneous elements and practices. In so doing, he established a huge range of now-famous analytic and diagnostic concepts, including *discourse*, *dispositive*, *power/knowledge*, *archaeology*, *genealogy*, *discipline*, *biopower*, *governmentality* and many others. These were not arbitrary creations *ex nihilo*. They emerged out of concrete research interests and outcomes that relied upon several intellectually close thinkers. Foucault was influenced by philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), his mentor, philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem (1904–1995), the historian and cultural anthropologist Georges Dumézil (1898–1986), as well as by the French *Annales School in History*, the *philosophy of language* and *American pragmatism*.⁴ The following text discusses first the *general concern and intent* of Foucault's work. Second, it considers his methodology and, third, his concept of discourse. A fourth section explains his *analytics of power*. In the guise of a conclusion, a fifth and final section points to his *legacy and current developments*.

Concern and intent

Foucault owes the extraordinary impact of his work to his impressive material analyses and conceptual innovations. His research examined the history of accounting for the reasonable subject through the separation of sanity from insanity (Foucault 2008, 2009a), of the healthy human body (Foucault 1994), of the emerging importance of the modern subject in the humanities (Foucault 2001a), of illegal action, discipline and punishment (Foucault 1995), and of 'normal vs. abnormal' sexuality (Foucault 1998). As he was primarily interested in the historical constitution of modern subjectivity, he collected data mostly from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century in France, the period generally recognised as the establishment of the modern subject and society. Foucault (1983; 2000b; 2000c) explained that each of his historical inquiries followed a different rationale, shaped by the specific questions and objects he was interested in. He therefore compiled all kinds of data according to his research interests – and not in order to build up 'representative samples'. Furthermore, he noted the focal point of his work: across such different fields of institutional,

organisational, scientific, juridical and administrative practices, his analyses were guided by his core interest in the historically shifting formations of 'modern subjects'. How did the actors in science, law, politics and so on define and identify the insane, the sick body, the criminal subject, the sexually perverse? And how did they treat the 'abnormal'? The so-called modern subject is revealed as a bundle of empirical and historical formations that take place in and between institutions, discourses and practices. In his late works, Foucault (1990a, 1990b) adds an interest in ethically responsible behaviour via technologies of the self (Foucault 2000a; Martin, Hutton & Gutman 1988), analysing advice books for ethically sound male behaviour in ancient Greek and Roman culture.

Such a project was not conceived of as a purely academic or intellectual endeavour. Referring to Immanuel Kant's concept of 'critique' and discussion of 'enlightenment', Foucault (1984, 2007) claims to establish a *history of the present*, of the historical becoming of our current moment, especially focusing on a *critical ontology of ourselves*, the modern subjects. This 'critical ontology' reveals the contingent historical constellations and transformations that brought about modern subjectivities – demonstrating that there is neither determining nature and essence nor ontological necessity involved. Nor does the idea of *critique* here point to Marxist versions of ideological critique, or to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Rather, Foucault refers to the analyses of conditions of possibility of some phenomenon. The difference to Kant in this is Foucault's turn towards empirical and historical inquiry instead of philosophical introspection. Foucault's critical intent aims to make visible the historical contingency of the present and 'to show people that they are much freer than they feel' (Foucault 1988, p. 10). Such an *ethos* of research is grounded in a Foucauldian constructivist project of enlightenment, understood as a never-ending inquiry into the given conditions of power/knowledge and their historical contingency. Because history is not a conditioned movement towards better life and progress, but a discontinuous series of contingent historical transformations of power/knowledge regimes, the work of critical ontology can never come to an end.

Methodology

Given his focus on historical processes of subject formation and his critical intent, what then is Foucault's general 'methodology of experimenting'?⁵ Subsequent work in history or the social sciences has drawn upon several core concepts and upon his general 'mode of thinking', often in a rather loose way, while discourse research has concentrated mostly upon his 1969 methodological book *The archaeology of knowledge* (Foucault 2010a) as an account of his general methods. That book had a somewhat programmatic tone. Foucault tried to give a systematic account of what he did in his earlier work. But he seldom returned to this work, disputed its rationale and preferred the perspective of *genealogy* (see p. 000) in his later writings. In their comprehensive interpretation of Foucault's work, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1983, pp. 104–125) account for the Foucauldian methodology as 'interpretive analytics'. This is an appropriate description of his strategy of research and analysis. *Interpretation* here does not refer to some strategy of text analysis, but to a more general approach involving the creation of far-reaching diagnostic concepts (like 'governmentality') for larger historical constellations and patterns of practices. Analytics points towards the way Foucault approaches his research themes. Here, it is important to note that Foucault avoids theory or pre-established theorising when carrying out empirical research and analysing data. This is quite the opposite of, for example, a Marxist perspective. Analytics refers to a procedure of splitting

up apparently coherent unities, looking for complex constellations and empirical relations between heterogeneous elements.

What is his concrete way of doing research? As philosophers and historians attacked him for being too close to empirical reality for solid analytical distance, yet not close enough for sound research, he tried to explain why he argued a problem-driven approach on a middle-ground level (Foucault 1980b). Foucault generally assumes the relevance and performance of institutions, discourses and practices. He then starts with a particular research interest inspired by contemporary social phenomena, such as psychiatric treatment of ‘insane’ people, the prisoner movement, or prosecution of ‘illegal (homo)sexuality’. The next step is collecting all kinds of available and relevant data from the historical period considered most important for the present condition – such as documents, reports, paintings, novels, laws, institutional orders, academic writing, proceedings of juristic disputes – which purport to deal with these questions in a given period of time. In order to account for the points of interest that would lead into inquiry, Foucault proposed the idea of *problematization* and the related term *eventualisation* (see Foucault 1991, p. 76). Why and how did insanity become, at a specific moment in recent historical time, a problem in need of institutional work and solutions that then led to our modern dispositives for dealing with the insane? Through which particular social or institutional practices and epistemic procedures did it appear on society’s agenda as an ‘event to act upon’? Why and how did the relation between criminal acts and practices of punishment become a problem at the end of the eighteenth century? How do transformations in historical periods occur, if we do not assume a natural mode of progression? How can we compare them? And how can our research contribute to make something an event on today’s agenda? The experimental part of Foucault’s thinking could be resumed as follows:

- Consider your case in a pragmatic way as an opportunity for new experience.
- Return from your analysis with new diagnostic concepts which make you (and others) see the phenomenon at the heart of your inquiry in a different way.
- Do not dip into *hermeneutics of suspicion* (Ricœur 1970), as in Marxist, Freudian, Heideggerian, or structuralist thinking, in which a piece of given data is accounted for in terms of a pre-established theoretical model, for example, the relationships of production, or the ego, id and super-ego structure.
- Avoid mono-causality or cause-effect thinking as an explanation and look for historical ruptures or *discontinuities* (rather than continuities) as well as for *causal multiplication*, which implies accounting for the multiple, heterogeneous and perhaps conflicting – but always singular – elements that constitute a given historical constellation.

There are two main conceptual tools Foucault uses in his empirical work, *discourse* and *dispositive*. Both are heuristic devices intended to somehow name and fix the elements of his inquiries. *Discourse* refers to institutional and language-based modes of meaning-making and ordering of people, objects and practices. It will be explained in detail in the next section. *Dispositive*, since the 1970s, has referred to a network of heterogeneous, but related, elements such as texts, laws, buildings, practices, legal and procedural measures, organised processes, objects – in short: sayings, doings and materialities – assembled to solve or treat an ‘urgency’, a problem, identified via occurring processes of problematisation. The term ‘dispositif’ is common in French; it refers to an ensemble of measures that is made available for a specific purpose, such as for a political, economic, or technical undertaking. For example, in *The will to knowledge*, Foucault (1998, p. 106) talks about the *dispositif*

d'alliance as a particular institution to organise 'relations of sex', which included strategic marriage in order to maintain property (kingdoms, industries, farms). A dispositive is a complex of heterogeneous, but related, elements (actors, discourses, practices, objects), drawn together as strategies, without strategic masterplan, to intervene into some 'problem to be solved'. This, for example, might include laws, architectural manifestations – such as the prison design concept in Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* – practices of surveillance, discipline and punishment, sacramental confession (Foucault 1990a), as well as other *practices*. As a methodological device, *dispositive* allows for an analytical perspective on the different elements appearing in descriptions of historical events, or constituting contemporary interventions into society and nature.

In the 1960s, Foucault, working at the cross-roads of philosophy, history and historical sociology (of knowledge), called his perspective *archaeology* in order to distinguish it from the established history of ideas, people, institutions and big events. From the 1970s, he preferred the notion of *genealogy*, without completely abandoning the former (Foucault 1984, 2000c, 2007). *Archaeology* referred to the usages of this term in the works of Immanuel Kant, Georges Canguilhem and Georges Dumézil. It is conceived as a methodological device or research perspective that implies inquiring into a particular historical constellation and its elements considered as 'monuments' (a term used by Georges Canguilhem).⁶ This implies, much as in the academic discipline of archaeology, accounting for the socio-cultural patterns of a given historical moment through an analysis of its immanent historical situatedness. A case in point is his book *The order of things*, which analyses patterns of scientific knowledge-making in three distinct historical periods. However, influenced by the social protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Foucault shifted his attention to the analytic strategy of *genealogy*. This perspective, taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, traces the discontinuities and transformations of historical constellations – which can be identified as *regimes of power-knowledge* (see below) – through time. As with Nietzsche, it avoids both the idea of a single point of origin far back in history and the related (Hegelian or Marxist) ideas of ongoing development and progress, starting from that original point. *Genealogy* instead is about *games of power* and *games of truth*, about conflict, struggle, domination and historical transformation, without implying a trajectory towards brighter futures.

A final point to discuss here is the question of data. Reference to data is important in Foucault and his move from theoretical philosophy to empirical research. In a famous statement, he considered himself to be a 'happy positivist' (Foucault 2010a, p. 125). This ironic confession implicitly addressed a harsh critique of his previous work as 'having a positivist style', voiced by a long-standing intellectual enemy, French feminist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). In so doing, Foucault pointed to his strong commitment to concrete work on empirical data. Such data were available basically as texts (books, documents, leaflets, proceedings, etc.), and sometimes as paintings or photographs. He worked through textual data much like historians do, via close reading, guided by analytical questions.⁷ His detailed pre-iconographic account of the figural elements of the painting *Las Meninas* by Velasquez (1599–1660) is a good illustration (Foucault 2001a). He then developed concepts in order to name what was done and accounted for in the (mostly written) documents: patterns of practices, elements of processes, ordering of perspectives. In fact, the chapter subtitles of much of his work indicate such classification procedures and category building out of data, which seem close to some versions of today's grounded theory methodology in the social sciences. Two examples will illustrate this. In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault (1995, pp. 141–149) discusses 'the art of distributions'. This subtitle can

be considered as a category that emerged out of empirical analysis (close reading, sorting and category building). He explains what he means by such 'arts of distribution' in accounting for and quoting different excerpts from historical texts. Here is one example presented under the quoted heading:

Jean-Baptiste de La Salle dreamt of a classroom in which the spatial distribution might provide a whole series of distinctions at once: according to the pupils' progress, worth, character, application, cleanliness and parents' fortune. (...) Each of the pupils will have his place assigned to him and none of them will leave it or change it except on the order or with the consent of the school inspector.

(Foucault 1995, p. 147)

A second example comes from *The order of things*, which deals exclusively with academic texts. Therein, Foucault explains, for example, the core organising pattern of scientific knowledge-making, the *episteme* established by the end of the sixteenth century, as 'resemblance'. Such resemblance appears in texts as discussions of 'similitudes'. Here is the quote:

As Crollius says: 'The stars are the matrix of all the plants and every star in the sky is only the spiritual prefiguration of a plant, such that it represents the plant, and just as each herb or plant is a terrestrial star looking up at the sky, so also each star is a celestial plant in spiritual form' (...)

(Foucault 2001a, p. 20)

Foucault was well aware that 'not all texts are equal'. The documents he used had a different status and symbolic-performative power according to their functional context (see Prior 2003). He combined such textual analysis with data on institutions, law procedures, experiments, public events, material devices – core textual data are only one (important) element in a relational constellation of heterogeneous parts. But as he worked on historical phenomena, somehow all of his data were textual (or, to a lesser degree, painted, photographed) – there was no other way to get access.

Analytics of discourse(s)

Foucault is probably the most influential thinker ever in discourse research and discourse analysis in linguistics, the humanities, cultural studies and the social sciences. It is important to note that he did not establish a *theory* of discourse, but a heuristic toolbox, an analytics of discourse, which clarifies the object of inquiry (discourse) and some strategies to approach it. Although his conception of 'discourse' shifts somewhat in his writings, the main reference is *The archaeology of knowledge* (Foucault 2010a). In fact, he considered this book a failure and never returned to it – he never realised an empirical analysis according to the conceptual framework he proposed. Despite this, the book can be considered a milestone in the inquiry into language, knowledge and meaning-making. This is due to at least three core elements. First, he succeeds in establishing a rationale for the empirical analysis of historical and current knowledge-making by introducing given textual and institutional data as solid grounds for analysis. Second, while being informed by contemporary philosophy of language, he argued that analysis has to move beyond linguistic interests in languages and their functions (*ibidem*, pp. 79–134) in order to address serious speech acts as ways of

constituting reality in institutional settings. Third, he accordingly introduced, beyond representationalism, the term *discourse* for the ordered practices of knowledge-making, which themselves are the object of such inquiry. The analytic task ‘consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.’ (Foucault 2010a, p. 49)

In French, the common term ‘*discours*’ refers to all kind of ‘important’ speeches or longer statements (e.g. during a wedding ceremony, a fiftieth birthday, a lecture at an academic conference) and written academic treatises (such as René Descartes’ ‘Discourse on method’). Such speech events have in common the fact that language use here is embedded in a particular institutional context, which shapes its ‘worth’. From Foucault’s perspective, discourse as a conceptual framework refers to a series of discursive events and practices that are ordered by some regularity or ‘rules of formation’. Single discursive events and statements obtain their meaning from the network of statements and formation patterns to which they ‘belong’. A statement may have a different function in different networks and thus be a different statement. The regularity in each case shapes what can be said, by whom and to what effects. It has to be reconstructed by the analyst from empirical data. Foucault identified four dimensions of ‘rules of formation’:

1. The *formation of objects* of concern to a discourse can be understood by reconstructing the rules according to which the objects – of which discourses speak – are created: Which scientific disciplines play a role, and in which way? Which patterns of classification are used?
2. The *formation of enunciative modalities* refers to questions such as: Who is a legitimate speaker, or what are the institutional locations and subject positions from which objects of discourse are spoken about? How do different forms of enunciation – statistics, narratives, experiments, and so on – relate to each other?
3. The *formation of concepts* refers to rules that form the basis of the respective statement: How are textual elements connected to each other? Which rhetorical schemas are used? How is the statement positioned regarding other texts, for example, through the respective mode of citation? How are quantitative statements translated into qualitative statements?
4. The *formation of strategies* refers to the external relationships of a discourse: What are the topics and theories of a discourse? How do they interact with other discourses? To what extent do they purport to be better solutions to problems than those others?

Foucault insisted in opposition to structuralism that he is interested in historically situated practices and their regularities. Religious discourses can be distinguished from legal, economic, political, or scientific discourses by their different formative principles of statement production. The interest of analysis lies in examining the rules that conditioned what was (and only could be) ‘actually’ said in ‘serious speech acts’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983, p. 48) at a given historical and institutional moment. The intent is to reconstruct the institutionalised regulations of discursive practices in observable games of truth, their elements, functions and effects. Discourse, therefore, is his way of apprehending the institutional patterns that make seemingly disparate empirical occurrences, as products of enunciations, belong to a common frame of reference or institutional structuring. Such occurrences are serial and regulated sequences of historically situated practices of producing statements. To Foucault, the use of language in institutional discourse is a social act of constituting reality that cannot be equated with the intentional actions of single speakers,

nor to the syntactical rules of language use, but instead is shaped by the institutionally stabilised rules and orders of discourses. This allows for the analysis of regular patterns, their historical and institutional emergence, stabilisation and transformation. And this furthermore is the solid basis for discursive meaning-making and construction of knowledgeable objects via sign use and the performative references to a 'signified', or *interpretans*. Discourse is not about signifying given things 'out there', but about the very production of such 'things'.

Soon after *The archaeology of knowledge*, Foucault's perspective on discourse shifted. During the wave of student revolts in the late 1960s, he became more explicitly interested in power (see p.75). Again, he followed his own original approach. In contrast to social movements and (for example, Marxist) academics who opposed truth or knowledge to power – take, for instance, the case of 'unmasking the hidden reality of power relations in society' – Foucault insisted that power and knowledge are closely intertwined. For him, it was important to do away with a tradition of thinking which claimed that knowledge can be established only when there is no more power, or that knowledge is somewhere outside of power. Instead, arguing once again in line with Nietzsche, he stated that power and knowledge imply each other: there is no power relation without a particular field of knowledge, and no knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute power relations. This claim has important implications for the position of the researcher or 'knowing subject', which cannot assume an external position free of influence by a given system of power. Instead, the knowing subject, the object of inquiry, and the epistemological practices are all together effects of historical power/knowledge regimes and their transformations (Foucault 1995, pp. 27–28).

In Foucault's short inaugural speech at the *Collège de France* in Paris in December 1970 (Foucault 2010a, pp. 215–238) this interest in power became clear in his discussion of internal and external elements that structure the unfolding of discourses. At this point, he was less concerned with general rules that account for the identity of a discourse than with dimensions that refer to the concrete processing of institutional discourse. These include situational contexts and taboos and the field of appliance of true/false statements, which all allow for some ideas to be voiced, but not others. Academic degrees and titles, commentaries and the principle of authorship permit some categories of people to speak while silencing others. Discourses are structured by mechanisms of exclusion and empowerment that produce 'scarcity' in the fields of serious speech acts.

Close to this, Foucault returned to various ideas of speech-act theory and Wittgensteinian philosophy of language (Wittgenstein 2009), but again, to mark a difference. His concept of *games of truth* adopts the latter's notions of 'language-games' and 'family resemblances'. Games of truth focus on the procedures that separate truth from error, or false knowledge. This might occur in the (human) sciences, but also, for example, in legal realms. Furthermore, Foucault now refers to discourses as strategic-tactical confrontations and conflicts. The interest is no longer in the analysis of individualised discursive formations per se, but in the role of conflicting, clashing, or collaborating discourses in given historical and local constellations of problematisation. In a series of lectures, he explained his new interest in investigating the role of discourse:

The first inquiry is historical: How have domains of knowledge been formed on the basis of social practices? (...) The second line of research is a methodological one, which might be called discourse analysis. (...) to consider these facts of discourse (...) as games, strategic games of action and reaction, question and answer, domination and

evasion, as well as struggle. (...) This analysis of discourse as a strategic and polemical game is, in my judgment, a second line of research to pursue. Last of all, the third line of research (...) what we should do is show the historical construction of a subject through a discourse understood as consisting of a set of strategies which are part of social practices.

(Foucault 2000d, pp. 6–7)

The *Pierre Rivière* case (Foucault 1982) can be considered a nice illustration. Rivière, a young man in early nineteenth-century French Normandy, had murdered his mother, sister and brother in order to re-establish, as he affirmed, the honour of his father. He gave a long, written account of his motives and wanted to be punished with death. But then the different actors involved in the trial – the judge, police, medical doctors and psychiatrists representing different schools of psychiatry – entered into a conflict in order to clarify his mental state when committing the killings. Foucault accounted for this event as manifesting a battle between competing discourses, which all claim to account for the legitimate ‘definition of the situation’ (Thomas & Thomas 1928, pp. 571-572): ‘Indeed it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. [We must imagine the world] as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. It is this distribution, that we must reconstruct [...]’ (Foucault 1998, p. 100) This is quite a comprehensive research programme for subsequent discourse research in the social sciences and the humanities.

To sum up, it is safe to say that theorising and defining discourse or discourse analysis was not a primary concern for Foucault. There are elements of a never-completed and employed methodology. And there are several conceptual devices to analyse the role of conflicting discourses and other elements in situations of problematisation. The different accentuations of ‘discourse’ in Foucault, taken together, constitute a rich toolbox, despite the fact that Foucault, as we have seen, did not say much about ways of analysing discourse as data.

Analytics of power

Power plays a major role in Foucault’s work. Political institutions, devices and actions are elements of the historical processes of problematisation he was interested in (Kelly 2014). But to Foucault, power implies much more than simply state action or class dominance.⁸ Power is not a singular instance ‘up there’, but a basic dimension of human action and human relations. It is a core part of power/knowledge regimes: ‘[T]he smallest glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics’ (Foucault 1998, p. 5; 1980a). Power relations can be found at every level of social action and society; they ‘are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter.’ (Foucault 1998, p. 94) Power is a play of distribution, rather than a quality of a position: ‘the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate’ (Foucault 1998, pp. 92). It is the central mechanism of producing subjects and objects. Playing with the connotations of the French (or Latin) word ‘subjection/subjectification’, which implies ‘becoming a subject’ as well as ‘being subjected’, Foucault addresses power as a productive, enabling and constraining force at the same time.

So, what is his conception of power? Foucault (1983, pp. 217–219) distinguishes between operations on things, which he calls ‘capacity’, relationships of communication (the circulation of meaning) and relationships of power. Exercising power happens between individual or collective actors and means, according to Foucault, *acting upon the actions of*

others, that is, via different modalities, shaping their actions. This therefore implies degrees of freedom of action on the side of the others concerned and possibilities of resistance; otherwise, there would be no need to shape their actions. Power as subjection historically tends to fail; it always produces resistance. Foucault then adds another category: 'Relations of strategy' (*ibidem*, pp. 224–226) emerge in confrontations between actors if the goal is to win over the adversary. If they succeed, they create an asymmetric constellation for action and re-action. When such a constellation is locked together in a stable way with relations of power, then an enduring situation of 'domination' occurs.

Here again, Foucault refused a general theory of power and replaced it by an 'analytics'. Such a perspective implies historical diagnostics of the multiple forms, exercises and historical transformations of power, including its most productive realm – bringing particular kinds of subjects and objects into being. The core question, then, is: How, by which means, is power exercised? And what happens then? Foucault (1983, pp. 223–224; 1998, pp. 92–102) has given some general advice on how to explore power: Analysis should look for the systems of societal 'differentiation' (by law, statues, privilege, etc.) which, as a condition and a result of power relations, allow some people to act upon the actions of others. A second dimension is the type of objectives pursued by such actors (e.g. profit making). Third, the means of establishing power relations should be addressed. Finally, the forms of institutionalisation (e.g. the state form), as well as the degrees of effectiveness or rationalisation of power are of interest. His insistence on the omnipresence of power relations does not imply that the way they are right here and now is the best way or the only way. As history tells us, struggles abound within the transformation of powers and power/knowledge regimes.

The analytics of power imply that every single historical phenomenon of interest needs its own empirical inquiry. Foucault therefore came out of his research with different diagnostic concepts of power – each one accounting for a specific historical modality of 'acting upon the action of others'. In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault (1995) introduces several concepts to identify historical transformations of power relations since the classical age. *Sovereign power* refers to the former concentration of the locus of power in the position and person of the king, who had to decide – and was allowed to decide – on giving life or death to individuals (Foucault 1998, p. 135). *Microphysics of power* accounts for the new emerging modes of intervening into the body parts and movements of persons, for example in military or prison contexts, by making them stand, walk, look here and there, or follow this or that rationale for movement. *Disciplinary power* is the most comprehensive term for the new technologies and templates of disciplining bodies and persons, including, for example, carrying out examinations and giving grades in schools.

The will to knowledge presents the concepts of *biopower* and *biopolitics*. These are set against a view that identified power with established law and 'the' state, named *juridical power* or *power of the law* – a position, which, according to Foucault, was widely and wrongly used in debates in the 1960s/1970s (Foucault 1980c, pp. 139–143). *Biopolitics* is complementary to disciplinary power and refers to state interventions and measures to produce 'normal' populations, for example, by acting on birth rates, health practices and conditions. *Biopower* is the more general term Foucault suggests for the combination of disciplinary power and biopolitics. It 'brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life' (Foucault 1998, p. 143; see Foucault 2003, 2009b, 2010b).

Governmentality, one of the most prominent terms created by Foucault (2009b, 2011, 2012), refers to the elements and properties of individual or collective state-based 'governing'

of conduct, to the ‘conduct of (one’s own or others’) conduct’. Governing refers to practices of guiding the way a person – or people in general – acts, for example by making people behave in a certain way (e.g. not drinking in order to be fit for work). It occurs in very different situations and constellations. There is governing of others in families, in schools, in monasteries, in all kind of institutions and in states: ‘To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault 1983, p. 221). In two influential lectures Foucault (2009b) dealt with transformations of liberal state government from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. He was interested in political economy’s ideas on the market, its functioning and its structuring effects on the conduct of citizens, as well as its beneficial role in nation building during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. ‘Governmentality’, according to Foucault, indicates a new ‘economy’ of power. It implies:

the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses [dispositifs] of security as its essential technical instrument.

(Foucault 2009b, p. 144)

Moreover, it refers to the process by which (state) ‘government’ and its dispositives became the dominant mode of exercising power, with the state itself becoming governmentalised. Foucault further distinguishes between governance through external *technologies of discipline*, which refer to the individual as object, through close *technologies of dominance* (ways of leading and subjugating others) and through *technologies of the self*, which refer to the individual as a moral, confessing, reflecting subject of self-conduct.

Conclusion

Foucault’s work and concepts have travelled across the world. He has stimulated most contemporary social sciences and linguistic research on discourses and power relations, as well as academic disciplines, such as cultural studies, feminist studies, social studies of science and technology, and post-colonial studies. A full account of his influence and the critiques of his work are far beyond the scope of this conclusion.⁹ Subsequent *discourse research*, even when claiming to be ‘Foucauldian’, has used his toolbox in rather loose ways, added other concepts to it and concentrated on the ways discourses establish ordered realities in political conflicts, public debate and scientific knowledge-making.¹⁰ His *analytics of power*, especially the concepts of biopower and governmentality, have provoked a huge amount of in-depth discussion and empirical work, for example, on the logics of neo-liberal government and government of risk populations.¹¹ Perhaps not all such usage is ‘true’ to the Foucauldian concepts, but nevertheless, the subsequent debates have been stimulating.¹² Interestingly, despite the huge amount of research into power relations inspired by Foucault, only a few newer conceptual propositions have been made. French sociologist Pierre Lascoumes (1995) introduced the notion of *ecopower* (‘éco-pouvoir’) for a constellation that emerged in the 1970s in the realm of environmental concern. Michael Power (1999) accounted for the ‘audit society’ and its ‘rituals of verification’. Keller (2011b) proposed the concept of *positioning power* to name the current constellations of ranking, audit and evaluation as structuring devices for the distribution of resources, chances and risk, ranging from clients’ comments on web pages to large financial audit infrastructures.

Leading cultural studies author Stuart Hall (1932–2014) argued for the integration of Foucauldian, Marxist and Weberian sociological approaches. Edward Saïd and other prominent authors in post-colonial studies use(d) Foucauldian concepts in order to account for the post-colonial condition. Anthropologist Paul Rabinow develops his *Anthropology of the Contemporary* by building on Foucault. Prominent science and technology studies writers Bruno Latour and John Law, feminist thinkers such as Karen Barad, as well as philosophers Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben, draw on Foucault’s influential work to ‘move beyond’. Empirical studies in history, sociology and political science have been profoundly shaped by him and today show a mix of Foucauldian and ‘post-Foucauldian’ approaches. Most prominently, philosopher Judith Butler (1990, 1997) built largely on Foucault’s analysis of discourse, body and power, adding psychoanalytical and deconstructivist elements in order to account for the bases of power. It is certain that his legacy will inform future inquiry into discourse, language, power and politics, even in research ‘beyond Foucault’. If inquiry tries to stay close to a ‘Foucauldian state of mind’, it would have to use his methodology and concepts, not as a sacred, enshrined system of analysis, but as a toolset at hand – which implies that it should be worked on, modified, or expanded according to the research questions of interest.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the editors for their helpful suggestions. For comprehensive presentations of Foucault’s work and life, please refer to Dreyfus & Rabinow (1983), Deleuze (1988), Downing (2008), Keller (2008), O’Farrell (2005); on Foucault’s biography see Macey (1995) and Eribon (1991); for current work see *Foucault Studies*, <http://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/foucault-studies/index> [accessed 30 January, 2016]. See Foucault (1999, 2000a, 2001b) for compilations of shorter key texts and interviews.
- 2 Other then-prominent positions in France include phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976).
- 3 The term ‘practices’ refers to conventionalised or institutionalised patterns of behaviour and action.
- 4 See the special issue of *Foucault Studies* (2011).
- 5 Foucault only slightly touched upon his methodology (Foucault 1991, 1980b; Kendall & Wickham 1999, Keller 2008). Conceptual tools are very important in this and will be discussed below.
- 6 The book established an influential rationale for empirical discourse research, which will be discussed on pp. 72–73. But it differs largely from Foucault’s own practice of, and interest in, analysis as explained above.
- 7 In his public lectures at the Collège de France, as well as in his two last books (Foucault 1990a, 1990b), Foucault commented on a narrow selection of (e.g. antique) texts, reporting what they say and discussing implicit assumptions, historical connotations and ethical aspects – thereby exposing his way of ‘doing textual work’.
- 8 The state indeed is an effect of particular power relations rather than their site of origin.
- 9 For an early feminist critique of a ‘male-centred view’ in Foucault’s last books see, e.g., Foxhall (1994). Marxist critique addressed a lack of explanatory theory on power relations. Critical theory authors and positivists attacked his historical relativism. Post-Foucauldian approaches today argue the need to go ‘beyond discourse’ to the heterogeneous materialities or material-semiotic dimensions of the world.
- 10 See, e.g., Saïd (1978), Hajer (1995), Darier (1998), Bührmann et. al (2007), Keller (2011a, 2013), Clarke (2005).
- 11 See Dean (2009; 2014); Lemke (2012), Burchell, Gordon & Miller (1991), Rose (2007), Walthers & Haahr (2005), Rose & Miller (2008), Bröckling, Krasmann & Lemke (2010).
- 12 See Rabinow & Rose (2006) for a critique of the use of *biopower* in the works of Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt or Giorgio Agamben.

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